

Rightly Relating Biblical and Systematic Theology

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Introduction

Nothing is more important than “rightly dividing the word of truth,”¹ and correctly “examining the Scriptures”² to understand “the whole counsel of God.”³ Scripture is the “only rule of faith and practice,”⁴ shaping everything. Equally important, then, is rightly interpreting the “one rule.” Theologians seek to do this through the disciplines of Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology – ways of studying Scripture. The purpose of this essay is to rightly relate Biblical and Systematic Theology by defining the characteristics of both disciplines, stating the necessity of both, and proving the necessity of both through a case study of the letter of James.

Overall Approach

Arriving at a definition of these disciplines is an extremely difficult task.⁵ Edward Klink and Darian Lockett have gone so far as to enumerate five different types of Biblical Theology,⁶ and conclude that some types are “notoriously difficult... to nail down.”⁷ Though many definitions are valid, most do not sufficiently differentiate Biblical from Systematic Theology. Take, for example, Ched Spellman’s interchangeable definitions, defining Biblical Theology as “the study of the whole Bible on its own terms” and Systematic Theology as “the study of God and all things in relation to God according to His Word.”⁸ James Hamilton’s definition of

¹ 2 Timothy 2:15 KJV

² Acts 17:11 ESV

³ Acts 20:27 ESV

⁴ Gardner, W. W. (1886). *Bible Inspiration: Plenary and Verbal*. American Baptist Publication Society. p 92

⁵ Carson, D. A. (2000). *Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology*. p. 89–104 in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Electronic ed. InterVarsity Press. p.89

⁶ Klink, Edward W. III, & Lockett, Darian R. (2012). *Understanding Biblical Theology, A Comparison of Theology and Practice*. Zondervan. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/understanding-biblical-theology/id585360311>. p.30

⁷ Klink & Lockett, 2012, p.33

⁸ Spellman, Ched (2020). *Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of Scripture*. Kregel Publications. pp.16,18

Biblical Theology has the same problem: “the attempt to understand and embrace the interpretive perspectives of the biblical authors.”⁹

Because of the definitional confusion concerning these definitions, and the lack of consensus among theologians, this essay will describe the relatively significant characteristics – the distinctives and commonalities – between the two disciplines. The Appendix is an outline of these characteristics. This approach will serve this essay’s overall purpose better than faulty definitions can.

Distinctives and Commonalities of Each Discipline

Systematic Theology is logically constructed through topics.¹⁰ Biblical Theology traces Biblical history and its themes to describe reality as described in Scripture.¹¹ Systematic Theology is “topical, logical,” and assigns a higher level of importance to some doctrines than to others (i.e., hierarchical).¹² Biblical Theology is textually determined, letting each text order the topics and their respective importance.¹³ Because of this, Biblical Theology is culturally descriptive, setting aside current cultural engagement as at least secondary, prizing descriptively faithful interpretation first.¹⁴ Systematic Theology is culturally confrontational, seeking to be culturally relevant through direct confrontation with the modern age.¹⁵

Both Biblical and Systematic Theology share Scripture as their primary source material.¹⁶ It is widely accepted that neither discipline is inherently more exegetically aligned with Scripture

⁹ Hamilton, James (2022). Lecture 1 | What is Biblical Theology? | James M. Hamilton Jr. | P&L 2022. YouTube. https://youtu.be/MK_TOQKjHu8

¹⁰ Poythress, Vern S. “Kinds of Biblical Theology.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70.1 (2008): 129–42. p.131

¹¹ Poythress, 2008, pp.134-135

¹² Carson, 2000, pp.102-103

¹³ Carson, 2000, p.103

¹⁴ Hamilton, James (2013). *What Is Biblical Theology?: A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns*. Crossway. p.23

¹⁵ Carson, 2000, p.103

¹⁶ Carson, 2000, p.102

than the other.¹⁷ Strictly speaking, proper exegesis is not inherent to either discipline – many theologians on both sides have been eisegetical. In other words, they are exegetically and eisegetically neutral disciplines. Furthermore, considerations of extra-biblical history (i.e., Historical Theology) is not an essential to either discipline. Historical Theology can play a supportive role, but it is not essential to either of them.

Biblical Theology sees God’s self-revelation as the “actual embodiment of revelation in history” or as “incarnate in history.”¹⁸ For the Biblical theologian, *Biblical* historical reality is inseparable from Biblical revelation. To the Systematic theologian, while Biblical historical reality coincides with Biblical revelation, it is not essential to accurately interpreting Scripture. The original setting (author, audience, place, time) is therefore far more *vital* to the Biblical theologian than it is to the Systematic theologian for their interpretive methodologies to work.

Systematic Theology interprets the parts from the whole. Biblical Theology interprets the whole from the parts. In other words, Systematic Theology interprets each passage and book by the entire theological content of Scripture. “Biblical Theology,” as Spellman helpfully clarifies, “asks how those larger sections of texts [sentences, paragraphs, and sections] relate to one another and create book-level meaning.”¹⁹ Biblical Theology, then, interprets each individual text in its own right, before interrelating and harmonizing them, placing interpretive precedence on the individual text. In Systematic Theology, the harmonization of the whole of Scripture takes interpretive precedence over the individual text within Scripture.

¹⁷ Spellman, 2020, p.18; Klink & Lockett, 2012, p.19

¹⁸ Vos, Geerhardus (2003). *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Eerdmans Publishing Company. p.15

¹⁹ Spellman, 2020, p.19

“Biblical Theology...” resorts “primarily to the categories of” each text of Scripture.²⁰ It “seeks to connect” the individual books “using their own categories”²¹ and “study... the whole Bible on its own terms.”²² Systematic Theology is not constrained to do so, and can tend to flatten theological categories across individual books, taking a more holistic approach. The same is true of grammatical and literary structures of each individual text: Biblical Theology seeks to use those structures, while Systematic Theology often overrides them.²³

Biblical Theology is “sequential,” approaching revelation with a “through time” approach that interprets Scripture “across history or in a temporal sense.”²⁴ Biblical Theology does this in two primary ways. First, it can be purely historically descriptive of what the Biblical text originally meant through the progression of time.²⁵ Second, it can specifically track the history of redemption or narrative themes through the historical development of the Biblical Canon.²⁶ Either way, Biblical Theology is tracking along the development of God’s self-revelation of Scripture.

Systematic Theology, in contrast, is systematically set “within time,” employing a mode of interpretation that organizes Scripture according to theological systems or patterns.²⁷ Systematic Theology insists on the united whole and complete compendium of God’s self-revelation. “Biblical Theology tells a story from beginning to end.”²⁸ Systematic Theology defines its own beginning and end as a topical compendium. Geerhardus Vos helpfully writes

²⁰ Carson, 2000, p.100

²¹ Carson, 2000, p.94

²² Spellman, 2020, p.20

²³ Carson, 2000, p.94

²⁴ Spellman, 2020, p. 47

²⁵ Klink & Lockett, 2012, p.42-43

²⁶ Poythress, p.135

²⁷ Spellman, 2020, pp. 47-48

²⁸ Spellman, 2020, p.20

that “Biblical Theology deals with revelation as a divine activity, not as the finished product of that activity” as Systematic Theology tends to do.²⁹

These are the characteristics of Biblical and Systematic Theology that make them distinguishable (see Appendix). They find both a common purpose through their commonalities, and distinct approaches through their distinctives. Now that they have been described, the necessity of both must be clearly stated.

The Necessity of Both Disciplines

Theologians of both Biblical and Systematic Theology seek to hold to what Abner Chou calls the “faithful hermeneutic,” namely, the “literal-grammatical-historical” hermeneutic.³⁰ This hermeneutic (i.e., proper exegesis), is not sourced from anything other than Scripture. It is a “Christian hermeneutic,”³¹ which is universally accessible through exegesis to every Christian. It is once for all delivered and taught within Scripture primarily through the “New Testament’s use of the Old” and the interrelation of the Biblical text.³²

The faithful hermeneutic is jeopardized when either Biblical or Systematic Theology excludes the other. These disciplines are not in opposition to one another, but complement each other with a most securing sweetness. They are not merely complementary as a bridge discipline and culminating discipline,³³ but act as inseparable twin sisters. When they are separated and one gains interpretive dominion over Scripture, theologians fall into error.

²⁹ Vos, 2003, p.13

³⁰ Chou, Abner (2018). *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers, Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles*. Kregel Publications. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/the-hermeneutics-of-the-biblical-writers/id1457789790>. p.36-37

³¹ Chou, 2018, p.35

³² Chou, 2018, p.36

³³ Carson, 2000, p.103

The error of a pure Systematic Theology is that it drifts into abstraction that ultimately leads to scholasticism, as can be seen throughout history. This occurred in both Thomas Aquinas³⁴ and William Perkins' theology.³⁵ On the other hand, the error of a purely Biblical Theology is to lose hold of "the whole counsel of God," conducting the interpretation of one text or Biblical author independently from the rest of Scripture.³⁶ This happens when Scripture is segmented into so many parts and parts of parts that Biblical Theology also becomes abstract, with theologians careening into mystical bibliomancy, losing their hold of propositional truth.³⁷ Both errors betray the faithful hermeneutic and are eisegetical, not exegetical.

In contrast to this polarized approach, uniting Biblical and Systematic Theology better secures theologians' hold on the whole Bible.³⁸ Systematic Theology's logically oriented structure balances Biblical Theology's thematic and historical position. Systematic Theology provides a basis for a unified whole-Bible perspective, while Biblical Theology peruses a whole-book interpretation. Systematic Theology confronts the culture through propositional truth, and Biblical Theology ensures that truth stays true to the text of Scripture. Thus, the unity of these twin sister disciplines ought to be maintained for the sake of a full and faithful exegesis of the Biblical Text. The necessity of this unity is demonstrated by the various interpretations of the letter of James.

Case Study: The Letter of James

³⁴ White, James (2022). *Thomas Aquinas, Cornelius Van Til, Greg Bahnsen*. YouTube. https://youtu.be/5jrr_mWSePA

³⁵ Frost, Ronald (2012). *God's Spreading Goodness*. Cor Deo Press. p.39

³⁶ Poythress, 2008, p.133

³⁷ Schaff, Philip (1953). *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol XI: Son of Man – Tremellius*. Baker Book House. https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/encyc11/encyc11/Page_9.html. p.9

³⁸ Gaffin, Richard B. Jr. (1976). "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," WTJ 38: 281- 99. p.298; quoted in Poythress, 2008, p.133

Most Systematic theologians (such as James Dunn³⁹ and Richard Bauckham⁴⁰) consider James to be wisdom literature of the New Testament, having no overarching theme. Most of them also consider it a circular letter because of James 1:1.⁴¹ A Biblical Theological approach, however, doesn't jump to those conclusions. Andy Gemmill is one such theologian who takes an undeniably Biblical approach to James. Gemmill makes the case that it is a *particular letter*⁴² – though the audience is unknown beyond what is discovered about them in the text itself. Furthermore, Gemmill does see an overarching theme in James, which has been described by David Gibson as: the “theme of wholeness or oneness.”⁴³

The Systematic approach is extraordinarily atomized when it comes to James. In Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, James is universally used as a source of supporting texts to Grudem's overall theology. In contrast, the Biblical approach is thematic, tying the whole letter together under connecting themes.

This striking difference between the two theological approaches can be seen most starkly when dealing with difficult passages. James 2:24 brings two very difficult interpretive challenges. First, James seems to claim that people are justified by works and not by faith; and, second, he thus contradicts Paul's in Romans 3:20,28.

The Systematic Theology method of resolving this issue is epitomized by Wayne Grudem. Grudem handles these challenges in two tactical ways. First, he writes that “justified” means “demonstrated to be righteous.” Second, that James quotes from Genesis 22, long after

³⁹ Dunn, James D. G. (2003). *Eerdmans Commentary on the Whole Bible*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. p.950

⁴⁰ Dunn, 2003 p.1,484

⁴¹ Dunn, 2003 p.1,484

⁴² Gemmill, Andy (June 11, 2013). *1. Exposition for Expositors: James*. Cornhill Scotland. https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/s/s6gldk1tdlsqqat/130611_sow_s1_andy_gemmill.mp3?dl=0

⁴³ Gibson, David (2022). *Radically Whole, Gospel Healing for the Divided Heart*. Crossway. <https://books.apple.com/us/book/radically-whole/id1609506347>. p.22

Genesis 15:6 when Abraham was counted as righteous.⁴⁴ James' argument is simply that faith without works is not really faith, according to Grudem.⁴⁵

Andy Gemmill takes a different approach, grounding chapter two in view of the whole letter. Gemmill looks at the bad behavior throughout the letter (what he calls the “symptoms”)⁴⁶ to point to a much deadlier issue (the “disease”): “a terrible dividedness of being towards God” or “spiritual adultery.”⁴⁷ James is not simply writing about the relationship between faith and works. He is dealing with his readers' “two-souledness”⁴⁸ towards God and towards others. James' objective is to call his readers to become “single again” towards God and others,⁴⁹ no longer deceiving themselves about their relationship with God.

“In this letter,” says Gemmill, “God is one, single, unified, treats everyone the same.” James' assumption, as it always should be, is that “those who are ruled by [God] to be single in response, but these people have faith and not works.”⁵⁰ They are divided in response to God's Word;⁵¹ towards people;⁵² and towards God Himself.⁵³ They listen but don't do;⁵⁴ they see but don't act;⁵⁵ they bless and they curse.⁵⁶ James' goal in chapter two is to convince his readers of their disease (their two-souledness towards God) by pointing out their symptoms: saying that

⁴⁴ Grudem, Wayne (2000). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Zondervan. p.731

⁴⁵ Grudem, 2000, p.732

⁴⁶ “Let me suggest then that this is the big underlying issue of this letter. These people are two-timing God, married to God, lusting after the world, and at lots of levels, that is reflected in dividedness of being, of speech, of action, of thought, of attitude” (Gemmill, June 11, 2013).

⁴⁷ Gemmill, Andy (June 13, 2013). 3. *Exposition for Expositors: James*. Cornhill Scotland.

https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/s/om17epufh9np1rv/130613_sow_s1_andy_gemmill.mp3?dl=0

⁴⁸ Gemmill, Andy (2019). *James: The Symptoms and the Disease*. TruthForLife.

<https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/main-session-andy-gemmill/>

⁴⁹ Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵⁰ Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵¹ James 1:7 ESV; quoted in Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵² James 2:4 ESV; quoted in Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵³ James 4:4 ESV; quoted in Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵⁴ James 1:22 ESV; quoted in Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵⁵ James 2:15 ESV; quoted in Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵⁶ James 3:9 ESV; quoted in Gemmill, June 11, 2013

they have faith while they sin against God and their fellow believers. The problem is not that James' readers lack works and they need to work to gain assurance. Instead, their bad behavior is revealing their spiritual adultery against God and their need to repent and draw near to Him again.⁵⁷

Gemmill, representing the Biblical Theology approach, resolves the challenges of James chapter two by looking at what James is dealing with and how he is trying to address it throughout the whole letter. Grudem, representing the Systematic Theology approach, resolves the challenges by placing James 2:24 in part of the Biblical historical reality of Genesis, and interpreting both James and Paul in their theological contexts. Both approaches have positives and negatives.

The Systematic approach is clear, clean, and obvious. Yet, it can present confusion concerning assurance of salvation. The interpretation cannot deal with what Christians should do they seek assurance: do they turn inward and work to be assured of their salvation? The Biblical approach is grounded, thorough, and faithful to the original setting. While resolving the confusion left by the Systematic approach, it is a complicated and less succinct interpretation.

Conclusion

“Rightly dividing the word of truth”⁵⁸ depends on rightly relating Biblical and Systematic Theology. Though they have their distinctives and commonalities, they sweetly complement each other, as seen in the interpretation of James. Systematic Theology brings out the practical wisdom of Scripture in a succinct, logical and theological manner. Biblical Theology adds the depth of the full Biblical historical reality present in individual texts and the whole Bible.

⁵⁷ James 4:8 ESV; quoted in Gemmill, June 11, 2013

⁵⁸ 2 Timothy 2:15 KJV

Systematic Theology needs the structure provided by Biblical Theology, and Biblical Theology needs the balance of Systematic Theology's succinct and tactical approach. Rightly related to one another, Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology better secure the faithful hermeneutic in interpreting "the whole counsel of God."⁵⁹

Word Count: 2,073

⁵⁹ Acts 20:27 ESV

Appendix

Distinctives and Commonalities between Biblical and Systematic Theology

Distinctives

Biblical Theology	Systematic Theology
Descriptive	Logical
Textually Determined	Topical and Hierarchical
Culturally Descriptive	Culturally Confrontational
Biblical Historical Reality Essential	Biblical Historical Reality Non-Essential
The Parts Interpret the Whole	The Whole Interprets the Parts
Uses the Categories of Individual Texts	Utilizes Holistic Categories
Sequential	Systematic

Commonalities

Biblical Theology	Systematic Theology
The Bible as Primary Source	The Bible as Primary Source
Exegetically and Eisegetically Neutral	Exegetically and Eisegetically Neutral
Historical Theology Non-Essential	Historical Theology Non-Essential

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