

Introduction

When delving into the realm of theology, the novice can be quickly overwhelmed not just with the technical terminology, but also with broader distinctive branches. It is common in modern scholarship to speak of biblical theology, systematic theology, pastoral theology, historical theology, missiological theology, contemporary theology, political theology amongst many other categories and subcategories.¹ To be thorough, one can even add the discipline of Natural Theology, which is not rooted in any sort of text, but instead sees a theology derives from the natural world; albeit at a level that submits itself to the special revelation of Scripture. It is within this relative ambiguity that this paper seeks to elucidate the two disciplines of Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology. There is no doubt that these are modern descriptions of two, sometimes hostile, fields of theology. This paper will seek to briefly elaborate on the definition, substance, and methodological differences inherent in these specialties.

Definition & Substance

Upon entering the foray of understanding the relationship between Biblical Theology (henceforth BT) and Systematic Theology (henceforth ST), it doesn't take long to realize that there have been antagonistic tendencies between those who are Biblical theologians (for convenience will call them biblicists) and those we will call systematics. For a fuller understanding of the problems between the two, one can read the article by Gerhard Hasel where he documents the historical development of the tension.² In attempting to convey a definition and consequentially substance, Hasel notes that Johann

¹ Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1986) 13. Ryrie mentions three broad categories overarching all forms. These can be by era (ie. Patristic), viewpoint (ie. Arminian), or focus (ie. Historical).

² Hasel, Gerhard F. "The Relationship Between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology." *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984): 113-127.

Gabler provided the classical definitions of both of these disciplines in 1787. Quoting Gabler from Hasel's article we can see the classical definition as, "There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophies rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors."³ It is within these confines that most subsequent definitions given receive their limited scopes.

Biblical theology then becomes that enterprise which has at its core a connection with history. This contrasts with ST, which is theological in its core. It is important to understand at the fore front that ST is usually considered as dependent on BT. Biblical theology attempts to understand the drawn out explications of the text where as ST uses those explications to form its own systematization. Richard Gaffin Jr. speaks of Gabler's original definitions when he writes, "biblical theology is an historical, and for him that means a purely descriptive, discipline, concerned to discover what in fact the biblical writers thought and taught; dogmatics, on the other, is a didactic or normative discipline, concerned to provide a contemporary statement of faith based ultimately not on the Bible but on philosophy and the use of reason."⁴

Further distinguishing the two disciplines is Charles Ryrie who writes of four characteristics of BT. These include: 1) Even though not required to use ST categories, even BT must be presented in a systematic form; 2) BT pays attention to the soil of history; 3) BT studies revelation in the progressive sequence in which it was given; 4) BT

³ Ibid., 113..

⁴ Gaffin, Richard B. "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology." *Westminster Theological Journal*. 38 (1976): 283.

finds its source material in the Bible.⁵ This presents a good summary not just of definition, but also of method that will be discussed later. It can be noted that it is sometimes difficult to separate a working definition without overlapping inherently into substance or method, but we will try to maintain the distinctions as is possible. Ryrie goes on to define ST as that which denotes the total structure of God's revelation, but is not limited by the canon. In this, ST may include historical backgrounds, apologetics and defense, and exegetical work.⁶ Grudem agrees when he defines ST as "any study that answers the question, 'What does the Bible teach us today?' about any given topic."⁷ It becomes apparent then that ST is concerned with a total approach of the entire Bible. We might then ask what is BT in his view, as it seems obvious that BT is inherently biblical. Granting potential overlap, he distinctly defines BT as being rooted in historical development of a teaching and concern with the individual nature of themes, authors, and times of that particular theological endeavor.⁸ Getting beyond the limitations of BT and the canonical text, others share that ST has three major requirements: 1) the writing will be concerned to elucidate in coherent fashion the internal relations of one aspect of belief to other potentially related beliefs; 2) the writing will show an understanding of the relations between the context of theology and 'the sources specific to the faith' (including tradition); 3) systematics will show an awareness of the relation between the content of theology and 'claims for truth in human culture in general, especially perhaps philosophy and science'⁹

⁵ Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1986) 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995): 21.

⁸ *Ibid.* 23.

⁹ Turner, Max & Joel B Green. "New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology:

I will try and summarize this section on definition and substance. We have seen that BT is rooted in the biblical canon and also connected with that canon being given in an historical frame of reference. On the other hand, ST is concerned with a total approach to theology that is not limited by the text, but instead can interact with other disciplines such as philosophy, science, etc. A summary point by Krister Stendahl has BT being concerned with what the biblical texts meant in the past versus ST being concerned with what it means today.¹⁰ There those who take issue with this past versus present paradigm and seek to demonstrate that BT can and does seek to bring the truths to the present while ST seeks to bring it to the present context of the faith community.¹¹

This dichotomous presentation leaves no doubt as to the schism that has occurred between the two disciplines. Brevard Childs notes “most biblical scholars generally know little about dogmatics [systematic theology], while, conversely, systematic theologians are woefully trained in the Bible.”¹² This demonstrates some understanding of why there exists a certain amount of suspicion between the two camps, but also a potential remedy to bridging this tension.

Methodological Differences

In seeking to understand method it can be realized that these are rooted in the definition and substance. The method of BT is rooted solely in trying to understand the text. This is shown in seeing how individual OT or NT theologians seek to understand their respective fields. This is in contrast to ST, which isn't limited to a text. Walter

Stranger or Friends?” *Between Two Horizons* ed. By Joel B. Green and Max Turner. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000) see note 21.

¹⁰ This is quoted by Hasel, Gerhard F. “The Relationship Between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology.” *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984): 116.

¹¹ Lemke, Werner E. “Theology.” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992): 456.

¹² Childs, Brevard. *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002): 73.

Kaiser, Jr. belabors this point when he writes, “Our proposal is to distinguish sharply biblical theology’s method from that of systematics... there is an inner center or plan to which each writer consciously contributed... these nodal points can be identified, not on the basis of ecclesiastical or theological camps, but such criteria as: 1) critical placements of interpretive statements in the text; 2) frequency of repetition of ideas; 3) recurrence of phrases; 4) resumption of themes; 5) use of categories of assertions previously used; 6) the organizing standard by which people, places, and ideas were marked for approval, contrast, inclusion, and future and present significance.”¹³ I have used this extensive quote to demonstrate the method rooted in the text that has been used historically as well as currently advocated. The method employed by ST is that which is focused on the “collection and then summary of the teaching of all the biblical passages on a particular subject.”¹⁴ As was noted earlier, this method is not limited to just the text, but can also include a collection of philosophical ideas, tradition, science, etc. Additionally, ST seeks to bring those truths to bear on what is applicable for us today in the present. In seeing the potential disparity that BT has in this historical descriptive method, Kaiser suggests, “That which was historically or culturally conditioned must be distinguished from that which is abiding or universal. Biblical theology must not only expound the exegetical meaning of the Bible, but must also attempt to translate the timeless biblical truths into contemporary garb, so as to allow us to appropriate them. The results of such a biblical theology could then serve as the basis for a purified dogmatic or systematic theology.”¹⁵

¹³ Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978): 11.

¹⁴ Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995): 23.

¹⁵ Lemke, Werner E. “Theology.” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992): 450.

Not all agree that BT suffers from this limitation. There is an understanding that even in BT, God has spoken things in His word that aren't bounded by the historical setting in which it was given. Yet those distinctions in method can certainly be accentuated as one looks at the definition and substance.

Conclusion

To summarize, we can highlight that given by Lemke. As it relates to source, BT uses the canon of the entire Bible whereas ST goes beyond this by using Scripture, tradition, reason, human experience, and knowledge. The methodology of BT is exegetical and theological whereas ST is theological and philosophical.¹⁶ It is within these confines that the differences can be clearly understood. Even though BT is rooted more in historical framework, both endeavor to use their respective approaches to bring the truth of God to us in the present. Lemke gives a final suggestion that if BT would continue to bring forth a careful exegesis of the texts, but also to bring them forth in contemporary garb, the results of such a biblical theology could then serve as the basis for a purified dogmatic or systematic theology.¹⁷ Is this the answer that would allow these two historic "enemies" to find themselves, not at odds with one another, but instead amicably complementary to one another? Time will tell.

¹⁶ Lemke, Werner E. "Theology." *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992): 456.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 450.

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