

SERVANT THOUGHTS

Biblical Theology and the Confessing Church¹ Part 1

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Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy insisted that the libretto for his famous oratorio *Elijah* be the dramatic story depicted in Scripture rather than the moralistic composition suggested by his theological advisor. No wonder, Felix's grandfather was Moses Mendelssohn, a well-known Jewish philosopher and Hebraist. His grandson's instinct, however, was distinctly Christian and biblical. To wrench Christianity from historical context, or shall we say text, is tantamount to denying the faith. The historical, exegetical discipline of biblical theology has always been an essential part of the fabric of the church's confession.

Geerhardus Vos's oft quoted statement, "The Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest,"² puts a point on Mendelssohn's insistence. At first glance it might appear that to Vos biblical theology was inimical to systematic categories, and thus the enterprise of dogmatic theology, and so even to creedal or confessional theology itself. This is a very injurious myth, which I hope to help dispel. For Vos, at least, nothing could be further from the truth. As a Christian, a theological professor, and an academic he was firmly committed both to the classic rubrics of systematic theology and the dogmatic confessions of the church.³ As a result, his development of a true biblical theology required filtering its essence

¹ The substance of this article was originally presented as a lecture at the Kerux Conference, Lynnwood, Washington, May 12, 2005.

² Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 24, 26.

³ Vos's first academic appointment at Theologische School (CRC) in Grand Rapids was as professor of didactic and exegetical theology. He wrote almost 1900 pages of dogmatic theology. *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 29-30.

from the polluted waters of the Enlightenment liberalism that characterized the earliest developers of biblical theology as a formal discipline.⁴

Biblical, Systematic, and Confessional Theology Defined

A definition of terms will help further our understanding of the important place biblical theology has in the church's confessional theology, its public expression of what it believes.

Biblical Theology – This is the academic theological discipline that Vos preferred to call “The History of Special Revelation.”⁵ Vos defines biblical theology as follows:

The study of the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space which lie back of even the first committal to writing of any Biblical document, and which for a long time continued to run alongside of the inscripturation of revealed material; this last named procedure is called the study of *Biblical Theology*.⁶

Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.⁷

Biblical Theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than *the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity*.⁸

Biblical theology reveals God *in actu* rather than *in potentia*. The mode of revelation is essentially drama, story, and narrative. Systematic categories in themselves tend to undermine this historical-vertical axis. In himself God is *actus purus* (aseity, self-existent perfection). But in history, relative to his creation, God is *in potentia ad extra*. We only know him through his self-revelation in *opera Dei ad extra*, that is as he interacts with his creation in the history of

⁴ William D. Dennison, “Reason, History, and Revelation: Biblical Theology and the Enlightenment,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 340-60. Cf. J. V. Fesko, “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” 443-77, in the same volume.

⁵ *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), xiv.

⁶ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 15.

redemption. Thus, all of the church's systematic categories must be exegetically rooted in the meta-narrative of Scripture.

Systematic Theology – The name itself refers to the structure of this type of theology, headed as it is under the thematic rubrics of the six classic loci: theology, anthropology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Dogmatic theology is commonly synonymous with systematic theology. However, names define natures. Thus, perhaps some of the dangers of systematic theology are accentuated, and to some degree perpetuated, by the use of the name. The stock in trade of Enlightenment rationalism is systems imposing controllable order on the universe—a concept viewed with just skepticism by postmoderns, but unjustly applied to the theological discipline of systematic theology. Moreover, the academic nature of systematics leaves it open to the tendency to create a distance between the system and the church, believer, and text of Scripture itself. But, this need not be so when the topics themselves are gathered from Scripture through careful exegesis. This was the genius of post-Reformation theologians, culminating in their greatest creedal production, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The potential weakness or misunderstanding created by systematic theology, I submit, is not inherent in the quest to organize the truth of God's historic revelation into biblical categories. It is the church's business to do so. Our own Westminster Confession and Catechisms are a clear testimony to this fact. We even require church officers to take the second vow: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing *the system of doctrine* taught in the Holy Scriptures?" (emphasis added).

Scripture itself points up the importance of forms and patterns of truth: a word pattern reveals a faith and life pattern. A word pattern is what? Words rooted in the historical accomplishment of redemption (see 1 Cor. 15:1-7). In 2 Timothy 1:13-14 Paul commands, "Follow the pattern [ὑποτύπωσιν *hypotupōsin*, form, standard] of the sound [ὑγιαίνοντων *hugainontōn*] words

that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”

Perhaps, reintroducing the word “dogmatic” into our definition may help to emphasize the place of systematized truth in the life and thinking of the church—as the church’s declaration of biblical certitudes. Dogma today is used in an almost entirely pejorative way to mean an arrogant assertion, whereas in the church’s history it refers to the certainties of revealed truth; and most especially the “accepted doctrines of the church.”⁹ Luke’s stated purpose for writing his gospel was “that you [Theophilus] may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4). The word “dogma” is transliterated from the Greek word used by Luke in 2:1, “In those days a *decree* [δόγμα dogma] went out from Caesar Augustus...” (emphasis added). The word sounds a strong note of authority. That very certitude being promoted by Luke is asserted at the beginning of a document the religious truth of which is inextricably rooted in history. It *is* history, divinely inspired and interpreted. The same root word appears with special reference to the decisions of the church in Acts 16:4, “As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance *the decisions* [τὰ δόγματα ta dogmata] that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem” (emphasis added).

A helpful dictionary definition of dogma is: “A doctrine or a corpus of doctrines relating to matters such as morality and faith, set forth in an authoritative manner by a church.”¹⁰ Thus, the church has a fundamental interest in the systematic enterprise, and must have as its primary concern the witness to the dogmatic certainty of God’s work in history.

Confessional Theology – This type of theology is the corporate answer to the question: “What do you believe the Bible teaches?” Thus, “What do *we* believe the Bible teaches?” Confessional theology is the crown jewel of the entire exegetical, theological enterprise.

⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 18.

¹⁰ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “dogma.”

Like biblical theology, confessional theology is concretely related to the church's actual existence in history. It is a work in progress, responding to the questions and challenges which the church's historical situation brings to the infallible text of Scripture. Confessional theology is always in progress (*semper reformanda*), interacting with the situation and history of the church.

Abraham Kuyper comments:

Dogma has no existence at first, but it originates only by degrees, and it is unthinkable without the Church that formulates it. If thus we would avoid the mistake of formulating our dogmatics unhistorically directly from the Scripture, but rather seek to derive it from the Scripture at the hand of the Church, then the Church as a middle-link between Bible and Dogma is absolutely indispensable.¹¹

The description "confessional" as opposed to "systematic" or even "dogmatic" emphasizes the fact that this is biblical theology *ecclesiastically* systematized. Unlike the broader enterprise of systematic theology, confessional theology is a consensus of the confession of the one holy, apostolic church—what the church agrees is true for all people, in all places, and at all times.

We have so distanced ourselves from the Roman Catholic apotheosis of tradition that we jettison the idea of tradition altogether or, at best, simply give the subject short shrift. Presbyterians cannot afford to do this. The egalitarian impulse of the electronic environment faces us with a powerful temptation at this point. We must return to the dogmatic drawing boards and explain to the church the biblical rationale for confessions. Confessional theology is an authoritative road map of the territory of Scripture, an authoritative statement of what the church believes, and is thus willing to live and die for. Such statements define who we are in relation to the triune God. While no one will confuse the map with the actual terrain it defines, we ought to think ourselves fools if we ignore the map and consign ourselves to being lost. And lost we will be in the pantheon of modern idols.

Thus, both systematic or dogmatic theology and biblical theology serve the interests of the confessing church. This systematizing instinct of the confessional church has been present from

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *The Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, transl. by Henrik de Vries (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), 635.

the earliest period of church history as the so-called Apostles' Creed attests. What is also notable is that the confessional categories are embedded in the history of redemption. So while biblical theology as an academic discipline is relatively new, and the academic discipline of Reformed biblical theology is even newer, the historical nature of Gods' revelation in Scripture has been recognized by the church since its inception.

Confessional Theology Is Rooted in Biblical Theology

Biblical theology is necessary to the development of confessional theology. As I have said, all historic confessions are rooted in the historical truth of the Bible. Biblical theology has always been at the heart of the church's confession of what it believes. In this respect we must be careful not to act as if Vos was the first to have biblical theological insight. Vos was the father of the academic theological discipline of Reformed biblical theology, the first chair of which was instituted at Princeton Theological Seminary when it called Vos to be its first professor of biblical theology in 1892.

For example, in the Apostles' Creed the Father is the "maker of heaven and earth." The Son "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; ... The third day he rose again from the dead," and so forth. The Trinitarian confession is deeply and explicitly embedded in the history of redemption with special focus on the incarnation. Thus even such nascent biblical theology also notably yielded a Christocentric emphasis.

Confessional theology is tied to Scripture through the fabric of history. All True confessions of the church are deeply rooted in redemptive history. With the Westminster Confession historical concerns became more self-conscious, explicit, and detailed. In particular, the doctrine of the covenants emerged as a central concern in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras.

In the WCF the concept of covenant is the unifying idea, emerging in the unfolding, historic drama of redemption in the form of several types of covenants, and developing in several

historical periods. The systematic theology of the Reformation was rooted in a movement back to the text of Scripture and the history of redemption. A genuine covenant theology emerged from the return to Scripture. As Michael Horton explains:

Rather than seeing the Bible as a sourcebook for timeless truths, it was regarded as a covenant between God and God's people, orienting it to history and dramatic events interpreted by the primary actor in those events. ...The current recovery of interest in eschatology as the very warp and woof of theology, rather than as an appendix to systematics was anticipated in these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed thinkers...¹²

Vos, Ridderbos, and Gaffin have built on this theology. Horton quotes Ridderbos:

It is not dogma that is central, but the fact of redemptive history itself, which makes such announcements as justification possible. Without minimizing the importance of the former, it is not the *ordo salutis*, but the *historia salutis*, which is primary for Paul. ...The whole Pauline doctrine is a doctrine of Christ and his work; that is its essence.¹³

The Reformed Scholasticism of theologians like Frances Turretin, often maligned as abstract rationalism, was entirely committed to the authority of Scripture as its starting point, and fundamentally historical in its approach to systematizing. In order to accent my point in favor of dogma in its relation to biblical theology, let me revise Ridderbos's assertion about redemptive history and dogma: it is not speculative, abstract dogma, but dogma affirming the divine accomplishment of redemption in history in the person and work of the Incarnate Son that is central for Paul.

The idea of the covenants is the structural matrix of the Westminster Confession, reflecting a mature expression of post-Reformation theology. As Vos asserts,

The Westminster Confession is the Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but is placed in the foreground and has been able to permeate at almost every point.¹⁴

¹² Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30-31. Cf. Herman Ridderbos *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Jordon Station: Ontario, Canada: Paideia, 1982); and *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, transl. by John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

¹⁴ Geerhardus Vos in *A Geerhardus Vos Anthology*, Danny Olinger, ed. (Phillipsburg NJ: P&R, 2005), 356. There are 50 uses of the word "covenant(s)" in the Westminster Standards (cf. WCF 17; WLC 28; WSC 5).

The Westminster Confession begins by affirming a thorough commitment to the covenant document of Scripture itself as the self-interpreting (*analogia fide*) revelation of God in history to his people. WCF 1:9, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.”

Covenant figures prominently (nine times), as would be expected, in Chapter 7 “Of God’s Covenant with Man.” It also figures prominently (16 times) in Larger Catechism questions 30-36 dealing with the accomplishment of redemption in Christ. This section is an expansion of Shorter Catechism questions 20-21 where “covenant” is used once. WSC 20, “Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery? A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.”

Prominent also is the two covenant structure—covenant of works and covenant of grace—of redemptive history and the centrality of Christ the Mediator in that history. Not mentioned, but no less germane or directly related, is the eschatological aspect of the WCF. But, enough has been discussed to demonstrate my thesis that: biblical theology is necessary to and not new to the confessions of the church; biblical, systematic, and confessional theology are distinct but not mutually exclusive to one another; and that this trio of disciplines is essential to preserve the church’s identity, worship, and witness.

In our non-confessional, and often anti-confessional, climate we have a large task ahead of us. Next month, in part 2, I will map out some of the ways in which we can further confessional consciousness in the church.

...to be continued.