

Establishing a Theological Paradigm in a Postmodern Society.

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Abstract. Christian theology is in a constant state of paradigm change.¹ Over the years, fundamental Christian doctrine has been adulterated by an incessant onslaught of extra-scriptural philosophy and opinion. As a result, we are at a time when there is a very wide range of theological opinion concerning the scriptures; opinions that defend their authority, to those that not only reject their authority, but reject the existence of God Himself. In order to establish a foundation from which to move New Testament theology into the future, we will observe where we have been, what the resulting basic schools of theology are, establish a set of presuppositions from which to generate a theology, and set a path for future study.

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It would seem that the number of theological positions that concern the Christian faith is exceeded only by the number of theologians expressing those views. The history of theological debate is a tangled web of opinions that are based upon a wide spectrum of paradigms that vary based upon individual interpretations of scripture and prejudices of the theologians. Scriptural analyses have used a variety of forms of criticism to create several schools of theological methodology over the years that varied from conservative positions that have endured the test of time through radical views that reject the authority of scriptures and have even pronounced the death of God. The accuracy and authority of the scriptures are considered inviolable by some. Others consider the scriptures simply a collection of myths. Some theologians use the accepted Biblical canon as the only source of authority concerning the things of God. Others feel free to use any information from any source, including the Bible as one of many other resources that describe the works of God. Others go a step further, rejecting all supernatural authority and accept as truth only what science and human rational thought can fully explain.

If one were to give much authority to those who espouse such a wide range of theological viewpoints, more questions would be raised than answers. With so many differences in theological opinion, is there any consensus among theologians today? What is the basis upon which to form a theology if there is a lack of a consensus? How can one proceed to form a reasonably authoritative theology with such a cacophony of mixed messages? The answers to these questions require a fundamental knowledge of the past theological work that has been accomplished, and a well-defined method for continued study that is based upon that work and the inviolable presuppositions of the

student. The historian, George Santayana, has said, “Those who are ignorant of the past are destined to repeat it.” In charting a course, it is not wise to repeat the errors of the past. Consequently, in order to establish an understanding of where we are going, it is helpful to observe where we have been. If we can organize the work that has already been done we will be able to establish consensus (or a lack of it), select the positions that have stood the test of time and, allowing for some hermeneutical presuppositions, set forth a reasonable direction for future theological enterprise.

According to Dr. Paul P. Enns², the scope of Christian theology can be organized into five schools of method: Biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology, dogmatic theology, and contemporary theology. An overview of each of these schools is useful at this point. We will notice that few actual theological positions fit nicely within one method, and over the years there has been much overlap between these schools. However, in order to organize our approach to future theological study, we will herein attempt to establish clear definitions of each.

Biblical theology refers to both a method of theological analysis and a liberal movement that was initiated by Walther Eichrodt in 1933 and self-destructed after the publication of Honest to God, by John A.T. Robinson. This movement used a historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation that doomed itself by excluding the divine aspect of scripture and denied scriptural authority. We are interested, not in a dead movement, but rather in Biblical theology as a hermeneutical method. As such, Biblical theology arrives at its theological argument by drawing its authority, context, and material from the Bible in an exegetical manner, sensitive to the progressive revelation of God to man that takes place throughout history. In this context, Biblical theology is “that branch of

theological science which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible.”³ Biblical theology seeks to reject the authority of public opinion or philosophy. Instead, it recognizes a progressive revelation of God throughout Biblical history as revealed in the scriptures. Consequently, as God has gradually revealed more and more of Himself, theology has also matured. One who is engaged in Biblical theology will be actively engaged in the consideration of what are considered important introductory matters such as the author, date of writing, audience, and the purpose for the writing. Knowledge of these matters can provide a context from which to approach the writing, greatly enhancing the understanding of it. If one is to determine the theological context of a subject using Biblical theology, all of the Biblical teaching on that subject will be investigated. *The only source of authority in Biblical theology is the Bible.* Some contemporary practitioners of Biblical theology include Charles Ryrie², Donald Guthrie⁴ and Robert Gundry⁵.

Systematic theology may be defined as “the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works.”⁶ Though Biblical theology is systematic, systematic theology in this context is not exclusively Biblical. For example, “Systematic theology may be done in a denominational context. For example, Baptist theology or Methodist theology are the Christian doctrines presented as Baptists or Methodists understand them. Such a doctrinal statement of belief may be strongly influenced by Biblical teaching,⁷” but insight is also drawn from their denominational history. Though more accurately described as dogmatic, Catholic theology is very systematic in this context since it adds the authority of the church, its leadership, and its tradition to form its theological

statements of belief. Millard Erickson defines systematic theology as “that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to the issues of life.⁸” This definition serves to show that systematic theology can allow the Bible to serve as a primary source of information from which to reach theological conclusions. *The primary source of authority in Systematic theology is the Bible.* However, a “primary” source is not the same thing as the “only” source as applied in Biblical theology, hence any method of theological approach that allows input from extra-Biblical sources is systematic within this context. Some would argue that there is no true Biblical theology, since it is not possible to exegete the scriptures without extra-Biblical presuppositions. When these arguments are taken seriously, the line between Biblical theology and systematic theology becomes very fuzzy. Systematic theology may be organized into several divisions:⁹

- Bibliology: Doctrine of the Bible.
- Theology Proper: Doctrine of God.
- Christology: Doctrine of Christ.
- Pneumatology: Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.
- Angelology: Doctrines of Angels, Satan, and Demons.
- Anthropology: Doctrine of Man.
- Hamartiology: Doctrine of Sin.
- Soteriology: Doctrine of Salvation.
- Ecclesiology: Doctrine of the Church.
- Eschatology: Doctrine of Last Things.

Historical theology looks at the dynamics of theological thought that have taken place through the centuries. It is concerned with the development of Christian theology and the changes in it that have evolved both through the progression of God's revelation of Himself to man. It is also concerned with how the basic doctrines have evolved over the years as a result of the variety of critical approaches to scriptural exegesis. Over the years the direction that the Church has gone has influenced the direction of theology, sometimes deviating from Biblical truth, other times coming back to it. For example, the Reformation with its emphasis on the centrality of Biblical authority returned the theology of the Church to an emphasis of grace. The basic divisions of historical theology coincide with the basic divisions of the history of European and Western civilization since the New Testament scriptures were written:¹⁰

- Ancient Theology: A.D. 70 - 590.
- Medieval Theology: A.D. 590 - 1517.
- Reformation Theology: A.D. 1517 - 1750.
- Modern Theology: A.D. 1750 - Present.

The definition of **dogmatic theology** and systematic theology have been interchanged over the years by writers who have defined systematic theologies and referred to them as "dogmatic." Others have defined dogmatic theologies and referred to them as "systematic." It appears that the term "dogmatic" is used more in German and Dutch literature, while the term "systematic" is used more in American and British literature. The word, "dogmatic" comes from the Latin and Greek word, *dogma*, referring to that which is held as an opinion. During the medieval and reformation historical periods, the church developed hierarchies of authority in its various denominations. As

each tried to establish clear statements of Biblical truth, their ecclesiastical leadership formulated doctrinal statements that were binding on the church membership. The term “dogmatic theology” can be used to designate those doctrinal statements, or articles of faith, that are decreed by church leadership upon its membership. *The source of authority in Dogmatic theology is the Church.* Some examples of systems of dogmatic theology include:

- Arminian Theology. The theology of Jacobus Arminius (1560 - 1609) and adhered to by Methodism, Wesleyanism, the Holiness movement, many charismatics, and others such as the Free Will Baptists.”¹¹
- Calvinistic Theology. The theology of John Calvin as published in Institutes of the Christian Religion.
- Catholic Theology. Most characteristic of dogmatic theology, it is a system of dogma that was produced primarily by the popes, theologians, and councils of the medieval Catholic church. Catholic theology is to be differentiated from Contemporary Catholic theology which rejects some of the church tradition and embraces much of contemporary theological positions, discussed below.
- Covenant Theology. Interpreting the scripture on the basis of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.
- Dispensational Theology. Man was placed under a historical sequence of differing stewardships, each requiring a response of faith. It is a very literal form of interpretation that provides a distinction between Israel and the New Testament church.

Contemporary theology, though sounding very modern in its title, actually originated with the Renaissance of the 14th through the 17th centuries. This time of “new birth” was one where the church “substituted a modern secular individualistic view of life for the medieval religious corporate approach to life. ... Emphasis was placed upon the glory of man and the world instead of upon the glory of God.¹² Under this system, the authority of God and His Word are replaced with human reason; all the truths of life can be adequately explained using science and philosophy. This theology built a framework of secular humanism that has led to religious liberalism and taken to the extreme, the outright denial of all supernatural entities or events. As we approach continued study, contemporary theology is one method that we must be fully aware of, and if our theology is to be Biblical, we will have to be prepared to provide an apologetic argument for all that we believe. Contemporary theology has had a great impact on the theological atmosphere in the last twenty years, creating no lack of dialogue across all fronts. Its rejection of God places its proponents at odds with all traditional Christianity, and its practitioners are considered “lost souls” to many evangelical Christians. Consequently, we have in place an agenda for conflict that is greater than any that is generated by the differences of any other theological method. *The primary source of authority in Contemporary theology is human reason.* Some examples of contemporary theological methods include:

- Liberal theology, or modernism. Any position that does not agree with human reason and established scientific law is rejected. Liberal theology is the basis for secular humanism and the destruction of truth.

- **Neo-Orthodox theology.** An enterprise of the early 20th century, this “new orthodoxy” was intended to return from two centuries of liberal beliefs to more traditional, orthodox, approach. It failed to do so because it failed to reject the liberal foundation it was supposed to correct. Practitioners such as Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Paul Tillich presented voluminous commentaries that, though Biblically based, maintained extra-Biblical liberal doctrine.
- **Radical Theology.** Like any subject enterprise, there are always those on the “lunatic fringe.” Proponents of theological doctrines that greatly deviate from traditional Christian beliefs may be considered radical. Invariably, such systems of theology can be attributed to an individual theologian. Consider a few examples that are worthy of our investigation:

Form criticism. Developed by Rudolf Bultmann (1884 - 1976), form criticism is an effort to explain scripture through the discovery of the literary forms used by the writers. He concluded that the scriptures are a collection of myths that must first be removed before truth can be uncovered.¹³

Worldly Christianity was developed by Detrich Bonhoeffer (1906 - 1945) He was influenced by Karl Barth and promoted a secular, “religionless Christianity” that held to man’s independence from God and any forms of religion.

God is Dead theology. Attributable to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), and still promoted by modern theologians like Thomas

Altizer (b. 1927), God is dead theology affirms the God of creation, but also asserts that all that exists goes through cycles of creation and destruction. By doing so, God willed his own self-annihilation. Man must now learn to get along without God. The “Kingdom of God is not the reign of God, or not in the New Testament as opposed to the Old, for it is that New Jerusalem which God will be ‘all in all,’ and therefore will not be and cannot be ‘God.’”¹⁴

The contemporary theological viewpoints that we see arising in recent years are “often described as a triumph of critical rationality over religious dogmatism.”¹⁵ We have seen a significant shift in world view in two stages. The first stage took place with the advent of modern science as practiced by the likes of Copernicus and Galileo. Their scientific discoveries shook a religious community that could not differentiate between dogma and science. The flat earth was the center of the universe. These truths were every much a part of their dogmatic theology as was their understanding of scripture. As science continued to generate new theories and proofs pertaining to the cosmos, that which was proven became an attractive source of answers to difficult problems that heretofore were addressed only through faith or dogma. The shift from religious dogma to critical rationality has been subtle and pervasive, continuing through this .

A second shift in popular Western world view has taken place as recently as within the last thirty years. By the early 1960’s the mixed stew of liberal theologies was put on a burner to boil, and boil it did. The United States played an important role in establishing Western world view, and was engaged in a vague, unpopular war, the war in Vietnam. Large-scale protests and riots were commonplace for the first time in

contemporary history; rebellion against governmental authority seeded rebellion against all authority, evident by the aggressive response of college and university students throughout the country. Resistance to authority defined a “new freedom.” This new “freedom,” though falling short of anarchy, issued in an era of “free-love,” heavy drug use, and a shift from traditional values to a self-centered, “if it feels good, do it” society. “Looking out for ‘Number One’” was a popular idiom of the day. All of this liberal, self-centered activity is simply a furthering of the social acceptance of critical rationality as the basis for a world view, moving God further away from the center of theological authority.

The result of this shift has been extremely pervasive. As has always been the case in the historical theological enterprise, the world view has infiltrated the church. Membership in the Christian communities bring the baggage of their world view into the body and influence its direction. Churches have had to decide whether to hold to the stable, and unpopular foundations of Biblical theology, or compromise with this new “postmodern” world view and introduce liberal theology into their system of beliefs. In the past twenty years we have seen the more liberal approach making a significant impact on religious thought. Denominations have removed gender references in their hymnals and Bibles to placate the feminist criticism of using a male reference to God. Denominations have also removed references to blood sacrifice from their hymnals. Making them more “user friendly.” “Academic theology has gone wrong in the past (in contrast to liturgy) by pretty much ignoring the narrative form of revelation. It has looked for truth in doctrine rather than in narrative.”¹⁶ Consequently, many pulpits no longer are used as a point from which to propagate the good news of the gospel, but rather are used

to promulgate liberal political views. “Within the Protestant membership, a general drift, varying from denomination to denomination, occurred from a firm adherence to earlier Evangelical theology and the inerrancy of the Scriptures to a modification of these convictions arising from adjustment to the intellectual currents of the day.”¹⁷ Doctrines that are not popular with the liberal world view are not preached. Euphemisms are used to soften the impact of sinful lifestyles and actions so that they can be accepted by religious communities. Homosexuality is an “alternative lifestyle,” the killing of unborn human babies is referred to as being “pro-choice.” The value and dignity of human life has been all but eliminated by the liberal world view, and this postmodern paradigm shift has been accepted by many main-line Christian communities. Not all error has been introduced by liberal theology. “In their writings not a few twentieth-century theologians have (in many cases unwittingly) encourage the trend away from Christian devotional exercises. I refer not merely to publications by religious liberals who would justify an anthropocentric religion, ... what concerns me to a far greater extent is the doctrinal emphasis characteristic of some of the foremost theologians...”¹⁸

The history of religious thought has been through cycles of wandering away from Gods authority, and coming back. The reformation is an example of return. The Great Awakening of 18th century America is a small example of such a return. If the past is any indication of the future, we as a society will continue to go through cyclic stages, but we will continue to wander away from our traditional Christian underpinnings. In the past 20 years, evangelical Christianity has maintained a solid foothold, but has not gained much ground in its attempt to promote fundamental, Biblical theology. At the same time, Islam

has flourished, doubling the size of its membership, and establishing majority influence in much of the world.

The end result of such a cacophony of theological debate is a world that is greatly divided on the issue of religion. In charting a course for future New Testament study, I see activity on two distinct and incompatible fronts. Liberal theology will continue to flourish. The public communications media will continue to shape a public opinion that will continue to be liberal and antagonistic to conservative Christian thought. Tim LaHaye, for instance, maintains that 250,000 secular humanists control the American media, government, unions, and universities.¹⁹ However, throughout the ages, the faithful remnant of God's people has always survived and will continue to do so. We will see a continued series of small revivals that will bolster the promulgation of Biblical theology. The most respected Christian theologian in today's society is Billy Graham, a practitioner of Biblical theology. The gospel is becoming accepted by new and large communities such as "Promise Keepers," a large evangelical, predominantly male, Christian movement. Even the Catholic church, because of a dearth of trained priests, is experiencing a Biblical awakening as lay leadership substitutes the traditional church sacraments with Biblical study.

"Many people today find they cannot ignore their religion's claim to be true, and yet they are aware of various difficulties in affirming its truth."²⁰ In order to establish a foundation for affirmation, it is necessary that one is familiar with their own beliefs, and that some basic presuppositions that are consistent with those beliefs be well-defined. If we are to be engaged in a study of New Testament theology, then the central focus of that study must be the scriptures, not secular human philosophy. The New Testament

proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ, an opportunity for an end between the enmity between God and man that can provide each individual with a personal and permanent relationship with the Creator. God's authority must be duly recognized and accepted for any progress to take place. Therefore, I would submit some of the following summary of faith-inspired presuppositions that are necessary to affect a successful and rewarding investigation of New Testament theology:

1. The Holy Bible was written by men who were divinely inspired by God to provide a record of His revelation of Himself to mankind. The Bible is complete, without error, and entirely sufficient to reveal all of God's will concerning mankind.
2. There is only one God. He is eternal, and not limited by the properties of His creation. He has revealed Himself to us through the person of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
3. Jesus Christ is the eternal, incarnate Son of God. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin, Mary, completely identified with mankind, and revealed the perfect will of God. Through His death on the Cross He provided for the redemption of men from sin.
4. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God through whom God does all of his work. Through illumination, the Holy Spirit enables man to understand God's truth.
5. Man was created by God in His own image as the crowning work of His creation. Man has been given a free choice and in exercising that choice invariably chooses to reject God. The only end for one who rejects God is eternal separation from Him.

6. The only avenue for salvation from this eternal separation is for mankind to turn to God in faith through Jesus Christ. The inspiration for turning to God comes only from the Holy Spirit who seals that decision by becoming active in the life of the believer. This salvation is a gift of God to those who believe, and is not available through any manner or mixture of works, but by grace alone.

Though this list of Biblically-based presuppositions can be significantly expanded and developed, it can also serve as the basis for contextual New Testament study. These basic doctrines are agreed to by main-line Christian denominations because they are scripturally based rather than dogmatically based.

With this foundation, a complete and consistent theology of the New Testament can come from (1) the study of the scriptures, and (2) help from the vast library of commentaries and study helps that are available from many different sources. In all Biblical study, it is the Holy Spirit that inspires and reveals truth, so the student must be sensitive to the illumination that the Spirit can provide in order to separate those commentaries that are consistent with the intent of scripture from those that are not.

If one were to pick up a medical journal that was published over 200 years ago, its contents might be interesting, and even amusing, but rarely would it be relevant. Much has been learned in medical science in the last two hundred years. The same could be said for a similar journal published 100 or even 50 years ago. Some of last year's breaking medical science is already outdated and irrelevant. The same argument holds for most of the areas of science, and any other area of the human learning experience. Man's truth is temporal, lasting only a short time. However, the gospel that was relevant

1900 years ago was relevant 200 years ago and is still relevant today. Because of God's immutability, it will continue to be relevant in the future (1 Peter 1:23). Any attempt by mankind to add to or delete from God's Word results in error (Rev. 22-18-19). It is the New Testament that clearly communicates the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is the New Testament that will continue to do so.

Only Biblically-based methods will provide us with a theology that is immutably relevant. "In this response, we see ourselves as deeply shaped by the postmodern world, ... Yet we affirm ourselves as finding our identity conferred by the history of our faith. A conversation arising from this kind of tension, I believe, promises the most creative possibilities for faith."²¹ The erroneous additions and modifications to theology that have been made over the past two thousand years have attempted to answer questions and fill gaps in understanding God and this world. However, the answers to all of these questions still lie in the scriptures. As we go about the theological enterprise we must seek to understand what God is saying through the scriptures, rather than what we want the scriptures to say. To do this we must understand the context of what we read, the intent of the writer, and needs of the audience, and more often than not, we must have an understanding of the original language used. Oftentimes literal English interpretations of scripture lack the vitality and dynamic of the original tongue, and can leave us with an shallow, incomplete or erroneous understanding. However, we will find that with a life that is submitted to God, a life that has a true and active desire to follow His will, one will be able to approach the scriptures in a way that is immutably relevant in application to every need of our lives throughout the remaining millennia or until the end of the age.

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