Levels of Systematic Theology and the Role of Logic

Layton Talbert[1]

Systematic theology comprises a vast and diverse field of information. A perennial topic of discussion that emerges in connection with this discipline is the role of logic. Systematic theologians themselves seem to emit curiously mixed signals when it comes to describing what constitutes normative systematic theology, particularly in the area of logical inference.

Herman Bavinck writes that the role of systematic theology ("dogmatics") is "to rationally absorb [Scripture's] content and, guided by Scripture itself, to rationally process it and also to acknowledge as truth that which can be deduced from it by lawful inference." Bavinck nevertheless concedes that

> a danger exists on many levels of making mistakes and falling into error. This fact should predispose the dogmatician . . . to modesty. The confession of the church and in even greater measure the dogmatics of an individual person is fallible, subject to Scripture, and never to be put on a level with it.[2]

So, deduction via "lawful inference" necessarily yields "truth"; and yet, that process is so fraught with potential human error that the results of systematic theology are "never to be put on a level with" Scripture. But then where does that leave us with respect to confidence in the binding nature of "truth" derived by "lawful inference"?

Robert Reymond, too, defends inferential deductions as equivalent to the Word of God.

> A word must be said about the willingness of the [Westminster] Confession to include within "the whole counsel of God" truths that "by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture." Some Christians have urged that logical deduction adds to Scripture and therefore must be resisted. This is wrong. *Validly* deduced truths add nothing to the overall truth of Scripture.[3]

The question, of course, is what qualifies as a "*validly* deduced truth." Reymond quotes John Frame for support: "logical deductions" merely "set forth the meaning of Scripture." But Frame, too, follows up with a caveat: "When it is used rightly, logical deduction adds nothing to Scripture. . . . Thus we need not fear any violation of *sola scriptura* as long as we use logic *responsibly*." In other words,

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[2] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:45.

[3] Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 86, emphasis added.

he bookends his defense of logic with the caution that logic may be used wrongly.[4] Frame describes logic as

> a discipline that gives us information that is useful in the application of Scripture, information that ought, indeed, to govern our thinking about Scripture but information that itself is subject to biblical criteria. The logician is no less fallible than are the linguist and the historian.[5]

Not only is the logician himself fallible, but Frame spends six pages exploring the various limitations of logic that should "make us hesitate in drawing some apparently justified logical conclusions."[6] "Therefore," he later adds, "it is not unreasonable, sometimes, to be suspicious of *apparently* sound logical reasoning" because "sometimes things *do* go wrong in logic."[7] Consequently, "our human logic is never the final test of truth."[8] Even "the Confession regards logic as a tool not an authority."[9]

Again, logical deduction "adds nothing to Scripture" and "is as authoritative as Scripture"; and yet, logic is limited and the logician fallible, so that the results of logical deduction are *not necessarily* equivalent to truth. So, where does that leave us with respect to the role and authority of logical inferences in doing systematic theology?

Wayne Grudem, too, defends the use of logic "to draw conclusions from the statements of Scripture"; but he also admits that, in doing so, "we sometimes make mistakes." Consequently, "the deductions we draw from the statements of Scripture are not equal to the statements of Scripture themselves in certainty or authority."[10]

The qualifiers are crucial: *lawful* inference, *good and necessary* inference, *validly* deduced truths, *rightly* used logic, *apparently* sound logical reasoning, a *responsible* use of logic. To conclude from these qualifications that logical deductions should be shunned is, of course, not only illogical but impossible. But the qualifications do compel certain questions. Are all "validly deduced truths" universally

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[4] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), 247, original emphasis. The excerpts from Frame come from a chapter on logic as a tool of theology. I take this to mean that logic, even when used "wrongly" or "irresponsibly" is still logic, just bad logic (based on flawed premises, potentially erroneous intuited data, etc.). For scriptural corroboration of this phenomenon, one need look no further than Paul's frequent use of "God forbid" to deflect conclusions that seem perfectly logical but are dead wrong.

[5] Ibid., 244–45. Charles Hodge even went so far as to suggest that the theologian faces a unique temptation to modify his presentation of the data in keeping with his preferred theories, which necessarily affects the premises of a deduction: "We must be honest here. . . . Even scientific men are sometimes led to suppress or pervert facts which militate against their favorite theories; but the temptation to this form of dishonesty is far less in their case, than in that of the theologian. The truths of religion . . . may alarm the fears or threaten the hopes of men, so that they are under strong temptation to overlook or pervert them." *Systematic Theology* (1871; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 1:12.

[6] Ibid., 255.

[7] Ibid., 260, original emphasis.

[8] Ibid., 258.

[9] Ken Casillas, *Beyond Chapter and Verse: The Theology and Practice of Biblical Application* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 148.

[10] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 18.

recognized as such? Surely *some* entirely logical deductions *can* add to Scripture. That certainly does not mean that logical deduction "must be resisted." But it does mean that we must be aware not only of the limitations of the logician but also the limitations of logic. And it means we need to be able and prepared to differentiate between logical deductions that are necessary and those that are merely feasible or not "validly deduced" and therefore not of equal authority with Scripture.

The first question, then, is how to define a *necessary* inference. Without that, alleged biblical authority could be conferred on any number of logical extrapolations. Differing conclusions on multiple doctrines in a myriad of systematic theologies seem to corroborate that point. One man's necessary inference may be another man's logical assumption— feasible, perhaps, but necessary?

As it turns out, the question of *defining* a necessary inference is fairly easily answered. Casillas identifies "two key criteria for evaluating implications" or inferences, "logical *validity* and logical *soundness*": "For an argument to be *valid*, its conclusion(s) must follow necessarily from its premises. . . . For an argument to be *sound*, all its premises must be true."[11] That means, of course, that any alleged inference must cohere with both the immediate text and its context, as well as the larger "contextual circle of the entire canon."[12] So a technical definition is not particularly mysterious.

The thornier question has to do with how we *identify* a genuinely, universally (or at least nearly universally) recognized necessary inference. Theologians typically carry into the syllogistic or inferential process an interpretive grid that is already in place, the baggage of impinging systematic theological assumptions and conclusions. Again, what one theologian deems "necessary"—based on the systematic theological scaffolding in place that informs his decision—may not be compelling to another theologian.

One of the limitations that should compel us to be judicious in our use of logic is the fact that we are sometimes dealing with incomplete data. In the absence of certain data, we may arrive at what we assume is a "necessary inference" by intuiting missing data that seems to us reasonable but may, in fact, be incorrect. I will return to this fallacy later in the essay.

Interfacing the Theological Disciplines

A brief excursion into the identification and interface of the major theological disciplines will help set the stage for a discussion of the role of logic in systematic theology. Theologians differentiate between an array of interdependent disciplines, each with its own set of specialized tools.[13]

- *Exegetical theology* determines what a text says within its context, which involves an array of grammatical tools for semantic analysis.
- *Biblical theology* determines (based on the previous discipline) what a text (or unit of text) signifies within its larger layers of context, which involves tools for literary analysis.

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[11] Casillas, 228–30, original emphasis.

[12] Ibid., 230.

[13] One is entitled to wonder why, if we all use the same tools, there are so many differences among Bible interpreters. Basically, it is because we do not all use all those tools in the same proportions, in the same order, with the same presuppositions, priorities, proficiency, or care—or any combination of these factors.

- *Systematic theology* determines (based on the previous disciplines) what a text implies in light of other texts, which involves tools of logical analysis.
- *Historical theology* factors in what other interpreters have inferred from the text, which involves tools for historical research and analysis.
- *Practical theology* decides how to apply the text to our faith and practice, which demands what might be called analogical analysis.

The three core theological disciplines are exegetical theology (ET), biblical theology (BT), and systematic theology (ST). Some theologians, following Geerhardus Vos, combine ET and BT as a single discipline. For practical and taxonomical reasons, I prefer to distinguish them in order to underscore their respective focus and domain in the theological process. The differences will become more apparent below, but to summarize the relationship, BT

> employs biblical exegesis [ET] which . . . establishes the intention of specific texts. In turn, it furnishes the material with which dogmatic theology [ST] . . . must build. [Consequently], biblical theology [BT] needs the work of biblical exegetes on individual Bible texts [ET]. . . . It is important to appreciate the role of biblical theology [BT] as intermediary between exegesis [ET] and dogmatics [ST].[14]

The role of logic is at the center of comparing and contrasting BT and ST theology. Theology is a form of knowledge, knowledge is rooted in meaning, and meaning is rooted in language. But language functions on multiple levels, from the simplest meaning-laden components to the most complex combinations and collections of those components. Acknowledging the following oversimplification for the sake of differentiation, the respective disciplines of exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology function *primarily* within respective levels of linguistic domain.[15]

Theological Domain	Component	Example
Exegetical Theology	Words	*just, live, faith*
	Sentences	*The just shall live by faith.*
	Paragraphs	Habakkuk 2:2–4
Biblical Theology	Concepts, Topics, Pericopes	Faith, World, Joseph Narrative
	Books	Habakkuk, Romans, Genesis
	Corpuses	Historical Books, Pauline Epistles
	Testaments	OT/NT Theology
Systematic Theology	The Bible as a Library or Encyclopedia[16]	Theology proper, Bibliology, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, etc.

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[14] D. L. Baker, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 99.

[15] The word "*primarily*" is the functional modifier. In reality, as I will point out later, each discipline sustains a symbiotic and mutually influential relationship with the others.

[16] The *OED* defines *encyclopedia* as "an elaborate and exhaustive repertory of information on all the branches of some particular art or department of knowledge." This category views the Bible as the holistic body of revealed truth.

With that overview as context, a closer look at the three major theological disciplines and their interface will help set the stage for this essay's proposed focus on the role of logic in ST. What follows is abbreviated for the sake of economy; far more detailed explanations of these theological disciplines are readily available elsewhere.

Exegetical Theology

Definition

I love the simplicity of Adolf Schlatter's approach to doing theology. "He was convinced that biblical exegesis was the only proper foundation for systematic theology. . . . His hermeneutical approach can be summed up by one phrase: 'perceptive observation.' For Schlatter, 'every true theologian is first and foremost an observer.'"[17]

Fittingly, Schlatter's definition of exegesis was "seeing what is there before your eyes!"[18] For the sake of a more precise definition that distinguishes it from BT and ST, however, ET may be defined as *the science of extracting the meaning of a given text based on a literary-contextual reading and guided by a genre-sensitive historical-grammatical hermeneutic.*

Vos described ET as a broad category that included exegesis, introduction, canonics, and biblical theology.[19] As I indicated already, I prefer to distinguish ET from BT.[20] As I will use the term, ET refers primarily to the foundational and necessary science of determining the meaning of a given text. ET is where all theology begins; it provides the information with which BT and ST work. And if we (like Bavinck, Reymond, Frame, Hodge, et al.) are serious about authority residing in the text, it is also where all theology ends; it is the final court of appeal, the ultimate verdict on all our theological conclusions—whether biblical, systematic, historical, or practical. It is exegetical *theology* insofar as the meaning of a given biblical text always communicates theological truth.

For example, exegesis pure and simple determines that the semantic value of 1 John 1:5 is that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all"—a theologically freighted linguistic proposition (hence the term exegetical *theology*) with which BT and ST then work in conjunction with other ET data from other texts. It is then up to BT and ST to explain—based on those various layers of context (the entire letter, John's writings, the NT, the whole Bible)—exactly what that statement does (and does not) signify in the wider environment of other texts.

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[17] Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Translator's Preface" to Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 12–14.

[18] Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany's Premiere Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 99.

[19] Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 4–5.

[20] Cf. Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2017); Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2017). Though neither author uses the term "exegetical theology," my distinction is consistent with the basic understanding reflected by both authors. In both volumes, the first several chapters explore the exegetical process before moving expressly (as each volume puts it) "from exegesis to theology."

To use another example, ET determines the semantic value of James 2:17 ("Even so faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself")—again, a theologically freighted proposition all by itself. Further ET in the paragraph helps to fill out the meaning of that proposition. But BT brings the broader epistolary context (e.g., Gal. 2:16) to bear on what James means (and does not mean) in view of the Bible's teaching elsewhere on the soteriological relationship of faith and works.

Function

In an evangelical context, ET operates on two foundational presuppositions:[21] (1) God exists and has revealed himself to man through man in the Scriptures; and (2) God has communicated through characteristically literal language,[22] so that a literary-contextual reading combined with a historical-grammatical hermeneutic is the soundest basis for determining meaning on the textual level. In short, ET pursues the question, "*What did God say?*" or "*What does the text say, and how does it say it?*"[23]

Methodology

ET involves determining, as accurately as possible, a given text's *content* on three principal levels: lexical (vocabulary), grammatical (syntax), and theological (thought communicated). That is done by factoring in, as far as possible, a given text's *context* on at least three principal levels: historical, cultural, and literary (genre). Obviously there is a great deal more that could be said to fill out this methodological process,[24] but this is sufficient for our present purposes.

Biblical Theology

Definition

Years of usage and debate over what defines "biblical theology" have so elasticized the term that what it means depends on whom you read.[25] My own working definition of BT is *the discovery and expression of the theological message that emerges from the Bible when explored inductively on its own terms, in its own context, on the multiple levels of subjects, themes, books, corpuses, testaments, or the whole Bible.*

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[21] Presuppositionless interpretation of communication is impossible; all communication and its interpretation functions on the basis of presuppositions. If you are comprehending this essay, it is because you are operating on the presupposition that I am using an essentially historical-grammatical mode of communication rather than, say, secret code.

[22] Characteristically literal language accommodates metaphorical and symbolic expressions.

[23] I am adapting and expanding the questions J. Barton Payne posed in order to differentiate between the nature and domain of BT and ST. BT asks, "What did God reveal?" while ST additionally asks, "What is true of God?" *Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1962), 21–22.

[24] For a thorough presentation of the exegetical methodology, see the aforementioned volumes in footnote 20.

[25] Cf. Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

Function

Because it is grounded in ET, BT begins with the same foundational assumptions as ET (see above), but it is further informed by the discoveries that emerge from ET itself. The textual meanings uncovered by ET, then, contribute several additional presuppositional assumptions on which BT operates: (3) God reveals himself in Scripture to be truthful, omniscient, omnipotent, and communicative;[26] (4) God's revelation, consequently, is always accurate, reliable, and normative; and (5) God's revelation is, nevertheless, historically progressive as well as authorially and literarily diverse. Beyond ET's question ("*What did God say?*" or "*What does the text say and how does it say it?*"), BT proceeds *further* along the lines of this inquiry: "*What has God revealed?*" or "*What does the Bible say and how does it say it?*"[27]

Methodology and Organization

BT's organization may be historical, literary, topical, or canonical. Often it is a combination of several of these.[28] The methodology is primarily inductive and (usually though not necessarily or exclusively) diachronic. Having said that, however, this does not mean that BT is *purely* inductive or devoid of logical inference. One need only read some of the largescale biblical theologies[29] to discover that the end result often factors in a great deal of ST deduction and inference—some necessary, some merely feasible. James Hamilton frankly admits, "Biblical theology is always done from some systematic perspective."[30] The reason for this is the symbiotic and mutually informative relationship that exists between these disciplines. This relationship is nicely captured by the graphic on the following page.[31] Again, a great deal more could be said regarding BT's methodology and organization, but it is not pertinent to the primary focus of this essay.

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[26] The revelatory reliability of Scripture (an essential assumption for BT to function meaningfully) is tied especially and specifically to these four foundational theological realities. I explore and relate these more fully in my forthcoming *The Trustworthiness of God's Words* (Christian Focus Publishers).

[27] What is the difference between *what did God say* and *what has God revealed?* That is a fair question. By *reveal* I am trying to capture the idea of a larger truth communicated over a broader scope of revelation than a single textual unit.

[28] If you want to see what that looks like, examine the table of contents for titles in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series (edited by D. A. Carson and published by IVP Academic)—titles like Gary Millar's *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, Richard Belcher's *Finding Favor in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, Daniel Hays's *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, or James Hamilton's *With the Clouds of Heaven: The Book of Daniel in Biblical Theology.*

[29] For example, see James Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

[30] Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 46.

[31] Ken Casillas, professor of OT at BJU Seminary, conceived and constructed this graphic with the capable assistance of Amy Schoneweis Vazquez, and kindly gave me permission to include it in this article. The size of the arrows, signifying relative influence, is as important as their direction. This is a slightly more robust way of conveying the relationships between the disciplines than Carson's well-known control line from ET to BT to ST (and Historical Theology) with back arrows from each discipline back to the previous ones.

Systematic Theology

God has given us a body of inspired revelation—an accurate, adequate, yet only partial revelation that is, itself, contextualized within an infallible and self-consistent "system" of truth (divine reality as it is fully known only to God). The absence in Scripture of a single, comprehensive expression of any particular doctrine is noteworthy. Had God intended to furnish an inspired ST, surely the best candidate for the task would have been the church's premiere theologian and cogent logician whose writings have been the cornerstone of systematic theologies ever since.[32] As Thomas Schreiner observes,

> the Pauline letters have played a decisive role in the formation of Christian theology over the centuries. . . . The theological impact of Paul may blind us to the most striking feature of his writings. He never wrote a systematic theology in which all the elements of his thought are related together and presented in a coherent and logical fashion.[33]

Any attempt at a single, systematic, comprehensive expression of truth is conspicuously absent from the NT. In no single book or letter does any biblical author ever attempt to give us a systematically comprehensive treatment of any particular doctrine. Lengthy as it is, 1 Corinthians 15 is not a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of resurrection; we know a great deal more about the resurrection from other passages that is not incorporated into Paul's Corinthian summary of that doctrine.

Even Romans, Schreiner points out in his commentary, leaves out far too much to be considered a comprehensive synopsis of Pauline theology.[34] Some important doctrines are too

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[32] For a quick demonstration of this statement, simply consult the Scripture index of any ST text. For example, of Millard Erickson's sixty columns of Scripture references, eighteen columns come from Paul's letters (twenty if you include Hebrews). That means that nearly 33% of the ET/BT basis for Erickson's 1200-page ST comes from roughly 6% of the Bible. It simply underscores the profound impact of the heavily theological writings of only the fourth most prolific writer of Scripture (behind Moses, Jeremiah, and Luke).

[33] Thomas Schreiner, "Interpreting the Pauline Epistles" in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 412.

[34] *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 15–16.

abbreviated and others are omitted entirely. Soteriology is the letter's primary theological focus, but again Romans hardly furnishes a *comprehensive* soteriology of the NT.

That does not mean that ST is in any way an illegitimate or unreliable discipline. But it is a reminder that God committed the task of systematic theological formulation to an uninspired process. Instead, in the NT, God continued his method of progressive revelation through the inspired, occasioned writings of human instruments, leaving the organizational and deductive task of ST to subsequent church history. This means that ST is both possible and appropriate, but only as authoritative and comprehensive as the ET and BT that supply its building blocks—as the theologians I cited at the beginning of this article take pains to remind us.

Definition

ST is *the logical synthesis, categorization, and organization of the theological teachings derived deductively from the full breadth of Scripture, including culturally relevant articulation and logical inferences that may extend beyond the information explicitly communicated in any text.* That means that it is, by nature, an inferential discipline, and that the end product is inevitably shaped by its principles of organization and methodology. It also means that ST sometimes includes conclusions that are ultimately theoretical, uncertain, and debated.

Function

Because ST is grounded in the discoveries of ET and BT, it begins with all the same foundational assumptions as those disciplines listed earlier. In addition to the assumptions of ET and BT, however, ST operates on the basis of an additional presupposition: (6) God's revelation is a holistic, timelessly relevant, revelationally self-consistent, theologically unified, self-contained body of truth.

Careful ST seeks to avoid secondary assumptions that actually contradict the original presuppositions. For example, while God has revealed himself, he has not *fully* revealed himself—that would be an assumption about God that contradicts part of his self-revelation that he is infinite and unsearchable.[35] Or again, man in the image of God has the capacity to harmonize but not necessarily to harmonize *comprehensively* all that God has revealed—that would be an assumption about man that contradicts the revelation that we are finite and fallen.

Beyond ET's question ("*What did God say?*" or "*What does the text say and how does it say it?*") and BT's question ("*What has God revealed?*" or "*What does the Bible say and how does it say it?*"), ST additionally asks "*What is true of God?*" or "*What does the Bible imply about God (or any other theological topic)?*" To answer that kind of question, ST relies predominantly on ET and BT, but also often draws logical inferences beyond the explicit data of BT or ET. This is part of ST's job as it has come to be defined and practiced.

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[35] It would also contradict specific statements indicating that his revelation, though adequate, is selective and partial (cf. the implications of passages such as Dt 29:29; Jn 8:6; Rv 10:1–4).

The axiomatic starting point of all theology is *revelation*—which implies that (a) we know nothing of God apart from his revealing it, and (b) all we know of God is only what he has revealed.

> The thesis of Deuteronomy 29:29 is that revelation is a matter of divine discretion. God chooses what to reveal and what to withhold. The corollary embedded in that thesis is that revelation is partial. Revelation is reliable disclosure but not full disclosure. The same word *secret* occurs . . . throughout the Old Testament when God *hid* his face from Israel because of their sin. *Secret* doesn't refer to what is nonexistent, but to something . . . *concealed* or *withheld* and is, therefore, *unknown* and *unknowable.* The verse posits only two categories of truth or reality: what is revealed and therefore may be known *with certainty,* and what is concealed and therefore may not be known *with certainty.* Revelation is all about divine self-disclosure, *but only partial* self-disclosure.[36]

A common error in doing ST is to assume that we have at our disposal—even in the Bible—all the truth that there is. We do not. Ironically, part of what God has revealed is that he has concealed certain truths. Revelation 10:1–4 illustrates this fact with arresting clarity.

> I saw still another mighty angel coming down from heaven . . . . When he cried out, seven thunders uttered their voices. Now when the seven thunders uttered their voices, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, and do not write them."

What is so flabbergasting about this passage is not that John was forbidden to record divine revelation which he had been given, *but that we are told about it.* The surface question is, why would God tell John something and then tell him not to tell us? The deeper question is, why would God *tell us that* he told John something and then told him not to tell us? Whatever other purposes this passage may serve, it clearly illustrates that there is additional revelation that God *could* have given us but has chosen to withhold from us. That is why it can be perilous to assume that we can safely make logical deductions based on assumed or intuited missing revelational data.

> Logic is a tool, a capacity that arises from the image of God in us. All tools have their uses as well as their limits. Logic can lead you into cul-de-sacs or down the wrong roads and still be logical, particularly if logic operates on the assumption that one possesses all the facts. You may know the frustration of watching or reading a whodunit, certain that you have solved the mystery, only to discover that the writer withheld some vital piece of evidence that changes the whole complexion of the case. Your confident deduction, under the circumstances, may be . . . logical yet dead wrong, simply because you assumed you had all the data when you didn't. This miscalculation surfaces regularly in theology.[37]

It is one thing to say that God has *accurately* and *adequately* revealed himself, and quite another to say that God has *completely* and *comprehensively* revealed himself. Likewise, a chasm separates the acknowledgement that God has given us all the revelation we need, and the assertion that God has given us all the revelation we need to construct a comprehensive ST that reliably explains even unrevealed

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[36] Layton Talbert, *Beyond Suffering: Discovering the Message of Job* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2007), 263, original emphasis.

[37] Ibid., 251.

things with certainty. For all its utility and necessity in correlating revealed truths, logic is an unreliable *substitute* for divine revelation itself.

Methodology and Organization

ST's organization is *topical* and *logical*, taking the basic truths derived from ET and BT and arranging them in what has become a fairly standardized order. As Carson notes, "to choose topics, to hierarchialize them, is to impose a structure not transparently given in Scripture itself."[38] Consequently, ST tends to omit a large amount of significant biblical content that does not fall under those standard ST categories. The average ST text, for example, omits any treatment of the biblical teaching on prayer, or the scriptural theme of the kingdom, or of the biblical covenants and their theological importance. This is not a criticism; it is simply how ST works.

ST's methodology is *deductive* and *synchronic*. *Synchronic* means that ST typically draws on contextualized statements from across the Bible as a whole and correlates them logically, irrespective of historical setting or revelational progression. Of course, setting and progression are part of the ET/BT process and ideally factored in on the data-gathering end; it is just very rarely discussed in the ST product. *Deductive* implies a methodological use of logic to derive conclusions. All theological disciplines employ logic; one cannot read, process, or draw any conclusions about a text without employing logic on some level. ST, however, goes beyond ET and BT in deriving logical implications and conclusions on multiple levels. Understanding those levels and the role logic plays in conjunction with the ET and BT data at each level helps distinguish between deductions that are necessary and those that are merely feasible but non-binding.

Theologians disagree over whether BT and ST are different in their organization only or also in their nature and methodology. Our seminary has historically recognized a distinction between BT and ST in *both* senses, because there is a real qualitative difference between *kinds* of theological conclusions, between bases for different theological conclusions, and therefore between degrees of certainty/authority of different theological conclusions. And there is a locus where those differences are usually worked out and can be found—namely, in *systematic* theology texts.

Levels of ST

That comparative background prepares us to return to the quandary with which this essay began—the necessary and yet somewhat ambiguous role of logic and inference in ST. The notion of "levels" of ST is not a new one. Various theologians have differentiated between levels of ST, but under different rubrics. In his discussion of ST, for example, DeRouchie references Al Mohler's "theological triage" rubric, which differentiates levels of ST based on their proximity to the core of Christianity.[39]

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[38] Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 101.

[39] DeRouchie, 396–97. First order doctrines "are those most central and essential to Christianity." Second order doctrines are those "that generate reasonable boundaries" which "distinguish denominations and local churches." Third order doctrines tend to deal with more "minor disagreements" between Christians.

It is a useful rubric for evaluating a doctrine's rank within a ST context, but it is not what I have in mind.

Gary Meadors comes closest to the kind of levels that I am proposing, in his introduction to *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*:

> Going beyond the immediate contexts and claiming that there are larger implications that teach us in those contexts, especially when a series of texts is evaluated, is a noble task. Let me illustrate this by a threefold model to account for how the Bible teaches. One can think of the Bible teaching us at three levels:
>
> - direct teaching (teaching that best represents what the original author intended the original audience to understand from the text)
> - implied teaching (teaching that seems reasonably clear by examining how texts speak . . .)
> - creative constructs (theologically constructed views that interpreters argue best represent the totality of the Bible).[40]

Meadors essentially collapses how theologians teach from the Bible with "how the Bible teaches"—which returns us to the issue of inferential authority, especially when we move into the third category of "creative constructs." What happens, however, when "interpreters argue" *with each other* over their "creative constructs"? The implication that "the Bible teaches us" via humanly "constructed views" over which interpreters disagree seems inherently self-contradictory. Conflicting "creative constructs" cannot be "how the Bible teaches us" unless we are prepared to surrender the Bible's (and hence, God's) self-consistency.

Nevertheless, Meadors's paradigm most closely parallels the levels of ST that I have in mind. These levels are (so far as I am aware) of my own devising. They may or may not be clearly identified and differentiated in the theologian's mind or in the systematic theological text itself; but the levels do tend to reflect the general organization and progression of a theologian's treatment of any given topic. But ST generally works through all three levels on virtually any theological topic. While these levels may be susceptible to a degree of oversimplification, it seems to me a useful rubric for dismantling and analyzing the mechanics of ST, particularly with respect to the role of logic.

Level 1 ST

First-level ST simply involves the logical arrangement and presentation of essentially ET and BT data. Straightforward "Bible doctrine is the bread and butter of systematic theology."[41] So ST is first and foremost about identifying, defining, and biblically corroborating what the Bible says about a given topic within the standard systematic theological grid.[42] Take, for example, the doctrine of God.

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[40] *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors, Zondervan Counterpoints Collection (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 10.

[41] Naselli, 284.

[42] The topical grid that guides most ST includes a constellation of major subjects that have been historically and nearly universally agreed upon as central to the task of ST, though the specific order or grouping of these topics is surprisingly unpredictable depending on the theologian. (For example, compare the table of contents in the ST of Wayne

First-level ST is essentially the organized presentation of passages teaching the divine attributes (omniscience, holiness, omnipotence, justice, etc.), or the organized presentation of passages teaching God's oneness (monotheism), passages that speak of God's plurality, passages that indicate distinctions of identity within the Godhead, and so forth. Or, to take another doctrinal example, Level 1 Christology would feature the organized presentation of passages that teach the deity of Christ, as well as passages that teach the humanity of Christ. So long as it represents a faithful presentation of scriptural teaching, Level 1 ST commands universal agreement within the Church, since it is essentially topically organized ET.

<div align="center">Level 2 ST</div>

Second-level ST is signaled by the move toward the logical coordination and coalescing of multiple lines of both explicit and implicit ET and BT data. So, to return to the example of theology proper, Level 2 ST distinguishes between divine attributes as *communicable* (holiness, justice, love, etc.) and *non-communicable* (omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, etc.), based on both explicit BT (verses that teach divine attributes in which God expects or commands us to be like him) and implicit BT (verses that imply that God alone is omnipotent, omniscient, etc.).

Level 2 ST would also describe where the Trinitarian nature of God is explored and hammered out.[43] ***Explicit* ET/BT data** (verses teaching that God is a single, unified being, not a multiplicity of deities; *and* verses teaching that there are also, nonetheless, *some* kind of distinctions within the being of God identified by terms like Father, Son, Spirit) **combined with *implicit* ET/BT data** (e.g., the implication in multiple passages that these three divine "expressions" are temporally co-existent) **produces a conclusion that faithfully reflects both sides of the ET and BT data regarding God's nature** (unity *and* distinction → God is one "Being" in three "Persons") **in a way that preserves *both* lines of data regarding God without creating a logical contradiction** (not God-is-one-and-not-one, but God-is-one-in-three). The mystery inherent in the ET and BT data is preserved in tension, not explained by subordinating one set of data to another.[44]

These are theological conclusions *necessitated* by multiple lines of ET/BT data in order to accurately reflect the full spectrum of the Bible's content. The resulting ST definitions are formulated and designed *not* to remove mystery but (a) to preserve the paradoxical mystery inherent in the biblical data itself, and (b) to fence out a heretical over-emphasis on either side of the data (Monotheistic Trinitarianism vs. polytheism, modalism, or Unitarianism).

Grudem, Millard Erickson, John Frame, and Robert Reymond.) That grid generally includes the doctrines of Scripture, God, Man, Sin, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Salvation, the Church, and Last Things.

[43] This paragraph is complicated by the necessary parenthetic addition of examples of the kinds of data in view. I have bolded the text in this paragraph to make the kernel statement clearer.

[44] Whereas Level 1 ST applies logic primarily on the organizational level, Level 2 ST additionally employs logic on the terminological level. For example, Trinitarian language is based on BT data but employs both terms and logic— one *being/essence* (*ousia*) existing in three *persons* (*hypostases*)—that go beyond the language used expressly in the text, but which seeks to preserve and communicate the full spread of the BT data.

Likewise, Level 2 ST is where the Christological doctrine of the hypostatic union takes shape. *Explicit* **ET/BT data** (e.g., verses where Christ clearly claims and displays attributes of deity *as well as* verses where Christ displays attributes of true humanity) **combined with** *implicit* **ET/BT data** (e.g., the obvious implication that Jesus was neither a liar nor a schizophrenic, nor sometimes God and sometimes man) **produces a conclusion that faithfully reflects both lines of BT data regarding Christ** (Christ is true God and true man combined in one Person in a way that excludes any mixing or confusing of his divine and human natures, so that he is neither a divinized human nor a humanized deity) **without creating a logical contradiction** (not God-and-not-God, but God-Man). Again, the mystery inherent in the ET and BT data is preserved in tension, not explained by subordinating one set of data to another.

Again, these Christological conclusions are *necessitated* by multiple lines of ET/BT data in order to accurately reflect the full spectrum of the Bible's content. The resulting ST definitions are formulated and designed not to remove mystery but (a) to preserve the paradoxical mystery inherent in the biblical data itself, and (b) to fence out a heretical over-emphasis on either side of the data (Theanthropicity vs. Docetism or Arianism). When it comes to Level 2 ST, paradox is the main stock in trade.

> Paradox ultimately points the believer not to unknowns but to revealed theological realities. . . . [B]y candidly acknowledging the limits of knowledge, it drives us back to the truths that are revealed and calls us to submit to them. The alternative is to place so much importance on finding logical resolution that the focus shifts away from the biblical text to extra-biblical distinctions and "necessary" qualifications to the biblical data.[45]

Thinking through this Level 2 ST process nudges us toward a definition of *necessary inference* that helps differentiate between whether conclusions are indispensable, merely feasible, or simply arbitrary. A *necessary inference* is a logically unavoidable conclusion that (1) is necessitated by (a) explicit textual statement and/or (b) the *unavoidable* implication(s) of a text, and (2) contradicts no other (a) explicit textual statement and/or (b) *unavoidable* implication(s) of another text. Even though the application of logic is different than in Level 1 ST, the results of Level 2 ST also command universal agreement (within the Church), because it is tied to both explicit and implicit ET and BT data.

Level 3 ST

Third-level ST incorporates the logical coordination/coalescing of a line (or lines) of ET or BT data with a line (or lines) of logical reasoning to derive a conclusion that is *not expressly* biblical *nor necessitated* by the ET or BT data itself. In other words, at this level, the conclusions tend to be *driven* more by logic than by the data. As such, the inferences at this level are negotiable rather than necessary. Consequently, Level 3 ST conclusions may not command universal agreement.

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[45] Joel Arnold, "Theological Antinomy: A Complementarian Model for Paradox" (publication forthcoming). Arnold adds: "Naturally most thinkers regard their solutions to biblical paradoxes as warranted because they are clear and necessary inferences from the biblical data. But one does wonder why there should be so much ambiguity or outright difference of opinion on how to resolve each paradoxical proposition if the inferential relationship is in fact so strong."

Applying this to the doctrine of theology proper, Level 3 ST would explore how the biblical doctrine of God's eternity may be explained in relation to theories of time (e.g., dimensional vs. linear), the necessary and unnecessary implications of God's spirituality (e.g., anthropomorphism[46]), or the labels we use to designate the precise relations among the members of the Trinity (e.g., eternal generation, spiration, procession). Level 3 Christology might extrapolate on the nature of the virgin birth. Erickson, for example, suggests that the virgin birth, while true, was not logically necessary to the incarnation, so that Christ *could* have had two parents, or no parents, and still been God incarnate in human flesh.[47] Or, third-level ST might explore the relation of the virgin birth to Jesus' sinlessness; may we infer (as some have) from God's use of the virgin birth that human sinfulness is passed genetically through the male? Similarly, Level 3 ST is the arena in which the Christological issue of peccability versus impeccability is raised; did the human nature of Christ mean he was capable of sinning, or did the divine nature of Christ render him incapable of sinning and, if the latter, how could Christ have been genuinely tempted if there was no possibility of his sinning? The debate over monotheletism versus dyotheletism would also be a Level 3 ST issue. Did Jesus have one will or two—a question taken up at the Third Council of Constantinople in 680, where they decided on dyotheletism and condemned monotheletism as heresy; but debate on that issue continues within orthodoxy because we simply don't have enough ET/BT data or *necessary* inference to settle the issue definitively and compellingly.

Summary of ST Levels

Levels 1 and 2, though organized topically and logically, are still fueled and driven in their conclusions by the ET/BT data. Level 3 tends to produce logic-driven conclusions simply because we have insufficient *definitive* ET/BT data to resolve some questions that naturally arise. Level 3 ST is where theologians may resort to inferring missing data not included in the revelation record, or to integrating logical or philosophical assumptions. Consequently, this is the level of ST that moves into areas of disagreement among otherwise orthodox theologians.

The "best" Level 3 ST aims at defending important points and implications of Levels 1 and 2. But the fact that we do not have express and definitive ET/BT data means we have to use logic to fill gaps and answer questions that Scripture does not directly answer; and some ST does that better than others. The most reliable authoritative ST conclusions are those that are *driven* by BT data (whether explicit or implicit) which is grounded in careful ET data.

Whenever you detect, in the formulation or defense of a doctrine, the conspicuous *absence* of scriptural data at key points—and the injection of logic to fill the gap created by that absence of data—then you are almost certainly in the more tentative territory of Level 3 ST. Even that distinction can

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[46] See my paper "'Greater Is He Than Man Can Know': Divine Repentance and a Brief Inquiry into Anthropomorphism & Anthropopathism, Impassibility & Affectability," accessible at https://seminary.bju.edu/theology-in-3d/anthropo-what/.

[47] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 688.

be tricky and debatable at times. The line between a possible or even good inference and a *necessary* inference is often a thin one.

The Problem

But here is the problem: in many of these areas of disagreement, many of these orthodox theologians believe they are in necessary and authoritative Level 2 territory. The difficulty with distinguishing especially between Levels 2 and 3 (as I suggested earlier) is that theologians disagree with each other over the authority of their conclusions and the necessity of their inferences. For example, here is an excerpt on baptism from the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647. (I have bolded certain phrases for the sake of comparison below):

> **Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary**; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person (Heb. 9:10, 19, 20, 21, 22; Acts 2:41; Acts 16:33; Mark 7:4).

> **Not only those that do actually profess** faith in and obedience unto Christ (Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 8:37, 38), **but also the infants** of one or both believing parents, are to be baptized (Gen. 17:7, 9, 10 with Gal. 3:9, 14 and Col. 2:11, 12 & Acts 2:38, 39 & Rom. 4:11, 12; I Cor. 7:14; Matt. 28:19; Mark 10:13, 14, 15, 16; Luke 18:15).

These are what adherents (like Robert Reymond at the outset of this article) would defend as "good and necessary" inferences; after all, look at all the ET data represented by the attached verses! By contrast, here is an excerpt on baptism from the Baptist Confession of 1689 (note that the bolded phrases below directly contradict those above):

> **Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary** to the due administration of this ordinance (Matt. 3:16; John 3:23).

> **Those who do actually profess** repentance toward God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, **are the only proper subjects** of this ordinance (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:36-37, 2:41, 8:12, 18:8).

How do two sets of theologians cite multiple passages and yet come to exactly opposite conclusions concerning how it is "necessary" or "not necessary" for baptism to be administered, and to whom? Neither would say that the ET data is self-contradictory. The difference lies in different lexical conclusions, hermeneutical presuppositions, foundational ST conclusions, and therefore the premises used to argue for each position.

But ask a Presbyterian or a Baptist whether his view of baptism is Level 2 or Level 3! Level 3 would imply that it is uncertain and negotiable, and neither is going to admit that. But Level 2 would imply that it is sufficiently textually grounded to be acknowledged by all believers as necessary and authoritative.

Again, Level 3 ST tends to be where specific doctrines crystallize into different systems of theology: Calvinism (unconditional election in conjunction with particular redemption) versus Amyraldianism (unconditional election in conjunction with universal provision) versus

Arminianism (conditional or corporate election in conjunction with universal provision). However convinced theologians may be of their respective views, it seems difficult to insist that such doctrinal conclusions are the result of *necessary* inference, or that they "add nothing" to the revelation of Scripture itself, when so much of the Church arrives at different conclusions regarding the same ET/BT data. Inference that does not command broad concurrence can hardly be described as *necessary*. And yet all of us hold to certain specific doctrines or theological systems because we believe the ET/BT data compel them, even though we are aware that much of the Church may disagree with us. What do we do with this impasse?

A Proposed Resolution

Allow me to illustrate a resolution. In the previous issue of *JBTW*, I explored Jesus' use of ST in his answer to the Sadducees' question about a future resurrection.[48] It is fair to ask, based on my differentiation between levels of ST, under which category of ST Jesus' answer falls. It is clearly beyond Level 1 ST because Jesus is drawing a doctrinal inference from a passage that does not directly teach a future resurrection. If my explanation of Jesus' argument is correct, his conclusion would be an example of Level 2 ST, in which case it would seem to be incumbent upon the Church to accept not only his conclusions but also (my explanation of) his reasoning as a necessary inference of the BT data.

I am well aware, however, that many (perhaps most) interpreters are not prepared to concede my explanation of Jesus' Level 2 ST argument. If Jesus' argument is Level 3 ST, however, then we are essentially in the negotiable realm of adiaphora. Yet Jesus obviously considered his argument to be utterly unambiguous, completely compelling, and non-negotiable.

My tentative resolution to this question, then, is twofold. (1) I personally believe that Jesus is doing what I identify as Level 2 ST; he is teaching the certainty and clarity of a doctrine (future, bodily resurrection) by necessary inference from a text that does not directly teach or address that doctrine (Ex 3:6) on the basis of other inferences alluded to in that text (God's covenantal relationship with the patriarchs and the inviolability of his covenantal promises to them), inferences that are grounded in a broader biblical-theological context that includes many other passages of Scripture. However, (2) my *conclusion* that Jesus is doing Level 2 ST is, itself, Level 3 ST, since it is grounded in certain hermeneutical presuppositions which I am convinced are correct, but which others are not.

Likewise, my basic views as a Baptist, or a premillennialist, or a dispensationalist are, in my convinced opinion, BT-driven Level 2 ST. But my *conclusion* that those views are Level 2 ST is, itself, Level 3 ST. That may sound circuitous and evasive; but how else are we to reconcile that every theological system and denomination holds to allegedly "necessary" inferences and authoritative doctrinal positions with which many others disagree?

The point is not that Level 3 ST is irrelevant, but that we need to be candid and aware of the role of logic and other mitigating influences at the different levels of ST conclusions—both our own and those of others. Again, one man's necessary inference is another's feasible but not necessarily

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[48] See "Jesus, the Sadducees, and the Resurrection: A Case Study of Systematic Theology in the Bible—The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *JBTW* 1/1 (Fall 2020), 69–90.

necessary inference. Understanding the components of Level 3 ST helps us be more aware of what goes into some ST conclusions and why we may be at liberty to agree or disagree with them, depending on whether I believe that the interpretation of the ET/BT data (and the underlying hermeneutical and theological presuppositions behind that interpretation) are justified.

Correlating the Disciplines

So, is ET, BT, or ST superior? That is a little like asking which member of the Trinity is superior. The answer, I suggest, is *yes* (in both cases). With respect to the theological disciplines, each excels over the others in certain ways and for certain uses. And each is essential and irreplaceable for the others to function properly and fully. All of them provide a necessary methodological check-and-balance for the theological enterprise. That is why our seminary emphasizes ST *and* BT, built on a thorough grounding in ET.

There is no shortage of reflection on why these disciplines need each other, and what we forfeit by emphasizing one to the neglect of the others.

> None of these disciplines can stand alone or be omitted. Without thorough exegesis biblical theology will be superficial. Without biblical theology the church is liable to approach the Bible as a collection of proof texts, picking out those suited to its particular interests and ignoring the witness of the Bible as a whole. Without dogmatic theology the Bible will remain an ancient book of alien culture, unrelated to the modern world.[49]

Similarly, with respect to the symbiotic relationship between BT and ST in particular, Michael Horton reflects,

> Without biblical theology, systematic theology easily surrenders the dynamism of revelation to timeless truths; without systematic theology, biblical theology surrenders the Bible's internal coherence—the relation of the parts to the whole.[50]

I like to describe the practical ramifications of the symbiotic relationship between these disciplines more illustratively. ST is like turning a piece of wild, raw countryside into a finely cultivated piece of productive farmland with symmetrical patchwork fields and crisp fence-lines and orderly crops and segregated livestock. Without ST we would have less appreciation for the Bible as a holistic, self-consistent, *pedagogical* vehicle for communicating God's revelation on every topic necessary for man's knowledge and welfare. We would tend to view the Bible as a rather loosely fitting collection of historical and literary documents. We would have no clear, organized, refined teaching of the Trinity, the nature of Christ, soteriology, or dozens of other important doctrines. Farms display a manmade beauty and order and structure. At the same time, there are some things you just will not see on a farm that you can see only in a more natural setting.

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[49] D. L. Baker, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, 99.

[50] Michael S. Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 29.

BT is like the uncultivated countryside that has its own kind of natural order and undomesticated beauty. Its arrangement is not manmade, though wilderness can be explored, and laced with hiking trails to make it more accessible, and even managed to be more naturally productive. Without BT we would have less appreciation for the Bible as a living, organic, multi-dimensional *literary* vehicle for communicating God's revelation on a wide variety of non-ST issues intended for man's edification and enrichment. We would tend to view the Bible as merely a textbook of isolated, propositional proof texts, viewed only in terms of human questions and humanly selected categories. We would overlook Luke's unique emphasis on women, John's unparalleled development of *kosmos*, the hinge-theme of wrath on which the story of Esther turns, and numberless other distinctive thematic emphases with theological import. But again, to return to the illustration, there are some things you will not see in the wilderness that you can find only on a farm.

In short, without thoughtful ST we lose the Bible's pedagogical/catechetical value as a coherently unified source of self-consistent theology. Without attentive BT we lose the Bible's historical/descriptive value as a literarily diverse source of multi-vocal theological expression. And without careful ET we lose the Bible's objective guide and guardrails for both BT and ST.

Conclusions

Systematic theologian Millard Erickson defines ST as "that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based *primarily* on the Scriptures."[51] The word "primarily" is an implicit acknowledgement that other factors enter into the ST endeavor. That is not a problem; that is how the discipline works. It becomes a problem only when one confuses feasible conclusions with necessary inferences with scriptural authority.

Systematic theologian Herman Bavinck's warning of the potential dangers inherent in the systematization process displays his customary wisdom and candor.

> It is completely true that in the sciences and in philosophy and theology in particular, systematic construction has done much harm. As a result, content has frequently been sacrificed to form, reality to idea, and capacity to will. When a theologian or philosopher attempts dialectically to construct reality from an a priori principle, when for the sake of system a hiatus is arbitrarily filled or a troublesome fact eliminated, there is every reason to . . . [warn] against the Moloch of system. . . . But the misuse that has often been made of system does not justify our positing an either-or. . . .
>
> For dogmatics is a positive science, gets all its material from revelation, and does not have the right to modify or expand that content by speculation apart from that revelation. When because of its weakness or limitations it is faced with the choice either of simply letting the truths of the faith stand alongside one another or, in the interest of maintaining systematic form, of failing to do justice to one of them, dogmatics must absolutely opt for the former and resist the desire for a well-integrated system. On the other hand, one must maintain the position that such a dilemma can occur only as a result of the limitations of our insight. For if the knowledge of God has been revealed by himself in his Word, it cannot contain contradictory elements or be in conflict with

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[51] Erickson, 8, emphasis added.

what is known of God from nature and history. God's thoughts cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily form an organic unity.[52]

Historically, part of ST's job has been to raise questions and search for answers not directly addressed in the Bible. Predictably, the result of that part of the process involves conclusions based on available but incomplete data. Such answers may be logical but not expressly biblical, and therefore may or may not be correct.

ST is both unavoidable and indispensable. It organizes and coordinates the truths of Scripture. It documents and summarizes the doctrines of the Bible. It often draws necessary theological conclusions not expressly formulated in Scripture. And it seeks to push the boundaries of what we do not know by exploring the potential ramifications of what we do know. To the degree that ST remains moored to the ET/BT data of the text, its conclusions are both necessary and helpful. To the degree that ST drifts from the moorings of the ET/BT data, so that its conclusions are driven more by logical inferences (or philosophy or experience or tradition), its conclusions tend to become speculative or even spurious.

To whatever degree my ST refrains from stating dogmatically what the text neither *states* nor *necessitates*, and from bending texts to derive a conclusion, to that degree its conclusions are ET/BT-driven. Whenever a theological conclusion steps off the sound footing of the text to assert a view or position for which I have no explicit textual authority, I have just moved to Level 3 ST. Again, there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. It is unavoidable if we have a modicum of curiosity about issues not directly addressed or definitively answered in Scripture. What is important to recognize is the difference between BT and ST, the various levels of ST, when we have moved from one level to another, and the fact that the further we move from stable textual footing the less authority we can claim for our theological conclusions. Ultimate theological authority always resides in the text.

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[52] Bavinck, 1:44–45.