

## PREFACE

I am thankful to editor Andrew McGowan for inviting me to present this fine group of essays to its readers. Reformed theology has often professed to be ‘always reforming’ (*semper reformanda*), but it has often been focused too much on its past achievements (*reformata*) at the expense of seeking new insight (*reformanda*). So I am delighted to see this book, and I am enthusiastic about the perspective set forth by McGowan’s introduction.

Nobody knows what theology, even Reformed theology, will be like in the future. So this book is not a series of predictions. Rather, these discussions of the future are *normative*. The authors tell us not what Reformed theology will be like in the future, but what it *ought* to be like. They identify problems to be solved, opportunities to be seized, resources to be appropriated, dangers to be avoided.

One major topic of interest to them is the nature of systematic theology as a discipline. Is there a ‘system’ of Christian truth that theologians can discern? If so, what is the relation of that system to the biblical text? The answers do not seem as obvious today as they may have seemed a hundred years ago. Stephen Williams explores in this regard how the search for logically consistent formulations can lead us away from the ‘wider system’ of Scripture and of the life-context of biblical teaching. He also warns us against theologies too narrowly focused on defending the distinctives of a particular denomination or tradition. Gamble and Bray recommend basing systematics more closely on

biblical theology.<sup>1</sup> Vanhoozer recommends a method of ‘triangulation’, in which we learn from God by correlating Scripture, church and world, participating with them in the ‘theodrama’ of salvation.

I do appreciate the attempts of Williams and Vanhoozer to make systematic theology less of an abstract conceptual theory, and more of a guide to the Christian life. So I have defined theology as ‘the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life’.<sup>2</sup> Exegetical theology applies specific passages, biblical theology, the history of redemption, and systematics to the Bible as a whole. So Robert Reymond identifies the typical question of the systematic theologian, ‘What does the whole Bible teach about such and such a topic?’ But that teaching is always applicatory. It is the *didachē* or *didaskalia* of Paul’s pastoral epistles; that is, to be ‘healthy’ (*hygiainos*), conducive to spiritual health (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1). The questions of systematics guide not only theory, but all other sorts of practice as well, so that we find systematics not only in the tomes of professional scholars, but also in Sunday school materials for 11-year-olds, in laypersons’ conferences, in sermons. And all Christians are systematic theologians when they take God’s Word into their hearts and lives.

As a long-time triangulator, I share Vanhoozer’s concerns about maintaining the primacy of Scripture alongside the vast complexity of other factors that go into human knowledge, even of the Scriptures. I applaud his rich discussion of this complexity. But I worry that in the triangulation literature, the

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1. My good friend Richard Gamble accuses me of relating orthodox biblical theology too closely to liberalism in my *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P. & R., 2002), p. 197. I reply that he exaggerates the force of my comparison: (1) I referred to ‘some’, not all, biblical theologians in the passage he discusses, and (2) my comparison is only with regard to theological *emphasis*, not with regard to any specific doctrinal issues. I think it overstates the matter to say that I am here creating a ‘guilt by association’ or that I have been uncharitable. In fact, I am very enthusiastic about biblical theology as one of many ways of appropriating biblical truth, and I say so plainly on pp. 7–8 of the volume. If anyone wants to discuss my view in a serious way, they would be wise (and charitable) to look at my systematic statement of it rather than such incidental references as the above. That statement is in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P. & R., 1987), pp. 207–212. See also Chapter 16 of my forthcoming *Doctrine of the Christian Life*.
  2. *Doctrine of the Knowledge*, p. 81. Readers of these essays should note that this definition of theology has a future orientation, as well as a foundation in biblical authority. Theology takes the unchanging Word of God and applies it to each new situation as it arises.

complexity may drown out the simplicity. The simplicity is that we hear the Word of God and do it, that we obey God rather than man. Given that triangulation is the key to our understanding and use of Scripture, that process ought to lead us back to the Bible, where we can say, 'Here God is speaking.' If hermeneutical complexity makes it too difficult for us ever to say this, then it has become too complex.

It is an essential of the Christian faith that believers are able to distinguish the Word of God from the word of man. History has shown that Christians have often erred in making this distinction by oversimplified exegesis. Triangulators (again, me among them) show how we cannot understand or properly use biblical texts without relating them to ancient language and culture, church creeds and tradition, our present community and the working of the Spirit in our heart. But if this process works properly, it must bring us to a place where we can say, 'Thus says the Lord,' even against ancient and modern culture, against our present community, and even against church creeds and tradition.

Certainly, there are many passages and teachings of Scripture that we can understand and affirm without much hermeneutical sophistication. Scripture teaches plainly that God created the world, that he values righteousness, that he hates murder and adultery, that he sent his Son to die for sinners, that he raised Jesus from the dead. In conflict with those who deny such teachings, we must not allow ourselves to be silenced by scepticism about what the Bible really means or how many factors must be related to other factors. Rather, our message should be loud and clear.

That clarity should be our goal, even as we explore more complicated issues like the Trinity, the nature of the atonement and so on. We must exegete responsibly, using all the tools at our disposal, doing our best to relate everything to everything else, taking into account the dramatic structure of Scripture, the communal nature of theology, and the spiritual maturity needed for interpretation. But this process should not leave us hanging – it should bring us to a point of confidence, where we can set forth God's words against the errors of sinners.

I have so far been speaking of confidence about theological propositions, and I am fully aware that the Bible, and theology rightly done, are more than merely propositional. Theology is the whole theodrama, in which we participate. But our roles in that drama, our living before God and one another, also require confidence. Our use of Scripture should energize our decisions and actions, not throw us into confusion.

Much as we try to see theological propositions in a larger perspective, however, they continue to play a large role in the life of the church, so that

disagreements about them threaten the peace and unity of God's people. So we need to continue to devote attention to them. Thus many essays in this volume deal with specific theological issues: the Trinity, Christology, the atonement, old and new covenants, union with Christ, justification and the church. It is significant that three of these, on the covenants, union with Christ and justification, deal with a potentially divisive debate in American Presbyterianism today.

Here I find Gaffin's treatment especially illuminating on the question of whether God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the believer. Whether or not Scripture specifically refers to such imputation, it is clearly implicit in our union with Christ. Remember that 'imputation' means to reckon the righteousness or guilt of one person to another. But to be one with Christ is certainly to have his righteousness as our own. In him we become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). Far from rendering imputation unnecessary, union with Christ is impossible without imputation, and vice versa. I am convinced that the church will make no progress on the justification issue until this point is fully understood and appreciated.

I could say much more by way of interaction with these insightful and wise authors, but my job is to whet the reader's appetite, and I hope that job is done. To read this book is not only to recall how rich a resource Reformed theology has been in the past, but to anticipate even more rich blessings from it in the future. May God use this book as a tool for continuing reformation.

John Frame