

Old Princeton and Westminster: The Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology

ARTICLE HISTORY

SUBMITTED

20 February 2023

REVISED

5 April 2023

ACCEPTED

10 April 2023

PAGE

59 - 74

Peter A. Lillback

Westminster Theological Seminary, USA
plillback@wts.edu

ABSTRACT

Historic continuity exists between the "Old Princeton" and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. While this continuity could be considered from various vantage points, it is especially evident in how theologians from both institutions have engaged in the interrelationship between biblical and systematic theology. These theological traditions have had an abiding concern for interpreting the Scriptures correctly due to their deep commitment to the authority of the biblical canon.

Keywords: Old Princeton, Westminster, biblical theology, systematic theology.



Introduction

The concern for the proper interpretation of Scripture is inherent in the canon. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, sought to correct an errant interpretation of the Mosaic law (Matt. 5:17-19, 21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). John's record of Jesus' teaching shows that our Lord declared that the Scriptures, when correctly interpreted, provided eternal life by faith in him (Jn. 5:39-47). Luke's record of Jesus' teaching demonstrates that his saving work was the heart of the Old Testament canon (Lk. 24:25-27, 45-48). Paul recognized the exemplary character of the OT (1 Cor. 10:6-11) as well as the Christ-centeredness of the Old Testament (2 Cor. 1:20). In Galatians, he suggests an allegorical interpretation of the patriarchal era (Gal. 4:21-31). Hebrews begins with the declaration of the ultimate fulfillment of Old Testament revelation in Christ (Heb. 1:1-2).

The best method to interpret Scripture is critical to the church's history. The disparate hermeneutics utilized by the interpreters of Scripture in the ancient church is evident in Augustine.¹ The concern for a literal versus a figurative interpretation is evidenced by the diverse hermeneutical traditions in the church's history. Examples of these are the Alexandrian allegorical approach, the Medieval four-fold interpretation, Origen's interpretive method, and the historical-grammatical method of Calvin.² The history of interpretation wrestled with the continuity and discontinuity of the Old and New Testaments, reaching a decisive perspective in Calvin's *Institutes* Book II, 10-11.³ Calvin's pioneering Reformed biblical interpretation blazed a trail to a distinctive method that pointed his students toward biblical theology.⁴

For many in Calvin's tradition, the Westminster Standards are the climactic statement of Reformed Theology in the Reformation age. Their publication in 1647 brought the creedal development of the Protestant Reformation to its historical conclusion. The Westminster Standards distilled Calvin's approach and incorporated the concept of covenant unity into its statements⁵, developing the unity of the Bible under the theme of the progressive development of God's self-disclosure in history climaxing in Christ's incarnation and completed redemption. Christ's redemptive work was developed in terms of both unions with Christ⁶ and the application of this salvation as the *ordo salutis* of the Holy Spirit's ministry of sovereign grace.⁷

Westminster Theological Seminary, founded in 1929, took its name from this Confession. The seminary has maintained this system of confessional theology with an *ex*

1 For example, see his *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 1.1.1. in Kyle Barton, "Interpreting Scripture with Augustine," *Conversant Faith*, 11 February 2016, <https://conversantfaith.com/2016/02/11/interpreting-scripture-with-augustine/>.

2 See, for example, Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) and Moses Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Academic, 1987).

3 See Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). Cf. Morton Smith, *Systematic Theology* (Greenville: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), I. 16; Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (P&R, 1980), 11.

4 Calvin's understanding of the seminal features of biblical theology can be seen in "Christ the End of the Law" in *The Practical Calvinist*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2002), 97-113.

5 Cf. WCF, Chapter VII.1-6.

6 Shorter Catechism Q&A#30. See also Andy Schreiber, "Union with Christ in the Westminster Shorter Catechism," *The Daily Genevan*, 8 October 2017, <http://www.thedailygenevan.com/blog/2017/10/8/union-with-christ-in-the-westminster-shorter-catechism>.

7 See articles X-XVI on effectual calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, etc. See also Stephen Unthank, "Union with Christ: The Westminster Confession," *Place for Truth*, 22 February 2019, <https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/union-christ-westminster-confession>.

animo commitment required of its faculty and Board of Trustees.⁸ J. Gresham Machen's leadership in the battle over the truthfulness of the biblical faith in the context of the reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary brought with it not only the Reformed theology of the Westminster Standards but also the developing science of orthodox biblical theology championed by Geerhardus Vos.⁹ This commitment has recognized that the Westminster Standards are the high-water mark of Reformed confessional theology while being only the spring of biblical theology.

Biblical theology emphasizes the diverse yet organic nature of God's historically redemptive self-revelation in the Messiah. It distinguishes itself from the methods of Systematic and Confessional theology born in the fires of the Reformation's concern for biblical truth that Reformed orthodoxy further developed. Systematic and confessional theology are both aware of the historical aspects of revelation and interact with its themes in terms of prophecies, types, the progressive revelation of the covenant, and the distinctive administration of grace in the various epochs and dispensations of Scripture. However, systematic theology generally prioritizes logical classification rather than biblical-historical development. In contrast, biblical theology emphasizes diversity in unity in the biblical story, while systematic theology seeks logical harmony in its quest for definitive doctrinal truth. Biblical theologians might be compared to travel guides on a tour of the Bible's historical terrain. Systematic theologians are like taxonomists who collect and compare the theological fauna and flora encountered on the expedition through Scripture. In the Westminster context, both disciplines have been valued and are considered allies with complementary concerns.

Literature Review

The Relationship between Reformed Biblical and Systematic Theology

Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) of Princeton Theological Seminary is considered by many as the father of Reformed orthodox biblical theology. Vos succinctly stated the distinctive qualities of biblical theology in his inaugural address at Princeton in 1894.¹⁰ For Vos, the-

⁸ Board of Trustees Westminster Theological Seminary, "Affirmations and Denials Regarding Recent Issues," 3 December 2008, <http://files1.wts.edu/uploads/images/files/Board%20Affirmations%20and%20Denials.pdf>.

⁹ WTS's approach to seminary education has reflected Matthew 13:51-52, a joining of the old and the new: Machen's Reformational theology reflected the old. Van Til's development of Kuyperian apologetics reflected the new. The Presbyterianism of Machen represented the old, but his joining it with the Reformed ecclesiology of R. B. Kuiper represented the new. The wedding of the old Presbyterianism in America (Machen) and that of Scotland (Murray) with the historic Reformed theology of the Netherlands (Van Til) represented a new Reformed ecumenicity as the Seminary was born with historic conservatism and Biblical creativity. The creative union of old and new in WTS theology has continued throughout its almost 100 years. All the while maintaining commitment and integrity to the historic Westminster Standards, the faculty developed and explored new concepts of theology and ministry: historic-redemptive Preaching (Clowney), presuppositional apologetics (Van Til); Biblical counseling (Adams, Powlison); contextual cross-cultural missions (Conn); creation ordinance ethics (Murray); the primacy of eschatology in New Testament exegesis as expressed in the theology of the "already and not yet" (Gaffin); the full inerrancy of the Biblical autographs coupled with an unflinching consideration of challenges to inspiration (Stonehouse, Young, Murray); the truth of God's revelation in Scripture viewed through the multiple perspectives and themes of revelation (Poythress); the importance of Christian truth as expressed in both Reformed and non-Reformed traditions (Wooley, Davis); the integration of technology with the study of Biblical languages (Groves), as well as interaction with new ecumenical challenges in Presbyterianism (Clowney). The growing commitment to online education and multiple language theological education are further examples of creativity as pedagogy and technology unite to advance WTS' global vision.

¹⁰ Vos' Inaugural Address, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," may be found in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (P&R, 1980), 3-24. For a compare-and-contrast study exploring the views of Warfield and Vos on the relationship between biblical and systematic theology, see Richard Lints, "Two Theologies or One? Warfield and Vos on the Nature of Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (1992): 235-53.

ology is the science of the knowledge of God.¹¹ However, this science is unique among all others since the object pursued by the student is the knowledge by revelation that God, the object of the science, has Himself already given to the student.¹² Thus theology is the study of God's Self-revelation.¹³ The theologian's task is to deal with the revelatory texts of Scripture by the principles of exegesis.¹⁴ Vos states, "In general, then, biblical theology is that part of Exegetical Theology which deals with the revelation of God."¹⁵ Flowing out of the exegetical task, however, the biblical scholar soon becomes aware of the necessity of making sense that God's revelation was not given in the definitive statements and polished definitions of systematic theology but rather in the dramatic episodes of the history of salvation.¹⁶

Vos summarises biblical theology by three attributes: The Continuity of Historical Progress in God's Revelation,¹⁷ The Organic Character of Revelation,¹⁸ and The Multiformity or Variegated Nature of The Teaching Found in Revelation.¹⁹ Thus Vos defines the science of biblical theology as follows: "Biblical Theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than *the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity.*"²⁰

Biblical theology is a newer theological science than dogmatics and systematic theology, while it emerges from two streams. The first is the historic reformed appreciation of God's progressive self-disclosure in the covenant's history.²¹ This hermeneutical approach began in the early Reformation with Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin and continued to be perfected by reformed theologians through the post-Reformation era.²²

The second impetus was from the less orthodox and sometimes even liberal spirit of higher criticism of the Scriptures.²³ This latter hermeneutic conceived the Bible as merely human writings, perhaps inspired as great literature is considered to be inspired, but not inspired in the Pauline sense of "God-breathed." (2 Tim. 3:16 – *theopneustos*). The higher critical methods saw the ancient Biblical literature as conflicting compositions on religious themes with all the idiosyncrasies and divergences of multiple authors and distinct genres composed over extended periods as they eventually evolved into a monotheism from primitive animism and polytheism. The seeming "concurus" of the documents and texts was due to cultural parallels, common themes of human religious aspiration, and the hand

11 Vos, 4.

12 Vos, 4–5.

13 Vos, 5.

14 Vos, 6.

15 Vos, 6.

16 See Vos, 4–5. Vos says, "It is certainly not without significance that God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system, but in a book of history, the parallel to which in dramatic interest and simple eloquence is nowhere to be found" (Vos, 23).

17 Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology", 7–8.

18 Vos, 11.

19 Vos, 13–14.

20 Vos, 15.

21 Vos, 10.

22 See notes 3 and 4 above.

23 The ironic early history of biblical theology is captured well by Vos: "It was the spirit of Rationalism which first led to distinguishing in the contents of the Scriptures between what was purely human, individual, local, temporal—in a word, conditioned by the subjectivity of the writers—and what was eternally valid, divine truth. The latter, of course, was identified with the teachings of the shallow Rationalism of that period." Vos, 15.

of later redactors who sought to harmonize the inherent contradictions and tensions the higher critics claimed to be inescapably apparent to the honest scholar.²⁴ The unique contribution of Reformed Biblical Theology is that it affirms and maintains historical Biblical orthodoxy and yet possesses an equally deep commitment to full scholarly engagement with the issues raised by higher criticism.²⁵

Vos' presentation of biblical theology as the progressive historical self-revelation of God culminating in Christ's kingdom sought to harmonize with the uncompromising commitment to the inerrancy of the old Princetonians, Hodge and Warfield. Hence, the Bible's distinctive epochs and different styles and emphases must be understood, embraced, and interpreted as God's organic and variegated historical revelation of Christ. Rather than seeing the Bible as hopelessly contradictory and discordant as posited by the higher critics, the Bible was historically considered a rich Christological unfolding of God's redemptive purpose seen from many different yet ultimately concordant perspectives. What the earlier Reformed theologians had understood so well in terms of the history of the covenant was not only correct, but it was also paradigmatic for many other organically related yet distinct historical redemptive themes. Thus, historic Reformed theology's articulation of the unified, progressive, and organic understanding of Christ and His covenant was the initial stage of carefully studying God's revealed word in terms of the progressive unfolding of the history of redemption.

Vos illustrates this relationship between biblical and systematic theology with the organic image of the rings of a tree.

The line of revelation is like the stem of those trees that grow in rings. Each successive ring has grown out of the preceding one. But out of the sap and vigor that is in this stem there springs a crown with branches and leaves and flowers and fruit. Such is the true relation between Biblical and Systematic Theology. Dogmatics is the crown which grows out of all the work that Biblical Theology can accomplish ... [Biblical Theology] will not so much prove these doctrines, as it will do what is far better than proof - make them grow out organically before our eyes from the stem of revelation.²⁶

Vos also articulated his emphasis in his "Introduction: The Nature and Method of Biblical Theology". Chapter One of his *Biblical Theology*, where he defines biblical theology as the branch of exegetical theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God, deposited in the Bible.²⁷ He explains that the historic progressiveness of the revelation process "has not completed itself in one exhaustive act, but unfolded itself in a long series of successive acts."²⁸ An analogy to illustrate the difference between biblical and systematic theology is the "line" representing biblical theology and the "circle" representing

²⁴ Vos sees the scholarly denial of the truth of Biblical revelation emanating from the philosophical expression of evolution applied to the history of revelation. Vos, 16-17.

²⁵ Vos, 19.

²⁶ Lee Irons has helpfully summarized salient quotations from Vos, Warfield, Murray and Gaffin on biblical and systematic theology. See "Biblical and Systematic Theology: A Digest of Reformed Opinion on Their Proper Relationship," *The Upper Register*, https://www.upper-register.com/papers/bt_st.html.

²⁷ Irons, "Biblical and Systematic Theology."

²⁸ Irons.

systematic theology.²⁹ For Vos, since the process of revelation comes to its conclusion in the canon, there is a deepening integration when understood guards against the misuse of proof texts of biblical and systematic theology through the process of revelation.³⁰

B. B. Warfield on the Relationship of Biblical Theology to Systematic Theology

Vos' contemporary at Princeton, B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), joined Vos in affirming the importance of biblical theology in the work of systematic theology.³¹ Warfield's key points can be summarised as follows:

- 1) Biblical theology emerges from excellent exegesis of specific texts of Scripture.³²
- 2) This careful work of exegesis and biblical theology properly understood leads to sound systematic theology.³³
- 3) Illustratively, Systematic theology should not create a mosaic but frame a landscape derived from the Scriptures.³⁴
- 4) A further analogy emerges from the military illustrating the inter-relationships of exegesis, biblical and systematic theology:

The immediate work of *exegesis* may be compared to the work of a *recruiting officer*: it draws out from the mass of mankind the men who are to constitute the army. *Biblical Theology* organizes these men into *companies and regiments and corps*, arranged in marching order and accoutered for service. *Systematic Theology* combines these companies and regiments and corps into an *army* - a single and unitary whole, determined by its own all-pervasive principle.... The simile is far from a perfect one; but it may illustrate the mutual relations of the disciplines, and also, perhaps, suggest the historical element that attaches to Biblical Theology, and the element of all-inclusive systematization which is inseparable from Systematic Theology. [emphasis mine.]³⁵

Early Westminster: John Murray's Perspective on Biblical and Systematic Theology

Vos' integration and differentiation of biblical and systematic theology, the melding of Hodge, Warfield, and Vos of the Old Princeton, continued under Westminster's seminal theologian and exegete John Murray. Murray, a student of Vos at Princeton, brought Westminster a deep appreciation for the importance of biblical theology. The essential themes of Vos' biblical theology are affirmed by Murray as follows:³⁶

²⁹ Irons.

³⁰ Irons.

³¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," in *Studies in Theology* (Oxford, 1932), 49–87; Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 7 (1896): 243–71. See Irons.

³² Warfield.

³³ Warfield.

³⁴ Warfield.

³⁵ Warfield.

³⁶ The following quotes of Murray are found in John Murray, "Systematic Theology," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. IV (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 1–21 which are taken from Murray's articles: *Westminster Theological Journal* 25, no. 2 (May 1963): 133–42, and 26, no. 1 (November 1963): 33–46.

- 1) [While the] method of systematic theology is logical, that of biblical theology is historical.
- 2) Our perspective is not biblical if we do not reckon with this history and the process and progression it involves.
- 3) The covenantal institution is fundamental to any construction of redemptive history and revelation.
- 4) [Biblical theology] is indispensable to the systematic theology faithful to the Bible.
- 5) Biblical theology is regulative of exegesis.
- 6) Only when systematic theology is rooted in biblical theology does it exemplify its proper function and achieve its purpose.
- 7) Biblical Theology protects against the danger of abstraction from biblical history, a potential temptation for systematic theology.
- 8) Biblical Theology prevents the misuse of Scripture through the danger of misusing proof texts.

The weighty theological contributions of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr have sustained this legacy of the old Princeton affirmed by John Murray.

Richard B. Gaffin Jr. and Westminster's Continuing Emphasis on Biblical Theology

Following John Murray's lead, Westminster's Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. has endeavored to advance the biblical-theological insights of Princetonian Geerhardus Vos.³⁷ Gaffin affirms the substantial extent to which "Vos and Murray agree in their conception of biblical the-ology and its relationship to systematic theology."³⁸ Gaffin's primary emphases can be summarised in the following.

- 1) Biblical theology addresses the tendency of systematic theology to de-historicize biblical texts.
- 2) Biblical theology is indispensable to systematic theology because it is regulative of exegesis.
- 3) The analogy of Scripture depends on the historical unity of biblical revelation demonstrated by biblical theology.
- 4) Exegesis ought to be biblical-theological and thus follow the hermeneutical principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture.
- 5) Biblical theology is the systematic theology the Bible engages in, providing the seminal form of authentic systematic theology.
- 6) Attention to the unity-in-diversity of the Old Testament and the unity-in-diversity of the New Testament joined in common witness to Christ leads to the near identity

³⁷ See Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *The New Testament Student and Theology, Vol. III of The New Testament Student*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley: P&R, 1976), 32–50; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics," in *The Vitality of Reformed Theology: Proceedings of the International Theological Congress*, eds. J. M. Batteau, J. W. Maris, and K. Veling (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1994), 16–50; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. by E. R. Geehan (Nutley: P&R, 1980), 228–37.

³⁸ For the following quotes, cf. Irons.

of Biblical and Systematic Theology.³⁹

- 7) Although Gaffin subsequently nuanced the assertion,⁴⁰ he noted that given the essential nature of biblical theology for understanding the Scriptures, the use of the term systematic theology ought to be reconsidered.⁴¹
- 8) Gaffin's analogy to explain the relationship between biblical and systematic theology is that biblical theology is comparable to a plot analysis of a drama. Systematic theology discusses the actors and their actions that create the plot.⁴²

In order to summarise the relationship between the venerable and necessary methods of systematic theology with the newer yet rewarding method of biblical theology, a chart of the analogies used to explain their relationship may be helpful.

Discussions

Analogies for the Relationship of Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology

To summarise our study thus far, it is helpful to assemble the various analogies our biblical theologians have offered to explain the relationship between the two theology methods. Each is listed below with their suggested explanatory biblical and systematic theology comparisons.

Geerhardus Vos

A Line and a Circle

An Organic Lifecycle

A Tree and Its Rings and the Tree's Branches, Crown and Fruit

The Circle of Revelation Is Not A School, but a Covenant

A Dramatic story not a Dogmatic Handbook

B. B. Warfield

A Military Recruiter, A Platoon, A Division, An Army

Not a Mosaic, But Framing a Landscape

Richard B Gaffin, Jr.

A Dramatic Story with its plot plan and character analysis

While not as valuable as the analogies of Vos, Warfield, and Gaffin, I have suggested that reading the Bible together with systematic and biblical theologians is like going on a journey with a city tour guide (biblical theologian) and with a biological taxonomist (systematic theologian). In sum, a comparative chart of these two approaches to theology may be helpful (see Table 1).

³⁹ Irons.

⁴⁰ Irons.

⁴¹ Irons.

⁴² Irons.

Table 1. A Comparison of Systematic and Biblical Theology

Systematic Theology	Biblical Theology
Logical order of Revelation	Historical Order of Revelation
Harmonic Consistency	Organic Consistency
Categorizing	Descriptive
Incorporates Church History	Focuses on Biblical History of Revelation
Systematic Unity	Unfolding Progressive Diversity in Unity
Exegetical and Confessional	Primarily Exegetical
Timeless Realities of Revelation	Historical Contexts & Drama of Revelation
Redemption Accomplished & Applied	Salvation Progressively Revealed in History
Accents Divine Coherence of Biblical Truth	Accents History of God’s Revelation

Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology in the Theological Encyclopedia

These complementary biblical disciplines are essential components of the Reformed expression of the theological encyclopedia. A brief consideration of their unique place in the structure of Reformed theological science shows the relationship of biblical and systematic theology with other critical disciplines of theological reflection.

The word “encyclopedia” means the “full circle” of “instruction” or “training” a student needs to master to complete his education. The concept of a “theological encyclopedia” was developed to explain the place each theological focus occupies among the theological disciplines. Understanding the natural tendency of each method aids in clarifying the interplay of biblical and systematic theology.

Historically, Abraham Kuyper developed the concept of the theological encyclopedia.⁴³ Before Kuyper, those in the Reformation tradition initiated a Biblically-based theological encyclopedia to supplant the classic medieval methods of theology. These earlier methods included the “*Sic et Non*” (a comparison of the “yes” and “no” of various conflicting and competing Christian writers creating something akin to a Christian “Talmudic” tradition), the *Sentences* of Lombard (the consideration of the classic texts of theology and the glosses of subsequent Medieval theologians) as well as the attempt to synthesize the ancient philosophical teaching of Plato and Aristotle with Christian theology (as Thomas Aquinas’ synthesis of Aristotle and Medieval Theology).

Smith divides the Theological Encyclopedia into “general” (“Since all truth comes from God, and since every fact is, therefore, revelational, it necessarily follows that the whole circle of human learning is theological. It all comes from God.”) and “directly theological.” The latter he divides into four major sections: exegetical, historical, systematic, and practical.⁴⁴ Kuyper writes as follows:

This attempt to write a Theological Encyclopedia, too, purposely avoids therefore every appearance of neutrality, which is after all bound to be dishonest at heart; and makes no secret of what will appear from every page, that the Reformed Theology is here accepted as *the* Theology in its very purest form. By this we do not mean to imply that the Reformed theologians are to us the best theologians, but we merely state, that Reformed Theology, 1,

⁴³ See Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 45–55.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Systematic Theology*, L14–18.

has interpreted the object of Theology most accurately, and 2, has shown the way most clearly by which to reach knowledge of this object. Let no one take this statement to intend the least infringement upon the respect which the writer of this encyclopedia is also compelled to pay to the gigantic labors of Lutheran, Romish, and other theologians. His declaration but intends to make it clearly known, that he himself cannot stand indifferently to his personal faith, and to this consequent confession concerning the object of Theology, and therefore does not hesitate to state it as his conviction that the Reformed Theology with respect to this has grasped the truth most firmly.⁴⁵

Thus, the outline of the Reformed theological encyclopedia is as follows:

Table 2. The Elements and Order of a Reformed Biblically Focused Theological Encyclopedia

Biblical Introduction	The knowledge of the Bible’s content, its inspiration and reliability and its development within its historic contexts culminating in the canon of the Holy Scripture.
Linguistics	Learning Greek and Hebrew, the languages in which the inspired authors wrote and the inerrant autographs were written.
Dogmatics	The mastery of the dogmatic truths required of orthodox Christianity established by the Patristic era’s ecumenical Councils and Creeds that define Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy.
Hermeneutics and Exegesis	The principles and practices of explaining the meaning of Scripture (exegesis) and the general philosophy of interpreting the Scriptures in light of their historical unfolding of Christ’s saving work in all of revelation (hermeneutics).
Church History and Historical Theology	The history of the church in its interaction with culture, heresies and philosophies and how this has created the progressive development of Christian thought and practice.
Biblical Theology⁴⁶	The study of the historical and organic development of biblical revelation in its various epochs pursuing God’s Christological purpose in all of Scripture recognizing the limitation of the understanding by the recipients of this revelation in light of the progressive character of revelation.
Systematic Theology	The construction of the System of doctrine is found in the Scriptures and summarised in the Confession of Faith and the critique of conflicting creeds and theologies.
Apologetics	The defense of the faith against the challenges of opposing views through the creation of a Christian philosophy or <i>weltanschauung</i> as well as a critique of these philosophical and theological antagonists.
Homiletics	The preaching and teaching of this Biblical faith in the contemporary culture and context of a given community of faith.
Practical Theology⁴⁷	The advancing of the Church through God-centered worship, faithful pastoral care, and Christ-centered missions ⁴⁸ to non-believers in various world cultures.

⁴⁵ Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 50–51.

⁴⁶ Morton Smith defines biblical theology as follows: “This is a study of the gradual development of the revelation of God through the Bible. It is historical in its nature and yet also exegetical. The attempt is made to understand what each particular historical period in the Bible would have understood about various different aspects of the revelation of God made to them down to that point.” *Systematic Theology*, I. 15. Smith also notes the “Covenantal Method” of systematic Theology as reflected by Coccejus, Wittsius, Vitringa and Thornwell in their division of theology under the categories of “before the law, under the law, and after the law.” He says, “the principle of distribution of this system is the historical development of the doctrine rather than the subject matter itself. It would fit better with what we today call Biblical theology than with systematic theology,” 16.

⁴⁷ Vos argues that biblical theology is also to be practical. However, consider Harvey Conn’s 1982 Inaugural lecture, “The Missionary Task of Theology: A Love/Hate Relationship?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (1983): 16, “Questions about the meaning of Scripture do not arise simply out of essentializing concerns. This is not to ignore or minimize the definitional characteristic of all theologizing that is done by covenant. It is simply to recognize that such questions are also missiological—our calling to relate the words of Scripture to our world views, our cultures, our homogeneous units of world ‘peoples.’”

⁴⁸ Conn, 20.

In this order, biblical theology is viewed as the indispensable preparation for biblically sound systematic theology.

Understanding the distinct tendencies of biblical and systematic theology underscores the potential misuse of each if not adequately exercised in conjunction with the other. A summary chart may prove helpful (see Table 3):

Table 3. The Tendencies and Potential Misuse of the Biblical and Systematic Theological Methods

Biblical Theology	Systematic Theology
<i>Tendency:</i> Inductive – movement from the specific Biblical data to the general themes of Scripture. <i>Misuse:</i> To emphasize the historically diverse phenomena of revelation to diminish the inerrancy of Scripture.	<i>Tendency:</i> Deductive – to move from dogmatic positions and defined doctrines to evaluate the specifics. <i>Misuse:</i> To so emphasize the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture that the difficulties posed by Scripture itself to Scripture’s claims for inspiration are overlooked or ignored.
<i>Tendency:</i> Creativity – a desire to see fresh insights in Scripture and from its historical context of revelation prompted by new discoveries in archeology, linguistics, and exegesis. <i>Misuse:</i> To blur creedal boundaries established in the church’s history in the quest to explore new avenues of research.	<i>Tendency:</i> Conservative – to preserve the hard-won confessional truths of Scripture in battles with heresies and falsehoods for the life and health of the church militant. <i>Misuse:</i> To resist advances in theological knowledge that reveal new facets of the inexhaustible riches of revelation.
<i>Tendency:</i> An interaction with secular scholarship in terms of the hermeneutical philosophies of the zeitgeist. <i>Misuse:</i> To follow the trends of the era uncritically in order to be relevant.	<i>Tendency:</i> An interaction with secular scholarship in terms of the general philosophical zeitgeist. <i>Misuse:</i> To be instinctively and/or excessively critical of new insights the deploying the apologetic and elenctic character of historic Reformed orthodoxy.
<i>Tendency:</i> An impetus to explore and challenge older interpretations and perspectives held by the church and seminary. <i>Misuse:</i> To advocate novel ideas without sufficient investigation or biblical warrant.	<i>Tendency:</i> An impetus to defend and declare the theological legacy that has withstood the test of time. <i>Misuse:</i> To emphasize or focus on issues that are no longer theologically or culturally primary in importance.

With the perspectives of Vos, Warfield, Murray, and Gaffin in mind, it is clear that the interplay between biblical and systematic theology serves to honor the tendencies and ward off the potential misuse inherent in each.

Proposed Affirmations and Denials Regarding Biblical and Systematic Theology

In the context of the Westminster Standards, biblical and systematic theology should be viewed as necessary and complementary disciplines in the Reformed theological encyclopedia. Reformed theologians must pursue the necessary and fruitful interplay between biblical and systematic theology by recognizing their distinct tendencies and potential misuse. To that end, as an exercise in clarification, the following suggested affirmations and denials are offered for reflection.

- 1A. We affirm that biblical theology is essential to the Reformed theological encyclopedia

- 1D. We deny that the biblical-theological method necessarily undermines systematic theology or denies the teachings of the *Westminster Standards*.
- 2A. We affirm that biblical theology must preserve the historical significance of the Ancient Near Eastern context when seeking to interpret Scripture.
- 2D. We deny that this historical milieu, as reflected in archeological discovery, Ancient Near Eastern literature, or New Testament historical data, is essential to biblical studies. They are fundamentally essential to know before one can begin to read the Bible and to understand its central themes, as affirmed in the confessional principles of the self-interpreting character of Scripture and the perspicuity of Scripture.⁴⁹
- 3A. We affirm that the *Westminster Standards* have a historical context that motivated and influenced its themes, emphases, and content.
- 3D. We deny that its biblical conclusions cannot be timelessly valid when the standards summarise the truth of Scripture.⁵⁰
- 4A. We affirm that the Bible is inexhaustible in its truth and application.
- 4D. We deny the implication that the system of truth summarised in the *Westminster Standards* is so historically bound. It cannot continue to instruct the church since each new facet of truth developed from the Scriptures only further reflects the richness of revelation and in no way diminishes the splendor of truth previously known.
- 5A. We affirm that biblical and systematic theology are interdependent disciplines and thus mutually accountable in their duty to correct and sustain each other in the pursuit and declaration of the meaning of God's written revelation.
- 5D. We deny that biblical theology can approach the Scriptures in a state of apostolic reprobation. Rather, biblical theology must be conscious of its presuppositions, confessional commitments, and historical milieu. Those significantly impact the practice of hermeneutics.⁵¹
- 6A. We affirm that a spirit of godly free academic inquiry can co-exist in the context of deep confessional fidelity.
- 6D. We deny that biblical theology cannot aid systematic theology, that the emphases of systematic theology must necessarily prevent the pursuits of biblical theology, or that biblical theology's exploratory concerns properly pursued compromises the confessional truths of our systematic theology.
- 7A. We affirm that freedom of inquiry in biblical studies and the pursuit of creative

49 See especially *WCF*, I. iv, vii, ix, x.

50 We must balance the historic and abiding validity of our *Confession* with the legitimate missiological and cultural concerns expressed by Harvey Conn, *WTJ* 45 (1983): 16–17.

51 Vos' previously cited remarks are pertinent here, "The second point to be emphasized in our treatment of Biblical Theology is that the historical character of the truth is not in any way antithetical to, but throughout subordinated to, its revealed character. Scriptural truth is not absolute, notwithstanding its historic setting; but the historic setting has been employed by God for the very purpose of revealing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It is not the duty of Biblical Theology to seek first the historic features of the Scriptural ideas, and to think that the absolute character of the truth as revealed of God is something secondary to be added thereunto. The reality of revelation should be the supreme factor by which the historic factor is kept under control. With the greatest variety of historical aspects, there can, nevertheless, be no inconsistencies or contradictions in the Word of God," 19.

- biblical insights within the boundaries of our *standards* are virtues being pursued by biblical scholars.
- 7D. We deny that a concern for Confessional integrity is a species of dogmatic close-mindedness or confessional myopia that tends to suppress academic freedom.
- 8A. We affirm that biblical theology rightfully emphasizes the eschatological breaking of eternity into time as Christ’s resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit inaugurated the Kingdom of God.
- 8D. But we deny that this eschatological emphasis of the divine “indicative” of union with Christ diminishes, distorts, or denies the existential duties of the believer in his day-to-day duties in the here and now in pursuit of obedience to the divine “imperative”.
- 9A. We affirm that the historical context of the biblical writers emphasized by biblical theology and the historical context of the church’s theological debates emphasized by systematic theology are essential questions for consideration in understanding the Bible’s meaning.
- 9D. We deny that such knowledge is necessary to understand the Scriptures or that such historical knowledge can be known in a final and confident way, given the inherent problems with establishing certainty in historical study.
- 10A. We affirm the Christocentricity of the history of redemption as revealed in all Holy Scripture.
- 10D. We deny that this leads to a Christomonism. It emphasizes only the person and work of Christ, such that moral duties affirmed in the old covenantal era or the new covenantal era contain no binding moral imperatives for God’s people, or that a call to obedience to the Lordship of Christ is a neonomian moralism, or that there is no abiding moral imperative upon all mankind emanating from God’s covenant with Adam in the creation ordinances established in creation and truly revealed in the history of God’s revelation in Genesis.⁵²
- 11A. We affirm that every theological discipline must concern itself with Confessional and doctrinal purity and a sincere concern for the boundaries of Biblical and confessional orthodoxy.
- 11D. We deny that a theologian at a confessional institution laboring in any aspect of the theological encyclopedia may work or write independently of his confessional obligations and vows.
- 12A. We affirm that theologian’s work, as in every other aspect of the Christian life, must operate under the threefold Christian-theistic ethics standard: the Word of God, the motive of the love of God and neighbor, and the pursuit of the Glory of God.
- 12D. We deny that theology in any of its expressions is to be governed solely by the

⁵² Cf. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 67.

author's creativity or the trends or values of the prevailing scholarly consensus or dominant worldview.

- 13A. We affirm that the Scriptures were written in a pre-scientific form and intentionally utilized the categories of thought and exploration that were meaningful in their ancient culture. In such a way, divine inspiration assures that they are genuine and will continue to be true regardless of scientific advances and discoveries. Care should be exercised using terms such as "myth" to describe the ancient historical events in Scripture that were communicated through pre-scientific terminology.
- 13D. We deny that any part of the canon of the Holy Scriptures is a myth if this word implies untruth or demands a "demythologization" to make the biblical accounts believable to contemporary cultures.⁵³
- 14A. We affirm that all true theology must base its claims upon a full affirmation of the *principium theologiae essendi* (the fundamental theological principle of being, which is God) as well as the *principium theologiae cognoscendi externum et internum* (the fundamental principles of knowing from without, which is Scripture, and the fundamental principle of knowing from within, which is the Holy Spirit's illumination). Moreover, these realities are only operative in a theologian and available to a theologian who has experienced *palingenesis* (regeneration) through divine grace and thus can conduct his or hermeneutical and exegetical tasks by the necessary illumination proffered by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴
- 14D. We deny that the natural man can truly understand or adequately interpret divine revelation since he operates with a metaphysical and epistemological view limited and distorted by the noetic effects of sin. However, in common grace, theologians may make discoveries that will advance the theological encyclopedia in God's providence.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is continuity between the historic "Old Princeton" and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia where theologians of both institutions have similarly engaged in the interrelationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology. While this study seeks to highlight awareness of this institutional continuity, its more significant concern is to encourage theological reflection on the unity of the history of divine revelation in Scripture. When an orthodox approach to the relationship between biblical and systematic theology is followed, as well as when the legitimate place of both of these disciplines in the theological encyclopedia is understood, the multiform witness of God's saving grace coheres and radiates the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, revealing Him to be the very heart of Holy Scripture.

⁵³ Cf. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 49ff.

⁵⁴ See Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 219ff, 340–405; Morton Smith, *Systematic Theology*, I, 33ff.

⁵⁵ See Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 150ff. Vos, 5.

References

- Barton, Kyle. "Interpreting Scripture with Augustine." *Conversant Faith*. 11 February 2016. <https://conversantfaith.com/2016/02/11/interpreting-scripture-with-augustine/>.
- Board of Trustees Westminster Theological Seminary. "Affirmations and Denials Regarding Recent Issues." 3 December 2008. <http://files1.wts.edu/uploads/images/files/Board%20Affirmations%20and%20Denials.pdf>.
- Conn, Harvey M. "The Missionary Task of Theology: A Love/Hate Relationship?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (1983).
- Enns, Peter. *Inspiration and Incarnation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015.
- Gaffin, Richard B., Jr. "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul." In *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, edited by E. R. Geehan, 228–37. Nutley: P&R, 1980.
- . "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology." In *The New Testament Student and Theology, Vol. III of The New Testament Student*, edited by John H. Skilton, 32–50. Nutley: P&R, 1976.
- . "The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics." In *The Vitality of Reformed Theology: Proceedings of the International Theological Congress*, edited by J. M. Batteau, J. W. Maris, and K. Veling, 16–50. Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1994.
- Irons, Lee. "Biblical and Systematic Theology: A Digest of Reformed Opinion on Their Proper Relationship." *The Upper Register*. https://www.upper-register.com/papers/bt_st.html.
- Kuyper, Abraham. *Principles of Sacred Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954.
- Lillback, Peter A. "Christ the End of the Law" in *The Practical Calvinist*, edited by Peter A. Lillback, 97–113. Fearn: Christian Focus, 2002.
- . *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001.
- Lints, Richard. "Two Theologies or One? Warfield and Vos on the Nature of Theology." *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (1992): 235–53.
- Murray, John. "Systematic Theology." In *Collected Writings of John Murray Vol. IV*, 1–21. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982.
- Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976.
- Schreiber, Andy. "Union with Christ in the Westminster Shorter Catechism." *The Daily Genevan*. 8 October 2017. <http://www.thedailygenevan.com/blog/2017/10/8/union-with-christ-in-the-westminster-shorter-catechism>.
- Silva, Moses. *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* Grand Rapids: Academic, 1987.
- Smith, Morton. *Systematic Theology*. Greenville: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994.
- Unthank, Stephen. "Union with Christ: The Westminster Confession." *Place for Truth*. 22 February 2019. <https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/union-christ-westminster-confession>.
- Vos, Geerhardus. "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline."

In *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin Jr. P&R, 1980.

— — —. "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline." In *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin Jr., 3–24. P&R, 1980.

Warfield, Benjamin B. "The Idea of Systematic Theology." In *Studies in Theology*, 49–87. New York: Oxford University Press, 1932.

Warfield, Benjamin B. "The Idea of Systematic Theology." *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 7 (1896): 243–71.