

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological
Seminary of
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T.

Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The Biblical Disciplines

In some circles it has become common to pit the biblical disciplines against one another, as if somehow these branches of learning were in competition. Exegesis gets opposed to homiletics as if these were independent and even hostile tasks. Advocates for both biblical and systematic theology argue as if one of these could dispense with the other.

These disciplines can no more be pitted against one another than arithmetic can be pitted against algebra or anatomy can be pitted against surgery. Why, then, do some seem to think that they are in competition? I suspect that these people are influenced by two errors. First, they usually do not understand how the overall theological task hangs together and how all of the disciplines fit into it. Second, they sometimes misunderstand the function and practice of one or more of the biblical disciplines.

The biblical disciplines together form a unified method that helps us to move from the raw data of Scripture to a right understanding and application of God's Word. Having a method is important because the Bible is a large, and sometimes complicated, collection of documents. A person who is simply thrown into the text of Scripture is more likely to sink than to swim. The mass of detail is overwhelming. That is part of the reason that Christ has given teachers to His church (Eph. 4:11-16). The teacher is not simply a person who has memorized the volume of biblical details. Rather, the teacher understands the framework or pattern of truth from which the details derive their significance and coherence. The teacher gains God's approval because he is “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Such teachers do not know everything in Scripture, but they do know how to go about the task of gaining biblical understanding.

In other words, faithful Christian teachers have mastered a method. The mastery and application of this method is a far more important qualification for teaching than an ability to regurgitate biblical details. The method consists in the collection of exercises that are known as the biblical disciplines. Effective teachers bring all of these disciplines into play whenever they study Scripture. In practice, these disciplines are inseparable, but in principle they can be distinguished and ordered.

First among the biblical disciplines comes the task of exegesis. A competent exegete employs the grammatical-historical method to study the Scriptures analytically. Therefore, the exegete must master two subsidiary disciplines. The first is grammar, particularly the grammar of the biblical languages. The second is history, especially those aspects of history that enable an understanding of biblical cultures and contexts.

A competent exegete has the ability to expose the meaning of any biblical text in its context—and the context includes the historical situation as well as the literary framework. Good exegetes must develop skill in handling serious texts. A reader who cannot follow Plato is not likely to be able to understand Paul. This does not mean that one needs to master Plato in order to master Paul, but the skills for understanding both authors are exactly the same.

Competent exegesis is essential, but it is not the goal of the biblical disciplines. It is a tool that advances students along the road of Christian understanding, but it is not the end of the road. It is not even the only tool. Rather, exegesis must be done in the service of theology.

Theology is the attempt to organize the teachings of Scripture so as to bring them to bear upon questions of interest. Theology comes in at least two varieties, biblical theology and systematic theology. The difference between them lies in their organizing principles.

Biblical theology is organized according to the interests of a biblical book, writer, or division. It seeks to understand how the Bible itself develops specific themes, either within a particular division or across the whole canon. Those themes are discovered within the biblical text itself.

The Bible reveals truth progressively. The earlier parts of the Bible will establish some particular theme (say, *kingdom* or *law*), and will disclose partial information regarding the theme. More details will then be revealed in later discussions. Biblical theologians attempt to understand how each particular idea or theme grows throughout Scripture. This gives them a way to envision the final shape of the theme. They also try to understand which ideas are of special significance for which authors, and to see how each author relates his core ideas to other ideas that he develops.

Biblical theologians typically begin with some smaller segment of the canon, such as a particular book or author. In the long run, however, their goal is to achieve a biblical theology of the whole Bible. This comprehensive biblical theology should enable them to grasp all of the important themes in Scripture and to relate them rightly to one another.

The value of biblical theology is that it lets the Bible itself decide which questions will be answered. This is important because theologians can sometimes force the Bible to answer questions that it does not intend to address. A good biblical theology will regulate and discipline all subsequent theological endeavors. It is a necessary step in developing Christian understanding. Like exegesis, however, biblical theology is a step along the way, a tool to advance the student. It is not the end of the road.

Rightly done, biblical theology will at some point turn into systematic theology. Systematic theology differs from biblical theology in that it is organized according to the interest of the theologian. Systematic theologians want to know everything that the Bible says about a question that captures their attention. They go to the biblical text seeking all relevant information. Typically, they are also interested in how the question has been discussed during earlier stages of Christian history (the discipline of historical theology), and whether or not they are bringing the proper cognitive tools to bear upon the question (the discipline of philosophical theology).

A good systematic theology must involve more than picking up proof texts here and there. Rather, a well-executed systematic theology builds upon the results of exegesis and biblical theology. Systematic theologies sometimes become encyclopedias of theological knowledge, but the real point of systematic theology is to get as complete an answer as possible to each question that can legitimately be asked of the Bible. The systematic theologian attempts to pull together the diverse strands of biblical knowledge and to exhibit their ultimate interconnectedness. The systematic theologian will understand better than anyone how all biblical truth is intertwined into a coherent whole. Systematic theologians want to understand this whole as comprehensively as possible.

These three biblical disciplines (exegesis, biblical theology, and systematic theology) depend upon one another. Without the first two, systematic theology has no foundation. Without systematic theology, exegesis and biblical theology have no way to reach into life. Systematic theology gives coherence and consistency to the biblical disciplines. It is an essential step along the way—but again, it is not the goal.

The goal is transformation of life. All of the biblical disciplines exist in order that the character of Christ might be wrought in the child of God. Exegesis and theology always are tools to be used in a greater enterprise, and that enterprise is the absorption of truth into life. The results of exegesis and theology must be brought to bear upon the lives of Christians through preaching, counseling, and the other disciplines of practical theology.

None of these disciplines can rightly be pitted against another. They all depend upon one another. They are all parts of a single process. If any part of that process is sacrificed, the entire process will be damaged. While scholars may seek to contribute mainly to one part of the process, they should never lose their interest in the whole. Furthermore, Christian leaders (pastors, missionaries, and others who preach and teach the Scriptures) must be competent in all the disciplines if their work is to achieve the results that God intends. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

A HYMN TO CHRIST, AT THE AUTHOR'S LAST
GOING INTO GERMANY.

John Donne (1572-1631)

IN what torn ship so ever I embark,
That ship shall be my emblem of Thy ark ;
What sea soever swallow me, that flood
Shall be to me an emblem of Thy blood ;
Though Thou with clouds of anger do disguise
Thy face, yet through that mask I know those eyes,
Which, though they turn away sometimes,
They never will despise.

I sacrifice this island unto Thee,
And all whom I love there, and who loved me ;
When I have put our seas 'twixt them and me,
Put thou Thy seas betwixt my sins and Thee.
As the tree's sap doth seek the root below
In winter, in my winter now I go,
Where none but Thee, the eternal root
Of true love, I may know.

Nor Thou nor Thy religion dost control
The amorousness of an harmonious soul ;
But Thou wouldst have that love Thyself ; as Thou
Art jealous, Lord, so I am jealous now ;
Thou lovest not, till from loving more Thou free
My soul ; Who ever gives, takes liberty ;
Oh, if Thou carest not whom I love,
Alas ! Thou lovest not me.

Seal then this bill of my divorce to all,
On whom those fainter beams of love did fall ;
Marry those loves, which in youth scatter'd be
On fame, wit, hopes — false mistresses — to Thee.
Churches are best for prayer, that have least light ;
To see God only, I go out of sight ;
And to escape stormy days, I choose
An everlasting night. ✠

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