

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY
AND
THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

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It was with both pleasure and trepidation that I accepted the invitation to offer these lectures in honor of Professor Kantzer.¹ Having made no prior contributions to the field of systematic theology, I naturally felt some misgivings about accepting the invitation to present the Kantzer Lectures. On the other hand, the subject is one that has held my interest throughout my career. A few years ago I wrote a commentary on Philippians in which, among other things, I made a special effort to deal with the theological significance of the letter. One passage where this task was particularly easy was 3:7-11. Echoing some oral comments made by my teacher and colleague Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., I decided to entitle that section "The Essence of Pauline Theology," then went so far as to expound the material using the categories of justification, sanctification, and glorification. Recently, a reviewer took exception to my approach, questioning

the appropriateness of this explanation since Paul himself does not use these categories in this context. Silva anticipates criticism on this point and attempts to argue that these classical (Reformed) soteriological formulations are derived directly from Paul's teaching. This is irrelevant to the issue. Silva's concern should be exclusively directed toward explaining Paul's thought in terms of what the text itself has to say (given Paul's theological inheritance and the polemical context). Resorting to these later formulations is not only anachronistic but obscures the impact of the specific words Paul chose to use on the occasion. In short, such an approach is methodologically indefensible.²

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¹This article is an abbreviated version of the Kenneth S. Kantzer Lectures in Systematic Theology, delivered at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, October 27-28, 1992. Although revised for publication, the essay at some points reflects the oral presentation. I wish to express my thanks to the faculty of the institution not only for honoring me with this invitation but also for the wonderful warmth with which they received me.

²C. E. Arnold, review of M. Silva, *Philippians* (Chicago: Moody, 1988; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), in *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 1991 (Atlanta, GA:

I can hardly think of a statement that would better illustrate a point of view that has become increasingly common in the past several decades. Of course, it is not a new perspective at all. Three centuries ago scholars were already arguing, with great vigor, that systematic theology—especially in its classical form—must be kept quite separate from biblical exegesis. Their concern was understandable. It would not have been difficult to show that theological biases had frequently hampered the work of exegetes, even to the point of distorting the meaning of the text. True “historical” exegesis was therefore being understood, more and more, as *theologically unprejudiced interpretation*. Leopold Immanuel Rückert, in the preface to his 1831 commentary on Romans, stated that the interpreter of Paul

is not to think with his own head, not to feel with his own heart, not to view from his own standpoint, but to put himself on the same level as the apostle, know nothing but what he knew, have no idea that he did not have, know no feeling that was unknown to him. . . .

In other words, I require of him freedom from prejudice. The exegete of the New Testament as an exegete . . . has no system, and must not have one, either a dogmatic or an emotional system. In so far as he is an exegete, he is neither orthodox nor heterodox, neither supernaturalist nor rationalist, nor pantheist, nor any other ist there may be. He is neither pious nor godless, neither moral nor immoral, neither sensitive nor insensible.³

And one of his contemporaries, the great NT exegete Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, expressed the same idea as follows:

The area of dogmatics and philosophy is to remain off limits for a commentary. For to ascertain the meaning the author intended to convey by his words, impartially and historico-grammatically—that is the duty of the exegete. How the meaning so ascertained stands in relation to the teachings of philosophy, to what extent it agrees with the dogmas of the church or with the view of its theologians, in what way the dogmatist is to make use of it in the interest of his science—to the exegete as an exegete, all that is a matter of no concern.⁴

Today most people would view these two formulations as strikingly naive. But we must not be fooled. The underlying commitment is alive and well. Moreover, there are plenty of exegetes around who would vigorously disown these statements, but

Scholars, 1991) 232. This criticism seems to identify words with concepts (“categories”) to which the words refer, but that is another problem.

³W. G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 110.

⁴Ibid., 111.

whose work, unwittingly perhaps, is a perfect expression of that viewpoint.

There is, however, an additional factor on which I need to focus. A generation ago, most evangelical biblical scholars, while no doubt sharing the naive ideal of "unprejudiced" scholarship, felt nevertheless that exegesis could have a serious relationship with theology. We have to admit, unfortunately, that this relationship was not always good for exegesis. There are indeed many examples of conservative scholars whose theological commitments have affected their exegesis in a negative way. With the rise of the so-called evangelical renaissance in biblical scholarship, therefore, we find a growing suspicion of, or lack of interest in, or downright dislike for, systematic theology.

Oh, there is a place for systematics—I'm sure they would say—but that comes *after* exegetes have done their work without being burdened by modern, speculative questions. As a result, the traffic is essentially one-way. Biblical scholars do their honest work and present their conclusions to the systematists (with the implication: those scoundrels had better pay attention to our exegesis). Exegetes may never admit it or even be conscious of it, but, for the most part, they do not really believe they can learn anything from the theologians—at least with respect to exegetical work.

But there is a separate and even bigger problem. A very influential current of thought in our day argues that the very notion of a biblically based systematic theology is hopelessly outdated. True, scholars who take this point of view do not, as a rule, accept the uniquely divine authority of Scripture; nevertheless, certain features of their position do tend to trickle down even to the conservative camp. At any rate, their point is in effect that the biblical material simply does not lend itself to a systematic treatment, and the reasons given are three.

In the first place, it is argued, systematic theology by its very nature approaches its subject matter in a way that is totally different from, and probably irreconcilable with, that of the biblical writers. The biblical material is ancient, Hebraic, concrete, selective, even haphazard. Systematic theology is modern, derives from Greek thought, relishes abstraction, and seeks to be comprehensive and unified. I shall address this objection, as well as some related problems already mentioned, in the last part of this essay. Second, systematic theology assumes that the Bible is a unit, whereas biblical scholarship has demonstrated, we are told, that the individual writers of Scripture held to theological viewpoints that are incompatible one with another. In other words, the traditional idea of the unity of Scripture is either a figment of the imagination or else it has to be qualified drastically. So, since we cannot really speak about "*the biblical doctrine of*" anything,

how can we expect to produce a systematic theology out of the Bible? This issue will occupy us in the second part of the article.

But that is not all. There is a third and even more radical objection. Not only are there contradictions among the various authors of Scripture: we can also find contradictions within the thought of individual authors. Now the writings of the Apostle Paul, more than any other part of Scripture, have provided the basic source of data for the formulation of systematic theology, and it is the consistency of his teaching that has come under considerable attack in recent years. We therefore begin our reflections with this question.

I. PAUL VERSUS PAUL: WAS THE APOSTLE COHERENT?

Among recent writers who believe that Paul's writings are self-contradictory, few have argued the case more vigorously than the Finnish scholar Heikki Räisänen. In his view, it is not merely that one can find inconsistencies between two letters that Paul may have written at different times to different churches. At least with regard to his teaching on the law, the apostle cannot give a substantive explanation of his views in even one letter without contradicting himself. Paul's theological problems were personal and psychological, and so "contradictions and tensions have to be accepted as constant features of Paul's theology of the law."⁵

There are, of course, great difficulties with this approach. Some of the alleged contradictions raise doubts not just about the authority of apostolic teaching but about Paul's basic intelligence! And, considering the fundamental religious issues involved, it seems historically improbable that Christianity could have survived such a shaky beginning. At any rate, Räisänen's extreme formulations have not received wide acceptance, and a number of scholars have responded adequately to them.⁶

On the other hand, it is commonplace to assume some degree of inconsistency among the various letters of Paul. Hübner, for example, argues strongly that this is the only way to explain the discrepancies between Galatians, where Paul seems totally negative toward the law, and Romans, which contains several positive statements.⁷ Of course, the question whether or not we can see theological development within the Pauline corpus is something that has intrigued students for a long time. But here we are concerned with more than just development. The claim is that various statements made by Paul do not fit together and cannot be made to fit together, in which case the aim of systematic theology is frustrated from the start.

⁵H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 11.

⁶Cf. S. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 93-101.

⁷H. Hübner, *Law in Paul's Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984).

But even among conservatives, who would hesitate to accuse the apostle of inconsistency, there are many scholars who question whether Paul's teaching could be described as coherent—at least if this means that his thought constitutes a *system* (a four-letter word if there ever was one). It is not difficult to understand why people would have such misgivings about this matter. After all, Paul's letters are occasional writings, intended to meet very specific needs, and it would seem unreasonable to expect the apostle to develop a seminary text in systematics by means of those letters. Even his lengthy epistle to the Romans, which deals extensively and methodically with fundamental theological concepts, cannot be treated as an academic dissertation; it too was occasioned by very concrete, practical, historical needs.

At this point, however, we need to avoid terminological confusion. As we all know, there is an interesting history behind this question. Pauline scholars during the last century or so have vigorously debated whether it is appropriate to speak of the apostle as a theologian. But do they all mean the same thing when they use the word *theologian*? Similarly, the discussion often becomes murky through a failure to define what is meant by such adjectives as *coherent* and *systematic*.

How else does one account for the diametrically opposed viewpoints that have been expressed in the past? The great Dutch thinker Abraham Kuyper downplayed the logical or synthetic element among the biblical writers and viewed them as speaking the "stylized, symbolic-aesthetic language of the East." On the other hand, another Dutch theologian, Geerhardus Vos, who taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, described Paul's mind as "highly doctrinal and synthetic," so that we must speak of his "theological system."⁸ Again, while an Adolf Deissmann goes out of his way to deny the systematic element in the Pauline writings,⁹ Albert Schweitzer strongly insists that Paul "is a logical thinker and his mysticism is a complete system."¹⁰ Evaluations of this sort, being mutually exclusive, suggest that more is going on here than differences of opinion—scholars are probably working with different categories and thus talking past one another.

⁸As quoted in R. B. Gaffin, Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 21, 19.

⁹A. Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912). Arguing that the "doctrinaire interest" of nineteenth century scholarship had led the study of Paul astray (p. 5), he sought to prove the following thesis: "St. Paul is essentially a hero of piety first and foremost. That which is theological is secondary with him. The naive is stronger with him than the premeditated, the mystic stronger than the dogmatic; Christ means for him more than Christology, God more than the doctrine of God. He is far more a man of prayer and witness, a confessor and prophet, than a learned exegetist and brooding dogmatist" (pp. 6-7).

¹⁰A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (1931; reprint, New York: Seabury, 1968) 139.

Perhaps it is easiest to make my own opinion clear by pointing out what I do *not* mean. To say that Paul was a systematic thinker does not for a moment imply that he produced handbooks of systematic theology. This point is worth repeating because when some individuals object to speaking of Paul's systematic bent, it is clear that what they have in mind is the character of his writings. As already mentioned, even the epistle to the Romans, in spite of the fact that it is indeed characterized by systematic argumentation and by relative comprehensiveness, does not qualify as a theology textbook. Indeed, we do violence to this letter unless we take fully into account its historical, occasional character.¹¹

Second, I do not mean that Paul—or anyone else for that matter—is *formally* consistent all of the time. To mention one obvious example: in Rom 1:21, Paul speaks of pagans as knowing God, but in Gal 4:8 as not knowing him.¹² Now the vast majority of people have absolutely no problem with that variation; certainly no serious scholar would appeal to that difference as evidence of an inconsistent mind. The context makes perfectly plain that in Romans Paul is dealing with the general knowledge of God's existence and majesty, while in Galatians he is dealing with redemptive categories. Given the flexibility, as well as the limitations, of human language, formal discrepancies are inevitable (unless we want to sound totally pedantic, in which case communication is undermined rather than enhanced), and we must not assume that they imply a *material* discrepancy, that is, a real contradiction. When we further consider the variety of circumstances Paul had to deal with, and the very different groups he was addressing, it is clear that only the most artificial kind of writing could have avoided apparent contradictions.

Third, I would not want to claim that Paul had explicitly worked out a full theological system. We cannot forget that many of the topics that are treated in a theological textbook have come up in the course of the centuries as a response to historically conditioned issues—more often than not, issues arising from heretical movements. It would not have occurred to Paul to reflect on them; indeed, some would have appeared meaningless without a knowledge of the historical context. Much less could we imagine that, even if he had come up with such a system, every part of it might have shown up in his extant writings. Again, I suspect that objections to treating Paul as a theologian are often the result of some frustration with the obvious gaps in the material. So, while it is indeed true that Paul does not have much to say about certain loci

¹¹Of course, even modern textbooks, such as Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, are historically conditioned, but the distinction is still valid.

¹²It would be the worst case of harmonization to appeal to the different verbs (*γνώντες* in the first passage, *εἰδότες* in the second) as though they express two different kinds of knowledge. The fact that *γνώντες* is used in Gal 4:9 should disabuse us of that notion.

of theology, that is hardly enough reason to deny that he was a systematic thinker.

Fourth, by using the term *systematic* I do not mean necessarily that there is a clear center to Paul's thought. There may be such a center (in fact, I am inclined to believe there is), but that is not essential to my viewpoint. Anyone familiar with the scholarly debate will recognize that this question has become the real bugaboo. If you begin with the assumption that any systematic thinker must have a clearly worked out conceptual center out of which everything else emanates, and then you find that scholars cannot agree on what such a center is in the case of Paul (justification, union with Christ, eschatology), you will of course conclude that Paul was not systematic. But that is a false dilemma we create for ourselves. If we were to bring together one hundred distinguished philosophers and asked them what was the center of their thought, how many of them would be able to tell us? And of those who could respond, how many might change their mind after they had a few days to think about it? Indeed, as we shall see, the very fact that one can account for Paul's teaching by choosing one of several themes may be a good piece of evidence that his thought was systematic.

But having clarified what we do not mean, what can we say positively about Paul's thought? In what sense can we claim that it is systematic? First, I would want to insist that his thought is *logical*. In other words, he is a careful and disciplined thinker. His arguments make sense. He is even able to unpack abstract concepts. To be sure, because he is always dealing with people who are going through concrete and urgent problems, he must be pastoral. His writing, therefore, is neither academic in style nor artificially logical. He is quite ready to use emotive language and hyperbole. Nevertheless, none of that is evidence against the view that Paul had carefully worked out his teaching, as diverse scholars have pointed out.¹³

Second, his thought is *coherent*. What I have in mind here is not merely that his individual arguments hang together, but that the various elements of his teaching fit with each other and support each other. Now this is a more controversial point, since, as we have noted, one can easily find formal discrepancies in Paul. It may well be that my assessment of those difficult passages is heavily influenced by my own theological presuppositions. I happen to believe that Paul's teaching has divine authority behind it; I am even committed to the view that this is an

¹³Cf. E. Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 177: "Very frequently . . . the righteousness of God is left to be defined simply as saving action and as salvation. But Paul's theology is always carefully thought out: the last adjective one could apply to it would be 'naïve'" (contrast Deissmann's remark cited above, n. 9).

infallible authority. So perhaps I have stacked the deck—possibly my presuppositions determine the outcome of my study.

But let us look at this question a different way for the moment. You are not likely to understand a writer accurately unless you approach the writing sympathetically. Such an approach, by the way, is more than a principle of academic research; it is a fundamental rule of social courtesy. If you hear an acquaintance say something that does not jibe with a statement he or she made yesterday, your first assumption (unless you have something against this person to begin with) is not that your friend is stupid or dishonest but that somehow the communication got garbled and so you ask for an explanation. More often than not, the explanation is indeed forthcoming. In other words, we need not bring in the question of religious authority at this point. Even if you are reading Plato, you should give him the benefit of the doubt. I do not claim to have an answer for every problem that surfaces in the letters of Paul, but I am convinced that a sympathetic reading easily takes care of most of them and that the rest can just as readily be explained by taking our own ignorance into account. Yet even if you cannot accept the notion of infallibility and you believe that there are indeed some insoluble problems, that is hardly enough reason to deny that Paul is a coherent thinker. Accordingly, some scholars who do not identify themselves with evangelicalism have recognized that the apostle Paul may indeed be described in such terms.¹⁴

Parenthetically, it should be added that such a recognition must affect our exegetical procedure. It has become common among NT scholars to argue that each Pauline letter should be interpreted on its own and without reference to the other epistles. In the past, no doubt, exegetes have often appealed too quickly to parallel passages in an effort to interpret Paul's words. As a result, the distinctiveness of each letter is sometimes blurred and the Pauline corpus becomes flattened. However, we can hardly afford to throw out the baby with the bath water. Again, a reference to Plato may be helpful. An obscure passage in one of his dialogues may helpfully and legitimately be illuminated by a corresponding passage in another writing.¹⁵ Such an approach is nothing more

¹⁴Cf. J. C. Beker, *Paul and the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); throughout his book he usefully relates coherence and contingency as twin concepts that distinguish Paul's writings. Note also the recent contribution by C. K. Barrett, "Paulus als Missionar und Theologe," in *Paulus und das antike Judentum. Tübingen-Durham-Symposium im Gedanken an den 50. Todestag Adolf Schlatters (†19. Mai 1938)* (ed. M. Hengel and U. Heckel; WUNT 58; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1991) 1-15.

¹⁵Although this method is so common that it hardly requires illustration, note the following example from G. Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (2d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 92-93, n. 45: "The metaphorical remarks in R. 506E, 507A, and 508B about the sun as the 'offspring' of the Idea of the Good must be interpreted in the light of what Plato means when he says in the *Timaeus* that the whole of the natural universe, not just the sun, is the 'offspring' of the Ideas generally, not just the

than contextual interpretation, since the context of an utterance is not only the immediately adjacent utterances, but also the broader framework of which that utterance is a part.¹⁶

Third and finally, I consider Paul a systematic theologian because of his attention to foundational categories. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, theologians gave pride of place to the apostle's teaching about justification by faith. Nowadays, of course, it is vigorously argued that this approach is a Lutheran distortion inspired by Augustine. I myself happen to believe that modern scholars have overreacted—that the doctrine of justification by faith does function as a conceptual adhesive that helps to make sense of much of Paul's teaching.¹⁷ Nevertheless, there is some truth in every falsehood, and when exegetes question the Lutheran emphasis on justification and shift attention instead to the Jewish-Gentile question, undeniably they have a point.

Even the argument of Galatians 3, the *pièce de résistance* for the doctrine of justification, is motivated and undergirded by a bigger, overarching question, namely, who are the true descendants of Abraham? And one could make a case for the view that the very structure of the epistle to the Romans is motivated by the same question. That question, however, turns our attention to redemptive history, specifically, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise; and the mention of fulfillment, in turn, is but another way to talk about *eschatology*.

Earlier I pointed out that Geerhardus Vos and Albert Schweitzer were among the most emphatic proponents of the view that Paul was a systematic thinker. It is probably not an accident that both of them were greatly preoccupied with Paul's eschatology. It is also not an accident, I think, that the most successful attempt to describe comprehensively Paul's theology as a unified whole—namely, Ridderbos's *Paul*¹⁸—is built on and

Idea of the good. In the *Timaeus* the metaphor is employed in the context of a cosmological scheme which enables us to control the intended meaning in a way which is altogether denied us by the allusive and unexplicated use of the metaphor in Book VI of the *Republic*.¹⁶ Of course, it is also possible, in the field of Platonic studies, to ignore the individuality of specific dialogues; cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato* (transl. and with an introd. by P. C. Smith; New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1980) 190: "In so doing [comparing dialogues] one must avoid getting involved in that old and fruitless game played by scholars from Proclus to Cornford, the game, that is, of seeking correspondences with other dialogues. Plato's dialogues are each complete movements of discussion and thought, movements which one must enter into oneself and pursue to their conclusion."

¹⁶I have commented on this issue elsewhere. Cf. my review article, "Betz and Bruce on Galatians," *WTJ* 45 (1983) 371-85, esp. 383-84.

¹⁷Cf. M. Silva, "Law in the New Testament: Dunn's New Synthesis," *WTJ* 53 (1991) 339-53.

¹⁸H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). Beker (*Paul*, esp. chap. 8) focuses on apocalyptic as the central category; without minimizing the differences between his approach and that of Ridderbos, we should appreciate how significant the points of contact are.

structured around the topic of eschatology. I do happen to believe that this concept can be viewed as the center of Paul's theology, but that is not my precise point. My concern is rather to suggest that the apostle, having reflected deeply and extensively on the most foundational questions—and in particular on the history of God's redemptive work, the mystery hidden from ages past—was in a unique position to see all the pieces come together.

That is why it is quite possible to take any one of over a dozen doctrines and argue convincingly that it functions as a center.¹⁹ In the heyday of liberalism, at the end of the nineteenth century, it became a commonplace to speak of Paul as the second founder of Christianity. That was intended as the greatest of insults. The apostle was viewed as having taken the pleasant, practical, loving teaching of Jesus, and converted it into an arid, abstract religion.²⁰ Well, he certainly was not the founder of a new religion. But as part of that foundation of apostles of which Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, the Apostle to the Gentiles was uniquely used of God to explicate—coherently!—the significance of Christ's work for the nations.

II. PAUL VERSUS PETER: THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE PAULINE GOSPEL

If asked to name some of the milestones in the history of NT scholarship, few students would forget to include on their list F. C. Baur's reinterpretation of apostolic Christianity on the basis of the information provided by Paul in his letter to the Galatians.²¹ According to Baur, Paul's argumentation in the first two chapters of

¹⁹Cf. J. Reumann, *Variety and Unity in New Testament Thought* (Oxford Bible Series; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 77ff. Here he lists sixteen themes, each of which has served such a function at some point, and comments: "It should be remembered, too, that all these themes interrelate in Paul's theology, and that some are virtually interchangeable. In them we find a unity for Paul's message" (p. 77). Cf. also V. S. Poythress, "Structural Approaches to Understanding the Theology of Paul" (Th.D. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1981), who uses the concept of holiness to demonstrate the difficulties involved in arguing that there is only one central unifying theme in Paul.

²⁰Or, to put it in somewhat harsher terms: "There has really never been a more monstrous imposition perpetrated than the imposition of the limitations of Paul's soul upon the soul of Jesus" (G. B. Shaw, in "Preface on the Prospects of Christianity," *Androcles and the Lion*, 1913; reprinted in W. A. Meeks, ed., *The Writings of St. Paul* [Norton Critical Editions; New York: Norton, 1972] 296–302, quotation on p. 300).

²¹See F. C. Baur, *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Work, His Epistles and His Doctrine* (2 vols.; London: Williams and Norgate, 1876). Of course, Baur depended heavily on material other than Galatians. Indeed, his ground-breaking study focused on the theological divisions reflected in 1 Corinthians: "Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des petrinischen und paulinischen Christenthums in der ältesten Kirche, der Apostel Paulus in Rom," *Tübingen Zeitschrift für Theologie* (1831), pt. 4, 61–206, reprinted in *Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelausgaben* (5 vols.; Stuttgart: Cannstatt, 1963–75) 1.1–146.

that letter reflected a deep division among the apostles that could hardly be reconciled with the picture of peace and unity provided by the author of Acts.

Aside from a few researchers who pushed the theory even further than its creator intended, subsequent critical scholarship has been characterized by a love-hate relationship with Baur. On the one hand, the name "Tübingen School" became so closely associated with a radical branch of Pauline interpretation that most scholars found it necessary to distance themselves from it. Accordingly, references to Baur, while acknowledging his contribution to the field, are often accompanied by careful qualifications that focus on his one-sidedness, particularly his insistence that first-century opposition to Paul had a single source, namely, the Judaizing party.

On the other hand, Baur's impact on modern criticism can hardly be overestimated. And it isn't simply a matter of his having set the agenda with which responsible students felt compelled to interact. Baur's influence was more profound than that. His work marked the full flowering of the historical-critical approach, and its scent has so mesmerized the laborers in the field that they have become oblivious to alternate forms of husbandry. That masterful historian of scholarship, Werner G. Kümmel, assures us that the study of the NT became *historical* in character only gradually and only to the extent that it learned to accept the reality of *contradiction* in the biblical record.²² Baur not only accepted that principle fully but built a whole new school of interpretation on its basis. Whatever disagreements may exist about its implementation, it is that principle that has reigned supreme and undisputed in "main stream" NT scholarship.

Evangelical scholars, of course, reject the principle. And, inevitably, they have little use for Baur. After all, didn't Lightfoot persuasively refute Baur's understanding of Galatians? If it is possible to interpret the letters of Paul in a way that does not materially contradict the Acts narrative, then it would indeed seem an inevitable inference that perfect harmony existed among the apostles. True, Peter may have faltered in Antioch, but that was a momentary aberration that, if anything, may be viewed as the exception that proves the rule.

This common perception of the debate, while accurate in most essentials, requires careful nuancing. For one thing, Baur's interpretation included some important insights. For another, as we shall see, Lightfoot himself was sympathetic to some of those

²²Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 29-31 and passim. A typical remark is his assessment of J. S. Semler as "the founder of the historical study of the New Testament." Why should we view Semler in that way? "For him the Bible as a book is no longer inspired and can therefore be viewed impartially with the eyes of the historical investigator, without endangering the Word of God, which he wishes at all costs to guard" (p. 68).

insights. But most important of all, our understanding of the biblical text can suffer if we fail to appreciate the diversity that characterized apostolic Christianity.

One of our difficulties in addressing this issue is both methodological and theological in character. I refer to the danger of formulating the problem thus: "How far can we stretch the concept of scriptural authority in the process of integrating the ideas of radical critics?" Perhaps no evangelical scholar would explicitly or consciously describe the task quite that way, but one can hardly avoid the impression that much of what passes for conservative biblical scholarship is affected by such a concern. As a result, exegetical conclusions are seldom shown to cohere with basic theological commitments, and the growing conceptual structure appears to lack intellectual integrity.

On the other hand, nothing could be more wrong-headed than letting our conceptual framework blind us to the evidence or to new ways of looking at the evidence. It is all too easy for us to prejudge specific interpretations simply because they have been advanced by unbelieving scholars or simply because they appear, at first blush, to conflict with our prior commitments. Our Christian faith does not ask us to ignore or reject the facts. Quite the contrary, it provides the only means of properly evaluating them—all of them.

It is one of the great merits of J. B. Lightfoot's exegetical work that he felt no need to downplay those features of the biblical text that might seem, on the surface, to create problems for the Christian faith. In spite of Baur's appeal to Galatians 2 (or was it in part *because* of such an appeal?), Lightfoot freely granted that tensions may have existed among the apostles as a result of Paul's message to the Gentiles. It may be helpful to quote in full some of Lightfoot's more remarkable statements.

On Gal 2:3:

St Paul is here distracted between the fear of saying too much and the fear of saying too little. He must maintain his own independence, and yet he must not compromise the position of the Twelve. How can he justify himself without seeming to condemn them? There is need of plain speaking and there is need of reserve. In this conflict of opposing aims and feelings the sense of the passage is well-nigh lost. The meaning of individual expressions is obscure. The thread of the sentence is broken, picked up, and again broken. From this shipwreck of grammar it is even difficult to extricate the main incident, on which the whole controversy hinges. Was Titus circumcised or was he not?²³

²³J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (10th ed.; London: Macmillan, 1898) 104. For some of the material in this section, cf. also my article, "The Place of Historical Reconstruction in New Testament Criticism," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. W. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 109-33, esp. 122-28.

And on 2:4:

What part was taken in the dispute by the Apostles of the Circumcision? This question, which forces itself upon us at this stage of St Paul's narrative, is not easily answered. On the whole it seems probable that they recommended St Paul to yield the point, as a charitable concession to the prejudices of the Jewish converts: but convinced at length by his representations, that such a concession at such a time would be fatal, they withdrew their counsel and gave him their support. Such an account of the transaction seems to accord alike with the known facts and with the probabilities of the case. It is consistent with the timid conduct of Peter at Antioch shortly after (Gal. ii. 11), and with the politic advice of James at a later date (Acts xxi. 20). It was the natural consequence of their position, which led them to regard tenderly the scruples of the Jewish converts. It supplies probable antecedents to the events of the Apostolic congress. And lastly, it best explains St Paul's language here. The sensible undercurrent of feeling, the broken grammar of the sentence, the obvious tenour of particular phrases, all convey the impression, that though the final victory was complete, *it was not attained without a struggle, in which St Paul maintained at one time almost singlehanded the cause of Gentile freedom.*²⁴

In my opinion, Lightfoot's exposition of Gal 2:3-4, controversial though it may appear to some readers, reflects a wonderful sensitivity both to the text and to the realities of human nature. If there had been prior unanimity among the apostles on the issue of Gentile circumcision, would it have been necessary for Paul to make his case in private (v. 2)? And would Paul have been deeply concerned (as indicated by the clause "lest I be running or had run in vain") about what might have happened if he had been unable to make that case? Again, can one satisfactorily explain Peter's action in Antioch as a completely isolated case that had no connection with theological debates?²⁵ In contrast to Lightfoot's commentary, most expositions of 2:1-6 (especially by evangelicals) are much too bland to account for the pathos of this text.

In the preface to his commentary, Lightfoot made explicit reference to the Tübingen school and expressed his opinion that it would not "obtain any wide or lasting hold over the minds of men." He hastened to add, however, that "mere denunciation" would be both unjust and unavailing. "Moreover, for our own sakes we should

²⁴Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 105-6 (my emphasis).

²⁵I do not dispute the point that the very nature of Paul's rebuke in Gal 2:11-14 assumes theological agreement between Paul and Peter at a fundamental level. That is, Paul accuses Peter of behaving in a way that is inconsistent with what he believes about justification. On the other hand, the distinction between theology and application is not an absolute one. (Cf. J. M. Frame, *the Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987] 81-85.) Peter's separating himself from the Gentiles was part—an inconsistent part to be sure, but nevertheless a part—of his theology.

try and discover the element of truth which underlies even the greatest exaggerations of able men, and correct our impressions thereby.”²⁶ One must wonder whether his incisive treatment of Gal 2:1-10 was one of the passages where he allowed his impressions to be corrected through the element of truth in Baur’s exaggerations.

It must be stressed, however, that Lightfoot’s exegesis of this and other relevant passages coheres admirably with his conception of the larger picture. This larger picture he drew with the touch of a master in one of the “dissertations” that accompany his commentary on Galatians. Entitled “St Paul and the Three,” it ought to be made required reading for anyone dealing with the problems of first-century Christianity. The thrust of this brilliant essay is to acknowledge the diversity and tensions—indeed, the “misgiving, prejudice, treachery, hatred, superstition”—that existed in the early church, while at the same time demonstrating that nothing in the Pauline letters represents the Apostle to the Gentiles “in a position of antagonism to the chief Apostles of the Circumcision.”²⁷

We cannot in this brief article prove that Lightfoot was successful in walking this fine line. Suffice it for our purposes to note that we are not forced to decide between, on the one hand, perfect and constant unanimity among the apostles and, on the other, contradictory theologies among them. That all the apostles preached the same gospel of grace we may be sure, but whether there were any differences in the articulation of that message and in the understanding of its implications is another question altogether.

Of help in sorting through these questions is Gal 1:11, where Paul sets forth the thesis of his letter in rather formal and solemn terms.²⁸ We need to appreciate, moreover, the forceful way in which the apostle identifies his message: τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τὸ εὐαγγελισθὲν ὑπὸ ἐμοῦ, “the gospel preached by me.”²⁹ It is

²⁶Lightfoot, *Galatians*, xi.

²⁷Ibid., 374, 352. For a recent appreciation of the significance of Lightfoot vis-à-vis Baur, see J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991) 1-4.

²⁸The clause γνωρίζω ὑμῖν, or a comparable expression, is used elsewhere by Paul to introduce new and important points (cf. esp. 1 Cor 15:1). Note also the syntax: Paul does not say, “I make known to you that the gospel preached by me is not according to man,” but rather he places τὸ εὐαγγέλιον as the direct object of γνωρίζω, “I make known to you the gospel preached by me—that it is not according to man.” Though not a rare construction (cf. E. de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* [ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921] 37), it certainly lends emphasis to the thought.

²⁹If one should insist on pressing the aorist tense of the participle, the reference would be primarily to the proclamation of the gospel when Paul evangelized the Galatians (though hardly to the exclusion of his subsequent and current preaching; cf. Burton, *Galatians*, 37). It seems to me preferable, however, to take the participle in a temporally undefined way, as suggested above by the simple rendering with the English past participle “preached.”

something of a curiosity that the standard commentaries fail to highlight this unique phraseology. Only a couple of them mention it at all.³⁰

We should further point out that the apostle does *not* say, "The gospel I preach is just like the gospel the other apostles preach." Indeed, nowhere in chaps. 1-2 does Paul argue along those lines. Although in 2:8-9 he does appeal to the occasion when the Three formally recognized his ministry (a fact that evinces fundamental agreement among them—cf. also the similar implications of 2:15-16), the apostle makes no effort whatever to deflect criticism by arguing that there was nothing distinctive to his message.

Some may object to this representation of the text by reminding us that the nature of the opponents' attacks deterred Paul from saying anything that might compromise his independence from the other apostles. I happen to agree that this understanding of the controversy is indeed the most accurate reconstruction of the occasion. I would further concede that Paul's case would be weakened if *all* he could say in response was that his message was no different from that of the Three. But I fail to see that the apostle had anything to lose by undermining his opponents' most basic misrepresentation! Nothing prevented Paul from saying:

Those who trouble you want you to think that I have abandoned the truth by preaching a different gospel from that proclaimed by the "pillars." They are misrepresenting the facts. The gospel I proclaim is no different from that which the Lord delivered to the Twelve. It is not a man-made message. On the contrary, I received it directly from the Lord and it is the same message of faith that the church has always acknowledged.

Such an argument would not have in any way weakened Paul's position. Quite the contrary. It would have proven to be a fatal blow to the Judaizers.

So why didn't Paul use this obvious argument? The only reasonable answer is that he was concerned to maintain, not only his independence from the Three, but the distinctiveness of his message as well. It is, I think, no accident that Paul also uses the expression "my gospel" to describe his message and that this description occurs in his letter to the Romans (2:16). The evidence suggests strongly that Romans consists of a systematic answer to the objections raised against him by the Judaizers. What Galatians sets

³⁰F. F. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 88) notes its correspondence to "my gospel" in Rom 2:16. Only F. Mußner (*Der Galaterbrief* [HTKNT; Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 1974] 65), though just in passing, notes its significance: "bewußt 'seines' Evangeliums . . . um das es ja bei der ganzen Auseinandersetzung geht" (though this is hardly sufficient reason to choose the variant δέ over γάρ).

forth with great urgency in the heat of battle, the letter to the Romans develops more calmly and fully during a lull in the midst of Paul's stormy ministry.³¹ It is true enough that a fundamental unity characterized the preaching of all the apostles. It is no less true that each of them, according to their diverse gifts and backgrounds, articulated that message in distinct ways. And it is especially true that Paul was given a particular mission that perhaps only he, under God's direction, could fulfill. That mission is most clearly expounded in the epistle to the Romans: to call forth the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles (1:5).

Just as Lightfoot learned something from the extreme view of F. C. Baur, perhaps we can appropriate an element of truth in the proposal of the Scandinavian scholar Anton Fridrichsen, who argued that Gal 1:11-12 presupposes not a formal denial of Paul's authority but a real objection to the content of his gospel.³² It is unfortunate that Fridrichsen went on to view Paul's message as a reinterpretation and even a denial of the Jerusalem gospel, but such an exaggeration should not prevent us from recognizing two fundamental points: (a) chaps. 1-2 of Galatians reflect the perception, at least among the Galatians, that there was something distinctive about Paul's preaching; (b) more important, these chapters do nothing to disabuse the Galatians of that perception—if anything, Paul affirms both the existence and the validity of that distinctiveness.

Perhaps no one has seen the nature of that distinctiveness more sharply than J. Gresham Machen. In discussing the controversy at Antioch (Gal 2:11-14), Machen argued as follows:

Evidently the keeping of the Law on the part of Jewish Christians was a half-way position. But when it was pursued conscientiously, as a duty still resting upon men of Jewish descent, it might possibly be dealt with gently by Paul. When, however, it was undertaken for fear of men, in the face of better understanding, it became "hypocrisy" and was rebuked sharply. If the transcending of the Law, in the interest of Christian unity, had once been grasped as a necessary consequence of the redemption wrought by Christ, then to repudiate it was to bring discredit upon Christ Himself, and make His death of none avail.

The influence of Peter's withdrawal from the Gentile Christians soon began to make itself felt; other Jewish Christians

³¹I have briefly argued this point in "Paul, The Apostle," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (ed. W. A. Elwell; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 2.1621-34, esp. 1631-32.

³²Fridrichsen first articulated his view in an essay entitled "Die Apologie des Paulus Gal. 1," which appeared alongside a piece by L. Brun in *Paulus und die Urgemeinde. Zwei Abhandlungen* (Beiheft zu Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift; Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1921) 53-76, esp. 56. For a fuller, more extreme statement, see his monograph, *The Apostle and His Message* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift; Uppsala: Lundequistka, 1947) esp. 8-11.

followed Peter's example, and even Barnabas was carried away. A serious crisis had arisen. But God had not deserted His Church. The Church was saved through the instrumentality of Paul.

To Paul had been revealed the full implications of the gospel; to him the freedom of the Gentiles was a matter of principle, and when principle was at stake he never kept silent.³³

It is clear that, in Machen's view, the freedom of the Gentiles was not a matter of principle to the other apostles—at least, not to the same extent or with the same intensity. More to the point, it follows from Machen's comment that the full implications of the gospel had not been revealed to the apostles of the circumcision. This is not to say that the apostles had conflicting views about justification by faith. Machen goes on to stress that "in the very act of condemning the practice of Peter, Paul approves his principles," namely, "the inadequacy of the Law, and the all-sufficiency of faith in Christ." This incident at Antioch, "therefore, far from establishing a fundamental disagreement between Peter and Paul really furnishes the strongest possible evidence for their fundamental unity."

It remains true, however, that Peter had not fully understood the significance of the gospel of grace as it bore on the relationship of Gentiles to Judaism. Peter's primary focus was the ministry toward the Jews. Since the continued practice of Judaism (as a cultural or ethnic feature) among believing Jews did not create problems of theological principle, the Jerusalem apostles did not find it necessary to "preach" its discontinuance. But in the context of the Judaizing heresy among Gentiles, that was precisely what Paul had to preach.

These considerations throw light on the exegetical questions raised by Gal 2:7-9. The agreement that Paul and Barnabas should minister to the Gentiles, while the Jerusalem apostles should go to the Jews, has been interpreted as evidence for the existence and toleration of "two gospels," that is, two conflicting Christian messages. Such a view can hardly be taken seriously. In attacking it, however, conservative scholars have argued that the distinction reflected in this passage has to do only with different spheres of ministry and that there was no discernible difference in the content of the proclamation. As a recent commentator has put it, "Paul's preaching was identical with that of the primitive Church."³⁴ But this is not possible. At the very least, we may be

³³Machen, *Origin*, 102 (my emphasis).

³⁴R. Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 99. Elsewhere in the same paragraph Fung qualifies his claim: "[T]he gospel preached by Paul (and Barnabas) was in all essentials the same as that which Peter, James, and John understood the gospel to be" (my emphasis). My difference with Fung and other evangelical writers, I suspect, is not one of substance. It seems to me, however, that in overstating the unity among the apostles, we may do injustice to the

fairly certain that, as part of the agreement, the Jerusalem apostles would *not* be expected to preach against the specific custom of circumcision among believing Jews, whereas Paul would condemn that practice among his Gentile converts. This then would have been a clear and perceptible difference to which the Galatians could point in accusing Paul.

Similarly, if my interpretation can be sustained, it would help to clarify the apparent discrepancy between Gal 1:11-12 and 1 Cor 15:1-3. Much ink has been spilled in the attempt to reconcile these two passages: did or didn't Paul receive the gospel from the tradition?³⁵ A persuasive solution, I believe, is one that neither ascribes self-inconsistency to Paul nor smooths over the differences between the common Christian proclamation and the specific character of the Pauline apostleship. In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle, as all interpreters agree, appeals to those central events of the gospel (the death and resurrection of Christ) that he would have heard about even prior to his conversion. Even the basic Christian understanding of those events (that they happened "for our sins") was shared by all believers, and it would have made little sense for Paul to deny that he was a recipient of tradition with regard to that understanding.

But those crucial features of the gospel message were not, as far as we can tell, in dispute among the Galatian churches. The debate rather focused on the significance of those features for Gentiles vis-à-vis Judaism, and it was Paul whom the Lord had commissioned as his chosen instrument to bring the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21). In Galatians, therefore, what is in view is not the common tradition, but the distinctively Pauline message of what "the truth of the gospel" means for Gentiles: they are not to be circumcised or otherwise come under the tutelage of the Mosaic economy. And it was *that* aspect of the gospel message that Paul could not have

God-given diversity among them and thus miss some important elements in the biblical text.

³⁵ Among recent evangelical discussions, note should be taken of R. Y. K. Fung, "Revelation and Tradition: The Origins of Paul's Gospel," *EvQ* 67 (1985) 23-41, and K. Chamblin, "Revelation and Tradition in the Pauline *Evangeliion*," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 1-16. Both of these authors survey the various approaches to the problem. Fung builds on and nuances W. Baird's somewhat ambiguous proposal (in "What Is the Kerygma? A Study of 1 Cor 15:3-8 and Gal 1:11-17," *JBL* 76 [1957] 181-91) that the Corinthians passage emphasizes the *form*, while Galatians the *essential dynamic character*, of the gospel. Chamblin proposes that in Galatians Paul identifies the gospel with Christ: there is no contradiction with 1 Corinthians because there Paul is referring to the message *about* Christ, while here in Galatians he means the personal appearance of Christ himself. Although we cannot doubt the strong conceptual link between Christ and the gospel (and even the possibility that in some contexts one term may include the other), a straight lexical identification of the two seems unlikely, since the resulting paraphrase would be awkward, to say the least: "I want you to know the Christ preached by me, that he is not according to man; I neither received him from any man nor was he taught to me, but rather [I received him] by the revelation of Jesus Christ."

received from human quarters—it was revealed to him directly by none other than the Lord himself.

Our theological convictions with regard to the unity of Scripture, understandably, can sometimes make us hesitant to appreciate the diversity of expression through which God has given his revelation to us. Scholars who have no regard for the inspiration of Scripture, on the other hand, are too quick to see that diversity and to interpret it as evidence of contradiction. Because of our sin and ignorance, however, even valid presuppositions, no less than false ones, can blind us to the truth. It is indeed quite possible for negative critics to detect traits in the text that, while appearing inconsistent with a high view of Scripture, turn out upon further examination to cohere with biblical truth.

The distinctiveness of Paul's message, as reflected in the epistle to the Galatians, is one of these traits. For us to recognize the uniqueness of this apostle's mission does not in any way blunt the oneness of the biblical message. On the contrary. It becomes further evidence for "the heavenliness of the matter [of Scripture], . . . the consent of all [its] parts, . . . the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, . . . and the entire perfection thereof."³⁶

III. PAUL VERSUS CALVIN: THE CHALLENGE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

These considerations are of great importance for the task of systematic theology. Because there was indeed a fundamental unity that characterized the apostolic proclamation, we may use that proclamation as the source for systematics.³⁷ On the other hand, because there was also genuine diversity in that proclamation—because there is a distinctiveness to the teaching of each apostle—the systematician must be careful not to harmonize the various elements into an artificial whole. The solution to this dilemma is to be found in the discipline of biblical theology.³⁸ All too often, in the formulation of systematic theology, we may focus on a particular doctrine, then proceed to collect data from various parts of Scripture without regard to their place in redemptive history. As a result, we end up flattening the richness of revelation, and we impoverish its content. Let us not only recognize the

³⁶Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5.

³⁷For an excellent essay that touches on several points covered here, see D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. W. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 65-95.

³⁸Cf. R. B. Gaffin, Jr., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," *WTJ* 38 (1975-76) 281-99; more briefly, G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991) 266-69.

diversity of Scripture; let us exult in it. The distinctiveness of Paul's preaching is not a threat to systematics but its real promise.

But now, inquiring about the relationship between systematics and Paul involves two distinct issues. One is whether we may legitimately use the Pauline epistles as the basis of or the source for systematic theology. The other, more controversial question still, is whether we may use systematics to understand Paul. In either of these senses, it is not only "Paul versus Calvin," but Paul versus any theologian who wishes to understand Scripture as a unified whole.

If I choose Calvin as the foil in my title, it is for various reasons. True, my own theological position has something to do with it, but there are other factors. Calvin wrote not only one of the most influential systematic theologies in the history of the Christian church; he also produced unusually fine commentaries on most of Scripture. Many biblical scholars the least disposed toward Calvinism as a theological system readily acknowledge that Calvin's exegetical work was far ahead of his time. The first edition of the *Institutes* was published when Calvin was a very young man, and the subsequent revisions and expansions reflect both his growing knowledge of historical theology (references to the Fathers and medieval theologians increase sharply in each subsequent edition) and his greater attention to exegetical work. No one is likely to argue that these two sides of his work were independent of each other—as though he forgot about his theology when he exegeted (and that is why his commentaries are good), or did not pay attention to the Bible when he did theology (and that is why the *Institutes* are so bad!). My own thesis is that both his exegesis and his theology are superb precisely because they are related.

Yet my purpose here is not to defend Calvin's theological system in particular, but rather the conception that one's theology, whatever that may be, ought indeed to be built on the scriptural data—including especially the Pauline letters—and, moreover, that one's exegesis of Paul stands to gain, rather than to lose, if it is consciously done within the framework of one's theology.

Let us take each in turn. Why should anyone object to using Paul's writings for constructing a systematic theology? Because Paul contradicts himself and thus his teachings do not provide the consistency needed for theologizing. We dealt with that problem in the first part. Second, because the diversity found within the pages of the NT suggests that there are various theologies, and any attempt to unify them into one inevitably distorts the text. That was the subject of the previous section. But there are other concerns. The very notion of a systematic—therefore abstract—discipline runs counter to the character of the biblical text, which stands in the Hebraic rather than the Greek tradition. This argument was very popular some decades ago. And while one still hears it

suggested from time to time, various scholars have applied severe strictures to it. The supposed differences between Hebrew and Greek thought are not nearly as great as many assume.

More serious is the objection that systematic theology must give expression to the historical context of the theologian. Modern men and women, we are told, are far removed from the society, thought, and assumptions of the biblical writers. While the biblical text can provide certain themes and guidelines, it can hardly serve as the basis or the primary (let alone exclusive) source of theology. At this point, obviously, evangelicals and nonevangelicals are faced with contrasting—indeed, incompatible—worldviews. (Honesty, however, demands that moderns, insofar as they reject a fundamental component in the thought of Jesus and his apostles, consider carefully whether they can in good conscience label their theology as “Christian.”)

Without denying or minimizing the differences between believers in the first and twentieth centuries, I would want to insist that the continuity between the two is of much greater moment. Vos understood this principle well on the basis of his eschatological reading of the Pauline teaching. In his view, we stand on the same side of redemptive history as Paul stood.³⁹ In spite of the temporal and cultural distance that separates us from the apostle, and in spite of the uniqueness that attaches to his inspired teaching, our theologizing can and should be of a piece with it. It is true that when we engage in theological reflection arising out of Paul’s writings we cannot divest ourselves of our own historical context. Yet in spite of that, or rather *because* of that, such theological work can do greater justice to Pauline thought than the futile attempt to articulate it in a contextual vacuum.

But this brings us to our second major issue, which is much trickier; namely, should systematics play a role in our exegesis? As we noted earlier, Meyer’s answer would have been, “Don’t even think about it.” In contrast, I want to argue not only that the exegete may address theological issues and suggest what bearing the text may have on theological reflection. I go a daring step further: my systematic theology may—indeed, must—inform my exegesis. To put it in the most shocking way possible, my theological system should tell me how to exegete. Can such an outrageous position be defended? I would like to suggest three considerations that make that position not merely defensible but indeed the only real option.

In the first place, we should remind ourselves that systematic theology is, to a large extent, the attempt to reformulate the teaching of Scripture in ways that are meaningful and understandable to us in our present context.⁴⁰ Sometimes, it is true,

³⁹Cf. Gaffin, *Centrality*, 19–20.

⁴⁰Or to use a controversial expression, systematics may be described as an exercise in *contextualization*.

theologians have given the impression (or even claimed) that their descriptions are no more and no less than the teachings of Scripture and that therefore, being independent of the theologian's historical context, those descriptions have permanent validity. But the very process of organizing the biblical data—to say nothing of the use of a different language in a different cultural setting—brings to bear the theologian's own context. Even Charles Hodge, who claimed with great pride that no original ideas had ever been proposed at Princeton,⁴¹ was a truly creative thinker, and his *Systematic Theology* reflects through and through an innovative integration of some strands of nineteenth century philosophy with classic Reformed theology.

Intrinsically, there is nothing objectionable in attempting to understand and explain an ancient writing through contemporary categories. Yet biblical scholars often assume that such an approach is off-limits. We need to remind ourselves that the very use of English to explain the biblical text means resorting to subsequent formal expressions. If a modern writer wishes to explain Aristotle's thought, for example, we all acknowledge not only the legitimacy but also the great value and even the necessity of doing so by the use of contemporary philosophical terms that make it possible to express clearly an ancient thinker's writings. Someone who merely restated Aristotle's teachings using Greek words, or even strict English equivalents, would fail to explain those teachings precisely because no attempt was made to contextualize them.

In the second place, our evangelical view of the unity of Scripture demands that we see the whole Bible as the context of any one part. An appeal to the study of Aristotle is of help here too. The modern scholar looks at the whole Aristotelian corpus for help in understanding a detail in one particular work. To the extent that we view the whole of Scripture as having come from one Author, therefore, to that extent a systematic understanding of the Bible contributes to the exegesis of individual passages. Admittedly, there are some real dangers in this approach. On the basis of a questionable reading of Rom 12:6, Christians have often appealed to "the analogy of faith" in a way that does not do justice to the distinctiveness of individual writers of Scripture. Moreover, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of *eisegesis*, that is, reading into a particular text some broad theological idea because we

⁴¹The reference was specifically to the journal edited by him (see M. Noll, "The *Princeton Review*," *WTJ* 50 [1988] 283-304, esp. 288). Of course, Hodge was not as naive as those words might suggest. His use of hyperbole was intended to focus on doctrinal substance, not on the way the doctrines were formulated. Indeed, some modern writers have emphasized—and severely criticized—the innovative use of Scottish Realism made by Hodge. Without denying that some aspects of that background had a negative effect, attention must be paid to the positive benefits as well. In any case, it is my opinion that the indebtedness of Hodge and later Princetonians to Realism has been greatly overstated.

(sometimes unconsciously) want to avoid the implications of what the text really says. It is therefore understandable that some scholars wish to restrict the principle of the analogy of faith to the end of the interpretive process, and then only as a means of summarizing the teaching of the passage.⁴² To do so, however, is to neglect God's most important hermeneutical gift to us, namely, the unity and wholeness of his own revelation.

Third, and finally, my proposal will sound a lot less shocking once we remember that, as a matter of fact, everyone does it anyway. Whether we mean to or not, and whether we like it or not, all of us read the text as interpreted by our theological presuppositions. Indeed, the most serious argument against the view that exegesis should be done independently of systematic theology is that such a view is hopelessly naive. One of the reasons we smile when we read the comments by Meyer and Rückert quoted earlier is that we have come to understand the impossibility of their ideal. It is easy to show how nineteenth century scholars were influenced powerfully by their worldview and preconceptions.

But it is not simply a matter of our being unable to shed our preunderstanding. What is even more important is that, even if it were possible for someone to drain our brains and leave us with a blank mind, it would hurt rather than help our hermeneutics. We need to appreciate that all the knowledge and experience that we have accumulated is God's gift to us, since it forms a framework—yes, a system—that makes further learning possible. The very process of understanding depends on our prior framework of interpretation. If we perceive a fact that makes sense to us, the simple reason is that we have been able to fit that fact into the whole complex of ideas that we have previously assimilated.

Of course, sometimes we *make* the fact fit our preconceptions and thus distort it. The remedy, however, is neither to deny that we have those preconceptions nor to try to suppress them, for we would only be deceiving ourselves. We are much more likely to be conscious of those preconceptions if we deliberately seek to identify them *and then use them* in the exegetical process. That way, when we come across a fact that resists the direction our interpretation is taking, we are better prepared to recognize the anomaly for what it is: an instance in which our interpretive scheme is faulty and must be modified. On the other hand, exegetes who convince themselves

⁴²Cf. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "Hermeneutics and the Theological Task," *TrinJ NS* 12 (1990) 3-14. Other writers are more negative, even to the point of undermining the coherence of Scripture. Cf., among others, C. R. Schoonhoven, "The 'Analogy of Faith' and the Intent of Hebrews," in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (ed. W. W. Gasque and W. S. LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 92-110, esp. 105. Much more helpful is H. Blocher, "The 'Analogy of Faith' in the Study of Scripture: In Search of Justification and Guide-lines," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987) 17-38, though I would wish to go a little further than he does.

that, through pure philological and historical techniques, they can understand the Bible directly—that is, without the mediation of prior exegetical, theological, and philosophical commitments—are less likely to perceive the real character of exegetical difficulties.

The old advice that biblical students should try as much as possible to approach a text without a prior idea as to what it means (and that therefore commentaries should be read after, not before, the exegesis) does have the advantage of encouraging independent thinking; besides, it reminds us that our primary aim is indeed to discover the historical meaning and that we are always in danger of imposing our meaning on the text. Nevertheless, the advice is fundamentally flawed, because it is untrue to the very process of learning. I would suggest rather that a student who comes to a biblical passage with, say, a dispensationalist background, should attempt to make sense of the text assuming that dispensationalism is correct. I would go so far as to say that, upon encountering a detail that does not seem to fit the dispensationalist scheme, the student should try to "make it fit." The purpose, of course, is not to mishandle the text, but to become self-conscious about what we all do anyway. The result should be increased sensitivity to those features of the text that disturb our interpretive framework and thus a greater readiness to modify that framework.⁴³

IV. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, there is no need to pit Paul against himself, for he was indeed a coherent thinker. Nor should we pit him against Peter or the other apostles, for the very differences among them should be viewed as reflecting a deeper unity. But it is not even a good idea to oppose Paul and subsequent theologians, for as we attempt to contextualize and formulate our faith in a way that is intellectually responsible—and how else can we give an adequate response to those who ask us about our hope?—we are doing nothing but to build on what the Apostle to the Gentiles accomplished under the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit. May we be given the grace to continue that task in submission to his infallible Word and motivated by a desire to do only that which will bring glory to his name.

⁴³Or so one hopes—at this point, unfortunately, psychological disposition usually takes over!