



SCOT McKNIGHT

FOREWORD BY  
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FIVE THINGS  
BIBLICAL  
SCHOLARS WISH  
THEOLOGAINS  
KNEW



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# INTRODUCTION



**SO YOU WANT TO BE A THEOLOGIAN?** Well, perhaps you answer back, “Not so much a ‘systematic’ theologian but, yes, a ‘theologian.’” You might then suggest, too, that after all, “We are all theologians, and I want to be a good one.” I’m glad for you, as I am honored at times to be called a theologian though in my world, and this is what is at the heart of this book and Hans Boersma’s companion volume, we Bible scholars tend to call ourselves exegetes or New Testament scholars or, to get a little pedantic, Matthew or John or Paul scholars. People in my discipline, New Testament, sometimes don’t like to be called theologians, and at times we (or they) dismiss anything smacking of systematics. Systematic theology is a complete, coherent account of the Christian faith, broken into parts but unified and driven by the system at work. Biblical theology sticks to the Bible and to its categories and terms and limits.

There is, then, to this day often a wide divide between a systematic theologian and a biblical scholar. We don’t tend to teach outside our special discipline, and we often don’t even read one another. Some days I think there ought to be a required order for



doing theology—that is, that we biblical scholars get to go first, and we set the course. That is, we write up our research into an article or a book, lay it on the table in the lunchroom for the faculty, and the systematicians pick it up and work it into their theology. On the best days, I think the systematicians will actually change their theology because of our Bible studies. On other days, I think they mostly ignore us, and (on every day, I suppose) they think we ignore them. We mostly ignore theologians. (Except for Karl Barth.)

Truth be told, many of us in New Testament studies, and even more so those in Old Testament studies, find ourselves fighting off the penchant of students to bring systematics into the discussion in a way that overwhelms the biblical author being studied and redirects the conversation to much later discussions.

Student: “Professor, Barth put forward this theory of Scripture. Is his view about what David is saying in Psalm 119 right?”

Professor: “Let David be David and you can discuss Barth in your systematic theology classes.”

Theology is more than Barth or any other contemporary theologian. In Professor James D. G. Dunn’s much-discussed *Christology in the Making*, a book that investigates the origins of belief in the incarnation and that concludes incarnational Christology is not to be found until the last-written documents of the New Testament, the question of the orthodox creeds comes up in his introduction—that is, theology in its most received form comes up. He writes about pressing questions, observing, “And for those who like myself find the definition of Christianity more clearly provided by the NT than by the creeds of Catholic Christendom the answers to these questions will have a critical bearing on faith itself.” This statement is followed by a very common warning by professors of my discipline: “But all should bear in mind that truly to hear the NT writers speaking in their own terms requires that the listener be open to the possibility that some of his

preconceived ideas will be challenged and have to be rejected even when others are confirmed.”<sup>1</sup> I remember reading this in 1980 as a seminary student and thinking, *A scholar after my own heart*. I’m not where I was those days, but I am convinced that we must begin with the Bible, and we must let the Bible speak on its own, and we must cede to the Bible the categories it provides. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. There you have our problem: Bible versus creeds versus confessions versus systematics. Perhaps not always “versus,” but these are the tension points to be explored in this volume and Hans Boersma’s *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*.

## NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS’ USE OF SYSTEMATICS

I give two examples of how this plays out, and how it plays out varies considerably. Volker Rabens, a young German New Testament scholar, in his study of the Holy Spirit and ethics and how the Spirit’s indwelling transforms, says this about another New Testament scholar: “Stalder’s study on sanctification and pneumatology in Paul is heavily influenced by the *topoi* of systematic theology.” Before the punch line, notice that he sees the typical categories of systematics to be too influential in this New Testament scholar’s work. So? “He will thus not be our main dialogue partner.”<sup>2</sup> Rabens, courteously but firmly, puts Stalder’s work back on the shelf because it has been too influenced by systematic categories for doing biblical studies.

Now a second example, this one from another New Testament scholar, a preeminent Pauline scholar at Duke Divinity School, Douglas Campbell. At the beginning of his massive volume *Pauline Dogmatics*, he says, “So I suggest that an accurate account of Paul reads him in a quite Barthian way primarily because Barth was in many ways a faithful interpreter of Paul.” At the end he says, “I have explicated

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<sup>1</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 10.

<sup>2</sup>Volker Rabens, *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 2n5.

Paul with the help of Karl Barth,” and, “I am now more firmly convinced than ever that we must begin with Barth.” Wow, the word he uses is *begin*. Begin “with Barth.” That’s quite a confession for those of us formed into New Testament studies when bracketing systematics *and* systematicians was the first rule of exegesis. That claim by Campbell is a stretch for many of us, but what Campbell drops in the footnote of that same page would be seen as methodologically unacceptable: “If my reader is getting nervous about the emphasis on Barth, may I point out (again) that Paul is best read as Barthian because Barth got most of his good stuff *from* Paul. Barth was a Paulinist.”<sup>3</sup> The question could be asked, But was Paul a Barthian?

One scholar shelves with precision someone who makes use of systematic categories, and one scholar openly contends a systematician is the best way to understand Paul himself. It’s not that simple, perhaps, but nuances will be brought into discussion in the chapters that follow. We want merely here to put the tension into play. There is a difference between biblical and systematic theology, between what Old and New Testament scholars are trained to do and what systematicians are trained to do.

## THE SEDUCTION OF SYSTEMATICS

I speak now as a biblical specialist. Theology in general is seductive because we are studying God, and this is true for the biblical and the systematic theologian. Studying God is both thrilling and intoxicating. Many times we lose sight of the Subject and begin to obsess about one of the human authors in the Bible, the world of the Bible, the intricacies of the history that shaped a given theologian, and the cultural context. We become historians rather than worshipers. Long ago Leon Morris, a highly respected Australian evangelical, argued the letter to the Romans was about God. That should have shocked

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<sup>3</sup>Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God’s Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 2, 742-43. The footnote is 743n3.

many interpreters because Morris showed how few studies of Romans said much about God.<sup>4</sup> It was decades before I heard anyone else call attention to the God-shaped theology of Romans, and the one I heard do so was Beverly Gaventa.<sup>5</sup> One would think in reading most discussions about Romans that the letter is about justification or soteriology, but, no, Morris and Gaventa are right: first it's about God in Christ. Talk about God and talk about history tend to be zero-sum games or the inverse of each other: those who talk about God don't talk much history, and those who talk history seem afraid to talk about God.

That topic—God—can be intoxicating in another way: it can be numbing. So, Brian Harris, another Australian (actually South African now living in Perth), can say,

Theology is a dangerous business. Though we might begin by feeling that we are in control of the process (we study God) we soon discover that the God we study is the God who studies us. Even as we examine the nature and character of God, we sense the pushback, “You think you are studying me—but actually I am studying your response to what you discover. Never forget, those who study God are challenged to live in the light of what they find.” It is dangerous to be a theologian and to be resistant to change, for you cannot study God and not change.<sup>6</sup>

The intoxicating power of studying God is the point of the early sections of J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*.<sup>7</sup> The so-called object of theological study is the all-consuming Subject, who interrogates us as the object, and being known by the Subject is the only true theology.

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<sup>4</sup>Leon L. Morris, “The Theme of Romans,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 249-63.

<sup>5</sup>Beverly Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel According to Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 75-96. Gaventa has said this in numerous places, and it is not unnoticed that she has been heavily influenced by Barth.

<sup>6</sup>Brian Harris, “What Do Theologians Do?,” January 8, 2019, <https://brianharrisauthor.com/what-do-theologians-do/>.

<sup>7</sup>J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

That seduction can be sensed in yet another way: not only is the Subject intoxicating, but the pursuit of that Subject by exploring truth is seductive. I speak as a New Testament specialist, but there are times when I envy the chasing down of new ideas in new contexts with new categories by theologians *in order that they might ascertain truth more clearly and feel it more deeply*. The reading of the great theologians—from the Cappadocians and Augustine to Vladimir Lossky, Jürgen Moltmann, Sarah Coakley, and Katherine Sonderegger—makes one yearn to enter the exhilaration of discoveries. I say this without diminishing what I think is the noble calling of biblical studies, for there too one enters the world of divine communication in order to know the truth.

Seduction, then, works in many directions, and this must be said about systematics (as it is said about biblical studies): the history of the discussion seduces us into thinking that only those in that history matter. Which is to say that diversity is eliminated, erased, or suppressed by entering into that traditional history of theology. While the Eastern Orthodox Church may talk about its Macrina and the Western church about its Teresa of Ávila, a brief mention of a female doesn't the problem solve. Complicate this now by the burgeoning growth of non-American and non-European voices (and this can be said in other ways), and all of us face a very serious challenge to learn to think with others when it comes to theology.<sup>8</sup> Our history of theology's exclusion of such diverse voices makes the intentionality of including other voices all the more important. I know I have often failed at this myself, and I know this book will not remedy those failures completely, but I will make attempts here to listen to more voices. I have in writing this book at times paused to ask myself whether the five points I make are not five white-male topics of discussion.

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<sup>8</sup>Robert Chao Romero, *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).



Another dimension of systematic theology's seductiveness is the clarity—sometimes wrong, sometimes right—of systemic thinking, the clarity of a system of thought that puts it all together. For instance, F. D. E. Schleiermacher considered all talk about future eschatology as not worthy of knowledge, and many today (sadly) have revived the German's theory.<sup>9</sup> Such dismissals lead ministers to lie or offer comforting pabulum at funerals. On the other hand, take trinitarian theology: the third and fourth centuries took endless hours and debates and meetings (and deaths) to come to terms with trinitarian thinking, which (as one narrative goes) was less emphatic in the West than in the East. The penetrations of trinitarian theology, according to the standard narrative, got a decisive push in the *Church Dogmatics* of Karl Barth. Since Barth an increasing number of theologians have learned to think trinitarian-ly, including Robert Jenson.<sup>10</sup> Trinitarian thought can itself become intoxicating and seductive. When Jenson discusses the image of God, instead of probing what *tselem* (and *demuth*) meant in the ancient Near East, he explores the idea on top of Barth's relational theory, leading Jenson to see "image of God" as meaning that humans can both be addressed by God and respond to God as well as speak to one another. His discussion is mesmerizing and miles from what biblical scholars have known for decades: that the term refers not so much (if at all) to our capacity to respond to God's word as to our *mission and task to represent God on earth to ensure God's rule is implemented in all creation*. It is not that Jenson's speech-response theory isn't theologically sound or evocative—it is that the expression "image of God" doesn't mean that in its context. His trinitarian

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<sup>9</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Edwina Lawler, Terrence N. Tice, and Catherine L. Kelsey, ed. Terrence N. Tice and Catherine L. Kelsey (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 2:992-98.

<sup>10</sup>For a lively study of Jenson's theology, see Lincoln Harvey, *Jesus in the Trinity: A Beginner's Guide to the Theology of Robert Jenson* (London: SCM Press, 2020). For a critique of his trinitarian thinking, see Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013); Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

commitment led him to ask, “How do we explain ‘image of God’ in terms of Trinity?” and not, “What does this expression mean in this text in its context, and how does that shape theology?”<sup>11</sup> Once one is committed to one’s system, one tends to see that system everywhere.

In only a slight twist of meaning to the word, the *seduction* of systematic theology is its ease when compared to the discipline of exegesis and the patience it requires. I’m fully aware, having read theologians for nearly fifty years, of the scholarly apparatus of their disciplines and the intense study required to become a systematician, but my experience is that theology per se comes more naturally and in some ways more easily than does biblical, exegetical theology. Theology can get in the way of hearing the Bible. One can, to put it bluntly, give a theological opinion about most anything, but to give an informed judgment on whether *pistis Christou* is objective or subjective (or a third way) requires the accumulation of a discipline and practice and knowledge. I’m pressing this from my side of the ledger in the contest of exegesis versus theology, but I do so from the experience of teaching students for nearly four decades. If I ask what one’s theory of atonement is, many would have a theory. But if I asked for detailed demonstration of their atonement theory from Jesus or Hebrews, they’d mostly draw a blank. If I were to ask what “righteousness of God” means, especially in Isaiah, most would go silent. Theology seems to come earlier than exegetical expertise. Add history along with Jewish, Roman, and Greek contexts to this, and suddenly the playing field becomes too big for many. It’s easier to read a theologian—and I truly mean this—than it is to master Hebrew and Aramaic

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<sup>11</sup>Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2:53-72. For recent studies see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005); Ryan S. Peterson, *Imago Dei as Human Identity*, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement 14 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016). This is not to say Jenson should have known what was published after his book; Middleton and Peterson summarize much scholarship that could have been appropriated by Jenson. I don’t see that Peterson, however, interacted (as he might have) with Jenson’s discussion of image of God in *Systematic Theology* 2:53-72.

and Greek, to scour the ancient sources of Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, then to engage two millennia of conversation and debate about each passage in the New Testament, *and then say something fresh*. I'm not saying that theologians are anything but demanding to read and even more to master. My point is that we all operate with a kind of instinctive systematic theology, and it comes first, while the requirement to think exclusively in terms of Matthew or Hebrews forces us out of our instinctive patterns of thought into others that are anything but common in the church. It is hard work for Bible professors to get students to think in terms of the particular author or book of the Bible instead of morphing that author or text into the larger theological and truth questions. What Matthew means by *kingdom* over against what Mark means is simply not a question most young students think (or even care) about. But they may well (and nearly always do) have an opinion of what *kingdom* means. And since they've not studied the texts, they can be surprised by what it meant in Jesus' world.<sup>12</sup>

Speaking with a theologian one day, I told him about this project and then I said, "I've smarted off about this long enough now I should put something down in print." What I have found is that it's easier to take easy swipes at those down the hallway in theology than it is to construct some major ideas that I wish theologians knew or, in most cases, wish were more pervasive in their theologies. I read lots of theologians who I think maintain good balance—such as Beth Felker Jones—but I also see things that make me cringe. This will not be a polemical book but will instead be a meandering through five topics. At times it will pause to offer some criticisms (and not always of theologians). Before I get there, I want to cover some bases: assumptions at work in good theology. I'll mention some of these, albeit very briefly.

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<sup>12</sup>Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2014).

## ASSUMPTIONS IN A THEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Genuine theology, biblical and systematic, is *a quest to know God*, or to be known by God and in the embrace of being known by God to become more like God's Son through the gracious work of the Spirit. Scripture plays a major role in shaping what we know and how we know, but good theology eventually admits that it must be at some level limited. What we know of God in being known by God is a speck of divine immensity, but we are confident that God has revealed himself (Godself) in Christ as God's Word and in the Scriptures as God's Word about that Word. There is a tendency in some theologians to press what we don't know hard enough that one wonders whether one can know God at all.<sup>13</sup> Hence, I want to drive in a stake: all theology must start at the exegetical level. At times theologians occasionally toss in some Bible references to decorate their theology rather than to let the Bible form their theology. Kevin Vanhoozer and Daniel Treier wisely then speak of the mirror of Scripture in the sense of its primary idiom, and what they mean is that our language needs to mirror the language of the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

All theology is *wisdom*. There is a rich history of wisdom in the Bible, which can't be isolated to the Old Testament's so-called Wisdom books, and that history did not stop with the Bible, as we find it in noncanonical texts as well. Once we recognize that theology is wisdom, the whole Bible becomes wisdom—searching, finding, articulating, living. If we define wisdom as living in God's world in God's way, that is, as Christoformity, then all of theology needs to

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<sup>13</sup>E.g., Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45-46. She speaks of "knowing in unknowing." For a similar point, see Benjamin Myers, "Exegetical Mysticism: Scripture, *Paideia*, and the Spiritual Senses," in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology*, ed. Janice McRandal (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 1-14.

<sup>14</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

be wrapped up in wisdom. It is unfortunate that both biblical and systematic theologians can turn theology into history or philosophy, and forget that it is about God and about wisdom and knowing God and being known by God. This kind of pursuit of wisdom, then, fears the common practice of bracketing off sources for genuine wisdom. In particular, the Christian faith uniformly confesses a trinitarian God, and that means theology must be trinitarian.

The living embodiment of that wisdom is that theology comes to us from the church, and hence all good theology is *ecclesial*. Yet we live in a divided church, not the church we confess in the creed, and thus our theology becomes partisan, or close to it, the moment we put pen to paper. True enough, but the church is what it is, and that “is-ness” gives shape to genuine Christian theology. Theology is not simply ideas articulated in disinterested fashion but ideas embodied in the context of church life. Which means our theology—and here I will meet some hesitations from those in my own disciplines—needs to be constrained, checked, challenged by the great tradition of the church, and that means beginning with the Nicene Creed. Then, too, our biblical studies at least need to be reshaped and redirected by our own denominational theology. This in part is what I mean by saying theology is *ecclesial*.

Something Sarah Coakley presses into play often is that all theology is *prayerful*, which she can call ascetical or refer to contemplation, contemplative prayer, and the more solitary spiritual disciplines. While her focus seems to be more individualistic, she’s an Anglican, and that means she’s at least tipping her hat to the great prayer traditions of the church, including the Book of Common Prayer’s collects.<sup>15</sup> Thus, theology is also worshipful and personal as

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<sup>15</sup>Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 88. For a good explanation of her approach with some of its weaknesses, see Myles Werntz, “The Body and the Body of the Church: Coakley, Yoder, and the Imitation of Christ,” in McRandal, *Sarah Coakley and the Future*, 99-114.

well as corporate and ecclesial.<sup>16</sup> What is said about Coakley can be said as well about Katherine Sonderegger's theology: she explodes at times into lyrical worship.<sup>17</sup>

Returning now to something hinted at: all theology is *cultural*. Every theologian speaks out of a culture, into that culture, and for that culture. Theology is located, and that means males and females and ethnic groups and races and ages and denominations are all at work in how theology is formed and embodied. There is no such thing as a theology done once and for all. Unredeemed desire, Coakley reminds us over and over, is behind the hegemonic articulations and embodiments that impede genuine Christian unity in our pursuit of knowing God and being known by God.<sup>18</sup> But theologian John Webster reminds us that theology is not only cultural because it also produces a culture and requires a kind of culture for it to flourish as God's design. I finish this introduction, then, with words from Webster, words that set the tone for the chapters that follow:

There can be few things more necessary for the renewal of Christian theology than the promotion of awed reading of classical Christian texts, scriptural and other, precisely because a good deal of modern Christian thought has adopted habits of mind which have led to disenchantment with the biblical canon and the traditions of paraphrase and commentary by which the culture of Christian faith has often been sustained. Such practices of reading and interpretation, and the educational and

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<sup>16</sup>A noticeable weakness in Coakley's first volume is an absence of ecclesiology in her trinitarian ecstasy theory. Does the church desire? For a set of responses to Coakley, see McRandal, *Sarah Coakley and the Future*. On this deficit in ecclesiology, see Werntz, "Body," 105. Her focus on Rom 8 fails to note that in Rom 8 there is an ecclesiology at work (Rom 8:18, in "us"; Rom 8:19, "children of God"; Rom 8:21, "children of God"; Rom 8:23, "we" and "the redemption of our bodies"; Rom 8:24, "we"; Rom 8:27, "saints"; Rom 8:28, in "for those who love God"; of course, Rom 8:29-30). All these indicate the prayer of the Spirit-prompted groaning is an ecclesiological group.

<sup>17</sup>Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>18</sup>Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 51-52.

political strategies which surround them, are central to the task of creating the conditions for the nurture of Christian theology.<sup>19</sup>

It is because I care about the Bible as God's Word, as sacred Scripture, that I have taken the alternative side to this two-book approach to the questions about what we wish the other one knew. The fundamental starting point is that we Bible folks think systematicians sometimes get a bit too far from Scripture, and so I want to explore five topics that I wish budding theologians would keep in front of them as they do their work: (1) theology needs a constant return to Scripture, (2) theology needs to know its impact on biblical studies, (3) theology needs historically shaped biblical studies, (4) theology needs more narrative, and (5) theology needs to be lived theology.

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<sup>19</sup>John Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 45.

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