

A PROPOSAL FOR THEOLOGICAL METHOD: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AS MODEL BUILDING

by Mike Stallard

INTRODUCTION

As a young man I had big dreams! My first big desire was to replace Al Kaline, my hero, as the rightfielder for the Detroit Tigers, my favorite pro baseball team. As you probably already know, I did not make it. I also had a desire to go to the primary university in my home state, Alabama, and play football (actually quarterback) for the Crimson Tide. As you probably already know, I did not make it. At one point, more realistically, I wanted to become a professional bowler. This was more reasonable since I lived at the bowling alley on weekends. As you probably already know, I did not make it. All of these things were more important than becoming President of the United States and leading the free world!

The path that the Lord actually took me down (although I did not know He was involved at the time) was undergraduate training that would lead me into the computer and engineering fields. As a senior in college, I took my first engineering job as a co-op student for a group of thermal engineers who were helping to design the Space Shuttle in the days before it was built. I literally marveled at my surroundings of high technology and technical expertise. My initial wonder was dampened rather early, on my first day in fact, when I realized that the large hi-tech color-coded graph that covered the whole wall was not related to the Space Shuttle at all, but was a record for the last several years of the “hearts” card game played in the group at lunch.¹

But while with that group for one year, I had my first exposure to something that is related to the subject of this paper. These thermal engineers were writing computer programs which they called “models.” They were trying to model the real world via computer. That is, they ran heat tests on possible materials with which to build the Space Shuttle without ever starting a fire. Since those days, I have discovered that “modeling” has become a buzz word for many areas (including ministry and discipleship in the Church). However, the point that has come home to me over and over again is that people often think in terms of models. In short, our world view, whether we are Christian, Buddhist, Moslem, Jew, Hindu, or atheist, is a model of what we believe reality to be.

Now that the Lord has brought me to Himself (the same year I worked for those thermal engineers) and led me into ministry and theology, I see the need to build carefully the model of what we believe. That is what this paper is about. In a preliminary way,² this article details a proposal for theological method that can be termed a “model” approach to the task of doing theology.³ The result should be a clear and coherent systematic theology or world view.⁴

¹ Engineers are generally more human than their reputation. They do, however, for the most part consider themselves philosophers and they like to argue about religion.

² My thinking in these matters is far from complete. Constructive feedback from others is welcome.

³ This paper was first written for a doctoral seminar at Dallas Theological Seminary on theological method in the Spring of 1985. I am indebted to Dr. Craig Blaising who produced an interest in me concerning why

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Before we actually look at the process of building our “model” or world view which we shall call systematic theology, some preliminary considerations about the definition, need, and starting point for theology (assumed after this to refer to “systematic theology” unless otherwise noted) should be examined.

The Definition of Theology

If one wants to describe his theological method, he must first have a clear understanding of what theology is. Traditional theological works have been written without trying (in any major way) to establish this first.⁵ In such cases a definition is assumed. However, with the growing interest in methodology it is becoming increasingly important for a theologian to define the task that he is doing so that a clear method will follow. In a society in which pluralism plays such a significant role, “theology” can mean different things to different theologians.⁶ Therefore, the place to begin is with a definition of theology.

The current proposal does not concern itself with such disciplines as biblical theology in the technical sense. It is systematic theology which is the focus. In that light, Charles Hodge does a good job of showing the various uses of the word “theology.”⁷ Correctly rejecting many as too ambiguous he seeks to separate even natural theology from Bible theology in the sense of seeing the latter as the only valid theology to be considered distinctively a Christian science. However, the current proposal for theological method prefers a broader definition of its task similar to the one given by Lewis Sperry Chafer.⁸ Wording the definition in slightly different terms the following statement emerges:

Systematic Theology is the discipline which develops and follows a system of doctrine which incorporates into its system all the truth about the Christian God, His universe, and his relationship to it, from any and every source available to the mind of man.

we formulate doctrines the way we do. I am also indebted to the other students in the class whose papers and presentations have sharpened my own thinking. I have recently rewritten it in the hopes of clarifying a few of the points made.

⁴ My use of a world view as a synonym for systematic theology is no accident. In a summary kind of way, I believe genuine Christian systematic theology to be a world view for which the Bible is foundational.

⁵ For example, note Berkhof’s Systematic Theology.

⁶ See David Tracy, “The Question of Pluralism in Contemporary Theology,” Chicago Theological Seminary Register 71 (Spring 1981): 29-38.

⁷ Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 1:19-22.

⁸ Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 1:5.

In short, systematic theology is the organized presentation of a world view purporting to have its basis in the Christian God and Creator. The broadness of the task is clearly seen in this definition. Note that the end product of the discipline of systematic theology is a set of doctrines. These doctrines are claimed to be the truth. Furthermore, this truth concerns itself with three objects:

- The **Christian God** is included which emphasizes the fact that we are speaking about “Christian” systematic theology. It would also indicate that the **Bible** is to be a source of input for systematic theology since the Bible is the revelational document of the Christian faith.
- However, unlike Hodge, **truth about the universe independent of the Bible** is included. Thus, the natural sciences would also be inputs to the task. Also, the interaction of God with His universe is involved which means not only the interaction recorded in the Bible but also the interaction between God and the His world as seen in the experiences of man not recorded in the Bible. Most of the items in this last category could be seen in the humanities as academic disciplines.
- Finally, the definition shows that this proposal sees systematic theology something to be understood with the **mind**. Inputs enter into the process through the thinking and reasoning capacities of the one doing the task of theology.

The Need for Systematic Theology

The next question someone might ask is “Why should anyone do systematic theology?” After all, theology has been done in the past and since God supposedly does not change why should theology ever change? There is an element of truth to that last statement. Remember the quote: *“IF IT’S NEW, IT ISN’T TRUE!”* There is a sense in which some elements of one’s theology do not change if it is truly Christian (the “fundamentals”). However, such an admission does not tell the whole story. There are three reasons to accept the need for updating theology from generation to generation.

- The world is sufficiently large to give the reasonable impression **that man has not observed all that he can observe**. This is especially obvious in the light of current discussions about the Information Super Highway. If inputs to systematic theology are not to be limited to the Bible, then additional inputs are added as man makes more observations as time passes.
- It must be noted that man and his environment (particularly relationships) do in fact **change**. The modern technological explosion has proven that, although man still harbors evil intentions deep inside his being, he has great capacity for change in the way he expresses that evil. For example, the modern genocide through abortion,⁹

⁹ This is not to say that abortion is a new issue entirely. In fact, abortion was a practice in the first century Mediterranean world which was stopped largely by the rise of Christianity. See Michael J. Gorman,

nuclear war, and the potential for ecological disaster¹⁰ are only a few of the issues that were never even dreamed about as the Reformers of the sixteenth century or the Princeton theologians of the last century sat at their desks of study. Surely modern man's sudden ability to destroy himself many different ways should be an input to a Christian's theology or world view as much as for example, baptism or the Lord's Supper. Systematic theology must address the questions of today as well as those questions that are common to all times and places.¹¹

- There is a real sense in which **man can continually improve upon his understanding of God**. As Bernard Lonergan notes, "the mysteries that God alone knows, that he has revealed, that the church has defined, may in the course of time become better understood."¹² Such an improvement may even be likely as one generation of theologians builds upon the structure of previous ones.

The Starting Point of Theology

Once theology in the sense of systematics has been defined and the need of its "present" task clearly comprehended, the Christian theologian must decide where to start in his task. Does he begin with the Bible or with those inputs that are outside of the Bible? For example, does he take the Bible to experience or does he take his experience to the Bible? The starting point for theology other than systematics is much easier to determine.¹³ However, the allowance of so many sources of input for systematic theology causes a dilemma.¹⁴

The present writer understands the starting point for genuine Christian systematic theology to be the Bible. This is not to underestimate the impact of nonbiblical (not necessarily anti-biblical) presuppositions that the theologian may have acquired from his environment before he opens his Bible (more will be said later about presuppositions). However, the Bible can certainly mold a person's presuppositions as much as any other input. In the case of a Christian theologian, such an influence is desirable or it would be doubtful that his theology could truly be called Christian in the traditional use of that

Abortion and the Early Church, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982). The point here is that the extent abortion is used today could not have been envisioned in past centuries.

¹⁰ I am not here siding with environmental radicals who want to propagate Eastern mysticism throughout society. I have in mind the ability of mankind through biological warfare to destroy the environment and the human race with it.

¹¹ This second reason for updating systematic theology in each generation falls in the category of Erickson's "contemporizing" of the Christian message (Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, 1:105) although much more is involved in Erickson's category.

¹² Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology, 12. This is in stark contrast to the doctrinal statements of many of our fundamental schools which include in the statement an affirmation that the doctrinal statement will never change. While the desire to protect against liberal encroachment is laudable, it may set us up for theological and spiritual deadness. After all, Peter told us to grow in the grace and *knowledge* of Jesus (2 Pet. 3:18).

¹³ For example, see Goppelt, Theology of the New Testament, 1:3-11, for a discussion of starting points for biblical theology.

¹⁴ For example, many theologians attempt to reinterpret the Bible based upon the already accepted dogma of evolution. The theological system one gets with this approach will be quite different from one starting with the Bible and then moving to science.

term. Therefore, the Bible must be brought to all areas of life at least logically, if not experientially, before other inputs are analyzed in the building of a theological system. Such a statement shows the priority of the Bible in such a scheme. This priority will be taken up in the next section concerning the sources of theology.

THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

In this section the sources or inputs to the theological task will be discussed. Of course, not every possible individual input can be analyzed in the scope of this presentation. However, a few of the more important sources can be discussed along with some general ideas concerning the sources of theology. Paramount to the task at hand is the establishment of a priority of those sources. From the last section it was noted that such a determination was essential in establishing a starting point for theological endeavor. The present discussion will also show that such a ranking is necessary to evaluate the various inputs as one pieces together his theological structure.

The Bible as Special Revelation

This proposal looks at the Bible as propositional and special revelation from God the Creator of the universe. It is special revelation in that it has not been available to all men in all ages. It is propositional in that it can be broken down into a group of propositions which make assertions about God and reality. The Bible for the Christian theologian is not only the starting point for theology but also the measuring rod by which the other sources will be judged. Therefore, it has the highest priority as the theologian prepares his system of theology. The Scriptures and only the Scriptures can in that sense be called “the basic source of Christian theology.”¹⁵

There are several reasons why the Bible deserves such a lofty position in the task of the Christian theologian:

- The Bible appears to be *more direct* than many other sources. In the Bible God speaks to men through other men. In nature, for example, God speaks to men through stars, plants, animals, that is, inanimate or animate objects which do not share the same level of communication with man.
- Many other sources are much larger as to raw content. This causes interpretation of these other sources to be open to a greater chance of error. For example, if one looks at all the records of history, historical theology, archaeology, etc., he finds a vast expanse of information (true of natural science as well). Not only will time be a factor in interpreting all of this information, man will have many more opportunities to make a faulty decision along the way. On the other hand, *the Bible is in smaller form that is more accessible to a man in all its parts as he produces his theology*. Although the Bible is inexhaustible in its application, it can be reduced to a rather small number of propositions when compared to a similar effort using historical or scientific data.

¹⁵ Ebeling, The Study of Theology, 13.

- The Bible is superior to the other sources of theology because of the guarantee God has given that He has spoken through it **without error**. This proposal accepts the claims that the Bible makes about itself. The curse upon the universe and the inherent evil of man (affecting science and history as well as other sources) keep those sources from revealing God to the degree found in the Bible. In nonbiblical sources there appears to be a “veiled” witness to God. Consequently, the Bible should be used by the Christian theologian as the source with the highest priority.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

Because of the Christian theologian’s acceptance of the Bible, he is confronted with the ministry of the Holy Spirit often presented as **illumination** (see John 14:26, Eph. 1:17-18). This dynamic of the Christian life must not be ignored in the undertaking of the theological task. It reminds one that the theological task is not just an academic discipline but a spiritual enterprise. It involves spiritual gifts (Eph. 4, Rom. 12, I Cor. 12-14) given by the Holy Spirit not just intellectual skills. Therefore, practices such as prayer (involves the Holy Spirit, see Rom. 8:26-27) are not out of place as part of the theological task.

The Role of Reason

The dynamic of the Holy Spirit should not cause one to overlook the role of man’s reasoning capacities in the theological task.¹⁶ Independent of the Holy Spirit, God has given man the ability to think.¹⁷ Our earlier definition of systematic theology made this element clear. His ability to reason through various sense perceptions as well as concepts not involving sense perceptions, such as justice and mathematics, is an input to one’s theology. In fact, it is here that the actual undertaking of theology can be seen. Reason is the window through which all of the other sources of theology (including the Bible) are gathered, analyzed, and synthesized.

In the process of reasoning the usual two ways of drawing inferences, **induction** and **deduction**, are both accepted as valid ways of coming to conclusions. In addition, the useful practice of creating hypotheses to explain given data (sometimes called **abduction**¹⁸) should be seen as a valid reasoning approach. More will be said later on this practice since the “processing” part of this theological proposal consists of a “model” approach.

When one looks at reason as an input to the theological task, he must be careful to admit the **limitations to man’s ability to think**.

¹⁶ The word “reason” is often used in a multitude of ways. It generally refers to the process of thinking (method) or to conclusions based on that process (opinion). In this section, the reference to reason is broad enough to cover both areas.

¹⁷ Although the fact that man is made in the image of God is not limited to intellectual abilities (see Gen. 21:26-28), the mind seems to be included as part of that concept (see Col. 3:10).

¹⁸ The process of abduction would include both deduction and induction.

- With respect to **induction**, it is probable that man will never be able to inductively examine the entire cosmos. For example, “no one has or ever will test . . . the melting point of every piece of copper that exists.”¹⁹ Therefore, pure induction is not enough to evaluate reality comprehensively and infallibly.
- With respect to **deduction**, arguing from a universal or general principle to a specific conclusion, one must lament the shortage of true universal premises that are necessary to develop a valid syllogism.²⁰ It is easy at this point for a person’s presuppositions to be involved so that his logical argumentation is only as good as his presuppositions. For this reason, man’s thinking abilities should have less authority than God’s special revelation in the Bible in the theological undertaking.²¹ Reason is as much a tool for doing theology as it is a source or input to theology.

Science and Nature

Perhaps the second greatest source for theology is to be found in nature which is studied under the disciplines of the natural sciences. Nature, meaning the entire universe as to its natural elements, i.e., the creation, is certainly the largest source of inputs into the mind of man and thus constitutes a major input into the theological task. The scientific discipline, which makes the data of nature available to us in an integrated form, has often been associated with the **scientific method** which has emphasized **induction** or **empirical evidences**. However, to limit the scientific task to this level is an oversimplification. While the inductive element of observation certainly plays a major role in scientific investigation, model building which goes beyond simple observation is also a major activity of science.²² In fact, the proposed method for doing theology given in this paper is most closely aligned with this aspect of science than with any methods in any other discipline.

The Christian theologian should not be surprised to see science as a major source for this theology. The Bible itself speaks of what has come to be called general revelation found in the creation’s witness to the Creator (Ps. 19:1-6). Job 12:7-8 makes the startling exhortation to learn from beasts, fowls, earth, and fishes. In short, the Christian theologian’s acceptance of the Bible as special revelation forces him to accept nature as an input to his system of theology.

- However, there is an approach that needs to be avoided which is at variance with the methodology presented in this paper. In the past (and also in the present) there has been the tendency to separate the study of special revelation from natural or general revelation. The study of the “Book of Scripture” has been seen as an isolated discipline

¹⁹ R. J. Ream, *A Christian Approach to Science and Science Teaching*, 73.

²⁰ Norman Geisler, *Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 42.

²¹ Our prior theological understanding of man in this world (anthropology) also adds to our view that man is limited in his reasoning powers. First, man is finite while God is infinite (assuming a biblical world view here). Second, after the Fall of mankind recorded so tragically in Genesis 3, man has been epistemologically limited. That is, sin has corrupted all of man including his mind. Therefore, there is no impetus to believe that man by reason alone can arrive at all truth.

²² See Philip Kitcher, *Abusing Science*, 30ff. Although Kitcher is clearly wrong in his criticisms of the “creation science” movement, he is right in understanding the scientific enterprise as more than empirical observation.

from the study of the “Book of Nature.”²³ However, for reasons cited above concerning the Bible as special revelation, the two cannot stand on equal footing. Furthermore, these two sources of theology (and all other sources) must be integrated. Without any synthesis there is no systematic theology or comprehensive world view. Therefore, the two must be correlated in such a way that the Bible is the primary and judging authority.

History and Historical Theology

Another major source for theology is history, and coupled with history is the discipline of historical theology. Concerning the first, the theologian must recognize that God has acted in history as recorded in the Bible. But beyond this point, it is equally true that God has acted in history that is not recorded in the Bible. Some of God’s acts have not been recorded or have been recorded in secular sources. These sources should be used as inputs to the theologian’s development of his representation of reality. In fact, the doctrine of Providence in the Bible suggests that God is the superintendent of history. If that is the case, then historical sources apart from the Bible can and should be correlated with other inputs to the task.

The exact method of doing historical research has been debated as often as for theology. Some would want to relegate historical research to an attempt to understand only *what* happened and go no further. By way of analogy this approach would be like the scientific emphasis upon induction (without repeated events). However, as it was with science, so also historical studies should go beyond mere observation. There must be correlation or synthesis of what has been observed in history. Because of this need and because of presuppositions that are naturally brought to the texts of history, it is better to view historical study along the lines of model building. The historian constructs a model explaining not only the various bits of information he has uncovered but also detailing how they relate and why those events happened.²⁴

The second and more narrow discipline (actually a subset of history) is historical theology. It is also more problematic to the theologian who seeks a stable (not necessarily static) system. One is instantly confronted with the fact that doctrine has developed over a period of time. The exact expression of theology today is not precisely what was stated in the past (at least at the surface level). Such an awareness prompts statements such as, “Differing cultural and philosophical conditions require different understandings and articulation of the Christian faith.”²⁵

The whole concept of *change* must be dealt with in the development of one’s own scheme of theology. However, in the earlier section on the need for systematic theology, it was noted that change is to be expected in theology because of the increase in number of observations (across many disciplines) and because of the changes in man and his environment which cause one to rethink the old issues and deal with new questions. Therefore, change should not be an intimidating word to the systematic theologian. He can learn much from an examination of the content of theologians that have been

²³ See Hookykaas, Religion and the Rise of Modern Science, 98ff., for a good discussion of the history of the issue.

²⁴ Harvey, The Historian and the Believer, 89ff.

²⁵ Wiles, The Remaking of Christian Doctrine, 6.

presented down through the years by the teachers and theologians that the Lord has given to the Church (see Eph. 4:11-13). In this way, both the continuity and diversity of the historical processes can be seen as positive inputs to theological method.

Other Disciplines

The categories of science and history are so large that they could, if taken in the broadest sense, encompass virtually all other disciplines. However, a few comments about other fields should be mentioned in passing although an analysis of each one will not be provided. A list of other appropriate disciplines to be considered as inputs for theology would include, but not be limited to, mathematics, linguistics, psychology, sociology, law, philosophy, and politics. The interaction of these disciplines with the theological task has readily been recognized by today's theologians. In short, it is assumed by this proposal that all academic disciplines can in some way be correlated with theology.²⁶

However, one should not take this statement to mean a blanket approval of all that is going on in the various fields including science and history (for example, this author rejects Freudian psychoanalysis in its general structure). To be an input for theology does not mean that something necessarily has to be true. The very process of theologizing includes validation of the inputs *as they come into the process*. Specifically, they are validated in light of the statements of the Bible. Theology does not begin chronologically with inputs already validated by the Bible but before they are validated by the Bible. What is being suggested is that the correlation of the academic disciplines (including use of the Bible) involves the need to make decisions across all of the disciplines (with the help of experts in those fields, of course).²⁷ Again the breadth of the theologian's task is seen as almost overwhelming.

The Role of Experience

There is a sense in which all of the disciplines above touch upon the experience of man. The Bible records experiences usually of the religious variety. Man experiences the world of nature in science. History records the experiences of past generations. Psychology attempts to make observations about past and present behavior which involves experience. On and on the descriptions could go. Experience cuts across all disciplines. How does the theologian deal with past and present claims concerning experiences? Does he discount them because of the inherent subjectivity?

The answer is that the theologian *must* incorporate experience as an input to his theological process. As Mullins notes, "All theology must be vitalized by experience before it can become a real force for the regeneration of men."²⁸ Experience involves

²⁶ This is just another way of saying that theology is the "queen of the sciences," the place where all disciplines are integrated and developed into a system of belief.

²⁷ Of course, one must be careful about so-called "experts" in any field, especially in our day of fashionable academics in which what is politically correct is substituted for what is substantially correct and well thought out.

²⁸ Mullins, "Religion and Theology," 30. One must be careful here to avoid some of the liberal excesses of Mullins with respect to experience. However, it is a fundamental axiom that a dead orthodoxy not lived

man's perception of reality. Because theology is the development of a world view or exposition of reality, this important data element cannot be left out.

However, there are some needed safeguards while incorporating experience into Christian theology. *First, all types and levels of experience should not carry the same weight.* Kelsey's healthy emphasis upon the function of theology in the Church community is helpful here even if his overall theological position is not.²⁹ What better input is there (experientially) to current theological formulation than the way past and present theology is influencing the Body of Christ? Therefore, truly Christian experience should have a higher place in the mind of the theologian than a completely secular experience as he determines his theological statements. This view runs counter to the generalizing of the experience category common to many modern theologies.³⁰

Nonetheless, such a conclusion does not mean that secular experience or religious non-Christian experience is to be discarded. All that it means is that the Christian theologian does not come to those experiences first. In fact, whether the experience in question is in the context of the Church or not, the subjective element (as with all other data items) must be filtered through the Bible before the theologian makes a final determination. The Bible is brought to experience to be its judge.

Summary

This section dealt with the sources or inputs to the theological task. The Bible as special revelation was assigned the highest priority as the judge or filter for all other disciplines. The role of the Holy Spirit marks off the enterprise as a spiritual one while the role of reason indicates where the enterprise takes place, namely in the mind. All disciplines, but especially history and science, contribute to the theologian's task. Finally, experience in spite of its subjective nature also deserves a place as an input to theology. See **Figure 1** for an overview of the sources for theology.

THE MODEL APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

The first major section of this proposal gave a definition of theology, defended the need for continuous update of theology, and declared the Bible to be the starting point of doing theology. The next section surveyed the sources to be used as inputs to the theological task. Now the time has come to present the **actual process** to be used in doing systematic theology. First, the reader will be taken through the various steps in the process. Following this survey will be discussions concerning presuppositions, creativity, and stratification involved in the model approach to theology.

out, salvation experiences not validated by a genuine experience of living, etc., will have no life and no demonstrable way of witnessing to a world which desperately needs changing.

²⁹ Kelsey, *The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology*, 90-97.

³⁰ See Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 91ff.

A Walk-through of the Model Approach to Theology

The proposed method for doing theology in this paper is similar to the scientific method or procedure used in scientific investigations. This will not be the first attempt to do such a presentation. The affinity between scientific and theological enterprises has been scrutinized before.³¹ It will be helpful if during the following discussion **Figure 2** is kept in mind. There a flowchart of the procedure is given with step numbers corresponding to elements of the discussion.

- **STEP ONE**

One begins by **gathering more data through observations**. Of course, if one is on the first iteration of this process “officially” someone might say that he was gathering “initial” data. However, it is unlikely that any theologian begins the theological task without a well-spring of data already collected since the time he was born. Consequently, he has a preconceived judgment about reality before he begins (see later). This data comes from the Bible as primary source and from all the disciplines and areas discussed in the last section.

The methods used in gathering information would normally correspond to the particular discipline concerning the data in question. For example, biblical data would be derived using valid exegetical, hermeneutical, and critical approaches. Scientific data would be obtained through inductive experimentation and model building. Historical data would be obtained using valid investigative procedures for that discipline. The analysis of what procedures are valid in what disciplines is outside the scope of this proposal. However, the subject is mentioned here to avoid oversimplification on this first step. It is not a simple undertaking.

- **STEP TWO**

A particular observation must then be correlated with the Bible. That is, it must be determined if the data item having reached this point in the procedure is actually in harmony with the propositional revelation found in Scripture. A data item will be considered in harmony with Scripture if no statements (or concepts) in the Bible contradict it. If the observation does not pass this validation test, it must be discarded or put on hold. The two options are given here because of the possibility that the data item might be in that gray area awaiting further data. That is, it is not clear if there is really a contradiction. Two illustrations may help.

First, **one data item from the world of science** would be the conclusion (reached reasonably in the eyes of many scientists) that the universe is eternal and not created. Such a view violates Genesis and a host of many plain passages throughout the Bible. Therefore, this conclusion drawn from the world of science must be discarded as an invalid data item for the theological system.

³¹ See T. F. Torrance’s works, Theological Science and Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge.

Second, **one data item from the world of religious experience** might be the testimony of your best Christian friend that he has recently spoken in tongues. Passages concerning tongue-speaking are not the easiest to exegete, especially in comparison to the issue in example one above. Therefore, the observation might be put on hold, both objectively and subjectively, as you thought through your feelings and did further investigation of the Scriptures or until further testimonies in the matter have been obtained (later your friend might recant!).³² This validation procedure along with the account above constitutes the filtering process discussed earlier under the sources to theology and illustrated in **Figure 1**.

- **STEP THREE**

The third step in doing theology corresponds to the **model building** common in the field of science. The theologian must take all of the gathered data and construct a model (or hypothesis) which best explains the data in hand.³³ Such an effort usually involves creativity and imagination on the part of the model builder (see later). Most times there may only be the refinement of an existing model when the data item does not require major revamping of the model from the previous iteration. Another factor playing a role at this point is stratification in the model. Because of its importance a separate discussion of that topic will be given below.

- **STEP FOUR**

The fourth step is **validation of the model**. Earlier, individual data items were validated to see if they could be allowed into the model building process. At this stage, however, it is the overall explanation of **the relationships of all of the inputs** that is to be tested. But what are the criteria for testing theological models? Surprisingly perhaps, there seems to be much agreement concerning criteria, or at least concerning certain individual tests that are used. Generally speaking, a model is to be considered valid (and therefore true) if it passes the following four criteria: consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, and congruity. **Consistency** is the absence of contradictions within the model. **Coherence** means that the unity of the overall model can be viewed through the relationships of the various items or statements in the model. “Without this internal relatedness of the statements to each other, we do not have a single system of assertions at all, but two or more separate sets of assertions arbitrarily placed side by side.”³⁴ The data items are “glued to each other” in a sensible way. There is no fragmentation in the model.³⁵ **Comprehensiveness** implies that a model must cover all of experience. In a theological system there is an attempt to formulate a world view. The model must be

³² Just for the record, this writer is a cessationist. This means that I believe the gift of tongues as practiced in the apostolic church has ceased to function by God’s design.

³³ One expression (although not the only one) of the model for systematic theology is a systematic theology textbook.

³⁴ Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, 53.

³⁵ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1:144.

broad enough to do justice to this task.³⁶ However, it is also true that more than one model may cover the same set of data. A final criteria, then, is **congruity**. One interpretation will be more congruent or applicable to experience.³⁷

CRITERIA FOR VALIDATION OF A THEOLOGICAL MODEL		
1	CONSISTENCY	There should be no internal contradictions within the model.
2	COHERENCE	There should be a genuine unity as the independent items of the model interrelate. That is, not only must there be no internal contradictions but the items of the model must be related.
3	COMPREHENSIVENESS	The model must be broad enough to deal with all possible data items in the desired realm.
4	CONGRUITY	The model must be appropriate, and therefore, applicable, to the reality that the model is trying to describe.

There is no reason to deviate from these four criteria of consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, and congruity. If the model fails on any one of these points, it is to be discarded as it is. It may need refinement or indeed it may need to be thrown away! In either case, reflection continues in the gathering of more data, that is, go to step one. If the model passes these tests, the next step in the procedure is followed.

- **STEP FIVE**

The last step in the chain is the incorporation of the model into the data pool from which future observations will be made. This is another way of saying that the next iteration will already have this model in mind. One application of this is that you now read some passages of the Bible in light of truth you have already learned. Perhaps many theologies of the past can be viewed as models which were valid as far as they went. Only an update may need to be done. The fact that the algorithm presented here is an unending loop signifies the continual nature of the theological process. The Church has been doing theology for almost twenty centuries and will continue to do so. Until the Lord comes there is no need for the theologian to burn the books in his study!

³⁶ Ibid., 1:145. Erickson uses the less definitive word “adequacy” instead of comprehensiveness.

³⁷ Ibid., 1:144. Erickson probably uses a better term here when he refers to “applicability” rather than “congruity.”

The Role of Presuppositions

Presuppositions have been alluded to already in this proposal but need to have formal recognition as to their place in the overall scheme of things. Complete objectivity is a myth. At every step in the procedure (with the possible exception of step five) there is room for the theologian's preconceived notions to creep into the process. At step one he has already gathered data for years before he begins to sit down to develop his theology.³⁸ At step two, correlation with the Bible involves a previous formalized or informal system which the theologian himself has not validated. At step three, the model is built with the creativity of the theologian involved. It is hard to imagine a creativity devoid of all connection to presuppositions. At step four, the applications of the criteria to the model may include the presuppositions of the one applying the tests. A particular theologian may be predisposed to the idea that a particular strand of his model is applicable to the situation at hand while another theologian because of a different starting points sees no connection at all. This possibility is ably demonstrated by the fact that men representing various viewpoints such as Ebeling, Kelsey, Tracy, Erickson, and Wolfe would agree on criteria but not on their particular models. Of course, how much agreement is found on beliefs among the members of our Baptist churches?

How should the theologian respond to the realization that his method is loaded with presuppositions at virtually every level? First, he should not try to avoid them, only recognize them. It would be impossible to live in a this world without presuppositions of some kind. However, when one understands what the specifics of his preconceived notions are, he can minimize their impact by adjusting for them in the development of his system. For example, he can be more demanding in his tests of the model at precisely those points.

The Role of Imagination

Imagination or creativity is an essential element in the theologian's work. In fact, there are two ways in which the theologian must be creative.³⁹ First, there is the need for imagination in building the model, that is, in seeing how things fit together. This idea is best illustrated by the analogy of science. Torrance comments on the notion of causality in science:

Because there is no logical road to these laws the scientist, in formulating them, must rely upon his "intuition," that is upon the sheer weight or impress of external reality upon his apprehension, although once formulated he can test them indirectly through their success in bringing the widest range of experience under their illumination.⁴⁰

³⁸ Wolfe speaks of the "web" or system which is constantly being built up in the mind of the theologian, philosopher, thinker, etc; *Epistemology*, 73-74.

³⁹ We are not here suggesting that the theologian ever creates new truth. He must be creative in seeing and expressing the truth.

⁴⁰ T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, 118.

A second illustration is the example of Francis Crick's "discovery" of the structure of DNA. This structure was not "found" by observation. Rather, using data at hand, Crick had a moment of insight in which he devised the model of a spiral staircase for the structure of DNA without every seeing it!⁴¹

In the same way, the theologian must have "insight" or "creativity" in observing data items freshly and in finding the structure that best explains their relationships. Such a use of imagination is not to be taken as an addition to the propositional revelation of scripture.

The second way in which a theologian can use imagination is in the form of expression given to his theological model. To do this he must have a keen understanding of the significance of his model and its elements to the surrounding culture. This may be what Wolfe tried to articulate when he said that "faith is the creative discernment of meaning."⁴² This imagination in perception should lead to the desired expression of the truth in language understandable to the present generation and particular culture being communicated to.⁴³ Caution must be exercised at this point. Cultural situations and experiences should not dictate the content of the theological system apart from a careful study of the propositional revelation given in the Bible. The dispensational approach to the progress of revelation and a further study of "application" are two areas outside the scope of this paper which may be of service in the putting of controls upon this aspect of creativity.

Stratification of Topics

Stratification refers to ranking the topics of your theological model in the order of most importance. This would be related somewhat to writing the "outline" of your theology. Common sense would indicate that in any given model not every element is as important as every other element. In Wolfe's systems analysis, he used the "spider web" analogy.⁴⁴ The closer one was to the center of the web the more important or at least the most stable elements were to be found (the fundamentals?). In an outline form this would mean that the lower one goes into the level of the outline, the less significant the expressed truth should be. In this connection, the following discussions will center on the distinction between doctrines and systems, levels of authority in stratification, and the idea of a central motif.

• *INDIVIDUAL DOCTRINES VERSUS SYSTEMS*

Defining a doctrine is almost as difficult as defining the word "species." Where does a "doctrine" end and a "set of doctrines" begin? The step is carried to the next level by asking when a "set of doctrines" becomes a "system of doctrines." The problem may be illustrated by the automobile. If I take the four tires off of my car, do I still have an auto? What if I then take off the hood, then the steering wheel, and so forth, until all that

⁴¹ See John W. Montgomery, "The Theologian's Craft," 67.

⁴² Wolfe, *Epistemology*, 74.

⁴³ See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1:105-126.

⁴⁴ Wolfe, *Epistemology*, 73-74.

is left on the ground is a radiator cap. I obviously do not have a car then! However, I am hard pressed to tell you the precise moment at which my car ceased to be a car. If you say when the engine is no longer in, I can tell you that my 1972 Dodge Challenger was engineless for several months while still registered as a car in the state of Texas!

The same can be said about building a car on the assembly line rather than tearing it down. It is nearly impossible to say at what exact point the individual parts merge to form an auto. In the same way, it is hard to tell when individual doctrines (interpretation of John 1:1) merge into a full-blown set of doctrines (Christology) which with other sets emerge into a theological system or world-view (Biblical Christianity). However, it appears that the thinking and model building process is the same for individual doctrines as for full-blown systems (in fact, the difference may only be how large the book you write is!). For that reason, the model approach here really makes no distinctions between developing doctrines and developing systems of theology.

- ***LEVELS OF AUTHORITY IN STRATIFICATION***

Degrees of authority of Bible statements range from direct statements (with the greatest weight) to outright speculations (with the least amount of weight). Surely, as one goes down the scale, he should not go up the ladder of stratification. One must also note at this point that the major topics of systematic theology should be derived from the Bible. Although there are other inputs to the theological task besides the Bible, the categories of the Bible are the elements of the model to which stratification most readily applies. Another way to express it is to note that there should be a level in the outline or model above which no non-scriptural elements should appear. In this way, one can be true to the idea of the Bible as the starting point of theology as indicated in the opening discussion.⁴⁵

- ***THE CENTRAL INTERPRETIVE MOTIF***

One must remember that the same data can be outlined or stratified differently by different theologians. Does this mean that in each case some theologians are wrong? Not necessarily. Here Erickson's idea of the central interpretive motif can be useful.⁴⁶ The theological landscape is so large that it is doubtful if one theologian could really view it all. Consequently, there is a narrowing of perspective. Various theologians can then look at what data they have from their perspective and reorganize it to express that perspective. As long as the levels of authority discussed in the above paragraph are kept in mind, the

⁴⁵ One example of this would be the use of current events by some Christians interested in the Second Coming as the centerpiece of the theological outline. They gather their outline from the newspapers and then sprinkle Bible verses on it. Instead biblical teaching should give the major outline and the newspaper accounts correlated properly to what the Bible says. Specifically, a standard theology book should not have in it a major chapter entitled "The Present Common Market of Europe and the Antichrist." That topic could and should be discussed but should be subordinate to clear biblical categories. A second example is the way psychology is used today to generate outlines for sermons, books, and Christian thinking. The main categories of the Bible about man and his nature should govern the interaction with psychology, not the other way around.

⁴⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1:77ff.

resulting stratification will be helpful. This way several different theologies can be seen as complementary rather than at odds with each other because of varying stratification.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

It may be, that as you read this, you are being exposed to the idea of **theological method** for the very first time. Do not let the technical jargon and the strangeness of the topic get you down. Read this paper again, this time more slowly, and meditate on the things that are being said including the footnotes. I am trying to express how I believe people think in this world whether they realize it or not. Whether you are professional theologians like Karl Barth, Charles Ryrie, or Carl Henry; whether you are the major theologian of a particular local church (we call these guys “pastors”); or whether you are the rightfielder for the Detroit Tigers, you have a world view, a systematic theology so to speak. Whether consciously or subconsciously you come to reject data items that come into your life and build a model framework for your belief system. My hope is that I have stirred you to begin thinking about that so that you will never have to say to people who ask, “I believe this stuff because that’s what they taught me in school!”

⁴⁷ A helpful analogy may be the resumes we use to send out to prospective employers. We can rewrite the resume to emphasize different aspects of our experience as long as we are still accurate in content. Both resumes would be correct just with different emphases. Of course, we must be careful here. Some theologies contradict each other and can not viewed as complementary. Do not forget the criteria cited earlier. For example, dispensationalism and covenant theology can not both be right. A second example: those who deny the Universal Church can not simply be said to have a different perspective from the theological system which allows the existence of a Universal Church. They are contradictory ideas.

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