

THE GOSPEL AND THE MODERN WORLD

A Theological
Vision for the
Church

D. A. CARSON

Edited by Brian J. Tabb

The Gospel and the Modern World

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A Theological Vision for the Church

D. A. Carson

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Contents

Introduction by Brian J. Tabb 1

PART 1: A THEOLOGICAL VISION FOR THE CHURCH

- 1 D. A. Carson's Theological Method by Andrew David Naselli 11
- 2 Prophetic from the Center: D. A. Carson's Vision for the Gospel Coalition by Collin Hansen 51
- 3 Should Pastors Today Still Care about the Reformation? 63
- 4 Why the Local Church Is More Important Than TGC, White Horse Inn, 9Marks, and Maybe Even ETS 71

PART 2: REFLECTIONS ON THE GOSPEL

- 5 The Gospel and Its Effects 87
- 6 The Hole in the Gospel 91
- 7 What Are Gospel Issues? 97

PART 3: REFLECTIONS ON THE BIBLE AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

- 8 When Did the Church Begin? 107
- 9 The Beauty of Biblical Balance 113
- 10 Subtle Ways to Abandon the Authority of Scripture in Our Lives 119
- 11 But That's Just Your Interpretation 137
- 12 Kingdom, Ethics, and Individual Salvation 149
- 13 A Biblical Theology of Education 157
- 14 The Changing Face of Words 177
- 15 One of the Saddest Texts in the Old Testament 183

PART 4: REFLECTIONS ON CHRIST AND CULTURE

- 16 Do Not Be Conformed to the World 189
- 17 Words and Deeds 195
- 18 Contrarian Reflections on Individualism 199
- 19 The Postmodernism That Refuses to Die 209
- 20 More Examples of Intolerant Tolerance 213
- 21 As If Not: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 7 219
- 22 Polemical Theology 223
- 23 Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me: Reflections on Missions Today 227

PART 5: REFLECTIONS ON CHURCH LEADERSHIP

- 24 Some Reflections on Pastoral Leadership 233
- 25 Generational Conflict in Ministry 239
- 26 Seekest Thou Great Things for Thyself? 245
- 27 The Underbelly of Revival? Five Reflections on Various Failures in the Young, Restless, and Reformed Movement 251
- 28 When Revival Comes 261
- 29 On Knowing When to Resign 267
- 30 Motivations to Appeal to in Our Hearers When We Preach for Conversion 273

PART 6: REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

- 31 On Abusing Matthew 18 287
- 32 On Disputable Matters 291
- 33 Perfectionisms 301
- 34 I'm So Grateful That I'm among the Elect 307
- 35 Spiritual Disciplines 311
- 36 Do the Work of an Evangelist 317

General Index 323

Scripture Index 331

D. A. Carson's Theological Method

Andrew David Naselli

HOW DOES D. A. CARSON do theology? In other words, what is his theological method? That question is challenging to answer for at least two reasons.¹

First, Carson has authored and edited a lot of publications. Here's how Justin Taylor put it in 2009:

Dr. Carson's sheer productivity is nothing less than astonishing. One could become tired just working through the latest numbers: he has written 50 books; 235 articles; 112 book reviews; and 46 edited books in the various series he edits. Average it out and it comes to about one book written or edited every four months, with one article and two reviews written every six weeks—for three decades.²

Nearly fifteen years later, those numbers are even higher.

- 1 This chapter was originally published as Andrew David Naselli, "D. A. Carson's Theological Method," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29 (2011): 245–74 (used by permission). It was my privilege to complete a PhD under Dr. Carson as my doctoral mentor (2006–2010) and to serve as Dr. Carson's research manager for about nine years (2006–2014), which was like a young lawyer getting to clerk for a supreme court justice. Three notes about this essay: (1) D. A. Carson is the author of all the resources I cite unless I note otherwise; (2) when I list multiple sources, I typically arrange the citations chronologically; (3) italics in quotations are original, not added.
- 2 Justin Taylor, "D. A. Carson Publications," Gospel Coalition, June 3, 2009, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>. See Carson's comprehensive bibliography at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org>. Over 350 of the books, articles, and reviews are available there for free as PDFs.

Second, although Carson has written several works that explain his theological method,³ he has not written a book or detailed article that systematically presents his theological method.⁴ That is what this essay attempts to do.

This essay begins with a biographical sketch of Carson and then focuses on describing (not critiquing) his theological method by answering three questions:

1. What does Carson presuppose for doing theology?
2. What does Carson think the theological disciplines are?
3. How does Carson think the theological disciplines interrelate?

A Biographical Sketch: Carson's Family, Education, and Ministry⁵

If postmodernism has taught theologians anything, it is that humans cannot interpret the Bible with complete objectivity. Theologians bring far too much baggage to the interpretive process, including language, culture, religion, education, upbringing, exposure, ethnicity, and sex. This biographical

3 See especially "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 65–95, 368–75; "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 39–76; "Approaching the Bible," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1–19; "Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 17–41; *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996); "New Testament Theology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 796–814; "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 89–104.

4 The closest is this short article: "The Bible and Theology," in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 2321–24. I was the managing editor for that study Bible, and for that article I assisted Dr. Carson by initially drafting it, which he then tweaked and expanded; I basically condensed his many writings on theological method, and I based the article's structure on my essay on Carson's theological method (see footnote 1 above).

5 This section is based primarily on Carson's anecdotes in his published works as well as in his sermons and lectures, his curriculum vitae, personal interaction with him, and a tribute by one of his former PhD students: Andreas J. Köstenberger, "D. A. Carson: His Life and Work to Date," in *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century; Essays in Honor of D. A. Carson at the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 349–69.

sketch mentions several factors that influence Carson's theological method to some degree. As helpful as it is to mention these factors, it raises a methodological question that I am not sure anyone can answer: How does one objectively measure such influences? Carson raised that question himself when I inquired about influences on his life.⁶

Carson's Family

Carson's father, Thomas Donald McMillan Carson (1911–1992), was born near Belfast, Northern Ireland, and his family immigrated to Ottawa, Canada, in 1913. With the desire to plant churches in Québec, he graduated from Toronto Baptist Seminary in 1937. In 1938, he married Elizabeth Margaret Maybury (1909–1989), and the Lord blessed them with three children. Donald Arthur Carson was their second child, born on December 21, 1946.

Tom Carson faithfully ministered in Drummondville, Québec, from 1948 to 1963, a trying time in which he experienced persecution and little apparent fruit at his church.⁷ Don Carson, who entered McGill University in Montreal in 1963, spent his formative years in this environment. His family lived simply, too poor to own a home or pay for his university training. His parents loved him and set a godly example. Carson recalls,

My life has been blessed by some influential models. I must begin by mentioning my own parents. I remember how, even when we children were quite young, each morning my mother would withdraw from the hurly-burly of life to read her Bible and pray. In the years that I was growing up, my father, a Baptist minister, had his study in our home. Every morning we could hear him praying in that study. My father vocalized when he prayed—loudly enough that we knew he was praying, but not loudly enough that we could hear what he was saying. Every day he prayed, usually for about forty-five minutes. Perhaps there were times when he failed to do so, but I cannot think of one.⁸

⁶ Interview by the author, November 29, 2006.

⁷ *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁸ *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 7.

Carson deeply respected his father and was especially close to his mother, who capably led ladies' Bible studies and could use Greek and Hebrew.

Carson, reared in French Canada, is bilingual and remained a Canadian citizen until he became a United States citizen in 2006. While working on his PhD in Cambridge, he met Joy Wheildon, a British schoolteacher, and they married in 1975. They have two children, Tiffany and Nicholas.

Carson's Education

Carson graduated from Drummondville High School (1959–1963) with the highest standing. He earned a BSc in chemistry and mathematics from McGill University (1963–1967), where he took extra courses in classical Greek and psychology. He received various scholarships and awards while earning his MDiv from Central Baptist Seminary in Toronto (1967–1970), and he took four units of New Testament study at Regent College (1970). His PhD is from Emmanuel College, Cambridge University (1972–1975), where he studied under the Rev. Dr. (later Prof.) Barnabas Lindars. His thesis is on God's sovereignty and human responsibility in the Gospel according to John.⁹

Carson's Ministry

Carson, now a world-renowned evangelical New Testament scholar, started as a part-time lecturer in French at Central Baptist Seminary in Toronto (1967–1970) and in mathematics at Richmond College in Toronto (1969–1970). He was an occasional lecturer at Northwest Baptist Theological College in Vancouver (1971–1972) while ministering as the pastor of Richmond Baptist Church in Richmond, British Columbia (1970–1972), where he was ordained under the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada in 1972.

After earning his PhD, he served at Northwest Baptist Theological College as the associate professor of New Testament (1975–1978) and academic dean (1976–1978). After hearing Carson present a paper at the Evangelical Theological Society's conference in 1977, Kenneth Kantzer asked him to join the faculty at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), where Carson has served as associate professor of New Testament (1978–1982), professor

9 Published as *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

of New Testament (1982–1991), research professor of New Testament (1991–2018), and emeritus professor of New Testament (2018–present). From 1978 to 1991, he took a sabbatical every third year in England.¹⁰

He has taught over fifty different graduate courses—many of them multiple times—on various levels: MDiv, MA, ThM, DMin, and PhD. He has served as the book review editor for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1979–1986), the editor of *Trinity Journal* (1980–1986), and the general editor of *Themelios* (2007–2018). In addition to editing dozens of books, he is the general editor of three major series: Pillar Commentaries on the New Testament, New Studies in Biblical Theology, and Studies in Biblical Greek. And with Eric Tully, he is co-editing the Pillar Commentaries on the Old Testament. He is the founding president and theologian-at-large of the Gospel Coalition (TGC).

Carson frequently preaches and teaches internationally at a substantial number of churches, conferences, student groups, colleges, and seminaries, including university missions.¹¹ He has been familiar with most of the major theological figures in evangelicalism on a first-name basis, and he is an avid critic of culture.¹²

He reads about five hundred books each year (in addition to hundreds of articles), and his reading expands far beyond theology into science, politics, and more. Ever since his days as a PhD student at Cambridge, he has devoted about half a day per week to read and catalog articles in about eighty theological journals, which he enters in a database with tags that enable him to locate and cite articles efficiently. His personal print library consists of about ten thousand choice volumes.

His reputation among the students at TEDS is legendary, and he upholds daunting standards for PhD seminar papers and dissertations. When I was his student, I was daunted to learn that he gives an A grade only if the paper

10 Instead of the school years being divided into two semesters, they were divided into three trimesters. The professors could take a sabbatical for one trimester every third year if they could justify it with a specific project. They also had the option of taking off all three trimesters, but the second two were without pay.

11 For example, from 1985 to 2010, Carson made over sixty-five trips to Australia to preach and teach in churches, schools, and conferences (an average of 2.6 times per year).

12 See esp. *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). Cf. “Sin’s Contemporary Significance,” in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Theology in Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 21–37.

is publishable in a first-rate journal. On a lighter note, he enjoys woodworking and hiking, and when the weather permits it, he rides a motorcycle.

The most prominent focus of Carson's ministry is the gospel. He writes and speaks about it frequently,¹³ and he has said something like the following countless times:

Recognize that students do not learn everything you teach them. They certainly do not learn everything I teach them! What *do* they learn? They learn what I am excited about; they learn what I emphasize, what I return to again and again; they learn what organizes the rest of my thought. So if I happily *presuppose* the gospel but rarely articulate it and am never excited about it, while effervescing frequently about, say, ecclesiology or textual criticism, my students may conclude that the most important thing to me is ecclesiology or textual criticism. They may pick up my assumption of the gospel; alternatively, they may even distance themselves from the gospel; but what they will almost certainly do is place at the center of their thought ecclesiology or textual criticism, thereby wittingly or unwittingly marginalizing the gospel. Both ecclesiology and textual criticism, not to mention a plethora of other disciplines and sub-disciplines, are worthy of the most sustained study and reflection. Nevertheless, part of my obligation as a scholar-teacher, a scholar-pastor, is to show how my specialism relates to that which is fundamentally central and never to lose my passion for living and thinking and being excited about what must remain at the center. Failure in this matter means I lead my students and parishioners astray. If I am then challenged by a colleague who says to me, "Yes, I appreciate the competence and thoroughness with which you are handling ecclesiology or textual criticism, but how does this relate to the centrality and non-negotiability of the gospel?" I may, regrettably, respond rather defensively, "Why are you picking on me? I believe in the gospel as deeply as you do!" That may be true, but it rather misses the point. As a scholar, ecclesiology or textual criticism may be my specialism; but as a scholar-pastor, I must

13 "The Biblical Gospel," in *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 1996), 75–85; "Editorial," *Themelios* 34, no. 1 (2009): 1–2; "What Is the Gospel?—Revisited," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 147–70; "The Hole in the Gospel," *Themelios* 38, no. 3 (2013): 353–56; "What Are Gospel Issues?," *Themelios* 39, no. 2 (2014): 215–19.

be concerned for what I am passing on to the next generation, its configuration, its balance and focus. I dare never forget that students do not learn everything I try to teach them but primarily what I am excited about.¹⁴

What Does Carson Presuppose for Doing Theology?

For Carson's theological method, he presupposes particular views about metaphysics, epistemology, and divine revelation.

Carson's Metaphysics: God

Confessions of faith and systematic theology textbooks typically begin with the doctrine of the word of God. But when Carson drafted the confessional statement for TGC,¹⁵ he intentionally began with the triune God, not revelation. He explains why in an essay he coauthored with Tim Keller:

The Enlightenment was overconfident about human rationality. Some strands of it assumed it was possible to build systems of thought on unassailable foundations that could be absolutely certain to unaided human reason. Despite their frequent vilification of the Enlightenment, many conservative evangelicals have nevertheless been shaped by it. This can be seen in how many evangelical statements of faith start with the Scripture, not with God. They proceed from Scripture to doctrine through rigorous exegesis in order to build (what they consider) an absolutely sure, guaranteed-true-to-Scripture theology. The problem is that this is essentially a foundationalist approach to knowledge. It ignores the degree to which our cultural location affects our interpretation of the Bible, and it assumes a very rigid subject-object distinction. It ignores historical theology, philosophy, and cultural reflection. Starting with the Scripture leads readers to the overconfidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a system of perfect doctrinal truth. This can create pride and rigidity because it may not sufficiently acknowledge the fallenness of human reason. We believe it is best to start with God, to declare (with John

¹⁴ "The Scholar as Pastor," in *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 98–99.

¹⁵ See "Foundation Documents," Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1) that without knowledge of God we cannot know ourselves, our world, or anything else. If there is no God, we would have no reason to trust our reason.¹⁶

Carson's Epistemology: Chastened Foundationalism

Carson recognizes both positive and negative elements in the epistemology of premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. He aligns himself, however, with none of them in its entirety, opting instead for a chastened foundationalism.¹⁷ Here is what Carson thinks of those four types of epistemology.

PREMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY¹⁸

Positively, this epistemology begins with God rather than one's self. Negatively, it is tied to an open universe as opposed to a closed universe (modern epistemology) or "controlled" universe (Carson's view).

MODERN EPISTEMOLOGY: FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE OLDER HERMENEUTIC¹⁹

This epistemology begins with one's self rather than God as the foundation on which to build all other knowledge: "I think, therefore, I am."²⁰ Using a scientific method that is "*methodologically* atheistic," humans can and should reach "epistemological certainty" and discover what is universally true.²¹ The older hermeneutic, based on this epistemology, prescribes exegesis with similar methodological rigor and objectively certain results.

16 D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller, *Gospel-Centered Ministry*, Gospel Coalition Booklets (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 6.

17 *Gagging of God*, 22, 57–137, et al.; "Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths in a Postmodern World," in *Can We Be Sure about Anything? Science, Faith and Postmodernism* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2005), 109; "Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz's *Renewing the Center*," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 45–46, 54–55; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 88–124.

18 *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 88–90.

19 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 48–56; "Approaching the Bible," 10–12; *Gagging of God*, 58–64; "Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths," 108; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 92–95, 122–24.

20 See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

21 *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 122, 94.

POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY: ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM
AND THE "NEW HERMENEUTIC"²²

Although this epistemology rejects modernism, it is modernism's "bastard child."²³ It likewise begins with the finite "I," but it rejects foundationalism and universal truth in favor of perspectivalism under the guise of a "tolerance" that is hypocritically intolerant.²⁴ The orthodox creed of the "new hermeneutic," which is based on this epistemology, is self-contradictory: the only heresy is the view that heresy exists, and the only objective and absolute truth is that objective, absolute truth does not exist.²⁵ Postmodern epistemology is commendable for emphasizing cultural diversity and human finiteness, especially one's inability to be completely neutral and objective.²⁶ Its weaknesses, however, outweigh its strengths: it is immoral, absurd, arrogant, and manipulative in its antitheses.²⁷

"CHASTENED" FOUNDATIONALISM

Carson includes commendable elements from both the older and new hermeneutic in his approach to Scripture.²⁸ His "first theology" is God.²⁹ Both modernism and postmodernism err by making the "I" the starting point and then drawing conclusions (e.g., that God exists). But while God is the

22 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 50–56; *Gagging of God*, 19–72, 195–200; "Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths," 108–9; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 95–98, 122–24; *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 8, 10–11, 62–63, 67–113, 200, 206–7.

23 *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 122.

24 *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

25 "Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends," *Themelios* 5, no. 1 (1980): 14–16; "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 33–42; "Preaching That Understands the World," in *When God's Voice Is Heard: Essays on Preaching Presented to Dick Lucas* (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1995), 160; *Gagging of God*, 30–35, 45, 54; "Is the Doctrine of *Claritas Scripturae* Still Relevant Today?" in *Dein Wort ist die Wahrheit: Beiträge zu einer schriftgemäßen Theologie*, ed. Eberhard Hahn, Rolf Hille, and Heinz-Werner Neudorfer (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1997), 105; "An Introduction to Introductions," in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctions*, ed. D. A. Carson and Stanley E. Porter, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* 168 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 16; "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 99–100; "Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths," 112–13.

26 *Gagging of God*, 96–102; "Claritas Scripturae," 107–8; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 103–4.

27 *Gagging of God*, 102–37; "Claritas Scripturae," 108; "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 100; "Domesticating the Gospel," 46–7; "Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths," 120–22; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 104–6, 112–15.

28 See his "introductory principles of biblical interpretation" in "Approaching the Bible," 12–19. Cf. *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 125–31.

29 Interviews by the author, November 8 and 29, 2006.

foundation of Carson's epistemology, Carson recognizes that humans are finite and sinful—that is, unlike God, humans are limited and are deeply affected by the noetic effects of the fall, not least in their reasoning capacity. This is why Carson prefers to modify his “presuppositions” with the adjective “corrigible” (i.e., correctable, reformable).³⁰

This in turn raises further questions regarding the effects of conversion and the Spirit's illumination, but the bottom line is this: humans cannot know anything absolutely (i.e., exhaustively or omnisciently) like God knows it, but they can know some things truly (i.e., substantially or really).³¹ I have heard Carson make that point at least one hundred times in various contexts; it is foundational to his epistemology. He often illustrates it in four ways.³²

THE FUSION OF TWO HORIZONS OF UNDERSTANDING

This model consists of two elements: distanciation and the fusion of two horizons. Distanciation refers to an observer or reader stepping back or distancing himself from an object he is scrutinizing. In the fusion of two horizons, a “horizon” refers to one's worldview, including presuppositions and cultural baggage. The horizon of the author's text and the horizon of theologians are initially separated by a huge gap due to differences such as one's historical and cultural location. Theologians may imperfectly but profitably fuse that horizon (i.e., minimize the gap) by deliberately “self-distancing” themselves from their “own biases and predilections” in order “to understand the other's terminology and points of view and idioms and values.”³³

30 Interview by the author, November 29, 2006.

31 “Hermeneutics,” 15–16; “Historical Tradition and the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?” in *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham, Gospel Perspectives 2 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 100–104; “A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), 12–13, 15–17; “Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism,” 60; “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 34; *Gagging of God*, 349, 544; *Exegetical Fallacies*, 126–28; “New Testament Theology,” 809; “*Claritas Scripturae*,” 106, 108–9; “An Introduction to Introductions,” 16; “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 100; “Domesticating the Gospel,” 46–50; “Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths,” 120–22; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 105–6, 114, 116, 216.

32 “A Sketch of the Factors,” 13, 15–16; “Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 38; “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 52, 67; “Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism,” 60; “Approaching the Bible,” 11; *Gagging of God*, 120–25, 544; *Exegetical Fallacies*, 126–27; “*Claritas Scripturae*,” 108; “An Introduction to Introductions,” 17; “Domesticating the Gospel,” 46, 49–50; “Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths,” 120–22; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 116–21.

33 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 52; cf. 67.

THE HERMENEUTICAL SPIRAL

Rather than a vicious hermeneutical circle in which theologians endlessly go round and round between their own presuppositions, systematic constructions, and encounters with the text, this model illustrates that theologians may “hone in progressively on what is actually there.”³⁴ Consequently, theologians may gradually minimize the radius of the circle as their understanding improves with time.

Thus instead of a straight line from the knower to the text, what really takes place is better schematized as a circle, a hermeneutical circle: I approach the text today, the text makes its impact on me, I (slightly altered) approach the text again tomorrow, and receive its (slightly altered) impact, and so on, and so on, and so on.³⁵ “We will never know all there is to know about” the Bible or anything else, “but we do spiral in closer than we once were.”³⁶

THE ASYMPTOTIC APPROACH

“An asymptote is a curved line that gets closer and closer to a straight line without ever touching it” (see figure 1).³⁷ Similarly, a theologian’s knowledge may get closer and closer to God’s absolute knowledge without reaching it. “Even fifty billion years into eternity, the asymptote will never touch the line.”³⁸

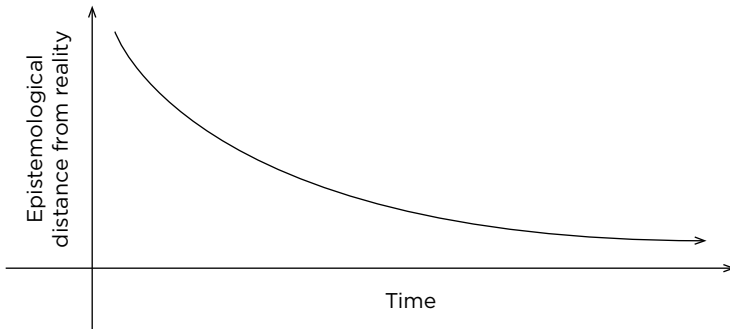


Figure 1: An asymptotic approach to epistemology. Carson has often drawn a figure like this on the board while teaching.

³⁴ “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 52.

³⁵ *Gagging of God*, 71.

³⁶ *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 119.

³⁷ *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 119.

³⁸ *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 120. Cf. *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 90–91, 101.

SPEECH ACT THEORY

Building on Paul Ricoeur's insistence "that the text bridges the hermeneutical gulf between reader *and author*,"³⁹ speech act theory allows "much more interplay than in the past between what a text *means* and what it *does*" while still maintaining "a chastened version of authorial intent."⁴⁰ "The Bible's appeal to truth is rich and complex. It cannot be reduced to, but certainly includes, the notion of propositional truth."⁴¹

Since theologians will never know anything like God knows, their theology is eternally improvable, and it would be most advantageous if theologians recognized that now. "Systematicians with comparable training but from highly diverse backgrounds can come together and check one another *against the standard of the Scripture that all sides agree is authoritative*."⁴²

Carson often illustrates this point in lectures by recounting his ten-year experience as the editor of five books sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship. Carson would select international evangelical scholars to contribute to a book project and then chair meetings for several days in which they would discuss each other's papers. In these meetings contributors would criticize each other from their vastly different cultural perspectives, and Carson found that despite their many differences they could reach remarkable unity on four conditions: (1) they were well trained, (2) they were willing to be corrected, (3) they affirmed that Scripture is authoritative, and (4) they had sufficient time.

*Carson's Bibliology: Sola Scriptura*⁴³

Methodology is important for Carson,⁴⁴ and after God himself, bibliology is most foundational. In an essay on how to approach the Bible, Carson begins by explaining who God is.⁴⁵ God is personal, transcendent, and

³⁹ *Gagging of God*, 122.

⁴⁰ *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 121. Carson often approvingly cites Kevin J. Vanhoozer's many works on hermeneutics that employ speech act theory.

⁴¹ *Gagging of God*, 163; see 163–74, 189–90, 348–53; "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," 38; "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 94–95.

⁴² "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology." Cf. *Gagging of God*, 552–53.

⁴³ For a brief summary of Carson's bibliology, see "Approaching the Bible," 1–10. For a fuller summary, see *Collected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

⁴⁴ Cf. "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 78.

⁴⁵ "Approaching the Bible," 1–2.

sovereign, and since he created the universe, humans are accountable to him.⁴⁶ General revelation is limited; special revelation controls it.⁴⁷ God has spoken, and his revelation is authoritative.⁴⁸ The Bible is uniquely a subset of both “the word of God” and “the word of human beings.”⁴⁹ “The locus of God’s special revelation is the Bible, the sixty-six canonical books, reliable and truthful as originally given.”⁵⁰

Anticipating that some will criticize his view as “hopelessly circular” and “deeply flawed,” Carson adds four further reflections:

1. “All human thought . . . is circular in some sense” since humans are finite and must depend on God’s revelation by faith.
2. Circularity is not “intrinsically false.” Further, Christians should “argue for the utter truthfulness and reliability of Scripture” because Scripture teaches it, “but they will not want to argue for the utter truthfulness and reliability of their doctrine of Scripture.”⁵¹
3. “There are unknowns and difficulties in the formulation of a responsible doctrine of Scripture,” but this is not troubling since “the same could be said for almost any biblical doctrine. . . . There will inevitably remain mysteries and areas of hiddenness.”⁵²

46 “Approaching the Bible,” 1. Cf. “Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism,” 46–49; *Gagging of God*, 222–38.

47 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 43–44; cf. “Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism,” 49–54; “Approaching the Bible,” 1–2.

48 See *Gagging of God*, 141–91; cf. 547–49; “Approaching the Bible,” 5; “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 27–29; “New Testament Theology,” 806–7.

49 “Approaching the Bible,” 2–3.

50 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 44. Cf. John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982); D. A. Carson, “Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983): 337–67; D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986); Carson, “Approaching the Bible,” 7; D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 726–43; D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016); “Subtle Ways to Abandon the Authority of Scripture in Our Lives,” *Themelios* 42, no. 1 (2017): 1–12; “Sola Scriptura Then and Now,” Gospel Coalition, October 31, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>; “But That’s Just Your Interpretation!,” *Themelios* 44, no. 3 (2019): 425–32.

51 Cf. “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 55.

52 “Approaching the Bible,” 9–10.

4. The noetic effects of sin on human thinking are substantial and must not be underestimated. The human desire to control God is idolatry.

What Does Carson Think the Theological Disciplines Are?

While Carson acknowledges that “*theology* can relate to the entire scope of religious studies,” he uses “the term more narrowly to refer to the study of what the Scriptures say. This includes exegesis and historical criticism, the requisite analysis of method and epistemology, and the presentation of the biblical data in an orderly fashion.”⁵³ Theology “is disciplined discourse about God,”⁵⁴ and the Bible “finally and irrevocably” constrains theology’s subject matter.⁵⁵

Carson recognizes that his definitions of the theological disciplines (described below) “do not avoid overlap,” but his distinctions “are clear enough and are not novel.”⁵⁶ So while there is not necessarily anything distinctly “Carsonian” to Carson’s theological method itself, it is worth analyzing for at least three reasons: (1) it differs significantly from how many other exegetes and theologians “do” theology; (2) it helps us understand the mechanics of how he does theology in his voluminous publications, and (3) it may help us improve our own theological method.

Exegesis

Exegesis is “careful reading.”⁵⁷ Exegesis “is the analysis of the final-form of a text, considered as an integral and self-referring literary object.”⁵⁸ In other words, “Exegesis answers the questions, What does this text actually say? and, What did the author mean by what he said?”⁵⁹ “All that exegesis is is reading the text to find out what’s there.”⁶⁰ Exegesis includes but is not limited to parsing, word study, and syntax at various levels (clause,

53 “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” 69.

54 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 40.

55 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 44.

56 “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” 70.

57 “The Bible and Theology,” 2321.

58 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 46.

59 “The Bible and Theology,” 2321.

60 “R. C. Sproul Interviews D. A. Carson on Biblical Exegesis,” March 10, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/>.

sentence, discourse, genre) while being sensitive to literary features and the running argument.⁶¹

In short, exegesis is open-ended. It is not the sort of thing about which one can say, "I have completed the task; there is no more to do." Of course, in one sense that is exactly what *can* be said if what is meant is that the exegete has come to the end of the text. The exegesis is complete at that level of analysis, when the entire text has been analyzed. But exegesis itself is not a mechanical discipline with a few limited steps that, properly pursued, inevitably churn out the "right answer." On the other hand, progressively sophisticated levels of exegetical analysis may rapidly illustrate the law of diminishing returns! Exegetes with this view are quite happy to speak of discerning the author's intent, provided it is presupposed that the author's intent is expressed in the text. Only in this way can the intentional fallacy be avoided. There is no other access to the author's intent than in the text.⁶²

Because Carson locates the text's meaning in the authorial intention as found in the text, he distinguishes between interpretation (i.e., what the text meant) and application (i.e., what the text means).⁶³ He is well aware that "truth is conveyed in different ways in different literary genres."⁶⁴ Carson's dozens of exegetical works demonstrate his proficiency at exegesis.⁶⁵

Biblical Theology

Biblical theology (BT) "is rather difficult to define."⁶⁶ For Carson, "BT answers the question, How has God revealed his word historically and

61 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 47.

62 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 47–48.

63 "Approaching the Bible," 18.

64 "Approaching the Bible," 14.

65 See "D. A. Carson's Publications," Gospel Coalition, July 24, 2014, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org>.

66 "Current Issues in Biblical Theology," 17. See pp. 18–26 for a survey of six "competing definitions" of BT. For further reflections on defining BT, see "New Covenant Theology and Biblical Theology," in *God's Glory Revealed in Christ: Essays on Biblical Theology in Honor of Thomas R. Schreiner*, ed. Denny Burk, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Brian Vickers (Nashville: B&H, 2019), 17–31.

organically?”⁶⁷ BT may inductively and historically focus on the whole Bible or select biblical corpora.⁶⁸ It involves a “salvation-historical study of the biblical texts (*i.e.* the understanding and exposition of the texts along their chronological line of development).”⁶⁹ (“Salvation history” is “the history of salvation—*i.e.*, the history of events that focus on the salvation of human beings and issues involving the new heaven and the new earth.”⁷⁰) At least five elements are essential:

1. BT reads “the Bible as an historically developing collection of documents.”
2. BT presupposes “a coherent and agreed canon.”⁷¹
3. BT presupposes “a profound willingness to work inductively from the text—from individual books and from the canon as a whole.” Its task is “to deploy categories and pursue an agenda set by the text itself.”
4. BT clarifies “the connections among the corpora”—that is, “it is committed to intertextual study . . . because biblical theology, at its most coherent, is a theology of the Bible.”
5. “Ideally,” BT will “call men and women to knowledge of the living God”—that is, it does not stop with the Bible’s structure, corpus thought, storyline, or synthetic thought; it must “capture” the experiential, “existential element.”⁷²

BT focuses on the turning points in the Bible’s storyline.⁷³ It recognizes “seeds” in Genesis 1–3 that grow throughout the story,⁷⁴ and it makes “theo-

67 “The Bible and Theology,” 2321.

68 “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 20, 23. These are definitions two and three in Carson’s survey.

69 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 90. Cf. “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” 69; “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 45; *Gagging of God*, 502; “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 100–101.

70 “A Biblical-Theological Overview of the Bible,” in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 2325.

71 Cf. “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 91–92, 95–97.

72 “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 27–32.

73 Cf. *Gagging of God*, 193–314; *Christ and Culture Revisited*, xi, 36, 44–61, 67, 81, 202, 226; *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God’s Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010).

74 “Genesis 1–3: Not Maximalist, but Seminal,” *Trinity Journal* 39 (2018): 143–63.

logical connections within the entire Bible that the Bible itself authorizes.”⁷⁵ BT’s most “pivotal” concern is tied to the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament.⁷⁶ One way to do BT is to “work really carefully with each biblical book or corpus by corpus,” and another is to track “themes that run right though the whole Bible.”⁷⁷ Theologians, not least Old Testament scholars, must read the Old Testament “with Christian eyes.”⁷⁸ Old Testament and New Testament theology are subsets of BT.⁷⁹ BT “forms an organic whole”⁸⁰ and serves as “an excellent bridge discipline, building links among the associated disciplines and in certain respects holding them together.”⁸¹ The study Bible that Carson edited shows how to do BT: the notes make biblical-theological connections, and the study Bible concludes with twenty-eight essays on biblical theology, most of which trace themes throughout the Bible’s storyline.⁸²

Historical Theology

Historical theology (HT) answers the questions, How have people in the past understood the Bible? What have Christians thought about exegesis

75 “The Bible and Theology,” 2321.

76 “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 39–41. Cf. “New Testament Theology,” 811; “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 97–98; G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, “Introduction,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), xxiii–xxviii; “The Hermeneutical Competence of New Testament Commentaries,” in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel, Texts and Editions for New Testament Studies 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 166–68. See also G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, Benjamin L. Gladd, and Andrew David Naselli, eds., *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

77 “What Is Biblical Theology? And Do We Need It?,” *Desiring God*, July 21, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>. For examples of tracing a God-designed typological trajectory through the Bible, see “Getting Excited about Melchizedek (Psalm 110),” in *The Scriptures Testify about Me: Jesus and the Gospel in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 145–74; “Why We Must Understand the Temple in God’s Plan Today,” *Desiring God*, July 22 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/>.

78 “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 40–41.

79 “New Testament Theology,” 796.

80 “Approaching the Bible,” 1. Cf. “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” 83; “A Sketch of the Factors,” 26–27.

81 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 91. On the need for wisely integrating BT, see *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 59–62, 67, 71, 81–85, 87, 94, 121, 127, 143, 172, 207, 227.

82 D. A. Carson, ed., *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018). For more information, see Andy Naselli, “NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible,” *Andy Naselli* (blog), August 18, 2015, <https://andynaselli.com/>. See also one of Carson’s essays in that volume: “A Biblical-Theological Overview of the Bible,” 2325–27.

and theology? and, more specifically, How has Christian doctrine developed over the centuries, especially in response to false teachings? HT is concerned primarily with opinions in periods earlier than our own. But we may also include under this heading the importance of reading the Bible globally—that is, finding out how believers in some other parts of the world read the text. That does not mean that they (or we!) are necessarily right; rather, it means that we recognize that all of us have a great deal to learn.⁸³

HT is “the written record of exegetical and theological opinions in periods earlier than our own, a kind of historical parallel to the diversity of exegetical and theological opinions that are actually current.”⁸⁴ HT is “the diachronic study of theology, *i.e.* the study of the changing face of theology across time.”⁸⁵

HT is valuable for at least five reasons: (1) it frees us “from unwitting slavery to our biases,” (2) “it induces humility,” (3) it “clears our minds of unwarranted assumptions,” (4) it “exposes faulty interpretations that others have long since (and rightly) dismissed,” and (5) it “reminds us that responsibly interpreting the Bible must never be a solitary task.”⁸⁶

Systematic Theology

Systematic theology (ST) “answers the question, What does the whole Bible teach about certain topics? or put another way, What is true about God and his universe?”⁸⁷

[ST] is Christian theology whose internal structure is systematic; *i.e.*, it is organized on atemporal principles of logic, order, and need, rather than on inductive study of discrete biblical corpora. Thus it can address broader concerns of Christian theology (it is not merely inductive study of the Bible, though it must never lose such controls), but it seeks to be rigorously systematic and is therefore concerned about how various parts of God’s gracious self-disclosure cohere. . . . The questions it poses

83 “The Bible and Theology,” 2321.

84 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 56.

85 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 91.

86 “The Bible and Theology,” 2322.

87 “The Bible and Theology,” 2322.

are atemporal . . . the focal concerns are logical and hierarchical, not salvation-historical.⁸⁸

"ST is the most comprehensive of the various theological disciplines."⁸⁹ Everyone uses some sort of ST, and it is foolish to denigrate it. The issue is not whether ST is legitimate; the issue, rather, is the quality of one's ST reflected in its foundational data, constructive methods, principles for excluding certain information, appropriately expressive language, and logical, accurate results.⁹⁰

Carson's approach to ST presupposes "that the basic laws of logic" are not human inventions "but discoveries to do with the nature of reality and of communication."⁹¹ The Bible is like part of a massive jigsaw puzzle because it contains only a small fraction of the total number of pieces.⁹² More precisely, the Bible is like a massive "multi-dimensional puzzle beyond the third dimension."⁹³ ST "must be controlled by the biblical data" and must beware of going beyond "how various truths and arguments function in Scripture," not least because "a number of fundamental Christian beliefs involves huge areas of unknown," such as the incarnation, the Trinity, and God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.⁹⁴

The Bible's unity makes ST "not only possible but necessary," and "modern theology at variance with this stance is both methodologically and doctrinally deficient."⁹⁵ An approach that recognizes this unity encourages "theological exploration" within the canon:

[J. I. Packer writes,] "There is . . . a sense in which every New Testament writer communicates to Christians today more than he knew he was communicating, simply because Christians can now read his work as part of the completed New Testament canon." This is not an appeal to *sensus*

88 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 45–46. Cf. "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 69–70; "Current Issues in Biblical Theology," 29; "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 101–2.

89 "The Bible and Theology," 2324.

90 "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 78; cf. 92.

91 "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 80. Cf. *Exegetical Fallacies*, 87–88.

92 "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 81–82.

93 "Current Issues in Biblical Theology," 30.

94 "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 82, 93–94. Cf. "Approaching the Bible," 17–18.

95 "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 95; cf. 90.

plenior, at least not in any traditional sense. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that with greater numbers of pieces of the jigsaw puzzle provided, the individual pieces and clusters of pieces are seen in new relationships not visible before.⁹⁶

Carson's standard for good ST is high. Michael Horton asked Carson, "Do you think there has been a lot of polarization where systematicians aren't always very good exegetes and exegetes aren't very good systematicians?"⁹⁷ Carson replied,

The danger springs from a culture of specialization—more and more knowledge about less and less—so that a person who really is on top of the exegetical literature quite frankly just doesn't have time to be right on top of the systematic literature, and vice versa. I've sometimes told students who say they want to do a Ph.D. in systematic theology, that one doctorate won't do—they'll need at least five: one or two in New Testament, at least one in Old Testament, a couple in church history, one in philosophy, and then they can do one in systematics. That's the problem—the nature of the discipline is integrative and synthetic. If instead people do systematics without any grasp of Scripture, they're likely to cut themselves off from what they confess to be their authority base, and so they're not really rigorous.⁹⁸

Examples of how Carson systematically integrates the theological disciplines include his treatments of compatibilism and theodicy,⁹⁹ Sabbath

96 "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 91. Carson is sympathetic with Douglas J. Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 175–211, 397–405, an article that has recently been updated: Douglas J. Moo and Andrew David Naselli, "The Problem of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 702–46. Cf. "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 56.

97 D. A. Carson and Michael Horton, "Why Can't We Just Read the Bible? An Interview with D. A. Carson," *Modern Reformation* 19, no. 4 (2010): 33.

98 Carson and Horton, "Why Can't We Just Read the Bible?" 33.

99 *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*; "Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility in Philo: Analysis and Method," *Novum Testamentum* 23 (1981): 148–64; *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006); review of *Evil and the Justice of God*, by N. T. Wright, *Review of Biblical Literature* (April 23, 2007); "Biblical-Theological Pillars Needed to Support Faithful Christian Reflection on Suffering and Evil," *Trinity Journal* 38 (2017): 55–77.

and the Lord's Day,¹⁰⁰ spiritual gifts,¹⁰¹ assurance of salvation,¹⁰² the love and wrath of God,¹⁰³ the emerging church,¹⁰⁴ and the Son of God.¹⁰⁵

Pastoral Theology

Pastoral theology (PT) answers the question, How should humans respond to God's revelation? Sometimes that is spelled out by Scripture itself; other times it builds on inferences of what Scripture says. PT practically applies the other four disciplines—so much so that the other disciplines are in danger of being sterile and even dishonoring to God unless tied in some sense to the responses God rightly demands of us. PT may well address such diverse domains as culture, ethics, evangelism, marriage and family, money, the cure of souls, politics, worship, and much more.¹⁰⁶

PT applies (i.e., cross-culturally contextualizes) exegesis, BT, HT, and ST to help people glorify God by living wisely with a biblical worldview. Basically, PT answers the question, How then should we live?

How Does Carson Think the Theological Disciplines Interrelate?

ST is like juggling: the balls represent the other theological disciplines, and ST's challenge is to avoid serious consequences by not dropping any

¹⁰⁰ Carson coordinated and edited the project (what he calls "a unified, cooperative investigation" [18]) that resulted in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982); see esp. Carson, "Introduction" (13–19).

¹⁰¹ *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 137–88.

¹⁰² "Reflections on Assurance," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 247–76.

¹⁰³ *Gagging of God*, 238–42; *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); "Love," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000); "How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of God?" in *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 279–312; *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002); "The Wrath of God," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 37–63.

¹⁰⁴ *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. For example, while critiquing their idea of truth, knowledge, and pluralism, Carson uncharacteristically lists Bible verses with very little commentary and notes that the context of each passage supports his theses: fifty-two verses "on what is true" and eighty-eight "on knowing some truths, even with 'certainty'" (188–99).

¹⁰⁵ *Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

¹⁰⁶ "The Bible and Theology," 2322.

balls.¹⁰⁷ Exegesis, BT, HT, and ST should be inseparable for theologians, but this is often not the case, for example, at American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature conferences, which tend to be high on specialization and low on integration.¹⁰⁸ “We live in an age of increasing specialization (owing in part to the rapid expansion of knowledge), and disciplines that a priori ought to work hand in glove are being driven apart.”¹⁰⁹

Theological Hermeneutics

THE COMPLEX INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

Carson explains the interrelationships between the theological disciplines with some diagrams. Some might think it convenient if we could order these disciplines along a straight line: Exegesis → BT → [HT] → ST → PT. (The brackets around HT suggest that HT directly contributes to the development from BT to ST and PT but is not itself a part of that line.) But this neat paradigm is naive because no exegesis is ever done in a vacuum. Before we ever start doing exegesis, we already have an ST framework that influences our exegesis. So are we locked into a hermeneutical circle (see figure 2)?

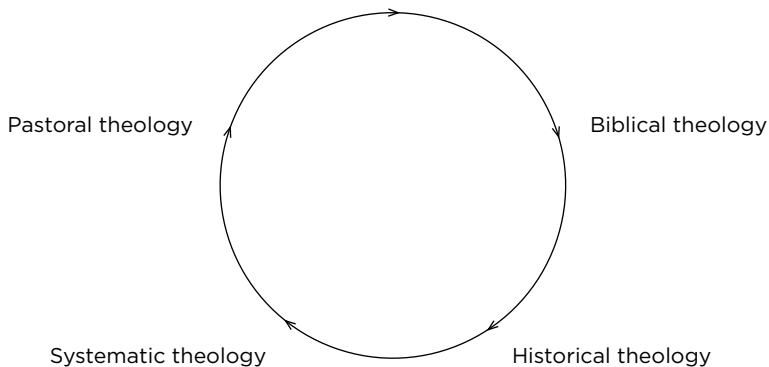


Figure 2. Hermeneutical circle. Carson has often drawn diagrams like these on the board while teaching.

107 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 39–40, 72.

108 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 40.

109 “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,” 65.

No; there is a better way. We might diagram it as shown in figure 3:

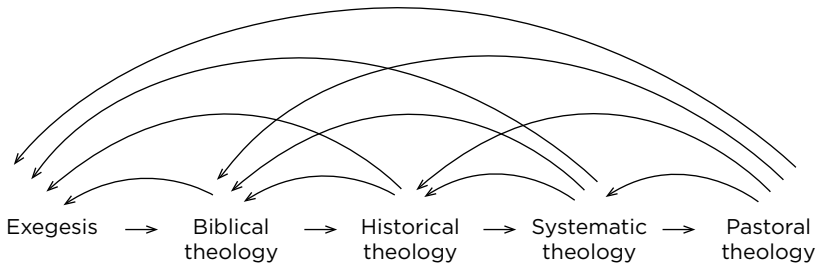


Figure 3: From exegesis to theology. Carson has often drawn diagrams like these on the board while teaching.

In other words, there are always feedback loops—information loops that go back and reshape how one does any exegesis or theology. The loops should not take over the final voice, but they shape the process whether one likes it or not. It is absurd to claim that one's ST does not affect one's exegesis. But the line of final control is the straight line from exegesis right through BT and HT to ST and PT. The final authority is the Bible and the Bible alone.

"For this reason," Carson explains, "exegesis, though affected by systematic theology, is not to be shackled by it."¹¹⁰

CARSON'S THEOLOGICAL HERMENUTIC: "BREADTH OF VISION"

Carson lists four ways to respond to the fragmented "current state of biblical studies":

1. Ignore or marginalize "all recent developments"—a pious "recipe for obsolescence."
2. Focus "on just one method, preferably the most recent"—a faddish "recipe for reductionism."
3. "Rejoice in the fragmentation," and "insist that such developments are not only inevitable but delightful, even liberating"—a pretentious and absurd postmodern approach.

¹¹⁰ "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," 92.

4. “Try to learn from the most important lessons from the new disciplines—and remain focused on the texts themselves” by emphasizing “the classic disciplines first” while learning from “tools, hermeneutical debates, and epistemological shifts.”¹¹¹

Carson takes the fourth approach, insisting, “All truth is God’s truth.”¹¹²

Carson recognizes that the disciplines are interconnected. If one of the disciplines is a string and one pulls at it, that inevitably affects the other disciplines as well.¹¹³ They are a package, which shows the need for a “thick” interpretation. Probably the loudest note Carson plays is the Christological, salvation-historical unity of the Bible’s storyline.

In practice, Carson is a multidisciplinary theologian, perhaps “one of the last great Renaissance men in evangelical biblical scholarship.”¹¹⁴ He is not merely a New Testament scholar. He is also an Old Testament scholar, a biblical theologian, a historical theologian, a systematic theologian, and a practical theologian (e.g., gifted preacher, critic of culture, former pastor, counselor).¹¹⁵ He also branches out into philosophy, English literature (e.g., poetry), science, math, nature, and other fields. It is no surprise that Kenneth Kantzer, former dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, repeatedly invited Carson to move from the New Testament department to the systematic theology department. Carson explains that he has remained in the New Testament department “partly because while I think it is important to feed biblical stuff into ST . . . it’s also important to bring breadth of vision to exegesis.”¹¹⁶ At the 1993 annual meeting of the Institute for Biblical Research, Carson presented this as a formal challenge to BT: “the daunting need for exegetes and theologians who will deploy the full range of weapons in the

111 “An Introduction to Introductions,” 14–17.

112 Interview by the author, November 29, 2006.

113 Interview by the author, November 29, 2006.

114 Köstenberger, “D. A. Carson,” 357.

115 This is evident in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Letters Along the Way: From a Senior Saint to a Junior Saint*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022). My wife and I read this book together during my first year as Carson’s teaching assistant and PhD student. We loved it. Reading these fictional letters is almost as personal as if you wrote a challenging theological or practical question to Carson and Woodbridge themselves and then received a thoughtful reply. Now I use this book as a resource for mentoring seminary students.

116 Interview by the author, November 29, 2006.

exegetical arsenal, without succumbing to methodological narrowness or faddishness.”¹¹⁷

Exegesis and Biblical Theology

BT “mediates the influence of biblical exegesis on systematic theology” because it “forces the theologian to remember that there is before and after, prophecy and fulfillment, type and antitype, development, organic growth, down payment and consummation.”¹¹⁸ The “overlap” between exegesis and BT is the most striking among the theological disciplines: “both are concerned to understand texts,” and BT is impossible without exegesis.¹¹⁹ “Exegesis tends to focus on analysis,” and BT “tends towards synthesis.”¹²⁰ Exegesis controls BT, and BT influences exegesis.¹²¹ BT “more immediately constrains and enriches exegesis than systematic theology can do.”¹²² In a sense BT is whole-Bible exegesis.

Exegesis and Historical Theology

The historic creeds are valuable, but they are not ultimately authoritative; only Scripture is.¹²³ The practice of many theologians, however, is to move directly from exegesis to ST with the result that they leave “precious little place for historical theology, except to declare it right or wrong as measured against the system that has developed out of one’s own exegesis.”¹²⁴ “Without historical theology,” however, “exegesis is likely to degenerate into arcane atomistic debates far too tightly tethered to the twentieth century. Can there be any responsible exegesis of Scripture that does not honestly wrestle with

¹¹⁷ “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 34.

¹¹⁸ “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 66, 65; cf. 58–66. In this regard the finest example of Carson’s combining exegesis and BT is probably this dense 44-page essay: “Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul’s Understanding of the Old and New,” in *The Paradoxes of Paul*, vol. 2 of *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 181 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 393–436. Cf. “Biblical-Theological Ruminations on Psalm 1,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church; Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 115–34.

¹¹⁹ “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 91.

¹²⁰ “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 91.

¹²¹ “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 91.

¹²² “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 66.

¹²³ *Gagging of God*, 362–33. Cf. “Domesticating the Gospel,” 51.

¹²⁴ “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 51.

what earlier Christian exegesis has taught?”¹²⁵ This explains why Carson includes significant sections on historical theology when he edits books that systematically address controversial issues such as the doctrines of justification or Scripture.¹²⁶

HT serves exegesis (and thus ST) in three ways:

1. HT opens up and closes down “options and configurations.”
2. HT shows how contemporary theological views are products of “the larger matrix” of contemporary thought.
3. HT contributes to ST’s boundaries by showing “remarkable uniformity of belief across quite different paradigms of understanding.”¹²⁷

Some may criticize Carson’s theological method as “biblicism,” but Carson distinguishes between two kinds of biblicism:

There is a kind of appeal to Scripture, a kind of biblicism—let’s call it Biblicism One—that seems to bow to what Scripture says but does not listen to the text very closely and is almost entirely uninformed by how thoughtful Christians have wrestled with these same texts for centuries. There is another kind of biblicism—let’s call it Biblicism Two—that understands the final authority in divine revelation to lie in Scripture traceable to the God who has given it, but understands also that accurate understanding of that Scripture is never supported by bad exegesis and always enriched by the work of Christian thinkers who have gone before. . . . To attempt theological interpretation without reference to such developments is part and parcel of Biblicism One; to attempt theological interpretation that is self-consciously aware of such developments and takes them into account is part and parcel of Biblicism Two. We hasten to add that both Biblicism One and Biblicism Two insist that final authority rests with the Bible. All the theological syntheses are in principle revisable. Yet the best of these creeds and confessions have been grounded in such widespread study,

¹²⁵ “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 39–40.

¹²⁶ D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001, 2004); Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*.

¹²⁷ “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 56–57; cf. 39–40; “Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture,” 18; “Approaching the Bible,” 18.

discussion, debate, and testing against Scripture that to ignore them tends to cut oneself off from the entire history of Christian confessionalism. The Bible remains theoretically authoritative (Biblicism One), but in fact it is being manipulated and pummeled by private interpretations cut off from the common heritage of all Christians.¹²⁸

Exegesis and Systematic Theology

Some theologians seem to think that their exegesis neutrally and objectively discovers the text's meaning and that they build their ST on such discoveries, but one's ST "exerts profound influence on" one's exegesis.¹²⁹ Without even realizing it, many theologians develop their own "canon within the canon," which to a large degree accounts for conflicting exegesis among Christians.¹³⁰ (A "canon within the canon" refers to "favorite passages of the Bible that then become their controlling grid for interpreting the rest of the Bible.")¹³¹

This problem may develop in at least three ways:

1. "An ecclesiastical tradition may unwittingly overemphasize certain biblical truths at the expense of others, subordinating or even explaining away passages that do not easily 'fit' the slightly distorted structure that results."¹³² For example, one's understanding of justification in Galatians may control one's understanding of justification everywhere else in the NT.¹³³ The solution is "to listen to one another, especially when we least like what we hear," and to employ ST in a way that confronts "the entire spectrum of biblical truth."¹³⁴

2. "An ecclesiastical tradition may self-consciously adopt a certain structure by which to integrate all the books of the canon" with the result that "some passages and themes may automatically be classified and explained in a particular fashion such that other believers find the tradition in question

128 "Carson on Jakes and the Elephant Room," Gospel Coalition, February 3, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

129 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 51. For example, "A person profoundly committed to, say, a pretribulational view of the rapture is unlikely to find anything but verification of this view in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, no matter how 'objective' and 'neutral' the exegetical procedures being deployed seem to be" (51).

130 "A Sketch of the Factors," 20.

131 "The Bible and Theology," 2323.

132 "A Sketch of the Factors," 21.

133 Cf. "A Sketch of the Factors," 21.

134 "A Sketch of the Factors," 23; cf. 27.

sub-biblical or too narrow or artificial.”¹³⁵ Dispensationalism and covenant theology are classic examples, usually employed by earnest theologians who consider their “theological framework” to be “true to Scripture.”¹³⁶ A more egregious error is a “paradigmatic approach” that uses parts of the Bible “without worrying very much about how the Scriptures fit together.”¹³⁷ An example of this error is Gustavo Gutiérrez making the exodus narrative a paradigm for the oppressed poor today to revolt.¹³⁸

3. “Many others reject parts of the canon as unworthy, historically inaccurate, mutually contradictory or the like, and adopt only certain parts of the Scripture.”¹³⁹

John Calvin is a sterling example of a pastor who responsibly integrates exegesis and ST:

The Reformation stands out as a movement that sought to integrate exegesis of the biblical books with what we would today call systematic theology. Not all the Reformers did this the same way. Some acted as if they were expounding the biblical texts, but tended in reality to jump from seminal word or phrase to the next seminal word or phrase, stopping at each point to unload theological treatments of the various “loci.” Bucer, for example, followed the text more closely but also unloaded his treatment of the “loci” as he went along, making his commentaries extraordinarily long and dense. Calvin strove in his commentaries for what he called “lucid brevity,” and he reserved his systematic theology primarily for what grew to become the four volumes of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Indeed, Calvin’s commentaries are so “bare bones” that not a few scholars have criticized him for not including enough theology in them. But what is striking about all these Reformers, regardless of their successes or failures to bring about appropriate integration, is the way in which they simultaneously attempted to expound the Bible and engage in serious theologizing. By contrast, today few systematicians are excellent exegetes, and few exegetes evince much interest in systematic theology.

¹³⁵ “A Sketch of the Factors,” 21.

¹³⁶ “A Sketch of the Factors,” 21, 24.

¹³⁷ “A Sketch of the Factors,” 24.

¹³⁸ “A Sketch of the Factors,” 24–26.

¹³⁹ “A Sketch of the Factors,” 21.

The exceptions merely prove the rule. There are many reasons why the Reformers were models in this regard—but whatever the reasons, we have much to learn from them.¹⁴⁰

Historical Theology and Systematic Theology

On the one hand, ST can err by undervaluing HT. ST is an attempt “to systematize what is found in the Bible,”¹⁴¹ and some theologians move from exegesis to ST without sufficiently considering HT.¹⁴² When studying what the Bible teaches about a particular subject (ST), the theologian must integrate HT.¹⁴³

On the other hand, ST can err by overvaluing HT. Consequently, such attempts at ST are not actually systematizing the Bible but instead systematizing what other theologians have said about the Bible: “Countless books that ostensibly belong to the domain of systematic theology are in fact an evaluation and critique of some theologian or of some theological position, based on criteria that are an interesting mix of tradition, Scripture, reason, philosophical structures and internal coherence.”¹⁴⁴ “In some measure,” ST “deals with” HT’s categories, but ST’s “priorities and agenda . . . ideally . . . address the contemporary age at the most critical junctures.”¹⁴⁵

Undervaluing and overvaluing HT are dangers that Carson addresses in his article that evaluates the “Theological Interpretation of Scripture” movement.¹⁴⁶ “TIS accords greater credibility to pre-critical exegesis—patristic, medieval, reformational—than to contemporary exegesis, and especially to patristic readings.”¹⁴⁷ On the one hand, Carson affirms, “One worries about interpreters who are always striving to find something *new* in Scripture but who rarely take the time to show how their readings are nestled within the massive confessional heritage of historic Christianity.”¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, Carson warns,

140 “Should Pastors Today Still Care about the Reformation?,” *Themelios* 42, no. 3 (2017): 438.

141 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 102.

142 Cf. “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 51.

143 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 46; “Domesticating the Gospel,” 33.

144 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 102. Cf. “The Scholar as Pastor,” 100.

145 “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 29.

146 “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . .” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207.

147 “Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” 196.

148 “Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” 196.

It is not entirely clear why so much emphasis is placed on the patristic period. For many Catholics, the appeal to the magisterial authority expressed through the first seven (ecumenical) councils may be part of the reason; for many others, a similar appeal is made to the Great Tradition. Both parties sometimes write as if either (a) these ecumenical councils share the authority of Scripture, or (b) at very least they are not to be questioned because they were both ecumenical and much closer to Christ and his apostles than we are; and so, further, (c) they constitute all that is necessary to establish a confessional bond of true Christians today—a stance which, of course, marginalizes the Reformation standards. No informed confessional evangelical will agree to (a): there is an ontological gap between the books of the Bible and all other documents. That the early councils were ecumenical—so (b)—is something for which to be grateful, and warrants that Christians everywhere should pay the more careful attention to them, but even council documents and creeds must be tested by Scripture, not the reverse. . . . The fact that the fathers were closer to the events described in the New Testament and to the time of writing of those documents is almost irrelevant. . . . In response to (c), why should we think the Great Tradition is a sufficient ground for a common Christian front? One could make a serious case that it provides a necessary ground, but sufficient? Are we to think that no serious aberrations would or could ever be introduced into the life and thought of the church after the patristic period? . . . If one is looking for excellent models of how the patristic and medieval fathers should be cited and used abundantly if discerningly, one could do a great deal worse than begin with Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers. The links between Calvin and Thomas Aquinas have frequently been probed, and his grasp of patristic sources is wholly admirable. So why the frequent marginalization of Reformational voices in TIS literature?¹⁴⁹

Biblical Theology and Historical Theology

BT and HT both study “the changing face of the accumulating biblical documents across time,” but BT has “abundant interlocking considerations

¹⁴⁹ “Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” 197–98.

(canon, revelation, authority) that demand distinctions.”¹⁵⁰ Since theologians are finite, BT functions best when interacting with HT’s past (“twenty centuries of Christian witness”) and present (“the living church”).¹⁵¹ In other words, “BT focuses on the Bible, while HT focuses on what significant figures have believed about the Bible. BT functions best when interacting with HT.”¹⁵²

Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology

Table 1 displays how I compare BT and ST, which repackages what I have learned from Carson.

Table 1. Comparing biblical theology and systematic theology¹⁵³

	Biblical theology	Systematic theology
Final authority	The whole Bible	The whole Bible
Task	Inductively describe what texts say in relation to the whole Bible. Explore how and what each literary genre or canonical unit distinctively communicates.	Deductively describe what the whole Bible teaches (with an objective of engaging and even confronting one’s culture). Integrate and synthesize what the Bible’s literary genres communicate.
Nature	Historical and literary Organic Inductive Diachronic (traces how salvation history progresses through time) Bridging discipline: a little further from culture and a little closer to the biblical text	Relatively ahistorical Relatively universal Relatively deductive Relatively synchronic (focuses on what is true at a point in time) Culminating and worldview-shaping discipline: a little closer to culture and a little further from the biblical text

¹⁵⁰ “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 91–92.

¹⁵¹ “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 101. Cf. “New Testament Theology,” 811.

¹⁵² “The Bible and Theology,” 2324.

¹⁵³ This table is from Andrew David Naselli, “Question 1: What Do We Mean by ‘Biblical Theology?’” in Jason S. DeRouchie, Oren R. Martin, and Andrew David Naselli, *40 Questions about Biblical Theology*, 40 Questions (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2020), 26. Used by permission.

BT is historical and organic; ST is relatively ahistorical and universal.¹⁵⁴ Unlike BT, which “is deeply committed to working inductively from the biblical text” so that “the text itself sets the agenda,” ST may be “at a second or third or fourth order of remove from Scripture, as it engages, say, philosophical and scientific questions not directly raised by the biblical texts themselves. These elements constitute part of its legitimate mandate.”¹⁵⁵

On the one hand, exegesis and BT “have an advantage over” ST because “their agenda is set by the text.”¹⁵⁶ ST must build on BT’s “syntheses of biblical corpora” and “tracing of the Bible’s story-line” with the result that “each major strand” of ST will “be woven into the fabric that finds its climax and ultimate significance in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, “ST has an advantage over exegesis and BT because it drives hard toward holistic integration.”¹⁵⁸

Literary genre and speech act theory significantly influence the relationship between BT and ST.¹⁵⁹ BT is “a kind of bridge discipline between” exegesis and ST.¹⁶⁰ BT “is admirably suited to build a bridge between” exegesis and ST “because it overlaps with the relevant disciplines,” enabling “them to hear one another a little better.”¹⁶¹ BT is “a mediating discipline,” but ST is “a culminating discipline” because it attempts to form and transform one’s “worldview.”¹⁶²

Systematic theology tends to be a little further removed from the biblical text than does biblical theology, but a little closer to cultural engagement. Biblical theology tends to seek out the rationality and communicative genius of each literary genre; systematic theology tends to integrate the diverse rationalities in its pursuit of a large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis. In this sense, systematic theology tends to be a culminating

154 Cf. *Gagging of God*, 502, 542–43; “New Testament Theology,” 808; “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 94–95, 101–3.

155 “Current Issues in Biblical Theology,” 29.

156 *Gagging of God*, 544.

157 *Gagging of God*, 544–45.

158 “The Bible and Theology,” 2324.

159 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 94–95.

160 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 94.

161 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 95.

162 “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 102.

discipline; biblical theology, though it is a worthy end in itself, tends to be a bridge discipline.¹⁶³

"BT is important today because the gospel is virtually incoherent unless people understand the Bible's storyline. ST is important today because, rightly undertaken, it brings clarity and depth to our understanding of what the Bible is about."¹⁶⁴

*Exegesis, Biblical Theology, Historical Theology,
Systematic Theology, and Pastoral Theology*

Although it is possible to treat pastoral theology as an independent discipline, it is wiser to recognize that the Bible was never given to stir up *merely* or *exclusively* intellectual questions. It was given to transform people's lives; it was given to be practical. The notion of impractical theology—theological study that is unconcerned with repentance, faith, obedience, conformity to Christ, and joy in the Lord—hovers somewhere between the ridiculous and the blasphemous.¹⁶⁵

Carson is not an ivory tower theologian: "The aim of thoughtful Christians, after all, is not so much to become masters of Scripture, but to be mastered by it, both for God's glory and his people's good."¹⁶⁶ Carson is deeply committed to the purpose for which the theological disciplines exist—namely, "to serve the people of God,"¹⁶⁷ which includes preaching and polemics.

PREACHING AND THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

Carson, a former pastor, is a preacher.¹⁶⁸ He explained in 1997,

¹⁶³ "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 103.

¹⁶⁴ "The Bible and Theology," 2324.

¹⁶⁵ "The Bible and Theology," 2324.

¹⁶⁶ "Approaching the Bible," 12.

¹⁶⁷ "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 71.

¹⁶⁸ "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 70–72; "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," 31–66; *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004); "The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel," *Criswell Theological Review* 7 (1993): 99–117; "The Challenge from the Preaching of the Gospel to Pluralism," *Criswell Theological Review* 7 (1994): 15–39; "Preaching," 145–59; *Gagging of God*, 491–514; "The SBJT Forum: What Do You Consider to Be the Essential Elements of an Expository Sermon?," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3, no. 2 (1999): 93–96; "Athens Revisited,"

I see myself first and foremost as a pastor, not a professional scholar or writer. The Lord called me to gospel ministry. Three times I have been involved in church planting, and I served a church as pastor before embarking on doctoral studies. If I now teach at a seminary, it is because for the time being I believe the Lord wants me to train other pastors and Christian leaders. But although I may remain here for the rest of my working life, I would certainly not rule out the possibility of a return to pastoring a local church. That is the front line, and there are times when working in a quarter-master's slot (which is where I am) prompts me to examine my own priorities.¹⁶⁹

Carson has maintained a busy international speaking schedule by regularly preaching and lecturing in a variety of forums with audiences consisting of scholars, pastors, laymen, and university students—both Christians and non-Christians.¹⁷⁰ “There is a sense,” Carson explains, “in which the best expository preaching ought also to be the best exemplification of the relationship between biblical exegesis and systematic theology.”¹⁷¹ When expounding a passage, “the first priority is to explain what the text meant when it was written . . . and to apply it, utilizing sound principles . . . to contemporary life.”¹⁷² The second priority is to trace how various motifs in that passage develop across the storyline of God's progressive revelation “with some thoughtful reflection and application on the resulting synthesis.”¹⁷³ Merely to exegete a passage and stop there “would be to fail at the same task” because

in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 384–98; “The Challenges of the Twenty-First-Century Pulpit,” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 172–89; “Preaching the Gospels,” in *Preaching the New Testament*, ed. Ian Paul and David Wenham (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 17–32.

169 “The SBJT Forum: How Does Your Role as a Scholar, Teacher and Writer Fulfill the Great Commission?,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1, no. 4 (1997): 73. See esp. *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*.

170 Over 550 of Carson's sermons and lectures are available for free as MP3s at www.thegospelcoalition.org. For an explanation, see Andy Naselli, “D. A. Carson MP3s Now Hosted by TGC,” *Andy Naselli* (blog), <http://andynaselli.com/>.

171 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 71.

172 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 71.

173 “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 71. Cf. “Preaching,” 151–54, 160.

the best expository preaching begins with the text at hand but seeks to establish links not only to the immediate context but also to the canonical context, *as determined by the biblico-theological constraints largely governed by the canon itself*. If these lines are sketched out in the course of regular, expository ministry, believers begin to see how their Bibles cohere. With deft strokes, the preacher is able to provide a *systematic* summary of the teaching to be learned, the ethics to be adopted, the conduct to be pursued, *not* by curtailing either exegesis or biblical theology, but by developing these disciplines on the way toward synthesis.¹⁷⁴

The pressing need in contemporary evangelism to postmoderns is to “start further back and nail down the turning points in redemptive history,” give primacy to BT rather than ST, herald “the rudiments of the historic gospel,” and “think through what to say” *and* “how to live” (i.e., “contextualization”).¹⁷⁵ BT is primary because the gospel “is virtually incoherent unless it is securely set into a biblical worldview.”¹⁷⁶ Preaching today should often take a BT approach because modern audiences are largely biblically illiterate and do not understand the Bible’s storyline. This is largely what motivated Carson’s fourteen-part seminar “The God Who Is There,” which simultaneously evangelizes non-Christians and edifies Christians by explaining the Bible’s storyline in a nonreductionistic way.¹⁷⁷

POLEMICS AND THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

Carson is committed to contextualizing theology, which occasionally involves engaging in controversial theological debates.¹⁷⁸ He represents his opponents accurately and respectfully and then sheds light on

¹⁷⁴ “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 71–72.

¹⁷⁵ *Gagging of God*, 496–511.

¹⁷⁶ *Gagging of God*, 502; cf. 193–345, 496–505, 542–44; “Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism,” 60–64; “Approaching the Bible,” 4; “Is the Doctrine of *Claritas Scripturae* Still Relevant Today?,” in *Dein Wort ist die Wahrheit: Beiträge zu einer schriftgemäßen Theologie*, ed. Eberhard Hahn, Rolf Hille, and Heinz-Werner Neudorfer (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1997), 109.

¹⁷⁷ *The God Who Is There* and *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God’s Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010). MP3s and videos of the fourteen sessions are available for free at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

¹⁷⁸ He briefly reflects on polemical theology in “Editorial,” *Themelios* 34, no. 2 (2009): 155–57.

sensitive, divisive subjects. Hot topics he addresses include divorce,¹⁷⁹ KJV-onlyism,¹⁸⁰ new hermeneutical trends,¹⁸¹ church divisions,¹⁸² questionable bibliology,¹⁸³ poor exegesis,¹⁸⁴ miraculous spiritual gifts like tongues,¹⁸⁵ complementarianism,¹⁸⁶ the Jesus Seminar,¹⁸⁷ assurance of salvation,¹⁸⁸ Bible translation,¹⁸⁹ imputation,¹⁹⁰ postmodernism and the emerging church,¹⁹¹ and the changing notion of tolerance.¹⁹²

Carson insists that Christians must adopt a biblical stance “regardless of how unpopular it is likely to be,” especially with reference to postmodernism.¹⁹³ “Too little reading, especially the reading of older confessional material, not infrequently leads to in an infatuation with current agendas, to intoxication by the over-imbibing of the merely faddish.”¹⁹⁴ With reference “to doctrine and cognitive truth,” Carson does not shy away from drawing lines “thoughtfully, carefully, humbly, corrigibly” yet boldly.¹⁹⁵

179 “Divorce: A Concise Biblical Analysis,” *Northwest Journal of Theology* 4 (1975): 43–59.

180 *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978).

181 “Hermeneutics”; *Gagging of God*.

182 “The Doctrinal Causes of Divisions in Our Churches,” *Banner of Truth* 218 (November 1981): 7–19.

183 “Gundry on Matthew: A Critical Review,” *Trinity Journal* 3 (1982): 71–91; “Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review”; “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament”; “Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture”; “Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 1–62.

184 *Exegetical Fallacies*.

185 *Showing the Spirit*; “The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament,” in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 89–118.

186 “Silent in the Churches’: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1991), 140–53, 487–90.

187 “Five Gospels, No Christ,” *Christianity Today* 38, no. 5 (April 1994): 30–33.

188 “Reflections on Assurance,” 247–76.

189 *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998).

190 “The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields,” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 46–78.

191 *Gagging of God*; “Domesticating the Gospel,” 82–97; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*.

192 *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); “More Examples of Intolerant Tolerance,” *Themelios* 37, no. 3 (2012): 439–41; “The Woman from Kentucky,” *Themelios* 41, no. 2 (2016): 209–13.

193 *Gagging of God*, 347; cf. 347–67.

194 “Subtle Ways to Abandon the Authority of Scripture in Our Lives,” 9.

195 *Gagging of God*, 365–66; cf. 438–39, 238; “Athens Revisited,” 387; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 234.

Spiritual Experience and the Theological Disciplines

Since interpreters are inseparable from the interpretive process, their attitude toward the text is significant. What is the difference between the theological method of a believer and an unbeliever (e.g., an evangelical and an atheist)? Will their assessments differ? The answer is not that believers always interpret the text more accurately.¹⁹⁶

Unbelieving exegetes and theologians must confront four barriers:¹⁹⁷

1. The peer pressure that unbelievers experience may affect their approach to the Bible. It takes courage "to break away" from a vast number of unbelieving scholars whose "approach to scriptural exegesis . . . is fundamentally uncommitted."¹⁹⁸
2. Unbelievers may try to understand "God's gracious self-disclosure . . . on its own terms," but that is insufficient if they do not "respond to God as he has disclosed himself."¹⁹⁹
3. Unbelievers face more than just intellectual barriers; others include "spiritual experience (or lack of it)" and "moral defection."²⁰⁰ A theologian's sexual morality likely has a bearing on how he configures what the Bible says about sex: "Spiritual, moral experience may not only shape one's systematic theology but may largely constrain what one actually 'hears' in the exegesis of Scripture."²⁰¹
4. Unbelievers have not embraced the gospel and thus do not approach the text with a worldview that is spiritually discerning (1 Cor. 2:14). They have an entirely different "way of looking at reality."²⁰² They prefer to master the gospel rather than be "mastered by it."²⁰³

196 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 67.

197 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 67–70.

198 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 67.

199 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 67; cf. 67–69; "Approaching the Bible," 10.

200 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 69. Cf. "Approaching the Bible," 12; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 118.

201 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 69.

202 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 70.

203 "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," 70. Cf. "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," 47; "Claritas Scripturae," 109–11.

Regarding Carson's own spiritual experience and theology, he is both scholarly and devotional.²⁰⁴ He refuses to separate what God has joined together—namely, serious theological study and spirituality.²⁰⁵ “Scholarship without humility and obedience is arrogant; talk of knowing and loving God without scholarship is ignorant.”²⁰⁶

“The aim is *never* to become a master of the Word, but to be mastered by it.”²⁰⁷ Carson aims to be academically responsible more than academically respectable, and his scholarship is ultimately about glorifying God by serving Christ's church.²⁰⁸

Conclusion

I began this essay by explaining that it focuses on describing—not critiquing—Carson's theological method. You might be thinking, “How would you evaluate Carson's theological method? What do you think of it?” My answer will disappoint those looking for a devastating critique, and I do not mean to sound hagiographic. I think that Carson's theological method is outstanding and that his first-class work is the fruit. Both his method and product are worthy of imitating. That is why in my book on how to interpret and apply the Bible (to which Carson wrote the foreword), I attempt to unpack the theological method I learned from Carson.²⁰⁹

Carson's theological method is so rigorous that it is daunting. The way Carson describes a New Testament theologian, for example, is formidable:

204 “The Scholar as Pastor,” 71–106.

205 “Approaching the Bible,” 18–19. Cf. Köstenberger, “D. A. Carson,” 359, 366–67.

206 “The Scholar as Pastor,” 77.

207 “The Scholar as Pastor,” 91. Cf. “The Trials of Biblical Studies,” in *The Trials of Theology: Becoming a “Proven Worker” in a Dangerous Business* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 109–29. For a summary of the chapter, see Andy Naselli, “Carson on the Trials of Biblical Studies,” March 25, 2010, Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

208 “Is there not an important responsibility to ask, each time I put pen to paper, whether what I write pleases the God of Scripture, the God of all truth, rather than worry about how my academic colleagues will react?” “The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology,” 68. Cf. Andrew David Naselli, “Three Reflections on Evangelical Academic Publishing,” *Themelios* 39, no. 3 (2014): 428–54.

209 Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017). See also Jason S. DeRouchie, Oren R. Martin, and Andrew David Naselli, *40 Questions about Biblical Theology, 40 Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2020).

Those who write NT theology should ideally become intimately acquainted with the text of the NT, develop a profound grasp of the historical (including social and cultural) frameworks in which the NT books were written, maintain and sharpen the horizon provided by the entire canon, foster literary skills that permit varied genres to speak for themselves, spot literary devices and correctly interpret them, learn to fire imagination and creativity in a disciplined way and acknowledge and seek to accommodate and correct their own cultural and theological biases. All of these elements must be maintained in appropriate balance, nurtured by love for God and fear of God and growing hunger to serve his people.²¹⁰

One wonders if a thorough, relatively comprehensive ST is even possible for a single theologian. It is hard not to come away from studying Carson's theological method with discouraging thoughts such as, "Wow. Who is gifted enough to do all that? Who is able to master exegesis, BT (both Old Testament and New Testament theology), HT, ST, and PT?" Not too far into the exercise, I experience information overload and admit that I cannot master it all. It takes a unique individual to be able to work competently with so much data and to account for Scripture's unity and diversity. It seems impossible to be an expert on both the forest as a whole as well as on all the individual species of trees. Carson recognizes that "the sheer volume of material" is challenging²¹¹ and that "Christians need each other; this is as true in the hermeneutical arena as elsewhere. . . . Responsible interpretation of Scripture must never be a solitary task."²¹²

While it is intimidating to do theology as rigorously as Carson describes, it is also hard for us not to come away encouraged for at least three reasons:

1. Carson's example is inspiring. He motivates us to consecrate ourselves to God by employing the theological disciplines "as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Pet. 4:10 ESV).
2. God has graced us with gifts to the church like Carson. Instead of feeling jealous or disheartened, we should feel grateful. We should thank God for his kindness to us. One NT scholar who is a close

²¹⁰ "New Testament Theology," 810.

²¹¹ "An Introduction to Introductions," 17.

²¹² "Approaching the Bible," 12, 18; cf. "Current Issues in Biblical Theology," 35.

friend of Carson's shared an insight with me in 2006. He occasionally struggles with feeling inadequate as a New Testament scholar who has not been as prolific as Carson. But he overcomes that feeling by recognizing that God graced him with gifts to the church like Carson. Instead of feeling depressed and inadequate because of scholars like Carson, we should gratefully serve God with the gifts he has given us and not feel inferior for the childish reason that we are not as gifted as someone else. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:21–23 ESV).

3. Carson continues to build up the church. I thank God that he has preserved Carson's health in his late seventies. If Jesus does not return and if Carson's health continues, Carson plans to continue equipping the church with even more books and articles. Would you pray that God will help Carson be faithful and fruitful to the end?