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# D. A. CARSON'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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How does D. A. Carson 'do' theology?<sup>1</sup> Answering that question poses at least two challenges. The first and larger challenge is to systematize Carson's theological method in a way that accurately reflects his voluminous published writings spanning some thirty-five years: over 60 books, 250 articles, and 115 book reviews.<sup>2</sup> Second, though Carson has written an unusual number of works that are directly or indirectly related to theological method, he has not yet written one that systematically presents his theological method as a package. That is what this essay attempts to do. It is primarily descriptive rather than critical, and it begins with a brief biographical sketch.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. CARSON'S BACKGROUND: SOME FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE HIS THEOLOGICAL METHOD<sup>4</sup>

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,

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<sup>1</sup> The author has served as D. A. Carson's research assistant since 2006 and is currently Carson's Research Manager. Carson was also his doctoral mentor. This article revises a paper submitted to Kevin J. Vanhoozer in December 2006.

<sup>2</sup> See Carson's comprehensive bibliography the Gospel Coalition website where over 350 of the books, articles, and reviews are available as free PDFs. <<http://j.mp/CarsonBiblio>> [accessed 16 August 2011]. See my explanation of this resource, 'D. A. Carson Publications' <<http://andynaselli.com/d-a-carson-publications>> [accessed 16 August 2011].

<sup>3</sup> Three items are noteworthy: (1) All resources cited are authored by D. A. Carson unless otherwise noted. (2) When the footnotes list multiple sources, the citations are arranged chronologically from the oldest to most recent. (3) All italicized words in direct quotations reproduce the emphasis in the original.

<sup>4</sup> 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.*

culture, religion, education, upbringing, exposure, race, and gender. This biographical sketch mentions some 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?<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1. Carson's Family

Carson's father, Thomas Donald McMillan Carson, was born near Belfast, Northern Ireland, and his family immigrated to Ottawa, Canada in 1913. Desiring to plant churches in Quebec, he graduated from Toronto Baptist Seminary in 1937 and married Elizabeth Margaret Maybury in 1938. The Lord blessed them with three children, and Donald Arthur Carson was the second, born on 21 December 1946. Tom Carson faithfully ministered in Drummondville, Quebec from 1948 to 1963, a trying time in which he experienced persecution but little apparent fruit at his church.<sup>6</sup> 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,

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.<sup>7</sup>

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 a few years ago. While working on his PhD in Cambridge, he met Joy Wheildon, a British school-

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*Carson at the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough; Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), pp. 349–69.

<sup>5</sup> Carson raised this question when I inquired about influences on his life. Interview by author, 29 November 2006, Deerfield, IL. Digital recording.

<sup>6</sup> See especially *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), pp. 25–6.

teacher, and they married in 1975. They have two children: Tiffany, a high school teacher in Santa Barbara, California, and Nicholas, a United States Marine.

### **1.2. Carson's Education**

Carson graduated from Drummondville High School (1959–63) with the highest standing. He earned a BSc in chemistry (and mathematics) from McGill University (1963–7), where he took extra courses in classical Greek and psychology. He earned various scholarships and awards while earning his MDiv from Central Baptist Seminary in Toronto (1967–70), and he took four units of NT study at Regent College (1970). His PhD is from Emmanuel College, Cambridge University (1972–75), where he studied under the Rev. Dr (later Prof) Barnabas Lindars, SSF. His dissertation is entitled 'Predestination and Responsibility: Elements of Tension-Theology in the Fourth Gospel against Jewish Background'.<sup>8</sup>

### **1.3. Carson's Professional Experience**

Carson is now a world-renowned evangelical New Testament scholar. He started as a part-time lecturer in French at Central Baptist Seminary in Toronto (1967–70) and in mathematics at Richmond College in Toronto (1969–70). He was an occasional lecturer at Northwest Baptist Theological College in Vancouver (1971–2) while ministering as the pastor of Richmond Baptist Church in Richmond, British Columbia (1970–2), where he was ordained under the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada in June 1972. After earning his PhD, he served at Northwest Baptist Theological College from 1975–8. After hearing Carson present a paper at the Evangelical Theological Society's conference in December 1977, Kenneth Kantzer asked him to join the faculty at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where Carson has served as Associate Professor of New Testament (1978–82), Professor of New Testament (1982–91), and Research Professor of NT (1991–). From 1978 to 1991, he took a sabbatical every third year in England.<sup>9</sup>

He has taught over fifty different graduate courses on various levels. He was the book review editor for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1979–86) and the editor of the *Trinity Journal* (1980–6).

<sup>8</sup> Published as *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, 2nd edn (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> 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.

In addition to editing about twenty-five books, he is the general editor of three major series: Pillar Commentaries on the New Testament (currently fourteen volumes), New Studies in Biblical Theology (currently twenty-six volumes), and Studies in Biblical Greek (currently thirteen volumes). He is cofounder and president of The Gospel Coalition, and he frequently lectures internationally for academic, research, and professional centres.

#### **1.4. Some Other Background Factors**

Carson also frequently preaches and teaches internationally at a substantial number of churches, conferences, student groups, colleges, and seminaries, including university missions.<sup>10</sup> He is familiar with most of the major theological figures in evangelicalism on a first-name basis, and he is an avid critic of culture.<sup>11</sup> He reads about five hundred books each year, not counting other periodicals, 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 a half-day per week to read and catalogue articles in about eighty theological journals, which he now enters in a database with tags that enable him to locate and cite articles efficiently. His personal library consists of about 10,000 ‘choice’ volumes. His reputation among the students at TEDS is legendary, and he upholds daunting standards for PhD seminar papers and dissertations. 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,<sup>12</sup> and he has said something like the following countless times in recent years:

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

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> See especially *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> ‘The Biblical Gospel’, in *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future*, ed. by S. Brady and H. H. Rowdon (London: Evangelical Alliance, 1996), pp. 75–85; ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:1–19)’, May 23, 2007, text, audio, and video <<http://j.mp/ruPyDE>> [accessed 17 August 2011]; ‘Editorial’, *Them* 34 (2009): 1–2; ‘What Is the Gospel?—Revisited’, in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. by S. Storms and J. Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), pp. 147–70; *Evangelicalism: What Is It and Is It Worth Keeping?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011). For MP3s, see <<http://j.mp/oRJ9YX>> [accessed 17 August 2011].

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 nonnegotiability 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 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.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. CARSON'S CORRIGIBLE PRESUPPOSITIONS

Carson's views of metaphysics, epistemology, and divine revelation are the corrigible presuppositions for his theological method.

### 2.1. Carson's Metaphysics: God

Confessions of faith and systematic theology textbooks typically begin with Scripture, and an increasing number begin with epistemology. But when Carson drafted the Confessional Statement for The Gospel

<sup>13</sup> 'The Scholar as Pastor', in *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, by John Piper and D. A. Carson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 98–99. Cf. Tony Payne, 'Carson on Culture', *The Briefing* 362 (November 2008), 32.

Coalition,<sup>14</sup> he intentionally began with the Triune God, not revelation. He explains why in an essay he co-authored with Tim Keller:

This is significant. 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 fall-  
 enness of human reason.

We believe it is best to start with God, to declare (with John 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.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2. 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.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'Confessional Statement', <<http://j.mp/GCCConfession>> [accessed 17 August 2011].

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller, *Gospel-Centered Ministry*, The Gospel Coalition Booklets (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 22, 57–137, and *passim*; 'Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths in a Postmodern World', in *Can We Be Sure about Anything? Science, Faith and Postmodernism*, ed. by D. Alexander (Leicester: IVP, 2005), p. 109; 'Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz's *Renewing the Center*', in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. by Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), pp. 45–6, 54–5; *Becoming Conversant with the*

*Premodern* epistemology, positively, begins with God rather than one's self.<sup>17</sup> Negatively, it is tied to an open universe as opposed to a closed universe (*modern* epistemology) or 'controlled' universe (Carson's view). Modern epistemology is based on foundationalism and the older hermeneutic.<sup>18</sup> It begins with one's self rather than God as the foundation on which to build all other knowledge: 'I think, therefore, I am' (Descartes). Using a scientific method that is '*methodologically* atheistic,' humans can and should reach 'epistemological certainty' and discover what is universally true.<sup>19</sup> The older hermeneutic, based on this epistemology, prescribes exegesis with similar methodological rigor and objectively certain results.

*Postmodern* epistemology is based on anti-foundationalism and the 'new hermeneutic'.<sup>20</sup> Although it rejects modernism, it is modernism's 'bastard child'.<sup>21</sup> It likewise begins with the finite 'I,' but it rejects foundationalism and universal truth in favour of perspectivalism under the guise of a 'tolerance' that is hypocritically intolerant.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> Postmodern epistemology is commendable for emphasizing

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*Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 88–124.

<sup>17</sup> *Emerging Church*, pp. 88–90.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology', in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. by J. D. Woodbridge and T. E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 48–56; 'Approaching the Bible', in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. by G. J. Wenham *et al*, 4th edn (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), pp. 10–12; *Gagging of God*, pp. 58–64; 'Maintaining', p. 108; *Emerging Church*, pp. 92–95, 122–4.

<sup>19</sup> *Emerging Church*, pp. 122, 94.

<sup>20</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', pp. 50–6; *Gagging of God*, pp. 19–72, 195–200; 'Maintaining', pp. 108–9; *Emerging Church*, pp. 95–8, 122–4; *Christ and Culture Revisited*, pp. 8, 10–11, 62–63, 67–113, 200, 206–7.

<sup>21</sup> *Emerging Church*, p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> 'Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends', *Them* 5 (1980), 14–16; 'Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism', in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. by D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 33–42; 'Preaching That Understands the World', in *When God's Voice Is Heard: Essays on Preaching Presented to Dick Lucas*, ed. by C. Green and D. Jackman (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 160; *Gagging of God*, pp. 30–5, 45, 54; 'Is the Doctrine of *Claritas Scripturae* Still Relevant Today?' in *Dein Wort ist die Wahrheit – Beiträge zu einer schriftgemäßen*



cultural diversity and human finiteness, especially one's inability to be completely neutral and objective.<sup>24</sup> Its weaknesses, however, outweigh its strengths: it is immoral, absurd, arrogant, and manipulative in its antitheses.<sup>25</sup>

Carson embraces '*chastened*' *foundationalism*. He includes commendable elements from both the older and new hermeneutic in his approach to Scripture.<sup>26</sup> His 'first theology' is God.<sup>27</sup> 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 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. That is why Carson prefers to modify his 'presuppositions' with the adjective 'corrigible'.<sup>28</sup>

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 for real).<sup>29</sup> I have heard Carson make that point at least one hundred

*Theologie*, ed. by Eberhard Hahn, Rolf Hille, and Heinz-Werner Neudorfer (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1997), p. 105; 'An Introduction to Introductions', in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctions*, ed. by D. A. Carson and Stanley E. Porter; SNTG 5; JSNTSup 168 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 16; 'Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology', *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), pp. 99–100; 'Maintaining', pp. 112–13.

<sup>24</sup> *Gagging of God*, pp. 96–102; 'Claritas Scripturae', pp. 107–8; *Emerging Church*, pp. 103–4.

<sup>25</sup> *Gagging of God*, pp. 102–37; 'Claritas Scripturae', p. 108; 'ST and BT', p. 100; 'Domesticating the Gospel', pp. 46–7; 'Maintaining', pp. 120–2; *Emerging Church*, pp. 104–6, 112–15.

<sup>26</sup> See his 'introductory principles of biblical interpretation' in 'Approaching the Bible', pp. 12–19. Cf. *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 125–31.

<sup>27</sup> Carson, interviews by author, 8 and 29 November 2006, Deerfield, IL, digital recordings.

<sup>28</sup> Carson, interview by author, 29 November 2006.

<sup>29</sup> 'Hermeneutics', pp. 15–16; 'Historical Tradition and the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?' in *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. by R. T. France and David Wenham; Gospel Perspectives 2 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), pp. 100–104; 'A Sketch of the Factors Determining Current Hermeneutical Debate in Cross-Cultural Contexts', in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, ed. by D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), pp. 12–13, 15–17; 'Christian Witness', p. 60; 'Current Issues in Biblical Theol-

times in various contexts; it is foundational to his epistemology. He often illustrates it in four ways.<sup>30</sup>

1. *The Fusion of Two Horizons of Understanding.* This model consists of two elements: distanciation and the fusion of two horizons, where 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'.<sup>31</sup>
2. *The Hermeneutical Spiral.* Rather than a vicious hermeneutical circle in which theologians endlessly go round and round between their own presuppositions, systematic constructions, and encounter with the text, this model illustrates that theologians may 'hone in progressively on what is actually there,'<sup>32</sup> gradually minimizing 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.<sup>33</sup>

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ogy: A New Testament Perspective', BBR 5 (1995), 34; *Gagging of God*, pp. 349, 544; *Exegetical Fallacies*, pp. 126–8; 'New Testament Theology', in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. by R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), p. 809; 'Claritas Scripturae', pp. 106, 108–9; 'Introduction', p. 16; 'ST and BT', p. 100; 'Domesticating the Gospel', pp. 46–50; 'Maintaining', pp. 120–2; *Emerging Church*, pp. 105–6, 114, 116, 216.

<sup>30</sup> 'Sketch', pp. 13, 15–16; 'Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. by D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 38; 'Exegesis in ST', pp. 52, 67; 'Christian Witness', p. 60; 'Approaching the Bible', p. 11; *Gagging of God*, pp. 120–25, 544; *Exegetical Fallacies*, pp. 126–7; 'Claritas Scripturae', p. 108; 'Introduction', p. 17; 'Domesticating the Gospel', pp. 46, 49–50; 'Maintaining', pp. 120–2; *Emerging Church*, pp. 116–21.

<sup>31</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 52; cf. p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Gagging of God*, p. 71.

'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'.<sup>34</sup>

3. *The Asymptotic Approach.* 'An asymptote is a curved line that gets closer and closer to a straight line without ever touching it.'<sup>35</sup> 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.'<sup>36</sup>

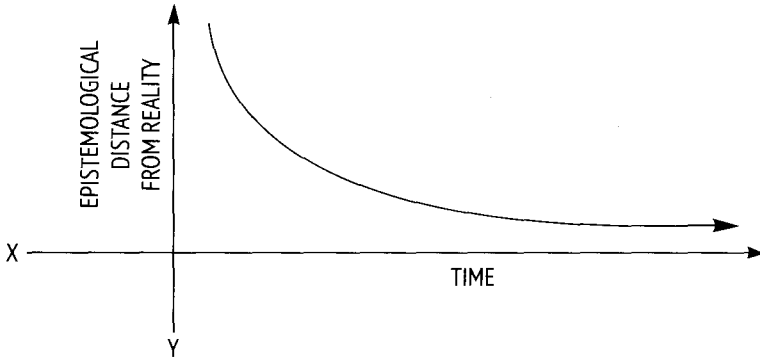


Figure 1: An Asymptotic Approach to Epistemology<sup>37</sup>

4. *Speech-Act Theory.* Building on Paul Ricoeur's insistence 'that the text bridges the hermeneutical gulf between reader *and* author',<sup>38</sup> 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'.<sup>39</sup> 'The Bible's appeal to truth is rich and complex. It cannot be reduced to, but certainly includes, the notion of propositional truth.'<sup>40</sup>

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. Understood in this light, contextualized theology provides invaluable insights for those from different cultures.

<sup>34</sup> *Emerging Church*, p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, which includes a figure illustrating this.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120. Cf. *Christ and Culture Revisited*, pp. 90–91, 101.

<sup>37</sup> This figure reproduces the one found in *Emerging Church*, p. 119.

<sup>38</sup> *Gagging of God*, p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> *Emerging Church*, p. 121. Carson often approvingly cites Kevin J. Vanhoozer's many works on hermeneutics that employ speech-act theory.

<sup>40</sup> *Gagging of God*, p. 163; see also pp. 163–74, 189–90, 348–53; 'Recent Developments', p. 38; 'ST and BT', pp. 94–5.

The insight that comes with different genders and nationalities can highlight issues that others have overlooked.<sup>41</sup> '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*.'<sup>42</sup>

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.

### 2.3. Carson's Bibliology<sup>43</sup>

Methodology is important for Carson,<sup>44</sup> and after God himself, bibliology is most foundational. In an essay on how to approach the Bible, Carson begins by explaining who God is.<sup>45</sup> God is personal, transcendent, and sovereign, and since he created the universe, humans are accountable to him.<sup>46</sup> General revelation is limited; special revelation controls it.<sup>47</sup> God has spoken, and his revelation is authoritative.<sup>48</sup> The Bible is uniquely a subset of both 'the word of God' and 'the word of human beings'.<sup>49</sup> 'The

<sup>41</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', pp. 53–4.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Gagging of God*, pp. 552–3.

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

<sup>44</sup> Cf. 'Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology', in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. by D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 78.

<sup>45</sup> 'Approaching the Bible', pp. 1–2.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 1. Cf. 'Christian Witness', pp. 46–9; *Gagging of God*, pp. 222–38.

<sup>47</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', pp. 43–4; cf. 'Christian Witness', pp. 49–54; 'Approaching the Bible', pp. 1–2.

<sup>48</sup> See *Gagging of God*, pp. 141–91; cf. 547–9; 'Approaching the Bible', p. 5; 'Current Issues in BT', pp. 27–9; 'NT Theology', pp. 806–7.

<sup>49</sup> 'Approaching the Bible', pp. 2–3.

locus of God's special revelation is the Bible, the sixty-six canonical books, reliable and truthful as originally given.<sup>50</sup>

Anticipating that some will criticize his view as 'hopelessly circular' and 'deeply flawed,' Carson adds four further reflections.<sup>51</sup>

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'.<sup>52</sup>
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.'
4. The noetic effects of sin on human thinking are substantial and must not be underestimated. The human desire to control God is idolatry.

### 3. CARSON'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE TASKS OF THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

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.'<sup>53</sup> Theology 'is disciplined discourse about God,'<sup>54</sup> and the Bible 'finally and irrevocably' constrains theology's

<sup>50</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 44. Cf. John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); D. A. Carson, 'Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review', *JETS* 26 (1983), 337–67; D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Carson, 'Approaching the Bible', p. 7; D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 726–43.

<sup>51</sup> 'Approaching the Bible', pp. 9–10.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. 'Exegesis in ST', p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> 'Unity and Diversity', p. 69.

<sup>54</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 40.

subject matter.<sup>55</sup> 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'.<sup>56</sup> So while there is not necessarily anything distinctly 'Carsonian' to Carson's theological method itself, it is worth analyzing for at least three reasons: it differs significantly from how many other exegetes and theologians 'do' theology;<sup>57</sup> it helps us understand the mechanics of how he 'does' theology in his voluminous publications; and it may help us improve our own theological method.

### 3.1. Exegesis

Exegesis 'is the analysis of the final-form of a text, considered as an integral and self-referring literary object'.<sup>58</sup> It includes but is not limited to parsing, word study, and syntax at various levels (clause, sentence, discourse, genre) while being sensitive to literary features and the running argument.<sup>59</sup>

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

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>56</sup> 'Unity and Diversity', p. 70.

<sup>57</sup> Carson differs significantly, for example, from Brevard Childs (1923–2007), who put a 'canonical approach' to Scripture on the map of contemporary studies. Carson writes ('NT Theology', p. 804) that for Childs

the final form of the text and thus the closure of the canon is critical: the challenge is to understand the texts as they have been handed down in final form by the church. Childs never abandons historical criticism and rarely steps outside the bounds of 'mainstream' critical judgments, but their hermeneutical and theological value is relatively small.... [D]espite his many useful suggestions as to how the Bible can be read as one canonical book, it is not clear how Childs's leap of faith to accept the church's canonical judgments, divorced from Childs's historical-critical judgments, will prove more epistemologically enduring than Barth's theology of the Word. Theologically Childs reaches conclusions that are very close to those of, say, Stuhlmacher. But the latter arrives at his destination by means of historical-critical judgments that leave his thought world a unified whole, while the former reaches them by consciously refusing to make much of a tie between his theology and his history.

<sup>58</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

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.<sup>60</sup>

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).<sup>61</sup> He is well aware that 'truth is conveyed in different ways in different literary genres'.<sup>62</sup> Carson's dozens of exegetical works demonstrate his proficiency at exegesis.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.2. *Biblical Theology (BT)*

BT 'is rather difficult to define'.<sup>64</sup> For Carson, BT may inductively and historically focus on the whole Bible or select biblical corpora.<sup>65</sup> 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)'.<sup>66</sup> At least five elements are essential:<sup>67</sup>

1. BT reads '*the Bible as an historically developing collection of documents.*'
2. BT presupposes '*a coherent and agreed canon.*'<sup>68</sup>
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.*'

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 47–8.

<sup>61</sup> 'Approaching the Bible', p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> See the resources listed in n. 1, above.

<sup>64</sup> 'Current Issues in BT', p. 17. See pp. 18–26 for a survey of six 'competing definitions' of BT.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 20, 23. These are definitions two and three in Carson's survey.

<sup>66</sup> 'ST and BT', p. 90. Cf. 'Unity and Diversity', p. 69; 'Exegesis in ST', p. 45; *Gaging of God*, p. 502; 'ST and BT', pp. 100–101.

<sup>67</sup> 'Current Issues in BT', pp. 27–32.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. 'ST and BT', pp. 91–2, 95–7.

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.'

BT focuses on the turning points in the Bible's storyline,<sup>69</sup> and its most 'pivotal' concern is tied to the use of the OT in the NT.<sup>70</sup> Theologians, not least OT scholars, must read the OT 'with Christian eyes'.<sup>71</sup> OT and NT theology are subsets of BT.<sup>72</sup> BT 'forms an organic whole'<sup>73</sup> and serves as 'an excellent bridge discipline, building links among the associated disciplines and in certain respects holding them together'.<sup>74</sup>

### 3.3. *Historical Theology (HT)*

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'.<sup>75</sup> HT is 'the diachronic study of theology, *i.e.* the study of the changing face of theology across time'.<sup>76</sup>

### 3.4. *Systematic Theology (ST)*

[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

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Gagging of God*, pp. 193–314; *Christ and Culture Revisited*, pp. xi, 36, 44–61, 67, 81, 202, 226; *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> 'Current Issues in BT', pp. 39–41. Cf. 'NT Theology', p. 811; 'ST and BT', p. 97–8; G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, 'Introduction', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), pp. xxiii–xxviii.

<sup>71</sup> 'Current Issues in BT', pp. 40–1.

<sup>72</sup> 'NT Theology', p. 796.

<sup>73</sup> 'Approaching the Bible', p. 1. Cf. 'Unity and Diversity', p. 83; 'Sketch', pp. 26–7.

<sup>74</sup> 'ST and BT', p. 91. On the need for wisely integrating BT, see *Christ and Culture Revisited*, pp. 59–62, 67, 71, 81–85, 87, 94, 121, 127, 143, 172, 207, 227.

<sup>75</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 56.

<sup>76</sup> 'ST and BT', p. 91.



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 are atemporal . . . the focal concerns are logical and hierarchical, not salvation-historical.<sup>77</sup>

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.<sup>78</sup>

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'.<sup>79</sup> The Bible is like part of a massive jigsaw puzzle because it contains only a small fraction of the total number of pieces.<sup>80</sup> More precisely, the Bible is like a massive 'multi-dimensional puzzle beyond the third dimension'.<sup>81</sup> 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, Trinity, and God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.<sup>82</sup>

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'.<sup>83</sup> 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 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.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>77</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', pp. 45–6. Cf. 'Unity and Diversity', pp. 69–70; 'Current Issues in BT', p. 29; 'ST and BT', pp. 101–2.

<sup>78</sup> 'Unity and Diversity', p. 78; cf. p. 92.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80. Cf. *Exegetical Fallacies*, pp. 87–88.

<sup>80</sup> 'Unity and Diversity', p. 82.

<sup>81</sup> 'Current Issues in BT', p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> 'Unity and Diversity', pp. 82, 93–4. Cf. 'Approaching the Bible', pp. 17–18.

<sup>83</sup> 'Unity and Diversity', p. 95; cf. p. 90.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. Carson is sympathetic with Douglas J. Moo, 'The Problem of Sensus Plenior', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. by D. A. Carson

Examples of how Carson systematically integrates the theological disciplines include his treatments of compatibilism and theodicy,<sup>85</sup> Sabbath and the Lord's day,<sup>86</sup> spiritual gifts,<sup>87</sup> assurance of salvation,<sup>88</sup> the love and wrath of God,<sup>89</sup> and the emerging church.<sup>90</sup>

#### 4. CARSON'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERRELATIONSHIPS OF THE THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

ST is like juggling: the balls represent the other theological disciplines, and ST's challenge is to avoid serious consequences by not dropping any balls.<sup>91</sup> Exegesis, BT, HT, and ST should be inseparable for theologians,

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and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 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 vol. 1 of *The Scripture Project: The Bible and Biblical Authority in the New Millennium*, ed. by D. A. Carson, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming in 2012). Cf. 'Exegesis in ST', p. 56.

<sup>85</sup> *Divine sovereignty and human responsibility*; 'Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility in Philo: Analysis and Method', *NovT* 23 (1981), 148–64; *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); review of N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, *RBL* (April 23, 2007) <[http://bookreviews.org/pdf/5581\\_5877.pdf](http://bookreviews.org/pdf/5581_5877.pdf)>.

<sup>86</sup> Carson coordinated and edited the project (what he calls 'a unified, cooperative investigation', p. 18) that resulted in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). See esp. Carson's 'Introduction' (13–19).

<sup>87</sup> *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 137–88.

<sup>88</sup> 'Reflections on Assurance', in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 247–76.

<sup>89</sup> *Gagging of God*, pp. 238–42; *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000); 'Love', *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000); 'How Can We Reconcile the Love and the Transcendent Sovereignty of God?' in *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, ed. by Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 279–312; *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002); 'The Wrath of God', in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. by Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), pp. 37–63.

<sup>90</sup> *Emerging Church*. For example, while critiquing their idea of truth, knowledge, and pluralism, Carson uncharacteristically lists Bible verses with very little commentary, noting 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'' (pp. 188–99).

<sup>91</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', pp. 39–40, 72.

but this is often not the case, for example, at American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature conferences.<sup>92</sup> ‘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.’<sup>93</sup>

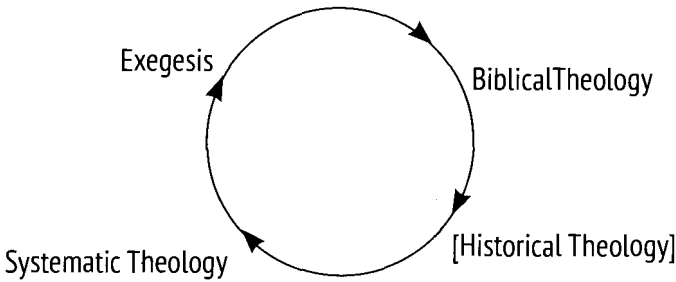
**4.1. Theological Hermeneutics**

Carson explains the complex interrelationships between the theological disciplines with some diagrams:<sup>94</sup>

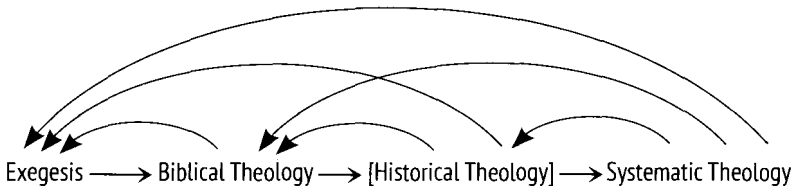
It would be convenient if we could operate exclusively along the direction of the following diagram:

Exegesis → Biblical Theology → [Historical Theology] → Systematic Theology

(The brackets around the third element are meant to suggest that in this paradigm historical theology makes a direct contribution to the development from biblical theology to systematic theology but is not itself a part of that line.) In fact, this paradigm, though neat, is naïve. No exegesis is ever done in a vacuum. If every theist is in some sense a systematician, then he is a systematician *before* he begins his exegesis. Are we, then, locked into a hermeneutical circle, like the following?



No; there is a better way. It might be diagrammed like this:



<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Unity and Diversity’, p. 65.

<sup>94</sup> This is from *ibid.*, pp. 91–92. Cf. ‘ST and BT’, pp. 95, 102–3.

That is to say, there are feedback lines (and more lines going forward, for that matter). It is absurd to deny that one's systematic theology does not affect one's exegesis. Nevertheless the line of final control is the straight one from exegesis right through biblical and historical theology to systematic theology. The final authority is the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone. For this reason exegesis, though affected by systematic theology, is not to be shackled by it.

Carson lists four ways to respond to the fragmented 'current state of biblical studies':<sup>95</sup>

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;
4. 'try to learn from the most important lessons from the new disciplines—and remain focused on the texts themselves,' emphasizing 'the classic disciplines first' while learning from 'tools, hermeneutical debates, and epistemological shifts.'

Carson takes the fourth approach, insisting, 'All truth is God's truth'.<sup>96</sup>

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.<sup>97</sup> 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 multi-disciplinary theologian, perhaps 'one of the last great Renaissance men in evangelical biblical scholarship'.<sup>98</sup> He is not merely a New Testament scholar. He is also an OT scholar, a biblical theologian, a historical theologian, a systematic theologian, and a practical theologian (e.g., gifted preacher, critic of culture, former pastor, counsellor). He also branches out into philosophy, English literature (e.g.,

<sup>95</sup> 'An Introduction to Introductions', in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctions*, ed. D. A. Carson and Stanley E. Porter, SNTG 5, JSNTSup 168 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 14–17.

<sup>96</sup> Carson, interview by author, 29 November 2006.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Köstenberger, 'D. A. Carson: His Life and Work to Date', p. 357.

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 NT to the ST department. Carson explains that he has remained in the NT 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.’<sup>99</sup> 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 exegetical arsenal, without succumbing to methodological narrowness or faddishness.*’<sup>100</sup>

#### 4.2. Exegesis and BT

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.’<sup>101</sup> 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.<sup>102</sup> ‘Exegesis tends to focus on analysis,’ and BT ‘tends towards synthesis.’<sup>103</sup> Exegesis controls BT, and BT influences exegesis.<sup>104</sup> BT ‘more immediately constrains and enriches exegesis than systematic theology can do.’<sup>105</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Carson, interview by author, 29 November 2006.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Current Issues in BT’, p. 34.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Exegesis in ST’, pp. 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 *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume II: The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, WUNT 181; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), pp. 393–436. Cf. my summary, ‘Carson: “Mystery and Fulfillment”’ <<http://andynaselli.com/carson-mystery-and-fulfillment>> [accessed 18 August 2011]. Cf. also ‘Biblical-Theological Ruminations on Psalm 1’, in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church; Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.*, ed. by Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), pp. 115–34.

<sup>102</sup> ‘ST and BT’, p. 91.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Carson, ‘Exegesis in ST’, p. 66.

### 4.3. *Exegesis and HT*

The historic creeds are valuable, but they are not ultimately authoritative; only Scripture is.<sup>106</sup> The practice of many theologians, however, is to move directly from exegesis to ST, leaving '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'.<sup>107</sup> '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 what earlier Christian exegesis has taught?'<sup>108</sup> HT serves exegesis (and, thus, ST) in three ways:<sup>109</sup>

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'.

### 4.4. *Exegesis and ST*

Many theologians 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.<sup>110</sup> Without even realizing it, many theologians develop their own 'canon within the canon,' which to a large degree accounts for conflicting exegesis among Christians.<sup>111</sup> 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

<sup>106</sup> *Gagging of God*, pp. 362–3. Cf. 'Domesticating the Gospel', p. 51.

<sup>107</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 51.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7; cf. pp. 39–40; 'Recent Developments', p. 18; 'Approaching the Bible', p. 18.

<sup>110</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 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' (p. 51).

<sup>111</sup> 'Sketch', p. 20.

structure that results.<sup>112</sup> For example, one's understanding of justification in Galatians may control one's understanding of justification everywhere else in the NT.<sup>113</sup> 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'.<sup>114</sup>

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 sub-biblical or too narrow or artificial'.<sup>115</sup> Dispensationalism and covenant theology are classic examples, usually employed by earnest theologians who consider their 'theological framework' to be 'true to Scripture'.<sup>116</sup> A more egregious error is a '*paradigmatic* approach' that uses parts of the Bible 'without worrying very much about how the Scriptures fit together'.<sup>117</sup> An example of this error is Gustavo Gutiérrez's making the exodus narrative paradigmatic for modern revolution by the oppressed poor.<sup>118</sup>
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'.<sup>119</sup>

#### 4.5. HT and ST

When studying what the Bible teaches about a particular subject (ST), the theologian must integrate HT.<sup>120</sup> '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'.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Ibid..

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 23; cf. p. 27.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp. 21, 24.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pp. 24–6.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>120</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 46; 'Domesticating the Gospel', p. 33.

<sup>121</sup> 'Current Issues in BT', p. 29.

#### 4.6. *BT and HT*

BT and HT both study 'the changing face of the accumulating biblical documents across time,' but BT has 'abundant interlocking considerations (canon, revelation, authority) that demand distinctions'.<sup>122</sup> Since theologians are finite, BT functions best when interacting with HT's past ('twenty centuries of Christian witness') and present ('the living church').<sup>123</sup>

#### 4.7. *BT and ST*

BT is historical and organic; ST is relatively ahistorical and universal.<sup>124</sup> 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.'<sup>125</sup> Exegesis and BT 'have an advantage over' ST because 'their agenda is set by the text'.<sup>126</sup> 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'.<sup>127</sup>

Literary genre and speech-act theory significantly influence the relationship between BT and ST.<sup>128</sup> Both BT and ST must in some measure 'distort' the text, but BT 'is intrinsically less distorting,' making it 'a kind of bridge discipline between' exegesis and ST.<sup>129</sup> 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'.<sup>130</sup> BT is 'a mediating discipline,' but ST is 'a culminating discipline' because it attempts to form and transform one's 'worldview'.<sup>131</sup>

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

<sup>122</sup> 'ST and BT', pp. 91–2.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101. Cf. 'NT Theology', p. 811.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. *Gagging of God*, pp. 502, 542–3; 'NT Theology', p. 808; 'ST and BT', pp. 94–5, 101–3.

<sup>125</sup> 'Current Issues in BT', p. 29.

<sup>126</sup> *Gagging of God*, p. 544.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 544–5.

<sup>128</sup> 'ST and BT', pp. 94–5.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.



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 discipline; biblical theology, though it is a worthy end in itself, tends to be a bridge discipline.<sup>132</sup>

#### 4.8. *Exegesis, BT, HT, ST, and Practical Theology (PT)*

PT—my term, not Carson’s—applies (i.e., cross-culturally contextualizes) exegesis, BT, HT, and ST to help people glorify God by living wisely with a biblical worldview. It includes pastoral theology, preaching, counseling, evangelism, ethics, education, and culture. It answers questions like ‘How should people respond to God’s revelation?’ and ‘How then should we live?’

Carson is not an ivory tower theologian. He is deeply committed to the purpose for which the theological disciplines exist, namely, ‘to serve the people of God,’<sup>133</sup> which includes preaching and polemics.

**1. Preaching.** Carson, a former pastor, is a preacher.<sup>134</sup> He explains,

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

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>133</sup> ‘Exegesis in ST’, p. 71.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., pp. 70–2; ‘Christian Witness’, pp. 31–66; *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004 [first published in 1993 with a different subtitle]); ‘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’, pp. 145–59; *Gagging of God*, pp. 491–514; ‘The SBJT Forum: What do you consider to be the essential elements of an expository sermon?’ *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3, no. 2 (1999), 93–96; ‘Athens Revisited’, in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 384–98; ‘The Challenges of the Twenty-first-century Pulpit’, in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. by Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), pp. 172–89.

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.<sup>135</sup>

He maintains a busy international speaking schedule, regularly preaching and lecturing in a variety of forums with audiences consisting of scholars, pastors, laymen, and/or university students (both Christians and non-Christians).<sup>136</sup> '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'.<sup>137</sup> 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 (which cannot here be explored) to contemporary life'.<sup>138</sup> The second priority is to trace how various motifs in that passage develop across the story-line of God's progressive revelation 'with some thoughtful reflection and application on the resulting synthesis'.<sup>139</sup> Merely to exegete a passage and stop there 'would be to fail at the same task' because

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.<sup>140</sup>

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.,

<sup>135</sup> 'The SBJT Forum: How does your role as a scholar, teacher and writer fulfill the Great Commission?' *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1, no. 4 (1997), 73. See esp. *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson*.

<sup>136</sup> Over 550 of Carson's sermons and lectures are available for free as MP3s at the Gospel Coalitions website <<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org>>. See my explanation, 'D. A. Carson MP3s Now Hosted by TGC', <<http://andynaselli.com/d-a-carson-mp3s-now-hosted-by-tgc>> [accessed 18 August 2011].

<sup>137</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 71.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*. Cf. 'Preaching', pp. 151-4, 160.

<sup>140</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', pp. 71-2.

'contextualization').<sup>141</sup> BT is primary because the gospel 'is virtually incoherent unless it is securely set into a biblical worldview'.<sup>142</sup> 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 recent 14-part seminar entitled 'The God Who Is There,' which simultaneously evangelizes non-Christians and edifies Christians by explaining the Bible's storyline in a non-reductionistic way.<sup>143</sup>

**2. Polemics.** Carson is committed to contextualizing theology, which occasionally involves engaging in controversial theological debates.<sup>144</sup> He characteristically (not without exception) represents his opponents accurately and respectfully and then sheds biblical light (rather than carnal, rhetorical heat) on sensitive, divisive subjects. Hot topics he addresses include divorce,<sup>145</sup> KJV-onlyism,<sup>146</sup> new hermeneutical trends,<sup>147</sup> church divisions,<sup>148</sup> questionable bibliography,<sup>149</sup> poor exegesis,<sup>150</sup> miraculous spir-

<sup>141</sup> *Gagging of God*, pp. 496–511.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 502; cf. pp. 193–345, 496–505, 542–4; 'Christian Witness', pp. 60–4; 'Approaching the Bible', p. 4; 'The Doctrine of Claritas Scripturae', p. 109.

<sup>143</sup> *The God Who Is There; The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story; Leader's Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010). MP3s and videos of the fourteen sessions are available for free at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/the-godwhoisthere>.

<sup>144</sup> He briefly reflects on polemical theology in 'Editorial', *Them*, 34 (2009), 155–57.

<sup>145</sup> 'Divorce: A Concise Biblical Analysis', *Northwest Journal of Theology*, 4 (1975), 43–59.

<sup>146</sup> *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

<sup>147</sup> 'Hermeneutics'; *Gagging of God*.

<sup>148</sup> 'The Doctrinal Causes of Divisions in Our Churches', *Banner of Truth*, 218 (November 1981), 7–19.

<sup>149</sup> 'Gundry on Matthew: A Critical Review', *TJ* 3 (1982), 71–91; 'Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review'; 'Unity and Diversity'; 'Recent Developments'; 'Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review', *TJ*, 27 (2006), 1–62.

<sup>150</sup> *Exegetical Fallacies*.

itual gifts like tongues,<sup>151</sup> complementarianism,<sup>152</sup> the Jesus Seminar,<sup>153</sup> assurance of salvation,<sup>154</sup> Bible translation,<sup>155</sup> the new perspective on Paul,<sup>156</sup> and postmodernism and the emerging church.<sup>157</sup>

Carson insists that Christians must adopt a biblical stance, 'regardless of how unpopular it is likely to be,' especially with reference to postmodernism.<sup>158</sup> With reference 'to doctrine and cognitive truth,' Carson does not shy away from drawing lines 'thoughtfully, carefully, humbly, corrigibly' yet boldly.<sup>159</sup>

#### **4.9. *Spiritual Experience and the Theological Disciplines***

Since interpreters are inseparable from the interpretive process, their attitude towards the text is significant. What is the difference between the theological method of a believer and unbeliever (e.g., an evangelical and an atheist)? Will their assessments differ? The answer is not that believers always interpret the text more accurately.<sup>160</sup>

Unbelieving exegetes and theologians must confront four barriers:<sup>161</sup>

1. The 'peer pressure' (my phrase) that unbelievers experience may affect their approach to the Bible. It takes courage 'to break away'

<sup>151</sup> *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), pp. 89–118.

<sup>152</sup> '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*, ed. by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1991), pp. 140–53, 487–90.

<sup>153</sup> 'Five Gospels, No Christ', *Christianity Today*, 38:5 (25 April 1994), 30–33.

<sup>154</sup> 'Reflections on Assurance', pp. 247–76.

<sup>155</sup> *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

<sup>156</sup> D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (WUNT 140, 181; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001, 2004); 'The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields', in *Justification: What's at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. by Mark A. Husbans and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), pp. 46–78.

<sup>157</sup> *Gagging of God*; 'Domesticating the Gospel', pp. 82–97; *Emerging Church*.

<sup>158</sup> *Gagging of God*, p. 347; cf. pp. 347–67.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 365–6; cf. pp. 438–9, 238; 'Athens Revisited', p. 387; *Emerging Church*, p. 234.

<sup>160</sup> 'Exegesis in ST', p. 67.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67–70.

from a vast number of unbelieving scholars whose ‘approach to scriptural exegesis . . . is fundamentally uncommitted’.<sup>162</sup>

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’.<sup>163</sup>
3. Unbelievers faces more than just intellectual barriers; others include ‘spiritual experience (or lack of it)’ and ‘moral defection’.<sup>164</sup>
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 prefer to master the gospel rather than be ‘mastered by it’.<sup>165</sup>

Regarding Carson’s own spiritual experience and theology, he is both scholarly and devotional.<sup>166</sup> He refuses to separate what God has joined together, namely, serious theological study and spirituality.<sup>167</sup> ‘Academia has not mastered him—he has mastered academia.’<sup>168</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

A question in the reader’s mind at this point may be directed at me: So what do *you* think of Carson’s theological method? Frankly, I feel inadequate to critique it. It is the kind of feeling I would have as a trumpet

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 67; cf. pp. 67–9; ‘Approaching the Bible’, 10.

<sup>164</sup> ‘Exegesis in ST’, p. 69. Cf. ‘Approaching the Bible’, p. 12; *Emerging Church*, p. 118.

<sup>165</sup> ‘Exegesis in ST’, p. 70. Cf. ‘Recent Developments’, p. 47; ‘Claritas Scripturae’, pp. 109–11.

<sup>166</sup> Carson, ‘The Scholar as Pastor’, pp. 71–106.

<sup>167</sup> ‘Approaching the Bible’, pp. 18–19. Cf. Köstenberger, ‘D. A. Carson: His Life and Work to Date’, pp. 359, 366–67.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 367. See ‘The Trials of Biblical Studies’, in *The Trials of Theology: Becoming a ‘Proven Worker’ in a Dangerous Business*, ed. by Andrew J. B. Cameron and Brian S. Rosner (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), pp. 109–29, which reflects on five domains that students in biblical studies must address: (1) four forms of integration, (2) polar temptations regarding work, (3) five facets of pride, (4) pressures to manipulate Scripture, and (5) three priorities regarding writing. What ties these five interrelated domains together, argues Carson, is humility. Cf. a fuller summary of the chapter at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2010/03/25/carson-on-the-trials-of-biblical-studies/>.

player if I were asked to critique Wynton Marsalis. Does the amateur critique the expert when the former would love to be able to do a small fraction of what the latter does? Nevertheless, it is a fair question, but my answer will disappoint those looking for a devastating critique. I do not mean to sound hagiographic, but my evaluation is that Carson's theological method is outstanding and that his first-class work is the fruit. Both his method and product are worthy of imitation.

If I had to pinpoint a weakness in Carson's theological method, I might suggest this: his method is so rigorous (especially in his exegesis and BT) that one wonders if a thorough, relatively comprehensive ST is even possible for a single theologian. It is hard for me not to come away from studying Carson's theological method rather discouraged, thinking, 'Wow. Who is gifted enough to do all that? Who is able to master exegesis, BT (both OT and NT theology), HT, and ST?' 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, accounting 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 problematic<sup>169</sup> 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'.<sup>170</sup> Nevertheless, his description of a qualified NT theologian, for example, is daunting.<sup>171</sup>

On the other hand, it is also hard for me not to come away encouraged in at least three ways. First, Carson's example and theological vision is inspiring. I am motivated to consecrate my life to God by using the theological disciplines as a good steward of God's manifold grace (1 Pet 4:10).

Second, I thank God for gracing me with gifts to the church like Carson. Peter O'Brien, a NT scholar and a close friend of Carson's, shared that insight when he addressed a small group of PhD students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School on 7 September 2006. He shared that he occasionally struggles with feeling inadequate as a NT scholar who is not as prolific as someone like Carson, but that he overcomes that feeling by recognizing that God graced him with gifts to the church like Carson. O'Brien taught me that instead of feeling depressed and inadequate because of scholars like Carson, I should gratefully serve God with the gifts he has given me and not feel inferior for the childish reason that I am not as gifted as someone else.

<sup>169</sup> 'Introduction', p. 17.

<sup>170</sup> 'Approaching the Bible', pp. 12, 18; cf. 'Current Issues in BT', p. 35.

<sup>171</sup> 'NT Theology', p. 810.

Third, I am excited that Carson is only in his mid-sixties and that he is in good health. If Jesus does not return and Carson's health continues, Carson will very likely equip the church with dozens of more books and articles. His magnum opus will be a two-volume 'whole-Bible' BT. He explained to me that he needs about twenty more years to do this well. He first desires to finish his commentaries on John's letters, Galatians, Hebrews, Revelation, and Ezekiel. Carson is one of those exceptional figures who is equipped to contribute an outstanding integrative BT that would serve as a reliable foundation for ST that is more genre-sensitive and aware of the Bible's storyline.