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## *The Limitations of Theological Reasoning: Some Musings*



*Thomas N. Smith*

Present day discussions of unique doctrines such as justification, the new covenant, the law, and so forth, seem to me to be missing the larger point. And this larger point has to do with theological method and with the more comprehensive issue of the nature of the Bible.

While not a trained theologian in the formal sense, I would like to offer some thoughts for consideration on these issues.

First, the issue is not finally about justification or the covenants or any other unique doctrine. Rather, it has to do with the sufficiency, finality, and limitations of the Bible itself. Moreover, there is the corollary issue of theological method as it relates to these larger issues.

I believe the Bible is sufficient as the revelation to the human race of God's heart and will. It tells us everything necessary for us to know and do (by grace) the will of God. But it never purports to be an *exhaustive* revelation of God, his nature, and so on. No Christian theology that I know of has ever suggested, by the term "sufficiency of Scripture," anything other than this.

I believe the Bible is final when it comes to this revelation of God's will and heart. Nothing more can be known of God

than what the Bible reveals. This is not to deny that further revelation of God will take place in the eschaton, as is appreciated by theologians such as Geerhardus Vos. It simply means that the final revelation of God is presently to be found in the words of Scripture.

In light of these things, the Bible itself is self-limiting and therefore limited in what it reveals about God. Add to this the fact that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, cannot even know the infinite without divine revelation, and we begin to conceive in an appropriate manner the limitations of Scripture as well as our own greater limitations. The appropriate human attitude in light of such things is one of humility, caution, awe, and wonder. This is summed up nicely in Deuteronomy 29:29.

What must be added to this, immediately, is the fact that the Bible itself is one long continuous *narrative*. It is a story made up of many stories. Even those elements of the Bible that are not story *in form* are in fact commentary, explication, or application of the larger story. Examples of this would be the wisdom of Proverbs, the civil laws of the Mosaic code, or the doctrinal portions of Paul to the Romans. There are many laws, proverbs, teachings, and so forth to be found in Scripture; there is but one story. Or to use another illustration: there are many covenants, but only one story; the covenants serve the story.

This story, or narrative, is the story of "the mighty acts of God" in the history of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Christian movement. Tom Wright summarizes this story in five acts: creation, covenant, Jesus, the early Christian movement, and the ongoing work of God in the world and church since Acts 28. I think this is an acceptable way of describing the story in shorthand.

Christ himself is the core of the story when viewed from the New Testament. He is the Creator, through whom and for whom all things were made. He is the promise that is being served by all of the covenants. He is the message of the New Testament gospel. He is the reason for the existence and efforts of the Christian church. He is both the beginning and

the end toward which all human history is currently moving.

The task and goal of all legitimate theological method is to discover, interpret, and proclaim/apply this story.

Because of this essential narrative nature of the Bible, it is vital to stress the essential *historical* nature of the Bible as well. The story takes place in time and space—human time and space. God, who creates time and space, works in time and space in the *history* of Israel in the Middle East, of Jesus of Nazareth (note how historical that descriptive term is!), of the early church "in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth."

Legitimate theology must take the Bible seriously as story.

Legitimate theology must take the Bible seriously as history.

Theologies that are less than legitimate, or illegitimate, will be detectable for their tendency to downplay the narrative nature of the Bible (as, e.g., in reducing the stories to "propositions" or "lessons") or for a like tendency to remove the teaching of the Bible from its historical context (such as eschatologies that treat Matthew 24 in a purely "futurist" manner). All of this becomes immediately apparent by dipping into any of the standard texts of systematic theology. Read the fifty chapters of Genesis, followed by fifty of the Psalms, and follow this with the sixteen chapters of Romans. Then read the first thirty or so chapters of Louis Berkof (I actually wonder how many people have ever really read—especially since leaving seminary—thirty or more chapters of Berhof or Hodge or . . .?).

This theological method becomes troubling for some, because it is content to let the Bible answer only the questions that *it* purports to answer. This is a reflection upon the all too human tendency to resolve mysteries, tie up loose ends, and seek answers. While "it is the glory of man to seek out a matter," a failure to exercise restraint in this enterprise quickly turns the glory into shame.

Think for a moment about all the ink that has been spilled on the subject of the "imputation of Adam's sin"—of how many points of view and variations of same there are on

this subject, all purportedly based on a few verses of Paul in Romans 5:12–21! This discussion has led further to the whole question of the origin of the soul, to creationist versus traducianist views of that matter. And Paul? He leaves the whole subject of imputation unresolved! As for the creationist/traducianist question, I can imagine him looking in amazement and saying, “*Say what?*”

Add to this the following list:

- The simplicity of the divine nature
- The order of the divine decrees
- The eternal generation of the Son
- The covenant of redemption/works/grace
- The nature of the soul of man
- The nature of man as the image of God
- The impeccability of Christ
- Creation and modern science
- The nature and person of Christ
- The nature of the death of Christ
- The extent of the atonement
- The origin of Satan
- The *ordo salutis*
- The nature of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness
- The relationship of perseverance and apostasy

And we could make this list still longer and longer. In each of these areas, men have, by “searching out the matter,” given long, complex, and often contradictory answers to questions never raised by the Bible. They have presumed to supply (by logical reasoning and proof texts[?]) what God has left out. Note also that none of these issues passes the “narrative-historical test.”

I do not think we have even begun to appreciate how offensive is such intellectual arrogance to God. This is, in part, because we have placed such a high premium on the intellect

in our part of the church. I personally have come to regard this kind of intellectual activity as idolatrous, arrogant, contrary to faith, in a word—another vain human attempt to “be like God.”

This is just one of many pastoral concerns that an overly logical theological method gives rise to.

Let me mention a few more.

- The intellectually weak, or those whose intellect is not temperamentally inclined to logical analysis, are confused and made to feel “second-class.”
- The intellectually strong, or those with a logical bent of mind, tend to become arrogant and to think they have it all “figured out.”
- Things of little biblical import are given too much importance.
- The important things are thereby neglected.
- Schism results. People who love the story and have a simple faith in Jesus are locked out by those who insist on doctrinal precision on such details as those mentioned above.

Add to this one more, one that should sorely trouble those who give lip service to *sola scriptura*. When the sufficiency and finality of Scripture are undermined by human attempts to *supply what God has left out*, the authority of the Bible is undermined as well.

I think the following are needed:

- We need to rethink our understanding of the Bible.
- We need to understand better the nature and limits of language.
- We need to pursue our theological musings with more humility and caution.
- We need to rejoice wherever the story is loved and believed.

- We must refuse a dogmatic spirit that insists on people accepting our musings as orthodoxy.
- We need a generous orthodoxy.

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