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On the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology

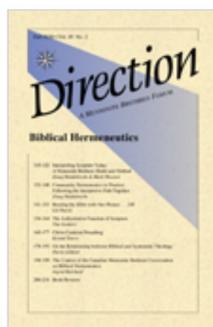
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I was invited to present a paper on the relationship between biblical and systematic theology at a conference on biblical interpretation organized by the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in October 2019. The main purpose of the lecture was to rehabilitate the discipline of systematic theology by clarifying its relationship to biblical theology and the role it can legitimately play in the overall interpretive process.

In the first part of this article, I will propose a basic definition of biblical and systematic theology, explore the role of each discipline within the broader process of interpretation, and highlight the distinctiveness of each. In the second part, I will examine the notion of human sanctity as a case study to illustrate the specificity and the limits of each approach.

The ultimate aim of the hermeneutical enterprise is meaningful, effective, and life-transforming communication.

Before I get to the heart of the matter, it will be helpful to comment on the rationale for such a reflection in the first place. Mennonite Brethren have always viewed themselves as a people of the book. For several reasons, in great part historical and sociological, they have tended to focus on exegesis rather than on theological pursuits.¹ In more recent years, they also embraced biblical theology, in great part because the discipline was {179}



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perceived as a natural extension of exegesis. In this respect, I want to note the late Elmer Martens's significant contribution to the field of biblical theology with the publication of his seminal book *God's Design* in 1986, now available in its fourth edition.²

As for systematic theology, it is my impression that Mennonite Brethren have not fared as well as they might have. They have either been suspicious of the discipline or simply shown a lack of interest in it. A significant number of Anabaptist scholars have given, and continue to give, sustained attention to what is commonly called political theology, which might be considered a form of systematic theology.³ But, in my opinion, the jury is still out as to whether the work done in this field will eventually position itself as theology or as (left wing) political ideology. Whether it will lean in the one direction or the other will depend on what ultimately turns out to be the discipline's center of gravity.

This situation can be linked to two factors. First, there is the common perception that systematic theology is equivalent to or coterminous with what is sometimes labelled neo-Reformed theology.⁴ But perhaps more importantly, systematic or doctrinal theology⁵—whether in its Reformed, Wesleyan, or dogmatic incarnation—is viewed as the product of a philosophical impulse rather than a biblical one.⁶ I hope to demonstrate in this paper that this thoroughgoing suspicion of systematic theology is unfortunate and unwarranted.

While I will focus on biblical and systematic theology, it is important to note that these disciplines are but two steps in a broader interpretive process, whose ultimate goal is—as New Testament scholar Grant Osborne points out—the “sermon.”⁷ In other words, while we must do our best to understand what the text says, discern its major themes, and organize the material in ways that are congenial with our own conceptual and philosophical categories, the ultimate aim of the hermeneutical enterprise is meaningful, effective, and life-transforming communication.

That this must be so is intrinsically linked to the nature of the Bible as God's word to humanity. Just as communication is at the core of this Word from God, the hermeneutical process must ultimately lead to prophetic discourse.⁸

STEPS IN THE HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS

Before we get to the primary object of this discussion, it will be helpful to outline how I understand the task of interpretation and clarify some elements of method.

First of all, in the context of this article I use the word *hermeneutics* to denote the entire process of interpretation from exegesis to {180} contextualization.⁹ Hermeneutics may thus be conceptualized as a series of steps, which together gives the interpreter access both to the meaning of the text and its contemporary significance. Following the method proposed by Osborne, I adopt a “meaning/significance” model in which exegesis and biblical theology focus on the meaning of the text in its original context, whereas systematic theology and contextualization focus on what the text signifies for today.¹⁰

If the hermeneutical endeavor is defined as a four-part movement, exegesis remains a primary and constant element throughout the entire process. In other words, regardless of the interpretative stage we happen to be at, the text must remain the center of gravity and the ultimate point of reference and verification. This special emphasis on exegesis is consistent with the unique character of the biblical text as the authoritative Word of God for humanity.

Meaning: Exegesis and Biblical Theology (what the text originally meant)

Exegesis and biblical theology are located on the first half of the hermeneutical process and focus on the original meaning of the text.

It is often stated that the purpose of exegesis is to discern the author’s intended meaning. While this accurately reflects the position held by many biblical scholars, this definition deserves to be modulated further. To allude to the *author’s* intended meaning represents a legitimate way to describe the task of exegesis, but it should be remembered that the author is no longer with us and can therefore not be consulted. All we have is the text. No one is in a position to appeal to the author’s intent to justify one interpretation over another. It is perhaps more accurate and precise to refer to exegesis as the determination of the original meaning of the text.

Rather than speculate on what might have been the author's intent, the study of the text represents an empirical process whose aim is to identify what a text meant at the time and in the culture from which it emerged. The primary emphasis here is not on an author but on an object, that is, the text.^{[11](#)}

Determining the original meaning of the text is undoubtedly the most important step in the entire interpretive process, for if we fail at the exegetical task, what we have then is a poisoned well that corrupts everything else.

Following Osborne's model, biblical theology represents the second step in the hermeneutical process and will be examined in more detail later. {181}

Significance: Systematic Theology and Contextualization (what the text means for us)

Systematic theology and contextualization (or application) belong to the second half of the hermeneutical process. These two steps focus more specifically on the significance of the text for the contemporary reader.

Since I include a more extensive discussion of systematic theology later, a short definition of contextualization will suffice to frame our discussion of systematic theology. Contextualization represents the place where the interpreter articulates more explicit implications of the text for contemporary individual Christians, the church, and society.

The task of contextualization is the most abstract and, for a lack of a better word, conjectural level of interpretation. It is, without a doubt, one of the most delicate steps in the hermeneutical process and must be deployed with much care, especially when we wish to explore the implications of the text for controversial social issues. This is a topic that would deserve a much more detailed treatment; but that would fall outside this paper's immediate focus.^{[12](#)}

Now that we have surveyed the major components of the interpretive process, it is time to define further the task of biblical and systematic theology as well as the relationship between the two.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Definition

According to Osborne, biblical theology is that “branch of theological inquiry concerned with tracing themes through the diverse sections of the Bible (such as the wisdom writings or the epistles of Paul) and then with seeking the unifying themes that draw the Bible together.”¹³ While this is certainly an adequate description of the task of the discipline, we need to parse it further.

Types of Biblical Theology

Biblical theology can be conceptualized in two different ways: synthetic and analytical.¹⁴ The synthetic method, which the definition above essentially describes, represents what churches and denominations seek to do when articulating or reviewing their confession of faith. This is also the approach that has, for some time now, characterized major Old and New Testament theologies.¹⁵

While I sympathize with the objectives of the synthetic approach, I have been hesitant to promote it. First, it represents the type of complex and demanding task that very few scholars, let alone pastors and students, have the skills and time to engage in. Second, it can lend itself to a selective use of texts to serve a prior agenda. Third, there has been a significant degree of ambiguity surrounding the method itself and its outcomes. Such works sometimes end up simply restating the text, which positions it too close to exegesis, or spilling over into systematic theology and contextualization.

The analytical approach, which is also an intrinsic component of the overall method as Osborne defines it, focuses specifically on the study of individual texts (pericopes), a book, or a corpus such as Wisdom Literature or the Pauline letters.

The latter approach is by far the most practical and realistic way to get at the theology of a *given text*, particularly for the purpose of sermon preparation. Once we have determined, to the best of our ability, what the text *says*, we can then proceed to identify the major theological elements that are carried by the passage.

I have found that the most effective way to discern the theological components of a text is to interrogate it with respect to

its implications for the articulation of a biblical worldview: what does the text teach about God, humanity, and the universe? These questions are not isolated silos; to address one theme also necessitates exploring the relationship between all three.

The benefits of this approach are threefold. First, this analysis often generates a dynamic relationship between exegesis and biblical theology that further clarifies the purpose and the meaning of the text.¹⁶ Second, the questions induce a new level of abstraction that still maintains the text as the center of gravity. Third, this new level of abstraction creates a bridge towards the articulation of a systematic theology that will be more likely to maintain its moorings in the text and provide a rigorous foundation for contextualizing it. While biblical theology is not fully contextualized, it represents a meaningful step in the movement towards establishing the significance of the text for today.¹⁷

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

As I intimated earlier, the suspicion of some Mennonite Brethren and other Anabaptists toward systematic theology is unfortunate and unwarranted. First of all, systematic theology is very useful in terms of providing a window on the unfolding of Christian doctrine (historical theology) and a point of reference that may in fact assist the Christian community in clarifying boundaries as it articulates biblical teachings and explores how they can be relevant for our culture.¹⁸

To welcome systematic theology into the conversation is a way to bring in a broader, theologically sophisticated, and credible community into the hermeneutical process. Those who fervently speak in favor of community hermeneutics should be the first to encourage a greater familiarity with {183} dogmatics as a way to accommodate a valuable conversation partner and ensure they do not become theologically insular.¹⁹

It is also important to note that a dogmatic theology that primarily takes its cue from philosophy represents only one possible approach to constructing a systematic theology. It is not, as is often believed, the only way to do systematic theology.

There are many scholars who now advocate for a type of systematic theology that more intentionally emerges from biblical

theology. While such a theology will no doubt resort to philosophical terminology and categories to articulate and organize theological concepts, it is a theology that will be more closely derived from the exegetical side of the hermeneutical process and will therefore be more closely governed by the text.

The task of this kind of systematic theology is to serve as a bridge between “what was meant” (the task of exegesis and biblical theology) and “what it means” to us (contextualization and the sermon).²⁰

SUMMARY

To summarize, biblical theology represents a first level of abstraction that seeks to describe the theological concepts found in a text or a corpus of texts. Biblical theology’s center of gravity is the text and is primarily contingent on a rigorous exegetical analysis. Systematic theology denotes a further level of abstraction, which represents the last stage before the actual contextualization of a text or a doctrine in the church or the public square. Systematic theology’s more explicit center of gravity leans towards the second half of the hermeneutical process: that is, contextualization and preaching.

Now that we have established a broader interpretive framework and defined more precisely what is meant by biblical and systematic theology, let us turn to a specific case study to highlight the characteristics of each method and how each can contribute to the contextualization of the text.

A CASE STUDY: THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over

the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:26-28 NRSV, *passim*)
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Why this Text?

As the prominent philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer eloquently states in his seminal book on philosophical hermeneutics, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), the reader always comes to the text with an *a priori* question.²¹ Even if we are not always completely aware of it, there is always a rationale, a reason, an interest, a question that propels us to read a text.

On a practical level, there are two ways to go about developing a biblical theology. One may harvest the elements of biblical theology attested in a given textual unit, or one may begin with a specific question and investigate a series of texts in order to derive some theological principles that may be relevant to the issue at hand.

For the purposes of this article, I have selected Genesis 1:26-28, which describes humanity’s status and role in creation. This text was obviously not chosen at random. There is a preliminary question behind my choice. And it relates to one of the most important questions of our time: What is a human being worth? I will examine further the significance of this issue when we move to the section of this article that deals with systematic theology. For now, let us focus on some of the more essential biblical theology observations that can be derived from the text.

What texts to choose, and on what basis they are chosen are critical questions. This issue alone would deserve a fuller discussion. But in this context it is sufficient to note that Genesis 1:26-28 represents an ideal starting point for addressing the issue of human dignity because of its position in the creation narrative, which is, by virtue of its literary genre, a foundational text.²² In a more extensive treatment of this question, I could also include texts like Genesis 9:6, Psalm 8, Psalm 139:13-16, and Jeremiah 1:5.²³ In addition to these texts, it would also be critical to examine the implications of the fact of the incarnation of Christ for our understanding of human nature. I am increasingly convinced that the incarnation represents the most explicit and formidable

affirmation of the intrinsic value and dignity of human life. God did not become a horse, a mouse, or a dog; God became a human being. A comprehensive biblical theology of human nature would need to include this data as well.

Exegesis: What does the text say?

Before we consider the biblical theology elements of this text, some basic exegetical observations are in order:

- ◆ Humanity is made in the image of God.
- ◆ The expression most likely derives from ancient Near East messenger language. It establishes a special relationship between humans and the deity and highlights humanity's status as God's representative in the world.²⁴ {185}
- ◆ Humanity is assigned a position of authority over creation.
- ◆ Though it is not stated explicitly, human beings are attributed special value because they are made in the image of God. This observation will be developed further under the biblical theology section.

More could be said but this is sufficient to move to biblical theology, which theoretically represents one level of abstraction beyond exegesis.

Biblical Theology

One of the major difficulties pertaining to biblical theology is that while it can be conceptualized as a step distinct from exegesis, the boundary between the two can sometimes be fuzzy. As I suggested earlier, the use of a grid articulating the various elements of a biblical worldview should assist in the formulation of observations that are more specifically germane to this second step.

The following statements represent possible biblical theology observations:

- ◆ Humanity is made in the image of God.
- ◆ There is a collective dimension inherent to the image of God. ("Let *us* make humankind..." [v. 26].)
- ◆ There is also an individual dimension to the notion of the image of God, which is indicated by the phrase "male and female he created them" (v. 27).

- ◆ The attribution of the image applies to all human beings, not just to the Hebrews.
- ◆ The image equally applies to men and women. The collective dimension clarifies humanity's distinct status and represents a statement of universal inclusivity. All members of the human race can claim the exceptional status inherent to the image of God.
- ◆ The image of God assigns a special status that is exclusive to human beings. This status is signaled by humanity's unique affinity with God and the irreducible distance that is created between humans and nature.

Systematic Theology

Systematic theology is where the interpreter asks the “So what?” question. It is the stage at which the biblical material is further defined and organized with a view to addressing contemporary issues. It will therefore be {186} articulated and expressed in a way that will be more compatible with current terminology and philosophical categories.

Systematic theology first requires that we examine more carefully the contemporary controversy that compels us to question the biblical text on the issue of the sanctity of human life. While it may be tempting to move directly from biblical theology to contextualization, an approach that may be adequate in some cases, in this instance there is great value in first focusing on articulating a systematic theology of this text. Not only does it ensure that we address the most relevant questions pertaining to the problem, but this exercise also has the potential to clarify contemporary implications of the notion of the image of God in ways that may not have been otherwise evident.

The Contemporary Question: What is a human being worth?

The value of a human being is the most central and critical question with which a society can ever grapple. The answer determines how any given population will treat its weakest and most vulnerable. While this is always true in principle, the sanctity of human life is once again emerging as one of the major issues of our time.

What is a human being worth? If history teaches us anything, it is that individual men and women represent one of the least valuable commodities on earth. The devaluation of human life began with Cain and Abel and has mostly gone downhill ever since. Six million Jews and countless other millions died during the Nazi era. Between twenty and fifty million people perished under Stalin's rule. Under Mao Tse-Tung, forty-five million vanished in a little over four years. Pol Pot, the infamous leader of the Khmer Rouge, had over one million of his own people mercilessly exterminated through forced labor, starvation, torture, and execution.

Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, and Pol Pot all had something in common: a compelling social and political vision for the realization of which they were willing to exterminate millions of innocent men, women, and children. The sad and tragic reality is that throughout human history, human life has been worth next to nothing.

Even in the West, where Christianity has been foundational in terms of introducing the notion of the intrinsic dignity and value of the individual,²⁵ the sanctity of human life took a huge hit in the twentieth century. Nietzsche had predicted that the "death of God" would inevitably entail the death of men: "There will be wars the like of which have never been seen on earth before."²⁶ Never has a man ever uttered a more accurate prophecy.

There are people who sincerely think that in Western societies, the intrinsic dignity and value of human life is a given. I would not deny that we have a certain awareness of human rights; but I would submit that even with all the attention human rights has garnered, the belief in the intrinsic {187} value of all human beings can no longer be taken for granted. There are at least three reasons that account for this pessimistic assessment.

First, there is no longer a universal foundation to support the concept of human rights and the intrinsic value of human beings. While the idea of human rights may be widely vaunted, it is an idea that precariously hovers in the air.

Second, with the rise of identity politics, we have moved into a situation where a person's value is increasingly decided on the basis of the group he or she identifies with and that group's grievances.²⁷ There is nothing new here. In step with the historical default

position as it pertains to the value of human life, it appears we are once again in the early stages of embracing a new and perhaps even more viral form of tribalism. As Kohelet aptly states in Ecclesiastes 1:9, there is indeed nothing new under the sun.

I often wonder how, if he were still alive, Martin Luther King, Jr. would respond to the ideology underpinning the Black Lives Matter organization.²⁸ I suspect he would be deeply troubled by how quickly and how far we have strayed from the most noble idea he expressed during the historic speech he gave at the Lincoln memorial on August 28, 1963: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Third, the indisputable litmus test of where a society stands on this most important of all issues is how it treats its most vulnerable. This test is brutal, slices right through our delusions, and mercilessly shatters the self-righteousness of the myriad of virtue-signaling, social justice warriors that populate the internet. I am referring to the status of the unborn.

In North America today, those who have the misfortune of being in the womb face an extremely precarious situation. In 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada removed *all* restrictions on abortion. Since then, nearly three million infants have been terminated.²⁹ In America, a little over 60 million unborn babies have been discarded since *Roe v. Wade* (1973).³⁰ In 2018, for example, the US reported about 3,800,000 births. In the same year, nearly 900,000 abortions were performed. That works out to about 19 percent of children *in utero* being terminated in those twelve months.³¹

Globally too, abortions are performed on a scale that defies the imagination. In China, official data put the number of abortions at around 330 million (most of them girls) since the one-child policy was enacted in 1978. Worldwide, about forty million abortions are performed each year.³² That may not seem like much as a percentage of the world’s population; but, to put it into perspective, historians estimate about sixty million people were killed during World War II.³³ Why do we deplore the latter number but ignore the former?³⁴ {188}

The corollary issue that every generation must face is this:

who is a human being? The answer has nothing to do with an empirical assessment of what constitutes a human being; a three-year-old boy can immediately spot the difference between a man and a giraffe. The answer is ultimately grounded in a prior ideological or theological assumption.

While exegeting and analyzing Genesis 1:26-28 to ascertain what the text says and what its major theological elements may entail is an interesting exercise, it is the present massive and multipronged attack on the status of the unborn that makes it necessary to turn to systematic theology to further organize the biblical data and construct a theoretical platform to effectively address the debate as it is taking shape today.

Elements of Systematic Theology

At this point, I would like to offer a basic outline of what a systematic theology pertaining to human sanctity could look like. Please note that we are now moving to a higher level of abstraction that should entail a tighter philosophical analysis and provide the building blocks needed to contextualize the biblical material. The following observations are offered as tentative statements.

ETHICAL FOUNDATION

As a divine pronouncement, the concept of the image of God offers a transcendent and authoritative rationale to affirm the intrinsic value and dignity of all human life, from conception to old age. It offers a theoretical foundation for the recognition that all humans have intrinsic value and dignity, a status not conferred by the state, but by God.

UNIVERSALITY

The universal character of the image of God speaks to the intrinsic value of all human beings.

INDIVIDUALITY

The individual dimension of the image of God provides a statement of principle that affirms the supreme value of the individual. Such a statement offers a much-needed counterweight to ever-emerging collectivizing ideologies such as those inspired by Marxism. It equally offers a stinging critique of identity politics and undermines the impulse to make the individual subservient to collective needs or the needs of the more powerful actor in any

relationship, institutional or personal.

A CRITIQUE OF SCIENTISM AND SECULARISM

The concept of the image of God undermines a materialistic view of human nature. This text proclaims that we are more than the sum total of {189} molecules and biological processes. There is something immaterial and transcendent about human beings, an idea Jesus himself confirmed when he said: “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’ ” (Matt 4:4).³⁵

A CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGICAL REDUCTIONISM

The Genesis text offers a stinging critique of any ideology that seeks to collapse the distinction between humans and nature. For instance, because radical environmentalists do not recognize the distinct, unique, and exceptional status of human beings, they unconditionally reject the notion of an irreducible distance between nature and humans. When that happens, the value of particular human beings becomes contingent on subjective criteria articulated by a particular class of individuals, a cultural elite.³⁶ In radical environmentalism the value of individuals will depend on the degree to which they embrace the ideology and live in a manner consistent with it.

As can be observed throughout this discussion, the moment we move to systematic theology, we also move closer to the contextualization of the text. Such overlap is to be expected. The specificity of contextualization would consist of a more precise identification of the ideological battlefield and the strategies required to address specific issues.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have sought to provide working definitions of biblical and systematic theology. I have also attempted to demonstrate how these two disciplines contribute to the overall hermeneutical process and relate to each other. While biblical theology is more precisely oriented towards the text, systematic theology more definitely leans towards the articulation of the significance of the text for today. It is also my hope that this article has not only demonstrated the value of systematic theology but may also have provided a glimpse into how the church can speak to our

culture in a way that points to life and to the Source of all life that is our Lord Jesus Christ.

NOTES

1. This is likely a consequence of the persecution experienced by the early Anabaptists, which left little space for the movement's leaders to extensively engage in theological explorations. Their concerns appeared to be more existential, emphasizing discipleship and the life of faith. For more details, see Warner O. Packull, "An Introduction to Anabaptist Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. D. Bagchi and D.C. {190} Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 194-217. See also Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973) and Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973).
2. Elmer Martens, *God's Design*, 4th ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015 [1986]).
3. For one such example, see A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014). For an insightful survey of the work done in the area of systematic theology by Anabaptist Mennonites, see David C. Cramer, "Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect," *The Conrad Grebel Review* (2013): 255-73.
4. I do not know how widespread the problem is, but there is, in this respect, plenty of anecdotal evidence of significant tensions in the Mennonite Brethren Conference. Much of the friction seems to orbit around how leaders position themselves with respect to the neo-Reformed movement as embodied by the Gospel Coalition. For analyses of the New Calvinism, see articles in the Fall 2013 issue of *Direction*.
5. For more details, see James Barr, "'Real' Theology and Biblical Theology," in *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 448-62.
6. Systematic theology often comes under a shadow of suspicion because of its tendency to use philosophical categories such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence rather than biblical images and terminology to describe God. The impetus to move away from traditional systematic language can be seen in the 1999 revision of the MB Confession of faith, especially so in Article 1, "God."
7. "It is my contention that the final goal of hermeneutics is not systematic theology but the sermon." Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, rev. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 29. For an insightful discussion of the Old

- Testament prophetic message in the light of communication theory, see Gary V. Smith, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 5-45.
8. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, the task of the interpreter is not to be original but to be unoriginal. This is not to say that the interpreter/preacher should seek to bore the life out of his or her audience. I am raising this point, because those who self-consciously attempt to be “original,” “cool,” or “with the times,” often turn out to be pedestrian and vacuous. In their zeal to be relevant, they too often become ideological fashion peddlers, pipelines for whatever *cause du jour* is captivating popular culture. On the other hand, those who sincerely seek to capture what the text says and do their best to translate it to their audience are often perceived as truly original, which is not surprising as God is the ultimate source of originality. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001 [1952]), 226-27.
 9. “Rather, hermeneutics is the overall term while exegesis and ‘contextualization’ (the crosscultural communication of a text’s significance for today) are the two aspects of that larger task.” Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 21. {191}
 10. Osborne, 23.
 11. For those who may be interested in a contemporary parallel, the debate raging between originalists and living constitutionalists in the United States may prove to be very enlightening both with respect to the nature of an old and original text—whether Constitution or Scripture—and how readers may appeal to it to adjudicate social issues. For an enlightening and insightful discussion of some of the most controversial issues pertaining to the interpretation of the US Constitution, see Antonin Scalia and Bryan A. Garner, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* (St. Paul, MN: Thomson/West, 2012).
 12. For a detailed discussion of contextualization, I refer the reader to Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 410-64.
 13. Osborne, 349.
 14. Note that these two approaches are not in opposition to each other; the synthetic approach presupposes an analytical component. See Osborne, 372-73.
 15. See, for instance, Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997) and Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).
 16. Exploring, for instance, the implications of the Genesis creation narrative with respect to the articulation of a biblical worldview will also result in a more extensive investigation of the theological, ideological, and cultural issues the text was designed to address. For a detailed discussion of the polemic character of the creation

account, see Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 60-63; Jean Bottéro, "Le Dieu de la bible," in *La plus belle histoire de Dieu: Qui est le Dieu de la bible?* (Paris: Seuil, 1997); *Naissance de Dieu: la Bible et l'historien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974): 81-102. For a more comprehensive survey of the conceptual world of the Old Testament, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

17. "There is a two-way relationship between biblical theology and exegesis. The former provides the categories and overall scriptural unity behind one's interpretation of individual passages, while exegesis provides the data collated into biblical theology. In other words, the two are interdependent. The exegete studies the author's meaning on the basis of literary considerations (grammar and thought development) and historical background (socioeconomic), then the biblical theologian works with the results and compiles patterns of unity behind the individual statements." Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 350-51.
18. In these confused so-called postmodern times, the historical dimension inherent to systematic theology may prove to be invaluable in terms of providing a long-range perspective on the issues Christians face.
19. To quote Osborne, the systematic theologian "traces the issue through church history to see how it was developed to meet different eras. This tells us how the doctrine was contextualized in the past and provides invaluable positive {192} as well as negative clues for the recontextualization of the doctrine for our own time." Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 374.
20. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between biblical, systematic, and homiletical theology, see Osborne, 353-57.
21. Translated into English under the title, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1998).
22. For more details, see Pierre Gilbert, *God Never Meant for Us to Die: The Emergence of Evil in the Light of the Genesis Creation Account* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 35-43.
23. Assuming that unborn children are in fact human beings, one could, in addition, use passages that affirm the exceptional character of human life (e.g., Gen 2:7) or forbid murder (Gen 4:10-11; Exod 20:13).
24. For a summary of the various interpretations of the image of God, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 29-32. For a more detailed

discussion of the royal messenger function the expression denotes, see David J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 53–103; and Edward M. Curtis, "Image of God (OT)," *ABD* 3:389–92.

25. For an insightful summary of Christianity's impact on the Western understanding of what it means to be human, see Ronald Osborn, "The Scandalous Origins of Human Rights," *The Veritas Forum*, <http://www.veritas.org/the-scandalous-origins-of-human-rights/>. For a more detailed study of this question, see also Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) and "God's Justice: The Sin of Slavery," in *For the Glory of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 291-365.
26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans., R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1979), 127. See also Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 405-406; Eric Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 5-6. Canadian journalist Mark Steyn eloquently examines the implications of Nietzsche's observation in *After America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2012), 323–24.
27. For an incisive examination of this issue, see Bruce Bawer, *The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind* (New York: Broadside, 2012).
28. It is important not to confuse the expression "black lives matter," which is a legitimate statement, with the ideology and the agenda promoted by the Black Lives Matter organization (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe>).
29. Wm. Robert Johnston, "Historical Abortion Statistics, Canada," Abortion Statistics and Other Data—Johnston's Archive, <http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/policy/abortion/ab-canada.html>. More detailed statistical information can be found on the Canadian Institute for Health Information, <https://www.cihi.ca/en>.
30. "Abortion Statistics," American Life League, <https://www.all.org/learn/abortion/abortion-statistics/>
31. Canada's ratio of live births to abortions is comparable. In 2018, for instance, {193} Canada had about 379,000 births and 85,000 abortions. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/443051/number-of-births-in-canada/>; <https://www.arcc-cdac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/statistics-abortion-in-canada.pdf>.
32. "Abortions This Year," Worldometers, <https://www.worldometers.info/abortions/>.
33. See Victor Davis Hanson, *The Second World Wars* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017), 38-39.

34. What I find most troubling about this issue, as became painfully clear during the presidential nomination for the US Democratic party last year, is how the debate firmly shifted from abortion to infanticide. Democratic party lawmakers and presidential nominees have and still exhibit a kind of unbridled enthusiasm for terminating innocent human lives inside and outside the womb that is very disturbing. For more details, see Lila Rose, "The Abortion Debate: The RHA Legalizes Infanticide," *New York Post*, 31 January 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/01/31/the-abortion-debate-the-rha-legalizes-infanticide>.
35. For an insightful treatment of this question, see J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).
36. C. S. Lewis brilliantly addresses this issue in *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001 [1944]).

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