

FRAGMENTED FIELDS

In this book, I argue for a close, symbiotic relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology. These are two different disciplines, but they should not be two entirely separate disciplines. I will explain how to understand both of these disciplines in greater detail in the chapters that follow, but in brief, biblical theology reflects the Bible's own wording and structure, and systematic theology seeks to bring all the details together into a coherent picture so we can consider the entire teaching of Scripture on a topic. In this *Pocket Guide*, I'm particularly interested in the interrelatedness of these two theological disciplines.

Before I get too far into the weeds, I want to highlight here my main point: biblical theology and systematic theology need one another. They need to be conversation partners. They need to learn from one another. One is not better than the other. We need both, and you should engage in both. That's what I hope to prove in this short *Pocket Guide*.

INCREASING FRAGMENTATION

Unfortunately, the close relationship between these disciplines is too often missed in the present-day academy. If you visit a university, seminary, or divinity school today—or just check their websites—you would find professors with a variety of specializations: Old Testament (or possibly Hebrew Bible), New Testament, church history, systematic theology, practical theology, philosophy, and so forth. You might even find entire departments reflecting these specializations. Conferences and learned societies focus on specific subsets of disciplines. Entire monograph series and academic journals may focus on one area of study.

The result of this increasing specialization is disciplines often become fragmented from one another. Even just the field of New Testament studies, for example, contains so much to learn that it is difficult to stay abreast in other fields, such as systematic theology or Old Testament studies. Each field of study produces its own constant stream of new academic publications

in addition to the classic works of the past one needs to read to understand the present state of scholarship.

But more than this, even those in the same field of study may find themselves focusing on only one small corner of that field. Each smaller field of study may itself be fragmented. A church historian focusing on the Reformation might do much less with the patristic era. Someone who studies the Old Testament prophets may be less familiar with scholarship on the Pentateuch. A New Testament specialist might not spend time researching the entire New Testament (which is, all things considered, a relatively short book in itself), but only on one subset of the New Testament.

For example, someone with a PhD in the field of New Testament studies might primarily focus on either the Gospels or Paul's letters, but perhaps not both. And even those who focus mainly on Paul might not focus on all of Paul's letters. It is common in scholarship to view only seven of the thirteen traditional Pauline letters as authentic. This book is not the place for me to defend Pauline authorship of all thirteen letters. I simply wish to illustrate the fragmentation even of those who focus on the same smaller subset of a field of study.

A professor friend of mine once relayed a conversation in which he asked a specialist on 1 Thessalonians a difficult question about 2 Thessalonians. The man rebuffed the question by claiming he was only trained to answer questions about 1 *Thessalonians*. This answer may have been a lighthearted response to my friend, but even so, it illustrates the present reality that disciplines

in the academic world are increasingly isolated from one another, and are even compartmentalized within the same disciplines.

This narrowing is not only true in biblical studies but can also be true for systematic theologians. Scholars may specialize in a particular tradition of systematic theology, engaging with specific interpreters. They therefore may have less time to deal with other interpreters and the scholars who write about them. For example, scholars who focus on Jonathan Edwards's theology may not engage extensively with those who focus on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, or Jürgen Moltmann. And they probably have even less time to devote to the most recent studies from the discipline of biblical studies.

One danger with such fragmentation is that we end up isolating topics from one another that should ideally be integrated—such as biblical and systematic theology.

REASONS FOR FRAGMENTATION

Many likely reasons explain our era of increasing specialization and fragmentation. One is the amount of information there is to master in any given field: there is simply too much for any one person to master. Specialization is therefore not altogether a bad thing; it is good that we have specialists in specific topics who can bring their expertise to bear on those topics for the benefit of others. But we still need to avoid isolation and echo chambers.

Another reason for the isolation of disciplines is the way that professors are typically trained. Aspiring scholars pursue PhDs in specific fields, but they also have to focus on a narrow question in order to study it deeply and to make a contribution to scholarship. When an entire generation of academics takes this approach, they may find others who share their specialty with whom they are comfortable conversing, with the result that they might miss out on cross-disciplinary discussions.

This division relates to a third reason for increasing specialization and isolation, namely, the modern academy that views theology as an academic enterprise. The modern academy, at least for much of its history, has put the Bible in the context of a classroom to be studied and analyzed as we might study and analyze any other book. This approach has increasingly been found in contexts that do not view the Bible as the inspired Word of God—the claim to inspiration is often viewed in the academy as either unprovable or as manifestly inconsistent with the difficulties encountered in Scripture.

The academy, by and large, employs the historical-critical method to study the Bible, which arose in the context of the academy. This historical-critical method probes and sifts and weighs evidence, seeking, among other things, to determine more or less reliable portions of Scripture. Such approaches may also focus more on supposed origins of texts and less on the actual words of Scripture. For example, many students who study the Gospels in a classroom setting may be surprised

how much attention professors give to the Synoptic Problem—that is, determining the order and direction of literary dependence among the first three Gospels. This question is important in an academic context, but less important for the average Christian. It does little to teach us what Jesus' life and teaching really mean for us. When such approaches are taken among biblical scholars, it is no wonder that systematic theologians find much of biblical studies unhelpful for their own tasks. For as we will see later, systematic theology looks at the teaching of Scripture as a whole.

If we wanted to find additional reasons for the fragmentation of theological disciplines, then we could surely do so. My point here is simply to note the prevalence of fragmentation and isolation among the disciplines of biblical and systematic theology.



It has been common since the Enlightenment to claim that the Bible is a book just like any other book—and it is to be studied like any other book. That might mean focusing on its human authors and the proposed historical development of the Bible. However, the Bible is not like other books. The Bible is uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, it is true that the Bible is a collection of individual books, and it is necessary and helpful to employ literary tools to understand the inspired texts because we must submit to the authority of Scripture.

INTERRELATED DISCIPLINES

It is unfortunate that we face such fragmentation not only within specific disciplines, but also across theological disciplines. In reality, all the theological disciplines are

interrelated. Dividing them is largely a result of the expediency of the academy rather than a result of truly being disparate subject matters. The deeper you go in your study of the Bible or theology, the more you will see this interconnectedness. For example, you cannot engage in compelling systematic theology by moving away from Scripture. A systematic theology based entirely on philosophy, for example, carries no authority. Similarly, if you're a student of the New Testament, you must consider the influence of the Old Testament on every page of the New Testament. Furthermore, you won't be able to dodge important theological questions that arise from a careful reading of the biblical texts.

Despite the various specializations we have at the seminary where I teach, I tell students that all the topics and classes are actually interrelated. They shouldn't be fooled into thinking they can isolate the knowledge from across their classes, as though they could be a good student in systematic theology but not in the Old Testament. For example, one crucial theological question is what it means to be made in the image of God. To answer this question requires careful exegesis of not only Genesis 1:26–27, but also of other scriptural passages. Church history is largely the study of how people understood and responded to the Bible's teaching in their contexts.

Furthermore, the isolation of disciplines in the academy presents artificial distinctions that don't reflect the real-world contexts for the application of those issues. In ministry, one doesn't deal only with Old Testament