Introduction

A few short decades ago, it was commonplace to hear theologians describe the Scriptures as systematic, or at least as filled with facts that could be arranged into a system. While true of both liberal and conservative scholars, references to the facts contained in Scripture seemed to predominate conservative Protestant thought. Scripture was portrayed as something like a gold mine of material waiting to be uncovered or discovered. Each nugget fit as a piece to the whole treasure of theology. A brief examination of the theological prolegomena of an influential theologian demonstrates the type of rationalism that lent itself to such a course of study.

The American Presbyterian Charles Hodge (1797–1878) spent almost his entire theological life as a student and professor at Princeton Seminary. His convictions concerning Scripture are well known, largely due to his widely regarded *Systematic Theology* (1872–1873). It is in the early pages of this work that he describes the method by which the theologian constructs a system.

> [I]n theology as in natural science, principles are derived from facts, and not impressed upon them. The properties of matter, the laws of motion, of magnetism, of light, etc., are not framed by the mind. They are not laws of thought. They are deductions from facts. The investigator sees, or ascertains by observation, what are the laws which determine material phenomena; he does not invent those laws. His speculations on matters of science unless sustained by facts are worthless. It is no less unscientific for the theologian to assume a theory as to the nature of virtue, of sin, of liberty, of moral obligation, and then explain the facts of Scripture in accordance with his theories. His only proper course is to derive his theory of virtue, of sin, of liberty, of obligation, from the facts of the Bible. He should remember that his business is not to set forth his system of truth (that is of no account), but to ascertain and exhibit what is God's system, which is a matter of the greatest moment. If he cannot believe what the facts of the

> Bible assume to be true, let him say so. Let the sacred writers have their doctrine, while he has his own.[1]

Here Hodge explains his belief that the Bible contains facts that are discoverable through observation and can be organized into an appropriate (i.e., universal or systematic) understanding of the knowledge of God revealed in Scripture. While this may not be the same thing as saying that we can have a comprehensive knowledge of God by ordering the facts of Scripture, it does mean that if the facts are placed into an appropriate arrangement, they will constitute some reasonable grasp on the knowledge God wishes for us to have about Himself.[2] The inductive method provides Hodge with the knowledge necessary to complete the system as given by God and recorded by the authors of Scripture.[3] As is evident from the quote above, the belief in Divine inspiration has made it possible for Hodge to presume that all the pieces are a part of the same puzzle, rather than pieces to several different puzzles.

In a bit less sophisticated manner, some have gone so far as to say that the authors of Scripture themselves were systematic.[4] Perhaps the most common reference to a Scriptural author as "systematic" is in relation to Paul's authorship of the epistle to the Romans. Melanchthon's commentary on Romans (1532) represents an early form of the traditional interpretation of the letter as a "timeless compendium of dogmatic theology."[5] This interpretation understands Romans to be primarily a treatise rather than a letter written for a specific occasion.

With the decline of rationalism, these views have fallen from favor in most scholarly circles. No longer is it defensible to think of Scripture as a storehouse of facts waiting to be arranged. While still affirming a sense of Divine inspiration, many contemporary scholars are poignantly aware of the individual authorship of works and the situations their writings were meant to address. And even though some would still wish to

1. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 13.

2. Ibid., 15–17.

3. Ibid., 17.

4. Though one would likely not find many contemporary scholars defending such a position, this is a position often cited in less scholarly or pre-critical works. This position was the traditional position with regard to Paul's letter to the Romans (see Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 398).

5. Brevard Childs recounts the history of the interpretation of Paul's entire corpus in his *The New Testament as Canon*, 243–427. For his comments regarding the history of interpreting Romans, see 247ff.

affirm that Scripture is primarily a propositional document, even they recognize that it is also filled with much more than simple statements of fact regarding God, and that at times their propositions need to be teased out from amidst a very intricate narrative.[6]

Scripture, however, has not been the central issue in the debate over the use of system, at least not in recent years. The focus of the discussion has centered more on the question of whether a systematic method is a modern convention, and as such, if it is a good thing for the church. The first part of this discussion is the focus of the chapters below.[7] How has theology been constructed and conceived over the centuries of living with and under the authority of a text and community of faith?

Underlying this debate over when system began is the question of what is system. On the historical front, the question regarding a definition typically centers on the existence of philosophical intentions in the texts of various historical figures. As Wolfhart Pannenberg has asserted regarding even the earliest of theologians,

> Greek philosophy was in search of the true nature of the divine, which led to the conclusion that there can be only one God. The one God of the people of Israel, however, who was also the God of Jesus and the early Christians, was viewed by the Greeks as an alien deity of an alien people and so could not command their allegiance. It was therefore *necessary* to make the argument that the God of Israel is, in fact, the one God conceived by the philosophers . . . The affirmation that the God of Israel and the God of the philosophers is the one and same God—an affirmation that entails the reception by Christian theology of the philosophical argument for the one true God—is a *constitutive* and *permanent* feature of Christian faith.[8]

Neither side in the debate has trouble with the notion that theologians have always used logic and such principles as non-contradiction (this may be considered a rather general definition of system). Where the two separate is on the subject of philosophical intentions. Was the theologian attempting to be comprehensive and integrated in his/her approach to every doctrine of Christian theology? Was there a purported universality

6. See Carl Henry's discussion of the propositional nature of revelation in his *God, Revelation and Authority*, 455–81.

7. For a discussion of system's appropriateness for the church, see my *System and Story*.

8. Pannenberg, "God of the Philosophers," 31. Emphasis mine.

to the theology, or was it engendered and delimited by some historical/pastoral circumstance? Philosophical grounding (e.g., foundationalism) and an affirmation of the universal import of doctrinal claims (e.g., a referential or representative theory of language) seem to mark a more rigid definition of what constitutes system. Two brief examples from the chapters below illustrate ways in which pre-modern theologians have been construed as systematic.[9]

The first example is found in Origen's work *De Principiis*. Origen sets a rather bold course for himself when he states at the conclusion of his Preface:

> Everyone therefore who is desirous of constructing out of the foregoing [outline of doctrines to be studied] a connected body of doctrine must use points like these as elementary and foundational principles, in accordance with the commandment which says, "Enlighten yourselves with the light of knowledge" (Hosea 10:12, Sept.). Thus by clear and cogent arguments he will discover the truth about each particular point and so will produce, as we have said, a single body of doctrine, with the aid of such illustrations and declarations as he shall find in the holy scriptures and of such conclusions as he shall ascertain to follow logically from them when rightly understood.[10]

This statement of intention, along with other statements regarding methodology in Origen's work, have been understood by some to indicate that Origen was engaging in a work meant to be systematic, in that it is Origen's attempt to outline his own philosophical understanding of Christian doctrine.[11] Others believe that Origen was a man of the church, a mystic whose main concern was to substantiate the authoritative witness of Christian doctrine according to the Tradition and to enable believers better to understand and live their faith.[12] In the latter case, his

9. As the resolution of this debate would take this study well beyond its scope, I will merely illustrate briefly the historical debate here without offering any conclusions or critique.

10. Origen, *On First Principles*, Preface, 10.

11. Berner, *Origenes*, provides a summary of the viewpoints, including a list of representatives from every side of the debate. Those who would hold to the view that Origen is a systematician include: F. C. Bauer, Bigg, von Harnack, Loofs, de Faye, Miura-Stange, Koch, Karpp, Nygren, Lietzmann, Jonas, Hanson, and Kettler.

12. Berner's (ibid.) compilation of figures who take this position include: Bardy, Völker, Lieske, de Lubac, and Crouzel. A mediating position is attempted by Cardiou, Daniélou, Kerr, Harl, and Wickert. Runia also adds Chadwick to the mediating group (see Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 169).

was an apologetic concern premised on the historical occasion of the early church. His intentions, then, were more pastoral, and not systematic. Within this, both sides may agree that Origen was systematic in the sense that his intentions were to be orderly and logical, even attempting to summarize certain recurring themes in the Bible. However, those who would affirm him as systematic in a more philosophically rigorous sense are seen as anachronistic by others who would argue such philosophical intentions as foundationalism, providing a justification for propositional language, or constructing a summary based in human reason were not within the purview of theologians until the Enlightenment.

Another historical figure attracting attention in this regard as well is John Calvin. Though much has been written regarding Calvin's methodology, and a general consensus reached regarding his overarching concern for method, challenges have arisen recently regarding Calvin's intentions and underlying reasoning throughout the *Institutes*.[13] Writing with regard to the purpose of his *Institutes*, specifically as it relates to the primary document of the church, the Scriptures, Calvin states: "For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents."[14] Commenting on his intentions, Francois Wendel argues that Calvin, by 1560, "[P]aid no great attention to form, although this remains very fine. What mattered to him above all in his last editions was to give strict precision and as logical a structure as possible to his thought . . . The principle changes are due to the new arrangement of the material, according to a more systematic plan and a stricter internal logic."[15] Wendel believes that Calvin's efforts in the later editions may constitute, at least, something akin to the systematic effort along the lines of modern theology. On the other hand, William Bowsma has argued strongly in favor of the notion that Calvin was a humanist engaged primarily in rhetoric, and as such could not have been a systematician, at least not according to Bowsma's

13. Though Calvin may not rightly be considered a Calvinist, some epistemological tendencies do seem apparent in his theology. Cf. Dowey, "Book Review, 'John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait,'" 847; and Leith, "Calvin's Theological Method and the Ambiguity in His Theology," 107–8.

14. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, Preface (1559) 4.

15. Wendel, Calvin, 119–20.

definition of systematics.[16] Again, Bowsma believes attributing the term systematic to Calvin is both misguided with regard to his intentions and anachronistic.

These brief forays into the historical debate may sound familiar, since many have discussed the purported intentions of both these theologians. However, these two are merely beginning of the conversation. The theological method of several figures in the theological history of the church has come under scrutiny. Is the assumption of systematicity dating to early church theologians due simply to the presuppositions of the modern historian/theologian? Or does something in the pre-modern theologians' work indicate the existence of universal attention to philosophical concerns, meaning such concerns are not limited to only the modern period? For the sake of discussion, Origen and Calvin focus the debate quite well, given their stated intentions, but what of other theologians in history? What of Thomas Aquinas and the authors of the creeds?

In regard to this last question, this study will attempt to draw out the methodological intentions of several historical figures and periods, evaluating the relationship of ancient to modern through the lens of what constitutes system and how order played a role in works written by various theologians. Irenaeus, Origen, and Constantine help focus the issues of method in relation to the community of faith in the early church. In each, we will see that though method may have been a concern, it was hardly foremost in their minds. Pastoral and political convictions played a far more important role, but does this constitute a systematic dependence upon external philosophical beliefs? Wycliffe, Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin serve to illustrate how the philosophical presuppositions of modern historians can skew the perspective of how pre-modern theology is read and understood. Each of these theologians has, at one point in modern historical study, been accused of being systematic. However, their systematicity is questionable when seen in light of their historical circumstance and apologetic/pedagogical concerns. Finally, examples of how the Enlightenment affected method in philosophy and theology are seen in the developments of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. Though no one

16. See Bowsma, *John Calvin*. Though Bowsma is reticent to define what elements he would deem systematic in theology, he does give some indication that they include transhistorical knowledge, non-pedagogical intentions (philosophy?), and finally, he believes systematics is necessarily tied to the rise of modernity (see pp. 5, 160, esp. notes 100 and 191).

figure, or even a group of figures, can be seen as "responsible" for how system came to used in post-Enlightenment epistemology, these specific Enlightenment figures represent, or illustrate, tendencies in method coming under widespread criticism by post-liberal theologians. It is with such critiques in mind that the final chapter outlines Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel and the influence of Kierkegaard on Barth and subsequent post-liberal/postmodern theologians. Some correction of the standard reading of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel seems in order; however, the thrust of his emphasis on writing theology that is once again directed toward the faith of the church is a needed reminder of theology's scope and purpose. Further, the link to primary influences on contemporary theological method is finally made.

One distinct limitation of this study is that it only evaluates the written work of specific theologians. We will not attempt to incorporate oral interaction or even evaluate the importance of the written word in relation to the spoken. Literacy may already have assumed a certain level of academia in the intended audience of these theologians. Thus, a certain amount of presumption exists in this study's consideration of the relationship of theology to the church. However, such a focus on the written seems warranted, since the written word has endured and had by far the greater direct impact.

The larger question for this study is how theology is best used in and by the church. Each pre-modern theologian discussed below illustrates the varying ways in which the modern pre-occupation with method has forgotten historical circumstance. One can almost imagine each theologian puzzling over the question of method. Each had a pastor's heart and a grave concern for the health of their specific community. Such concerns come through in their writing, but are often forgotten in the face of pre-conceived paradigms by the contemporary reader. Though our study will still focus primarily on method, we will attempt to set such concerns in the appropriate historical context. Pre-modern theologians were, often, marked by a grave concern for the church, raising the mantle for what has passed as theology since the turn to modernism and postmodernism. These chapters are intended to serve as a reminder that theology written for an audience outside the context of the community of faith (i.e., any rational or "enlightened" mind) would not be recognizable as theology in much of the historical context of the church.