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If N. T. Wright is Right, How Then Shall We Do Theology?

Abstract:

In November of 2022, theologian N.T. Wright gave a series of lectures for the Centennial Celebration of Asbury Theological Seminary. In this response from Asbury Theological Seminary's Howard Snyder, the implications of Wright's lectures are explored and expanded. In particular, Snyder explores the meaning of Scriptural Theology as opposed to Systematic Theology. He explores how Systematic Theology came to be the dominant way of reading scripture, and then proposes ten principles for doing theology rooted in scripture instead of any human system.

Keywords: Scriptural Theology, Systematic Theology, Church history, mission, globalization

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N. T. Wright said something truly radical in his November 15, 2022, chapel address at Asbury Seminary. Wright said that for most of church history, Christians have been “reading the biblical story upside down. It’s time to get it the right way up.” For the past 1,500 years and more, the church has misunderstood the Bible. Let’s begin to get the story straight.

Audiences are charmed by Wright’s eloquence. But have we pondered the deeply radical claim he makes? —that the church for nearly two millenia has misread and misunderstood the Bible, and the whole meaning of salvation? If Wright is right (and he is!), this raises two critical questions: How did we get into this mess? And how do we get out of it? Is it possible for the church to get the story “right way up,” as Wright proposes?

Part One: How We Got Here

For centuries the Christian church has systematized its theology in ways that are now familiar. We recognize the great doctrines and their interpretations in the different branches of the church. But we should take a close look at *how* this systematization developed. Systematic theology organizes truth according to some system. Generally, this is a system either external to scripture, or perhaps one reduced or abstracted from scripture. Systematic theology is widely understood as the “human work of classifying and systematizing [biblical truth] according to logical principles,” noted Geerhardus Vos.¹

Systematic theology was born in medieval Europe. Its origins trace to the 1200s as part of the development of universities. “In truth Theology [before 1200] had not yet become a system,” noted Hastings Rashdall. “The object of an ecclesiastical education was to enable the Priest or Monk to read and meditate upon the Bible and Fathers for himself: the theological writings of the times are for the most part either refutations of prevalent errors or abridgements of the patristic commentaries or treatises.”² With the rise of formal theological instruction in universities, this changed and theological systematization flourished.

Neither the New Testament nor the early church engaged in systematic theology as we know it now. Biblical writers of course had always used metaphors, analogies, and sometimes allegories. Paul says in Galatians 4:24, speaking of the sons of Sarah and Hagar, “Now this is an allegory” (Greek, *allegoreo*, meaning “to use an analogy”).³ The Apostle Paul is often viewed as a master of logic. Yet most of his profound arguments are built on analogies and metaphors, mining the Old Testament. But neither

Paul nor any other biblical writer employed some overall organizing system from outside scripture.

Christian thinkers in the early centuries of church history developed the idea of multiple “senses” of scripture. First of course there is the literal, historical “sense” or understanding. Then there is the metaphorical or figurative sense. Gradually this figurative sense expanded to include what came to be called the “moral” sense and also the “anagogical” or mystical sense. From the time of the Emperor Constantine on, the idea of the “four senses” of scripture took hold: *literal* (or historical), *allegorical*, *moral* (or tropological), and *anagogical* (mystical). This idea was popularized, noted Henri de Lubac, in the aphorism, “The letter teaches events, allegory what you should believe, morality what you should do, anagogy what mark you should be aiming for.”⁴

Over the centuries different writers used different terms for these senses. Some distinguished three, some four. It grew increasingly common however to speak of “the four senses of scripture.” In the mid-1200s one author summarized the prevailing way of Bible interpretation this way: “For when it comes to divine eloquence, we find a set of four wheels, according to a fourfold differentiation of senses... There are four rules or senses of Sacred Scripture, that is to say, history, allegory, tropology, and anagogy... All of divine Scripture turns on these four wheels.”⁵

Two crucial points arise here. First, the foundational sense (literal/historical), as the most basic and obvious meaning, remained relatively fixed and stable, whereas the figurative or metaphorical sense (less tied to the actual biblical text) mushroomed and expanded. Second: In this way, theology developed a structure or system of interpretation not found in the Bible itself. The “four senses” concept was not itself based in scripture. Yet this concept became the lens through which all scripture, every word and passage, was viewed. Throughout the Middle Ages, interpreters thus began their biblical exegesis with the assumption already in their heads that they would find four senses. And (no surprise) that is indeed what they found and in turn taught.

The result was the flourishing of all sorts of metaphorical, figurative, symbolic, allegorical, and mystical interpretations (something N. T. Wright mentioned in passing). Many of these interpretations relied more on human ingenuity and the growing free market of metaphors than on the biblical text itself. Increasingly, biblical interpretation sprang from these subjective sources more than from the narrative of scripture, inductively

exegeted. Henri de Lubac noted that “from the dawn of the Middle Ages” this “doctrine of the ‘fourfold sense’” was “at the heart of exegesis,” unquestioned, and it “kept this role right to the end.” In time it lost its force however, eventually becoming “no more than a lifeless shell.”⁶

This is the point where “modern” systematic theology emerges. The “fourfold sense” approach gave way to other ways of organizing, all mostly external to scripture. Before the twelfth century “there was no such thing as systematic theology,” noted de Lubac. “All theological erudition was concentrated on Exegesis” conducted by means of scripture’s supposed “four senses,” often leading to “ingenious contrivances, as well as the broadest speculations.”⁷

By the time systematic theology arose in Europe, allegory—allegorizing—had become “the most widespread literary form,” not only in theology but also in poetry and even legal texts, noted Dominican theologian and historian Marie-Dominique Chenu. Allegory was “decidedly overworked.”⁸ Chenu elaborates:

... allegory, with the usage of the fathers for a model, was to by-pass history and, letting itself go, was to abuse incidental literary elements of a narrative by turning them into symbols. Despite some reactions against the practice, systematic allegorization in the twelfth century would universally destroy the literal texture of scripture... the error was extremely widespread in all departments of theological endeavor.⁹

Wow. This is another way of saying radical Wright is right.

In biblical interpretation, the pendulum had swung away from primary accent on the plain, literal meaning of scripture and biblical history toward an *actual preference for allegory*. Biblical history and literal texts were still important—for they were God’s inspired Word—but understanding and applying them was done through allegory. As systematic theology arose and developed from the 1200s on, it was thus less and less tied directly to the biblical text, particularly in its literal and historical (narrative) form and meaning.

Systematic theology was thus born with a bias away from the literal and physical and toward figurative, “spiritual,” and symbolic interpretations of scripture. Today most systematic theologies correct for that tendency to some degree. But still, often there is a greater emphasis on the spiritual (in the sense of non-physical, non-material) meaning and application of

biblical texts and truths than on their literal, physical application.¹⁰ Spiritual disciplines, for example, focus (appropriately) on prayer and the life to come, but tend *not* to focus on things like earth stewardship, physical and environmental health, and day-by-day engagement with time, money, and our relationship with the physical creation.

The various forms and branches of systematic theology that we know today gradually emerged from this heritage. At the time of the Protestant Reformation John Calvin (1509-1564) wrote his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which for most Protestants became the “standard model” for how orthodox theology should be done. Sound theology should be systematic theology. Given this history, theologians still today tend to think of systematic or analytic theology as the highest, purest form. No other way of theologizing enjoys such status. The result: Theology focuses on doctrines, not discipleship. On theological debates, not on down-to-earth following of Jesus.¹¹

Part Two: Theology Now and Tomorrow

How then shall we do theology today? Reflecting on the history of Christian theology in the West, and even more on Jesus words in Luke 24, we may distill ten guiding principles for doing theology today. We find most of these (not all) embedded in N. T. Wright’s theology.

1. Follow Jesus.

In doing theology faithfully, we seek first to follow the steps of Jesus, taking his hermeneutical lead.¹² This means that “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” we interpret today, repeatedly, ongoingly, endlessly, back and forth, all “the things about [Jesus] in all the scriptures” (Lk 24:27). This more than anything else is what marks N. T. Wright’s theology, in my opinion.

Jesus promised continually to guide this process by his Spirit. “When the Spirit of truth comes,” Jesus said, “he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (Jn 16:13). Jesus, himself led by the Spirit, gives this promise not just to his first followers but to the church, world without end. To be led by the Spirit means to live a life of prayer, as Jesus himself models. The fourth-century disciple Evagrius Ponticus wrote, “If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian.”¹³ Jesus by the Spirit gives us theological depth

and insights over time as we meditate on God's Word and humbly seek the guidance of the Spirit. Sound theology follows the footsteps of Jesus in prayer, lowliness, and listening for God's Spirit.

2. *Engage the entire biblical narrative in its fullness without exception.*

Sound theology follows the full, whole Bible narrative, without exception, using the proven principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) that Jesus himself modeled.¹⁴ This means in particular: 1) grasping the fundamental narrative form of the entire Bible; 2) observing the key themes and covenants that form the living sinews of scripture; 3) keeping the focus on God's promised future and the way the plan or economy of God brings creation to this fullness through Jesus Christ by the Spirit; and 4) paying attention to the missional thrust of all scripture. God's Word is a word for us, for the nations, for the whole creation.

Engaging all of scripture also requires, of course, sensitivity to the various kinds of literature in the Bible and to other sound inductive hermeneutical principles, as will be noted below in point 5. Irenaeus, the first great Christian theologian,¹⁵ provides a useful model for engaging the whole of scripture. Irenaeus insisted that we pay attention to "the order and connection of the scriptures"—the way everything ties together coherently under Jesus Christ the Head.¹⁶

Irenaeus lived from about 134 to 202 AD, completing his ministry as Bishop of Lyons in Gaul (modern-day France). He learned how to walk in God's ways from the Christian martyr Polycarp (69-156 AD), Bishop of Smyrna, who himself was taught by John the Apostle. Polycarp used to speak of "the things concerning the Lord" he had heard from John and other "eye-witnesses of the Word of Life," and Polycarp "reported all things in agreement with the scriptures," Irenaeus said. "I listened eagerly... and made notes" of Polycarp's words, "not on paper, but in my heart, and ever by the grace of God do I truly ruminate on them."¹⁷

Irenaeus is known especially for his concept of *recapitulation*. The idea comes directly from Ephesians 1:10, which speaks of God's plan "to gather up [*anakefalaioomai*, bring together under one head] all things in [Jesus Christ], things in heaven and things on earth." The English word *recapitulate*, from the Latin, translates literally the Greek verb Paul uses. Irenaeus developed this key theme of *recapitulation* in connection with three

other linked concepts: *intellect* (in the sense of God as universal personal loving mind), *economy* (*oikonomia*, God's overall plan), and *participation*, by God's grace becoming "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), living in communion with God in the body of Christ transformingly in the world. These themes were not totally unique to Irenaeus, but he gave them classic expression.¹⁸ Irenaeus, John Wesley, and other great teachers down through history underscore this truth: The soundest and most helpful theology engages the full biblical narrative in all its linked dimensions.

3. Keep God's revealed character and covenant central.

Traditional systematic theology speaks of God's *attributes*. Scripture however focuses primarily on God's *character*. Discerning the character of God as revealed in scripture and especially in Jesus illuminates the entire message of the Bible and the power of the Good News. The kingdom of God makes sense when we grasp the *character* of this High Holy God who reigns, not just abstract "attributes."

Highlighting the character of Yahweh the Lord helps us understand the Bible's consistent focus on God's lovingkindness (steadfast love; *hesed*) and his covenant faithfulness (*emunah*).¹⁹ The Bible shows repeatedly that the Triune God of steadfast love and faithfulness establishes *covenant*—not one only, but a connected coherent sequence of covenants culminating in the New Covenant in Jesus Christ and the New Creation that covenant faithfulness brings. This biblical covenant structure is undergirded by God's twin covenants with humankind and with the whole earth, as Genesis 9:8-17 shows.

Focusing on God's revealed character and covenants keeps theology linked to life grounded in discipleship. Otherwise doctrine wanders off into abstract ideas and concepts, theories and disputes. God's character and covenants lead us in turn to mission: proclaiming, extending, and embodying God's loving covenant purposes in all the earth.²⁰ Sound theology is all about walking in God's ways.

4. Learn from the Book of Creation.

God has given the world two books, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature (or better, the Book of Creation).²¹ It is silly to base theology solely on one or the other. The Bible and the created order are the two lenses God gives us to see him, his character, and his covenants;

the two angles that together give depth perspective; the two voices calling and singing out and echoing God's truth, calling and beckoning people to follow him through Jesus by the Spirit.

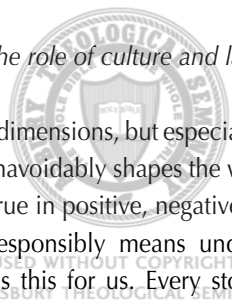
Sound theology therefore calls us to study and learn from "the wisdom of God in creation," as John Wesley repeatedly phrased it. The medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor wrote about 1130 AD, "This whole visible world is like a book written by the finger of God... to make manifest the wisdom of God's mysterious workings."²² For Hugh and others before and since, studying both books was, as the scientist Seb Falk noted, "not only legitimate." It was in fact "an integral part of praising God."²³ God's everlasting covenant with the earth/land (Gen 9) gives us both a discipleship responsibility and a theological responsibility—two sides of the same coin.

The awareness of these two books of revelation—with Jesus by the Spirit in a sense being the animating, interconnecting third—goes back to scripture itself. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom 1:20). This is a theme the Psalms constantly stress—for example, Psalm 19:1-6.

Together, scripture and the book of Creation are mission resources to help God's people "declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples" (1 Chron 16:24; Ps 96:3). The Lord says his people "shall declare my glory" to and among the nations, to "the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory" (Isa 66:19). Standing in awe and humility before God's written word and God's wisdom revealed in creation, we seek the Holy Spirit's guidance so we may understand and interpret God's two books wisely and missionally in our day.

5. Understand the role of culture and language in our theological endeavors.

Culture in all its dimensions, but especially language, imagination, and modes of thinking, unavoidably shapes the ways people formulate and express doctrine. This is true in positive, negative, and more or less neutral ways. Doing theology responsibly means understanding and engaging culture. The Bible models this for us. Every story in scripture inhabits a cultural-historical, earthly home. All the language, terminology, images, and truths of the Bible are expressed in a variety of cultural forms. This is part of the richness of scripture.



Positively, culture offers a kaleidoscope for seeing God's truth and sharing it with others, fulfilling our kingdom-of-God mission. Negatively, culture can distort Bible truth in subtle, unseen ways. The Good News and our discipleship must always be "inculturated," of course. God's grace and truth and love invade from outside our cultural context, even as it is already present in culture and history through creation and the prevenient grace and providence of God.²⁴ Here again, we see this modeled in scripture and especially in Jesus. Theology and discipleship are necessarily cultural. We see this all around us, if we pay attention. Recognizing this helps us do theology soundly.

6. *Honor and use discretely the Great Tradition of Christian theology.*

The Great Tradition is a wise teacher. It should be studied and understood. But it carries less authority than scripture, than Jesus' own witness, and than God's revelation in the created order. Where theologies or creeds conflict with creation they are wrong, or at least skewed.

The Great Tradition does three things: 1) It lifts up key insights and truths that have emerged from a range of historical contexts; 2) it shows us how church, culture, and doctrine always interact; and 3) it expresses critical points of theological consensus on fundamental truths such as the Trinity, Christology, and salvation. We learn how the Great Tradition has developed over time, a historical progression as doctrine builds on doctrine amidst newly emerging challenges.²⁵

However, since the Great Tradition is itself culturally embedded and reflects issues arising at different times, it engages some doctrinal truths and neglects others. The Great Tradition has gaps. In Western theology after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, *mission* was largely neglected. John Howard Yoder observed, "Doing theology as an educational enterprise in Western Europe was in a non-missionary context. Europe thought of itself as a Christian culture, and whatever could be called 'missions' belonged in some other part of the world. Since the context itself did not raise the missionary question, it was natural that theology did not deal with it."²⁶ It seemed as though God's mission—the conversion of the known world—had pretty much succeeded.²⁷ This misunderstanding still persists in much contemporary Protestant theology and in the academy. But in the Bible, and wherever God's people have been fully faithful, mission always interweaves dynamically, symbiotically, with theology.

The Great Tradition is still growing. It continues to emerge globally in varied ways, and especially in relation to culture and to the role of the physical creation in God's economy.²⁸ Doctrinal growth will continue until New Creation comes fully. Now we "see through a glass, darkly," but then we shall know even as we are known (1 Cor 13:12 KJV).

7. Learn from the global church.

What is God doing in and through the church globally? What is the worldwide body of Christ in all its amazing diversity learning that should inform and enliven our theology and mission today, wherever we live?

In doing theology, the church must engage not only the historic Great Tradition but also the emerging Global Tradition. Both time (theology through history) and space (theology across cultures) inform us.²⁹ Through this partnership the varied church traditions enrich each other in the spirit of Paul's exhortation in 2 Corinthians 8 about sharing economic resources: each part of the church receiving from and supplying the need of the other.³⁰

As both church and world increasingly interconnect, becoming more and more networked, so Christianity is more and more a global enterprise. Above all, where Christians are suffering pain, poverty, persecution, and death and yet giving witness, the global church is our teacher. Theology can continue to learn from liberation theology in its varied forms.³¹ Liberation theology rightly stresses doing theology "from the base"—that is, from the perspective and experience of the poor and oppressed; from what the world calls the margins. This means open-eyed focus on political and socioeconomic realities, global and local; a process of "conscientization"—an awakening to the socio-political-spiritual powers that often shape and victimize human lives. Paulo Freire spoke of "the pedagogy of the oppressed."³² So did Jesus, in plain words and parables, two thousand years earlier.

In learning from the global church, we learn of the glorious diversity of global theological thought and the multiple ways of expressing it. Theology is as varied as is the rainbow, the color spectrum. Or think of growing crops and forests. Just as agriculture suffers from being reduced to mere monoculture, so the theology suffers from being squeezed to a mere mono-discipline or mono-culture. Healthy integral theology is a multidisciplinary quest. Life in all forms thrives on diversity, variety, interchange, symbiosis. Here the global church (both today and yesterday) helps us.

8. *Focus always on edification in the full biblical sense.*

The purposes of theology are the praise of God, witness in the world, upbuilding the body of Christ, the church, and extending God's creation project. The New Testament letters focus especially on edification; building and reinforcing the "edifice" of faith—that is, the Christian community—for the sake of fidelity and mission.³³

In the New Testament, *edification* means building up and strengthening the household of God, the community of faith. Edification is a community enterprise with intimate personal application. Speaking to the church about gifts and graces, the Apostle Paul says, "Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor 14:26 NRSV); "Let all things be done unto edifying" (KJV). As an integral part of discipleship, doing theology means strengthening the bonds of Christian community, making the church's witness more winsome, persuasive, and prophetic, its praise more true and glorious, and its engagement with earth more authentic and nourishing.

Theology in itself has always a fatal tendency to turn in on itself, to focus on doctrinal nuances and forget its prime purpose. This is the "occupational hazard" of all who specialize in theology. The prime purpose of theology is not theory but praise, witness, and healthy, functioning members of the body of Christ. For this reason, doing theology needs to be understood and practiced within the context of the multiple and reinforcing fullness of spiritual gifts, as we see especially in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and 1 Peter 4:10-11. Theology is the church, led by the Spirit, understanding and performing its calling as body of Christ and kingdom community in the earth.

9. *Honor the sovereignty and glory of God as we work in humility and in awe of great mystery.*

The more we truly perceive and experience God, the deeper our humility. The deeper also, however, our responsibility. The book of Job shows how to do theology in this mode. Towards the end of the book, Yahweh confronts Job directly. Your "comforters," God says, are merely "darken[ing] counsel by words without knowledge." But you, Job: "Gird up your loins like a man, I *will* question you, and you *shall* declare to me"! (Job 38:2-3). Earlier God had said, "Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God" (Job 37:14). Now Yahweh declares, "Anyone who argues with God must respond" (Job 40:2). The Lord spoke similarly to the

prophet Ezekiel when he fell on his face before the Divine Majesty: “Son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you” (Ezek 2:1).

This is how to do theology. Honoring the sovereign Personhood of God, which means not only humility but also daring to respond consciously, willfully to God’s reality through further reflection, ever seeking understanding. For humans are created in God’s image, not in the image of creatures unable to respond rationally and willfully and in words to God’s self-disclosures. “Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you” (Ps 32:9). But Yahweh also says: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8-9). The Lord God of hosts has self-revealed as lovingkindness and covenant faithfulness, the God who makes covenant requiring faith and fidelity in all dimensions of life—today, and into the future. We do theology in humility and in awe of great mystery.

10. Rest in faith, hope, and love, and in the consolation of Christian community.

Doing theology means resting in God’s grace and faithfulness—daily now, and in the end ultimately. Resting humbly in faith, hope, and love together with our sisters and brothers in Christian community on earth and in heaven and in comradeship with the “all creatures” and “all things” of God’s creation. For theology is a communal endeavor. Shared. It is a *synergy* and *symbiosis* of interconnection between the Triune God, one another, and all creation. Not in chaos or confusion, but in the trusting, obedient, loving relationship revealed to us in Christ Jesus.

Open Questions

This is doing theology the way Jesus did. Yet we know that the story of theology is never complete for us. This is so for four big reasons:

- Much has not yet been revealed.
- We have not yet reached the end of the story.
- Our spacetime-bound minds are not capable of understanding much that is beyond our dimensions of experience and understanding.
- New and ongoing scientific discoveries will require new theological reflection.

So, we are left with many mysteries and imponderables, part of The Great Mystery. Many things (as my wise aunt used to say) that we hide in our mystery bag. We still ponder troubling puzzles such as this: Will evil in the end prove to be more positive than negative in the long story of human history, as Christians earnestly wish to affirm? Or are we even asking the right questions?

Finale

Finally, we remind ourselves once again that theology is way more than words. It is not done with words only. Yes, some do theology by writing. Some by teaching or preaching. Some do theology by singing or dancing or composing. Some do theology by discipling newborn believers. Some do theology by serving the poor or providing shelter for the homeless. Some do theology by prayer, contemplation, intercession. Some do theology by encouraging others. Some do theology by planting trees, painting pictures, or pursuing science. Some do theology by government service or by social or economic research. Some do theology by prophetic silence. “They also serve who only stand and wait,” wrote John Milton, reflecting “On His Blindness.”

There is no narrowly right way to do theology. For theology is always faith seeking understanding and life seeking fidelity. The task can be approached in many ways. But any way of theology that fails to focus on the divine calling to walk in God’s ways is gravely deficient and can be fatal.

It is all a matter of grace, of *charism*, calling, and covenant; of unity, diversity, and mutuality; of life together in the body of Christ while walking by faith in the world, looking “forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

End notes

¹ See the discussion in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Analytics, Poetics, and the Mission of Dogmatic Discourse,” Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds., *The Task of Dogmatics: Explorations in Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2017), 23-48 (Vos quotation and citation from p. 35).

² Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), 1:33.

³ The KJV uses “allegory” only here. The NRSV however uses the term also in Ezekiel 17:2 and 24:3; the KJV uses “parable” instead (as

does the Septuagint, *parabola*). The Hebrew term here is *chidah*, meaning “riddle.”

⁴ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Medieval Exegesis*, Vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 5.

⁵ Quoted in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 1:73.

⁶ Quoted from an 1898 source by de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 1:13.

⁷ De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 1:74. Some church school libraries were even organized according to the fourfold sense, books catalogued by sections on *historia*, *allegoria*, *anagogia*, and *tropologia*. De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 1:12.

⁸ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 141. Thus “the least details, individual words themselves, were lifted to the level of a persistent allegory.” One author for example “classified and interpreted allegorically all the biblical texts that mention bread” (111).

⁹ Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society*, 117.

¹⁰ The plasticity of symbolic and metaphorical interpretations meant one could quite easily find one’s way around (for example) Jesus’ troublesome teachings about the cost of discipleship.

¹¹ The complete story is of course much more complex than this. See Howard A. Snyder with Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Created Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce between Earth and Heaven* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade Books, 2011), especially 3-61.

¹² Dennis F Kinlaw in his *Let’s Start with Jesus: A New Way of Doing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) proposes to do this. But he limits “creation” almost exclusively to the human creation, which Jesus did not do. See Snyder and Scandrett, 53.

¹³ Evagrius Ponticus (345-399 AD), *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Trappist, KY.: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 65.

¹⁴ This approach may be contrasted with that of Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991). In Chapter 14, “Systematic Theology,” Osborne describes five “components of theological construction”: 1) scripture, 2) tradition, 3) community, 4) experience, and 5) philosophy (287-98). Though there are similarities between Osborne’s approach and that proposed here, Osborne does not focus on Jesus’ own theological interpretation or on God’s character and does not deal with the book of creation or the need for engagement with the global church.

Osborne says “systematic theology is the proper goal of biblical study and teaching” (286). Not really. The goal is the further revelation of Jesus Christ, the edification of the church, and the embodying of the kingdom of God. Additionally, Osborne does not deal at all with God’s covenant with the earth (Genesis 9) and hardly at all with the whole subject of covenant.

¹⁵ Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Teaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NJ: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 102.

¹⁷ Quoted in Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* [1949] (Allen, TX: Christian Classics reprint, n.d.), 1:287.

¹⁸ Eric Osborn, *The Emergence of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 20-22.

¹⁹ I am indebted to John Oswalt on this point.

²⁰ This is another theme N. T. Wright emphasized in his Asbury Seminary lectures.

²¹ See Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), “God’s Two Books,” 19-25.

²² Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Three Days*, 4, quoted in Seb Falk, *The Light Ages: The Surprising Story of Medieval Science* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), 84-85.

²³ Falk, *The Light Ages*, 85.

²⁴ Howard A. Snyder, “‘Works of Grace and Providence’: The Structure of John Wesley’s Theology,” Annual Lecture, Manchester Wesley Research Centre, June 13, 2017.

²⁵ See James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901). There are a great number of fine books on the history of doctrine. All major theologians engage the history of dogma to some degree.

²⁶ John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: 2014), 36-37. Yoder adds, “If you look through European systematic or practical theology texts, the theme of mission is absent in most of the texts and even in the presuppositions with which most of the texts were written.” Thus a “theologian” in a European Protestant university (or an American Ivy League university) did not feel that the missionary enterprise was something for which his or her church was responsible. Theology had to do with domestic church management.”

²⁷ Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 1998.

²⁸ Hence the importance of engaging theologically all the areas of culture, from economics to technology.

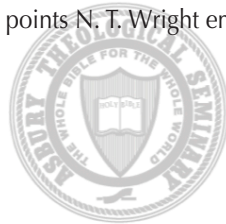
²⁹ See Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

³⁰ "I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little'" (2 Cor 8:13-15).

³¹ See for example Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelization of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982); Leonardo Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Basic Communities Reinvent the Church*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982); Samuel Escobar, *Changing Tides: Latin America and World Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973); José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1974); C. René Padilla, ed. *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Pablo Richard, *Death of Christendoms, Birth of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., *Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976).

³² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). Freire dedicated his book "To the oppressed, and to those who suffer with them and fight at their side."

³³ These also are points N. T. Wright emphasized at Asbury.



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