How to do a theological study

By Kevin Gary Smith

Systematic theology is *a systematic study of what the Bible teaches about a topic*. Can we justly call doing systematic theology *research*? The answer depends on *how* we do it, the method we use. If we begin with the presupposition that the task of theology is to systematise the teachings of scripture, the manner in which we proceed should meet all the criteria of research. In this chapter, I shall discuss the presuppositions and steps of evangelical theology. Based on these presuppositions and steps, I shall present two models for doing evangelical theology.

Presuppositions of evangelical theology

The point of departure for evangelical theology is the conviction that the Bible is God's full and final revelation. Three vital presuppositions of evangelical theology derive from this conviction. First, God has spoken in his Word. Since we have an inspired, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient Word from God, our task is identify and summarise what it teaches. Second, as a corollary to this, because the Word of God comes from the mind of God, it forms an harmonious whole, without inner contradictions (provided that we interpret it correctly). Third, although the Bible's teaching is a coherent whole, it does evidence progressive development over time. Progressive revelation implies that each new revelation builds on the foundation of earlier revelation on the same topic.

The evangelical approach to systematic theology differs vastly from the liberal approach. Because liberal theologians do not begin with the assumption that God has spoken, they have to resort to speculation (Ware 2001). Lacking a solid, objective point of departure, their theological method amounts to little more than creative speculation as to what God might be like. Theology thus

degenerates into a subjective, conceptual comparison of what others, whether ancient writers or other theologians, have written.

By taking as its starting assumption the fact that God has spoken in his Word, evangelical systematic theology can proceed in a truly scientific manner (Ware 2001). Ware explains that a two-fold process lies at the heart of the scientific method, namely, (a) data collection by observation and (b) theory construction. Just as a physicist gathers data by observing experiments and proceeds to formulate a theory to explain all the data in a harmonious way, so a systematic theologian gathers data by careful exegesis of the biblical text (observation) and develops a theory to account for all the data. Like every other science, systematic theology "moves beyond inductive itemisation to the synthesis of theory construction".

Steps in evangelical theology

The task of the systematic theologian is to construct a model that accounts for what all the relevant scriptures teach about a topic. This task requires four steps.

Step 1: Identify all the scriptures that address to the topic

This is a crucial preliminary step. If your research is to be credible, it needs to account for *all* the relevant data. If you omit certain texts, their implications may alter or discredit your theory. A pitfall to avoid is selecting scriptures that support your preferred outcome and overlooking those that challenge it.

The scope of many research projects does not permit an exhaustive inductive study of all the scriptures addressing a topic. If there is a large body of biblical materials to cover or if you are writing a short paper, you should delimit your study. There are several ways to do this. For example, instead of covering all scriptures on the deity of Christ, you could limit your study to those that call him "God" (Greek, *theos*) or you could limit your study to cover only the pastoral epistles.

Step 2: Analyse each scripture to determine its meaning

The objective of this stage is to permit each scripture to speak for itself, to mean whatever the original author intended. To achieve this goal, you need to conduct an inductive, exegetical study of each selected text. This corresponds to the observation stage of the scientific method, gathering the raw data from which you will construct your theory.

Exegesis is the bedrock of theology. Your theology will never be better than your exegesis. If your analysis of the individual texts is flawed, your interpretation of all the data, your final theological model, will also be flawed. For this reason, if you want to do theology, you must develop your exegetical skills. In particular, learn Hebrew and Greek. I am amazed by the number of aspiring systematic theologians I meet who consider learning the biblical languages to be unimportant to their trade. If theology must be built on exegesis—as it surely must—learning the languages is not optional.

When you have completed your exegetical study of a text, state its teaching about the topic in propositional form, either as a single proposition or a series of them. Reducing each text's contribution to propositions lays a good platform for the next step.

Step 3: Deduce timeless principles taught by groups of scriptures

After you have completed your exegetical study of each text and stated its contribution to the topic in propositional form, the next step is to reduce the mass of data to a limited number of timeless truths (propositions). The objective of this step is to deduce the major truths; that is, to group the many data into categories and summarise them as generalisations. Based on the individual observations (inductively observed facts), we deduce necessary generalisations (Ware 2001). This process is called deduction.

Ware (2001) illustrates the process with the doctrine of the trinity. When all the exegesis is complete, four main truths emerge from the data:

- There is one God.
- The Father is God.

- The Son is God.
- The Spirit is God.

These four truths are deduced from the mass of biblical evidence. However, they do not yet represent a full-fledged doctrine because they do not indicate how the four truths relate to each other. Therefore, the theologian's task cannot end here. He must develop a model that explains how they relate.

Step 4: Construct a theory to account for all the relevant data

Step three leaves you with a minimum number of major truths derived from exegesis of the key texts. The last step is to construct a theory or a model that accounts for all the data in a unified way. Ware (2001) calls this process *retroduction*,[1] which he describes as looking at the data and asking how we can best make sense of it. He quotes John Warwick Montgomery's definition of retroduction:

> Retroduction is the creative ordering of relevant data into a conceptual fabric that exposes the relationships among those data in a way that enhances their native meanings.

The goal is to formulate a conceptual model that accounts for all the data and clarifies the relationships between them. Such a model enhances the native meanings of the data making the links between them clear. The Christian doctrine of the trinity is a theological construct that goes far beyond the four main propositions (see above). Understanding how the statements are simultaneously true and appreciating the relationships between the Persons of the trinity greatly enhances our grasp of the data.

Constructing a viable theological model is an iterative process. First examine the data and formulate a tentative theory to account for it all. Then return to the data and ask if the proposed understanding does justice to it. Does it account for all the data? Does it elucidate the relationships between the data? Is it logically consistent? If the answer to any of these questions is "no", you must re-examine the data. As you re-examine it, you either modify your original theory or construct a different model.

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[1] Retroduction is also called abduction.

Data do not dictate their own interpretation. Different theological systems emerge because alternate models are proposed to account for the data. The Calvinist and Arminian views on election represent two completely different models for explaining the same data. Postmillennialism, amillennialism and premillennialism present three synopses of the biblical data regarding the millennium. The task of a systematic theologian is to analyse the data as objectively as possible and develop a model that best accounts for all the data, elucidating how they fit together.

How do we put all these pieces together into a working design for a research project in systematic theology? I am going to offer two models. In the next section, I shall propose a basic model for systematic theology. The basic model attempts to cover all the texts in the selected corpus, whether is be the entire canon or a part of it. In the following section, I shall offer an alternate model that anchors the study in a single, major text of scripture.

Basic design for evangelical theology

In essence, the basic model has five logical divisions, each of which form a main section of the study (see illustration 1).

Section 1: Introduction

The introduction states the "what", the "why" and the "how" of the study. Under the banner of the what, it states the problem, key questions, deliminations and hypothesis. The why section indicates the value of the study. The how part describes the methodology and concludes with a preview of the flow of the study.

Section 2: Current views

The study needs to be conducted with a thorough understanding of existing research on the topic. This section offers a clear, objective description of each of the major current views on the issue under investigation.
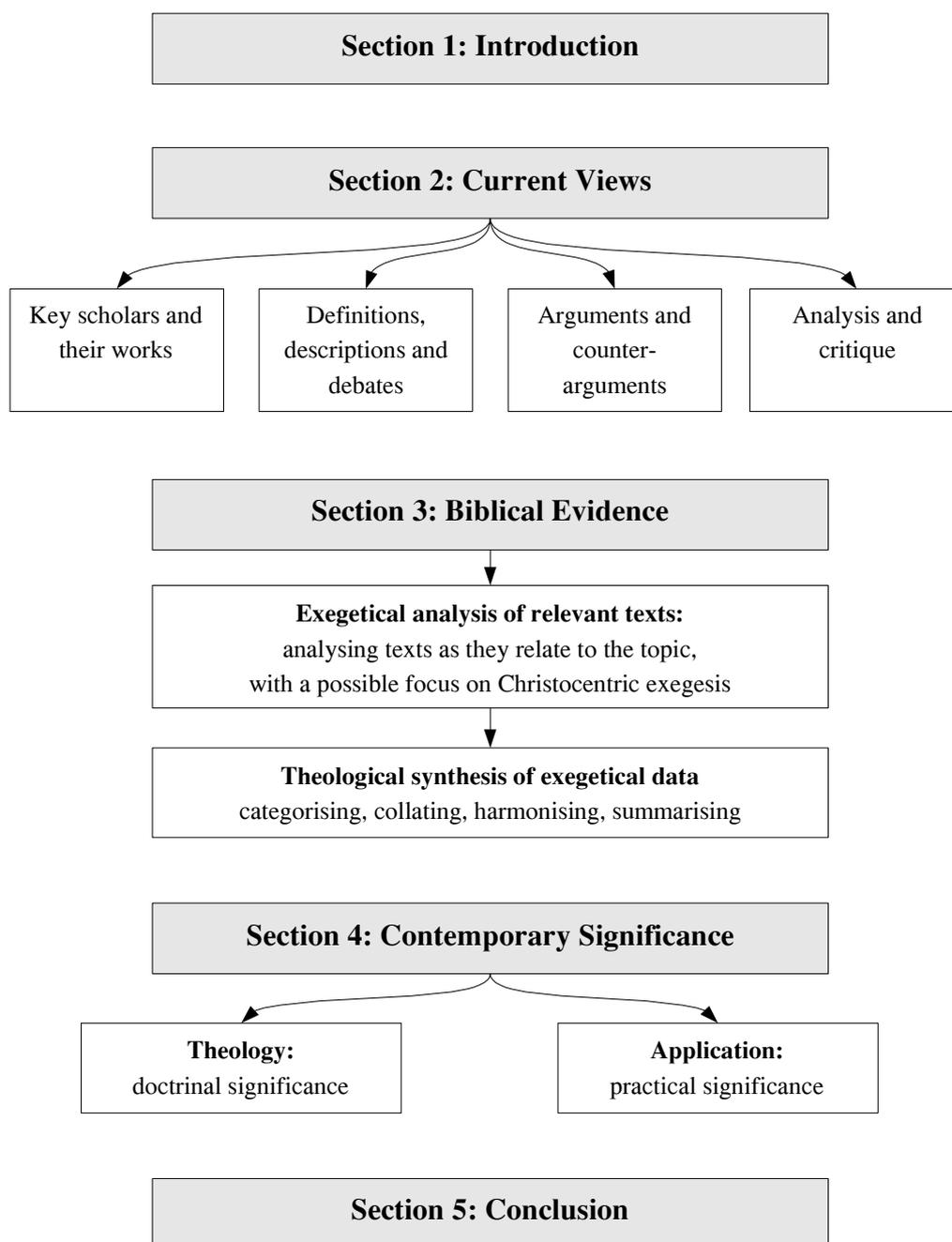
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│           Section 1: Introduction            │
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│           Section 2: Current Views           │
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Key scholars and their works	Definitions, descriptions and debates	Arguments and counter-arguments	Analysis and critique

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│          Section 3: Biblical Evidence        │
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│      Exegetical analysis of relevant texts:  │
│      analysing texts as they relate to the   │
│      topic, with a possible focus on         │
│      Christocentric exegesis                 │
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│   Theological synthesis of exegetical data   │
│   categorising, collating, harmonising,      │
│   summarising                                │
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│       Section 4: Contemporary Significance   │
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Theology: doctrinal significance	Application: practical significance

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│           Section 5: Conclusion              │
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Illustration 1: Basic design for evangelical theology

Typically, the treatment of each view should cover such elements as:

- *Key scholars and their works*. The presentation of each view should be based on the writings of some of its most significant contributors. Wherever possible, demonstrate first-hand familiarity with the writings of the most important advocates of the view. Your description should

not be based on second-hand reports of their beliefs (translations of foreign-language works are acceptable). Furthermore, while it is appropriate to include seminal works by older theologians, the focus should be on *current views* as expressed in recently published books and articles.

- *Definitions, descriptions and debates.* You should clearly define and describe each major view. You should also expose the main points of debate surrounding it, including the presuppositions on which it is based.

- *Arguments and counter-arguments.* You should state the main arguments used in support of each view and how the view counters objections. As used here, "counter-arguments" refers to arguing in favour of the view by answering objections and criticisms to it. (The arguments *against* each view are usually presented as part of the argument for the alternate views.)

- *Scriptural interpretation.* Where relevant, the description of each view should indicate how its advocates interpret the scriptures, both their general approach to the scriptures and their specific handling of important passages.

- *Strengths and weaknesses.* A critique of the obvious strengths and weaknesses of each view needs to be built into this section in an appropriate manner. I say *obvious* strengths and weaknesses because you have not yet done the study, so you are not yet qualified to comment beyond the level of what is self-evident.

These bullets are not intended to be treated as headings. They indicate the ingredients that form part of the recipe for a good description of a current view. The ingredients need to be mixed properly.

Naturally, you are free to delimit the perspectives you cover in this section. For example, if covering an ethical issue such as abortion, you may need to include all views (both Christian and non-Christian perspectives). Alternatively, when analysing certain issues, you may wish to delimit the study to focus on the perspectives within a particular faith community (e.g., Pentecostal or Reformed).

In the field of systematic theology, the description of current views will *usually* be based on literary sources. However, this is not necessarily the case. There is no reason why this section cannot incorporate empirical research (fieldwork) to discover the current views of a particular community. For example, if you were researching the beliefs of Baptist pastors in South Africa regarding the inspiration of the Scriptures, you might draw your data from published works, denominational archives and surveys or interviews with Baptist pastors.

The summary of existing views on the topic sets the stage for your own in-depth analysis of the issues, which necessarily begins with an exegetical study of the biblical texts addressing the topic.

Section 3: Biblical evidence

The next major section of the research consists of a thorough inductive analysis of the relevant biblical texts. This phase of the study constitutes the bulk of the study. In a thesis or dissertation, it may require several chapters. The process itself divides logically into two distinct phases: induction and deduction. The *induction* phase consists of an exegetical study of each text touching on the topic. When it is complete, you will have a mass of isolated data. The *deduction* phase reduces this mass of isolated data into a few generalisations, that is, into the smallest possible number of propositions.

Induction: exegesis of passages

As a Christian committed to developing a biblical worldview, you must strive to build your theology exegetically. This step calls for you to identify and analyse all the relevant biblical texts. The number of texts and the level of the study will determine how deep the exegesis needs to be. However, unlike when doing an exegetical study, it is not necessary to document every stage of your exegesis. You may report only the results of your exegetical study, commenting on the relevant aspects of the text as they relate to the topic of the research.

Deduction: extraction of propositions

The exegesis will leave you with a host of data, all tied to the truth implications of specific texts. To work with this data in a way that enables you to construct a theory to explain it, you need to reduce it to a manageable number of propositions. Divide the ideas that emerge from the exegetical phase into categories in such a way that nothing is left out. Then formulate propositional statements that encompass all the data in each category. When this process is complete, you will have the key ideas for which you will need to account in your theory construction section.

Section 4: Theory construction

Once you have analysed the relevant texts (induction) and isolated the key ideas they teach (deduction), you need to put all the data together to form a holistic picture of what the Bible teaches about the issue (retroduction). This is theory construction. Your goal is to construct a model that accounts for all the biblical evidence in a unified manner, making the relationships between the individual data clear. When you have devised a tentative model, go back to all the exegetical data and check that your model adequately accounts for each datum without distorting it. Keep revising your model until it does so.

Every major evangelical systematic theology contains numerous examples of how expert theologians go about this process. What are dichotomy and trichotomy? They are models designed to explain all the biblical evidence regarding the constitution of man. What is the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement? It is a theory attempting to explain all the biblical data on the reason for and significance of Jesus' death. The scholars who write these textbooks have followed the above processes; when you read their books, you are seeing the result of their analysis, their proposed model with a sample of the evidence added as proof texts.

Section 5: Contemporary signficance

The task of theology is not complete, in my opinion, until its significance for today's church its believers is considered. The final section of the study should

explore the contemporary significance of the study. This can be done at two levels, namely, doctrinal and practical.

The entire discussion in this concluding section needs to be overtly and intentionally tied to the main issue driving the research agenda. Do not allow your discussion of the significance of your study to focus on peripheral details. Major on the majors.

For many studies, the volume of biblical data available on the topic combined with the length of the study make the basic model unsuitable. In such cases, the researcher has three options: (a) narrow the topic; (b) reduce the corpus; or (c) use a different design. The alternative design presents a way of handling a large number of texts in a more focused manner than the basic design.

Alternate design for evangelical theology

You cannot always conduct a full exegetical study of what the entire Bible teaches about a chosen topic in a single research project because this often requires in-depth exegesis of a large number of texts, a task that is not doable in one study. However, it is possible to conduct an in-depth exegetical study of one or two key texts *and* allow that exegesis to be informed by a thorough survey of other relevant texts. In such cases, the study is anchored in a key passage. Earlier biblical passages are analysed in relation to the *anchor text*; these provide the *informing theology*. Subsequent texts may be analysed for how they elucidate or develop the theme of the anchor text.

Illustration 2 shows the basic approach. The main biblical text on the topic is used as the anchor text. A detailed exegetical analysis of this text lies at the heart of the study. To place the anchor text in its theological context, the study begins with a synopsis of the informing theology, that is, what earlier passages of scripture have taught to lay a conceptual foundation for the key text. The teaching of the key text is further elucidated by how later texts of scripture have added to its teaching or applied it. The study closes with a discussion of the contemporary significance of the teaching. Aside from an introduction, these four parts typically constitute the structure of the study. In some cases, you may need to include a chapter on "current views", identical to the one in the basic design.
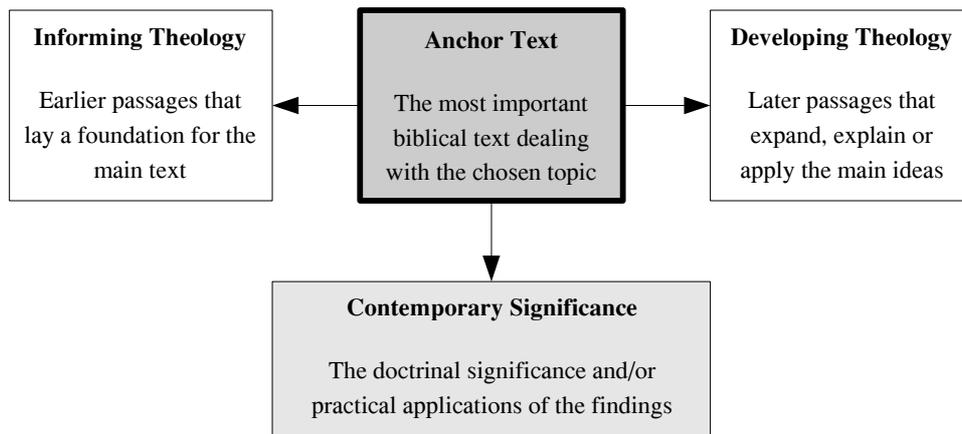
Illustration 2: The alternate design for a theological study

Section 1: Introduction

See the corresponding section under the "basic design for evangelical theology".

Section 2: The informing theology[2]

Conduct an exegetical survey of the antecedent biblical texts that form part of the informing theology of the anchor text, leading to a synthesis which systematically summarises the combined teaching of the relevant texts on the issue. Two steps are involved:

Step 1: identify and analyses relevant texts. This step calls for you to identify and analyse all the relevant biblical texts. The number of texts and the level of the study will determine how deep the exegesis needs to be. It is not necessary to document every stage of your exegesis. You may report only the results of your exegetical study, commenting on the relevant aspects of the texts as they relate to the topic of the thesis.

Step 2: synthesise and summarise the overall teaching. Once you have analysed the relevant texts, you need to put all the data together to form a holistic picture. This involves categorising, collating, harmonising and summarising the exegetical data. In short, it is systematising the teachings of

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[2] If a literature review addressing contemporary views is deemed necessary, it will be section 2 and the informing theology will become section 3.

texts you analysed. All this should be done with an eye on how they impact upon the main research question and the anchor text.

Section 3: The anchor text

The heart of the study is a detailed exegetical study of the anchor text, which ought to be a major biblical passage dealing with the topic under investigation. For a detailed description of how to conduct an exegetical study, see the chapter on "how to do an exegetical study".

Section 4: The developing theology

This section is similar to the one on the informing theology, except that it examines how the key theme is further developed and applied in subsequent biblical passages.

Section 5: The contemporary significance

See the corresponding section under the "basic design for evangelical theology".

Christopher Peppler uses a variation of this model for what he calls "christocentric exegesis". The words and works of Jesus (i.e., the gospels) lie at the centre of this model. They are informed by the Old Testament and explained and applied in the remainder of the New Testament (see illustration 3).
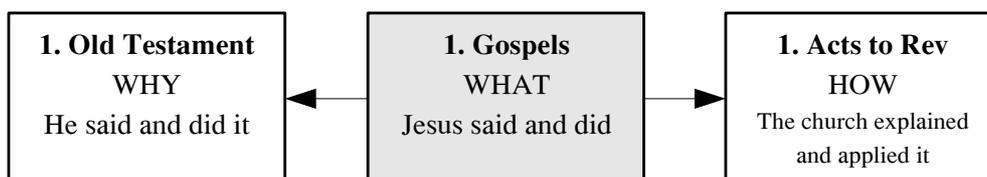
1. Old Testament WHY He said and did it	←	1. Gospels WHAT Jesus said and did	→	1. Acts to Rev HOW The church explained and applied it

Illustration 3: Christocentric exegesis

This model of christocentric exegesis is a favoured approach at the South African Theological Seminary. Wherever possible, we strive to ground our exegesis in the words and works of Jesus. We recognise that sometimes all the key biblical texts lie outside of the gospels, this exegetical model may not be

applicable, but wherever possible we encourage you to give "what Jesus said and did" a prominent place in your exegesis and theology.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an orientation to doing research in the field of systematic theology. An evangelical approach to systematic theology begins with an essential presupposition—God has spoken in his Word. The task of evangelical theology, therefore, is to identify all that he has said in the scriptures, analyse each relevant text, extract the key principles as propositions and construct a theological model to account for all the data.

We offered two designs for research projects. The first is the basic design for evangelical theology. It begins with a survey of current views on the topic, then proceeds to analyse the scriptural evidence by following three main steps —induction, deduction and retroduction—and concludes by exploring the significance of the research findings. The alternative design anchors the study around a key text, analysing how earlier texts serve as its informing theology and later texts develop and apply its ideas.