

Introduction

This is a book about a critical realist theological method. So this book will discuss: exegetical method, theological method, philosophical method and scientific method in an attempt at providing a unified method heavily informed by Biblical theology, in which theology, science and philosophy can work and be integrated.

“Critical Realist Theology” are each terms that need to be defined. By “theology” I mean *the study of God and His relationship to the creation*. By “realism” I mean that *objects have an existence independent of the mind*, so that my mind’s task is to try to approximate these objects (God and creation) accurately corresponding to how these objects are in fact. That is, God is a Being which theology is trying to describe. Likewise, the creation includes stars, planets, particles, and animals which science describes. In “Critical realism” our *knowledge of God and the creation is partial but can be true, by using both subjective and objective tools for knowledge*. In this way, theology and science becomes a map or a model that corresponds to the truth. As such, theology and science is made up of successive paradigms which bring us closer approximations of the real God and creation truth.

Philosophically, critical realism emerges in the wake of Descartes, Locke and Kant. Descartes argued that the real world and God were objects available as certain knowledge to our own mind, a knowledge built *by deduction upon immovable foundations*. In this, our ideas are distinct from the objects which our ideas approximate. Locke granted simple ideas were known directly *by experience* but more complex ideas like a concept of the Christian God would be *known reasonably* by combining these simple ideas into a complex idea. This Lockian confidence has been championed by a group of evangelicals which could be called commonsense realists. In contrast to them, Immanuel Kant proposed a critical idealism, which claimed that one's knowledge is certain knowledge of the mind, but because the mind functions within transcendental categories and forms, our knowledge can't claim to be of the real world (things in themselves). In reaction to these options in 1916, Roy Sellars proposed the view of critical realism.¹ In the chapter "The Relationship of Philosophy, Theology and Science" I survey a range of philosophical contributions and construct a positive nuanced critical realist use of philosophy as it contributes to theology and scientific methodology. In that chapter, I argue that philosophy's role in theology should be streamlined to: 1) helping us be precise and coherent in our thought (as a critical realist), within a Renaissance humanism program of "back to the Christian textual roots" which Biblical theology largely provides, 2) helping us think through ramifications of our commitments and the relationships this identifies us with, and 3) providing any additional basic beliefs that are strongly warranted, but do not counter those of Biblical theology. In my version of

¹ Roy Sellars, *Critical Realism* (Chicago: Rand McNally Co., 1916).

critical realism, I follow a moderate foundational Lakatos' scientific method² which deductively develops some concepts of God and inductively develops theology from Biblical theology and philosophy of religion. The philosophical aspects of this method are described in the next chapter.

This philosophical method can be briefly explained by a model of a tree that identifies that those techniques with greater certainty or plausibility should be given privilege of preferential place in framing worldview, theology, and science. Especially see the next chapter for historical development and evaluation of this briefly stated model. I ground the place of my worldview with moderate foundational roots from: 1) rationalism (like: law of identity, law of noncontradiction, "I think therefore I am," and performative language), 2) empiricism (like immediate sensations), and 3) incorrigible (basic beliefs). I allow certain knowledge of mathematical derivation and rationalism (e.g., ontological argument) to frame the trunk of my epistemic tree. The important weight bearing branches are then framed by empiricism which further confirms itself by rational argument (e.g., cosmological argument, teleological argument) and by Charles Peirce's pragmatism.³ Preferred among this empirically based Peircian pragmatism is a

² Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge. Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, London, 1965*. edited by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91–195; "Proofs and Refutations," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 14(1963-64): 1–25, 120–39, 221–43, 296–342; *Problems in the Philosophy of Science* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1968); "History of Science and Its Rational Reconstructions," in *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 8. edited by R. Buck and R. S. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1971); R. S. Cohen, P. K. Feyerabend and M. W. Wartofsky, *Essays in Memory of Imre Lakatos. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 39 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1976); Paul Feyerabend, "Imre Lakatos," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 26(1975):1–18; Ian Hacking, "Imre Lakatos's Philosophy of Science," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 30(1979): 381–402.

³ *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Charles Peirce essays on pragmatism that are particularly helpful include: "The Fixation of Belief," *Popular Science Monthly* 12(Nov., 1877): 1–15, and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," *Popular Science Monthly* 12(Jan., 1878): 286–302.

hermeneutical spiral of well attested peer reviewed exegesis of Scripture because it possesses divine authority and the text's interpretive thrust is within the text itself giving it a distinct edge over empirical observation of other media (cf. chapters on: "The Role of Tradition in Theology," "Thiselton-Ricoeur Hermeneutic," "Biblical Authority," "The Reef of Biblical Theology," and "A Biblical Theology Affecting Systematics"). The peer review aspect of exegesis, theology, and science reflect some of the corporate aspects of critical realism (cf. chapters on "Contextualization" and "A Theology of Work"). This priority of peer reviewed exegesis would insist on theology and science to be nested within Biblicism. So a divinely inspired creation account should be given preferential place in framing issues of origins and a peer reviewed warranted exposition expressing those Biblical sentiments should as well (cf. chapter on "Creation and Fall," and "A Biblical Anthropology Funding Bio-Ethics"). Close behind this in credibility is peer reviewed Peircian pragmatically tested empirical science. Of course tentative exegesis and promising but not verified Peircian pragmatic science should be held more tentatively. Thus warranted science can affect the exegesis of texts, such as within a Copernican solar system the Biblical phrases of the "sun rises and sets" should be understood phenomenologically as that of appearance while the earth spins on its axis and revolves around the sun. When tentativeness occurs within theology and science, it should move the research program within its discipline to a more peripheral place of the medium branches of the tree, and should be governed by a Lakatos' method with its sophisticated falsification. Smaller more tentative branches can be governed by William James pragmatism,⁴ which should fit within and not contradict the already placed

⁴ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897), ch. 1 "The Will to Believe."

warranted peer reviewed exegesis, theology and science. Even Deweyian pragmatism could be given some place among non-moral twigs of the tree that do not contradict those branches framed by epistemology, exegesis, theology and science. Examples of James and Dewey pragmatism contributing within a Biblically framed integration of psychology and theology are provided in the chapters “A Transactional Model of Human Based on Biblical Theology” and “A Theology of Work.” Peripheral place of small twigs and leaves should be given to: phenomenological, aesthetic, intuitionist, and existential strategies. None of these peripheral options should displace, nor be permitted to overrule the warranted peer reviewed exegesis, theology and science. However, some of the contributions in this peripheral area can be quite significant. For example, my phenomenological commitment to be involved with Boy Scouts with my sons has certainly colored my life in a major way. These peripheral areas of my epistemic tree’s canopy also provide a sense of the whole big picture and vitality, which are very important for life.

In a context where evangelical theology tends to be proposed within commonsense realism, there are some critical realist theologians who have proposed a nuanced approach toward God, which admits to subjectivity from one’s contexts and point of view. For example, William G. T. Shedd acknowledged progressiveness within the discipline of theology that would be characterized as a discipline wide critical realism in his comments on “The first investigator is not so likely to strike upon the intrinsic constitution of a thing as the last one, because he has not the light of previous inquiries. Methods of investigation are continually undergoing correction and modification, and are

thus brought closer to the organization of the object.”⁵ With the discipline of theology developing, theology should not be thought of as a static authoritative tradition. My chapter on “The Role of Tradition in Theology” examines the changing concept and authority of *tradition* through the history of the church to advocate a Biblical theology tradition, which especially respects a scholarly engagement of the Biblical text as the best means of accessing God’s revealed authority for theology. The chapter illustrates the changing nature of theology by examining how each traditional shift developed a shifting concept of trinity. Chapters two and three (Philosophical Method and Tradition) are attempts to contribute to history of doctrine, especially on the category of theological methodology.⁶ To help sensitize my students in methodological issues, I use these chapters as readings in my courses on: history of doctrine, current trends in theology, and theological methods.

Among evangelicals of these earlier days perhaps only A. H. Strong opted for a more nuanced personal critical realist position. Strong affirms that “the laws of our thought are laws of God’s thought and that the results are normally conducted thinking with regard to God correspond to the objective reality.”⁷ At the same time he conceded that “all knowledge is relative to the knowing agent; that is what we know, we know not as it is objectively but only as it is related to our senses and faculties.”⁸

Moving to our contemporary day, Alister McGrath presents theology as a critical realist. He identifies his method as an empirically based pragmatic realism and when he

⁵ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), vol. 1, p.4, Ch. 1, sect. 1.

⁶ E.g., Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1937), pp. 37–82; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1978), pp. 3–82.

⁷ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.: Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1907), vol. 1, p. 10.

⁸ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1:10.

adds mathematical derivation to it, he calls this method, “critical realism.”⁹ In critical realism, “reality is apprehended by the human mind which attempts to express and accommodate that reality as best it can with the tools at its disposal—such as mathematical formulae or mental models.”¹⁰ He sees that empirically based pragmatism is the foundation for this realism in the natural sciences.¹¹ He illustrates it several times over, especially in physics. He then justifies this realism as against conventionalist approaches, which would be either anti-realist, theory dependent, or indebted to James pragmatism. He develops a critical realism that engages the world at a variety of levels, each evaluated for its clarity and predictability. He extends this scientific method to theology as an attempt to ground theology as a scientific discipline with a critical realist methodology.

This critical realist approach has been appropriated into contemporary hermeneutics by moderate evangelicals working within historical Jesus studies. These critical realist interpreters wish to express critical realism’s *hermeneutical spiral* with precision and find value in allowing epistemic categories to inform hermeneutical ones.¹² That is, the textual data is observed by interpreter, such that they float a proposal for the meaning of a text that is then checked by comparing it to the details present in the text itself. Then the process is repeated drawing closer and closer to what the text actually says in itself. For example, N. T. Wright identifies his form of critical realism.

⁹ Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Reality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), vol. 2, especially identifying himself as a critical realist, pp. xv–xvi, 123–244, and especially developing his view on p. 188. Bernard Lonergan presents a similar analysis in “Cognitive Structure,” *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988), pp. 205–21 and *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), p. 238.

¹⁰ Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Reality*, vol. 2, p. 195.

¹¹ Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Reality*, vol. 2, pp. 257, 174–175.

¹² Kennard, *The Relationship Between Epistemology, Hermeneutics, Biblical Theology and Contextualization* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), pp. 57–58, 124–25, 133–34; other examples regularly occur at the November AAR/SBL meeting.

This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialog or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’).¹³

James Dunn affirms this approach preferring to call it a *dialog* with the text.¹⁴ Dunn warns us about the parameters of this Critical Realist dialog with the text.

The point is that without the interpreter’s openness to being addressed by the text, the interpreter can scarcely hope to avoid abusing the text. Unless the text is at least in some sense, allowed to set its own agenda, it is questionable whether it is being heard at all.¹⁵

This Critical Realist approach to Hermeneutics will positively be developed in my chapter “A Thiselton-Ricoeur Hermeneutic,” so that we might gain sensitivity to the agenda that the text sets for itself. In this chapter I positively present the contributions from precise hermeneutics of empirically grounded pragmatism, existentialism, and contextualization. At times it is helpful to delineate an approach from alternatives that bare some resemblance. The chapter on “Biblical Authority” examines other close hermeneutical alternatives in our hermeneutical context and clarifies a process of accessing the divine authoritative message among the cacophony of rivals. The guiding strand through the forest in this chapter is in a critical realist’s engagement with text as the priority in its context. That is, other approaches that deviate from *text in context* *Biblical authority* may be interesting but they depart from the divinely authoritative message.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 31–46 and especially p. 35 here with Wright’s emphasis. Robert Stewart (“N. T. Wright’s Hermeneutic: An Exploration: Part 1 and 2,” *Churchman*, 117[2003]:153–175, 235–266, especially p. 154) wrongly identifies Wright as affirming, “one can never have knowledge of the thing-in-itself,” which more Jamesian or Kuhnian critical realists do affirm. However, Wright’s historical Jesus work identifies him as more Peircian in trying to obtain the real historical Jesus to which the evidence points, when approached with scientific enquiry.

¹⁴ James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 110–111.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 124.

A critical realist theology combines philosophy, historical theology, exegesis and Biblical theology in a particular temporal and cultural context. Each of the chapters of this book focuses on one of these sources and explores issues related to a sensitive warranted inclusion of this area as it contributes to theology. The context within which I operate is provided by chapters: 1) “The Relationship of Philosophy, Theology and Science,” 2) “The Role of Tradition in Theology,” 3) “Biblical Authority in the Contemporary Hermeneutical Scene” and 4) “Contextualization.” I find it helpful to briefly point out the landscape so that my students might better understand the rationale for my path. My positive program is evident in the following chapters: 1) the critical realist section of “The Relationship of Philosophy, Theology and Science,” 2) the Biblical theology section of “The Role of Tradition in Theology,” 3) “A Thiselton-Ricoeur Hermeneutic,” 4) “The Reef of Biblical Theology,” and 5) “Biblical theology Affecting Systematics.”

The particular emphasis which I have in my critical realist theology stresses: 1) the Biblical text as supremely divinely authoritative, and 2) Biblical theology as the main forum to convey that authoritative message into theology. My chapter “The Reef of Biblical Theology” explains my method for a descriptive Biblical theology. In this, I generalize the content which I construct from inducing exegetical meaning from multiple Biblical texts and Biblical author’s works as a whole. I illustrate this methodology in wisdom literature, which tends to be particularly difficult for most attempts of Biblical theology to handle. So my proposal provides a unique resolution for these difficult areas, showing that the easier areas can also be resolved by the same method. Following up on this methodology for doing Biblical theology, I propose a strategy for transforming

Systematic theology by these gems. In the chapter “A Biblical Theology Affecting Systematics,” I explain how such a Biblical theology approach can be incorporated within systematic theology and the gain that this is for systematics in increasing deep Biblicism. This chapter proposes five methodological assumptions:

- 1) Use Biblical terms in the Biblical way.
- 2) Make sure that systematic theology is deeply Biblical in its concerns.
- 3) Theologically reflect the thrust of the genre utilized.
- 4) The interpretation of Biblical texts needs to be done from an informed perspective within the possibilities and that which is likely within the historical cultural context of the text under examination.
- 5) Whatever is Biblical should be reflected within systematic theology.

Using these assumptions, I provide practical suggestions for constructing systematic theology to reflect the Biblical theological thrust, genres and practical concerns of the Biblical text.

Since all theology is done within a context, it is important to explore the contextualization process. The next chapter analyzes levels of culture and contextual engagement to surface suggestions for community contextualization of theology. The process is briefly illustrated from Bryan College’s missionary in residence from Papua New Guinea. Then the process is more extensively engaged in for the Bryan College setting with analysis of Appalachia, William Jennings Bryan, evangelicalism, and Bryan College. Suggestions from each area sensitize us to issues of contextualizing Biblical theology in a critical realist manner to our setting.

Sometimes examples help. I have included four research programs: 1) “Creation and Fall” provides a Biblical theology foundation for theology and science from Biblical texts about creation and curse (especially of death). It showcases the Biblical theology agenda being represented by using major passages and their thrust, which I champion as part of my method in the chapter “Biblical Theology Affecting Systematics.” 2) “A Biblical Anthropology Funding Bio-Ethics” provides a profoundly integrated approach from Biblical theology that both informs systematics and then spells out progressive practical strategies for the field of bio-ethics. 3) After following my lead through the previous chapter in an earlier form and adding an occasional psychological implication, Paul Holmes of the University of Chicago psychiatry department led his and our integration of psychology in the next chapter, “A Transactional Model of Human Based on Biblical Theology.” These two chapters (2 and 3) serve as a deeply Biblical and profoundly integrative expression of systematic theology and psychology. In an earlier form the combined chapters, minus the bio-ethics material was presented at the Wheaton Theology Conference in 1997 within the topic of the integration of Psychology and Theology. 4) “A Theology of Work” takes up a sub-theme from Biblical theology but addresses a rather significant issue from my and my student’s contextual situation. Again the agenda is set by Biblical theology but because it is a piece of systematic theology these Biblical theology gems are integrated with contemporary concepts of work and economics. These examples help to show how this critical realist theological method works.

A final chapter “Putting the Method Together” integrates the method as a whole, bringing unity after each chapter has focused on its particular aspect, and returning to the issue on how science can nest within this Biblical, theological and philosophical method.