

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: JOHN OWEN AND GEERHARDUS VOS – REFORMED FEDERAL/BIBLICAL THEOLOGIANS?

Introduction

In Reformed theological circles, the name Geerhardus Vos is immediately associated with the discipline of biblical theology, and rightly so. He has come to be known as “the father of a Reformed biblical theology.”¹ J. I. Packer calls him “an all-time master in the field of Biblical Theology.”² The importance of his writings cannot be disputed in Reformed circles, agree or disagree with his methodology and/or doctrinal formulations. Is it accurate, however, to assume that what has come to be called biblical theology in Reformed circles does not predate Vos in Reformed theology, at least in proleptic form?³ Was Vos’ method a novel and radical paradigm shift in the history and development of Reformed theological interpretation? Was he a pioneer among Reformed theologians to view the Bible as progressive, organic, redemptive revelation centered upon the concepts of covenant and Christ? Was he the first to place eschatology prior to soteriology in the revelational scheme of the Scriptures? In one sense, as far as the nomenclature, ‘biblical theology’, is concerned, Vos can rightly be understood as its father and founder among Reformed theologians. But labels aside, is there a strand of Reformed biblical theology that predates Vos, labeled as it may be? And more specifically, can John Owen be included in the halls of such Reformed biblical theologians?

Though it is true that the title of the *Soli Deo Gloria* translation of Owen’s *Theologoumena pantodapa, sive, De natura, ortu, progressu et studio, verae theologiae* (Theological Affirmations of All Sorts, Or, Of the Nature, Rise, Progress, and Study, of True Theology⁴ [i.e., *Biblical Theology*] is technically and historically anachronistic, can it be substantiated that Owen, a seventeenth-century English Puritan and Reformed orthodox theologian, stands within the bounds of a Reformed biblical-theological method, though predating the formal and historical inception of what we know as biblical theology in Protestant circles? Does Reformed theology have to wait until Vos to find adherents to a more redemptive-historical approach to Scripture?

The Grandfather of Biblical Theology in the Reformed Tradition: The Federal Theology of the Reformed Orthodox

If Owen (and others) can be classified as something like protological Reformed biblical theologians,⁵ this would not only demand a qualification when identifying Vos as the father of a Reformed biblical theology, but it would also give us insight into the theological methodology of Vos and Reformed orthodoxy, since Owen fits within that historical-theological school of thought and method. Though it certainly is not the intention of this dissertation to strip Vos of Gaffin’s label, if we can prove that what Owen was doing has some essential parallels in what Vos did, that there is a large degree of continuity in their methodology (and theology), several issues will be brought to the table for reassessment and fresh consideration. First, we will be able to assert that Vos resuscitated federal theology⁶ under the rubric of biblical theology as a self-conscious Reformed and confessional theologian. In other words, the grandfather of Reformed biblical theology is the federal theology of the seventeenth-century Reformed

¹ It appears that this label was first attached to Vos by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. Cf. Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), xiv, referenced as *RHBI* here on out.

² Packer in Owen, *BTO*, xi.

³ I am not claiming that Gaffin meant this by his statement referenced above.

⁴ Owen, *BTO*, xii. This is Packer’s translation of the Latin title.

⁵ Cf. Owen, *BTO*, xiii, where Packer says, “Those with a taste for Owen, or for theology, or (best of all) for both, will read this Puritan *proto-Biblical Theology* with joy, . . .” Emphases added.

⁶ We will survey the federal theology of the seventeenth-century Reformed orthodox below.

orthodox. This brings with it some further questions. Why did Vos have to resuscitate federal theology? Why the gap between Owen and the federal theology of Reformed orthodoxy and Vos and his articulation of biblical theology in the Reformed tradition? If there are links between Vos and the Reformed orthodox (and it will be argued that there are several), why the disconnect of time? What happened between Owen and Vos to retard the development of federalism among the Reformed?

Second, we will be able to call into (further) question the many negative claims terminating upon Reformed orthodox interpretive methodology which pit it against Calvin and the earlier Reformed theologians. This view paints Reformed orthodoxy as a rationalistic, neo-Aristotelian, devolutionary movement away from Calvin, Christ, and the Scriptures.

Third, we will have to admit that Owenic federal theology and Vosian biblical theology are compatible with Reformed confessionalism. Neither Vos nor Owen repudiated their confessional commitments in light of their theological methodology and formulation. Neither viewed these issues in an either/or fashion – i.e., *either* federal/biblical theology *or* the Confession; *either* Moses, Christ, and Paul *or* Aristotle; *either* Calvin and the early Reformers *or* post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy. Either (1) they consciously lived with the inconsistencies involved with the antithetical developmental theory of Reformation and post-Reformation Reformed theology or (2) they did not detect any or (3) there were none, at least not antithetically speaking.⁷ For some time, it has been quite fashionable in academic halls to put a wedge between Calvin and the Calvinists, between federal/biblical theology and dogmatic/systematic theology, and between the Bible and the Confession. Some seek to force us to choose between two supposed enemies. Owen and Vos chose both and saw no contradiction in this. In fact, both believed that dogmatic/systematic theology is grounded in the text of Scripture, that federal/biblical theology precedes dogmatics, and that confessional theology (i.e., symbolics) assumes the previous work of exegesis, exegetical synthesis, and dogmatics.

What is Biblical Theology and how does it relate to Federal Theology?

What is biblical theology? This question can be answered both historically and theologically. Historically speaking, it did not appear as an explicit theological discipline until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries during the beginning decades of the critical era. It has undergone development and modification, depending on specific authors and their theological and philosophical presuppositions.⁸

Theologically speaking, biblical theology is a method of interpreting the Bible. For Reformed interpreters, it involves, roughly speaking, the study of the *historia salutis* (i.e., the historical unfolding of salvation as found in the Scriptures). One of the regulating questions of this dissertation is as follows: Does the study of the history of redemption and redemptive-historical formulation predate the historical inception of biblical theology as a distinct theological discipline in Reformed theology? Can the essential elements of biblical theology, understood as the study of the history of redemption, be traced back to at least the time of John Owen and Reformed orthodoxy? Our answer will be a resounding yes!

This dissertation seeks to display that Geerhardus Vos, in many senses, is “Owenic” in his approach to the history of redemption. In fact, several contemporaries of Owen displayed a keen respect for the history of salvation and its organic progress from creation, to fall, to redemption in Christ, to the consummation, as we shall see. This makes Owen a somewhat typical federal theologian and gives us further reason to believe that Vos resuscitated federalism under a new name and in a new and unique historical and theological context.

Some influential Evangelicals have claimed that the post-Reformation era did not view Scripture redemptive-historically, but statically. For instance, while tracing the history of New Testament theology, George Eldon Ladd says:

⁷ We will argue for this third position below.

⁸ Cf. the section below on the history of biblical theology.

The gains in the historical study of the Bible made by the reformers were soon lost in the post-Reformation period, and the Bible was once again used uncritically and unhistorically to support orthodox doctrine. The Bible was viewed not only as a book free from error and contradiction but also *without development or progress* [italics added]. The entire Bible was looked upon as possessing one level of theological value. History was completely lost in dogma, and philology became a branch of dogmatics.⁹

This dissertation takes issue with Ladd and many others. It does so on several fronts: (1) a favorable assessment of the Muller thesis (i.e., the post-Reformation era was not a betrayal of Calvin and the early reformers [cf. Chapter Six]); (2) evidence to the contrary from the seventeenth century itself; and (3) evidence from Geerhardus Vos which shows that he did not view himself as a novel paradigm shift among Reformed theologians and, in fact, was not. Vos viewed his own work in a broader historical context dating back at least to the post-Reformation era. Though Vos' contribution to Reformed theology came at a crucial point in the history of Christian thought and, more specifically, in the early history of the biblical theology movement, his basic methodology can be found in Reformed orthodoxy – witness, John Owen and seventeenth-century Reformed orthodox federal theology. Though this can be shown to be true, it must also be admitted that this method did become somewhat dormant in Reformed theology until it was resuscitated and further developed by Vos. This is most likely due to the effects of the Enlightenment.

The Methodological Approach of the Dissertation

A few words about the methodological approach of the dissertation may help at this juncture. We will examine the methodology and redemptive-historical formulations of Geerhardus Vos (late nineteenth century and early twentieth century) first then go back to examine Owen (seventeenth century). There is an obvious danger in this. We run the risk of anachronistic interpretation. In other words, we run the risk of interpreting Owen in light of Vos and imposing Vos' terminology, methodology, and theology upon Owen. Great care will be taken not to do this. This would turn things upside down and be an illustration of a historical-intepretive fallacy.

A justification for this approach is warranted. Why Vos first then Owen? Consider these well-known and agreed upon facts. First, it is generally agreed that Vos is *somewhat* of a paradigm shift among Reformed theologians in the field of biblical theology.

Second, Vos' methodology is universally accepted as biblical-theological/redemptive-historical. As mentioned above, he is known as the father of a Reformed biblical theology. So, why Vos first? Simply because his theological method is a somewhat well-known commodity in the Reformed tradition. No one doubts his credentials as a Reformed biblical theologian.

Third, surveying the histories of biblical theology (as we shall do) we will find that Owen is *not* mentioned as an adherent to the biblical-theological/redemptive-historical method and that seventeenth-century federalism is mentioned only in passing. However, upon examination of Owen's method in his *Biblical Theology* and elsewhere, we find Owen, and many of his contemporaries, fitting within the parameters of what constitutes biblical theology in the Reformed tradition as supremely exemplified by Vos, though of course not historically speaking.

Fourth, it is commonly held that Post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy tended toward a rationalistic, neo-Aristotelian, hyper-dogmatic theology instead of exegesis and biblical theology. It is argued that the seventeenth century was a movement away from Calvin and, methodologically speaking, a movement away from the Bible as the foundation of theology, and philosophically speaking, a precursor to the devastating rationalism of the eighteenth century. But if what Vos did was, at the very least in seed form, already done by the Reformed orthodox, then accusations hurled at the Reformed orthodox must also be hurled at Vos. As we shall see, however, *in terms of methodology*, the accusations normally hurled at the

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 2. Cf. also, for example, Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, second edition, 1993).

Reformed orthodox do not stick. And if they do not stick on the seventeenth-century men, they cannot stick on Vos.

Fifth, John Owen is generally agreed upon as fitting within the era of Reformed orthodoxy. Granting this to be the case (which we will discuss below), one would assume that his method would have other contemporary adherents. If we can identify his method and show that it was contemporaneous with other Reformed orthodox theologians, we would have to admit that at least some within that school utilized what has come to be known as biblical theology, at least to a degree and obviously utilizing the theological nomenclature of that era.

Sixth, both Vos and Owen subscribed to very similar post-Reformation Reformed orthodox symbolic documents – the Savoy Declaration (Owen) and the Westminster Standards (Vos). If the links mentioned above can be established, we would have to conclude that, at least in the minds of Owen and Vos, federal/biblical theology is a handmaid and friend to symbolics and not its undoing.

In one sense, this dissertation attempts to go from the known (i.e., Vos as a Reformed, confessional, biblical theologian) to the relatively unknown (i.e., Owen as a Reformed, confessional, federal theologian). We will attempt to show that just as Vos was fundamentally anchored to the text of Scripture, so was Owen; just as Vos saw no contradiction with his biblical-theological/redemptive-historical methodology and his confessional commitment, neither did Owen. In fact, both saw a natural relationship between what we know as federal/biblical theology and dogmatics/systematic theology. Neither pitted one against the other in an antithetical manner. Both saw one as foundational to the other and the other dependent upon its foundation.