

*An Interview with D. A. Carson*

# Why Can't We Just Read the Bible?

*In 2003, White Horse Inn co-host Michael Horton interviewed D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. As we feel this subject is still relevant—especially to this issue on “Interpreting Scripture” and in particular to Kevin Vanhoozer’s article (see page 16) on biblical studies versus theology—we are printing it here for our readers.*

**Since you work in the field of New Testament studies, you must occasionally run into people who wonder if systematic theology is friend or foe. Is New Testament scholarship undermined by an attempt to find logical correlations? Doesn't *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone—imply that all I really need to do is read my Bible?**

Certainly there are a lot of people who think that, and historically, in this country, there have been a number of seminaries deeply suspicious not only of systematic theology but of historical theology. They seem to give the impression, sometimes taught explicitly, that provided you have your hermeneutics right, your principles of biblical interpretation, then all you have to do is turn the crank and out falls biblical truth. And there is a sense in which I want to sympathize with this thinking—although I will turn around and critique it—that at the end of the day our final authority is not in our systematic theology or in any creed; our final authority is still Scripture. In theory, everything is revisable by more light from Scripture.

**And a layperson can read the Scriptures and understand the Scriptures.**

Absolutely. It is important to keep saying that. There is no esoteric guild of specialist priests who impose a certain kind of interpreta-

tion on the conscience of believers. And even in practical experience you sometimes see that, don't you? Occasionally you'll find an old woman or man who is semi-literate, and yet such people may have read their Bibles through again and again. Although they can't self-consciously make all the correlations a sophisticated systematics can make, nevertheless they have a kind of nose for error and heresy. Somebody comes along with some screwball idea, and they can immediately say about forty verses that make them question something or other.

**Sort of the way we question our grammar, yet don't know the rules for it.**

Exactly right. And in that sense you want to say even at a practical level, I want people to read and reread their Bibles. God himself says, “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is of a contrite spirit and who trembles at my word.” So it really is important to say that before you start putting in footnotes about the importance of presuppositions and structures and all the rest.

**How do you as a New Testament scholar who trains pastors in a seminary environment answer the common objection: “All I really need is the Bible, give me the original languages. I really don't need**

**systematic or historical theology because I'm working with the primary source. I don't need to learn about what other people have thought about the Bible when I have access to the Bible directly”? And, “Systems tend to press the exegetical data through a grid. Verses aren't allowed to speak for themselves. By the time a system gets hold of the Scriptures, the Scriptures have become a wax nose”? First of all, do you hear this in evangelical or other circles, and how do you respond?**

I think that charge was more common fifteen years ago than it is today, because one of the effects of postmodernism, for good or ill, is to recognize that we do think out of systems, that we do bring our biases with us. To be frank, I think we began that way of looking at things in late modernism rather than in postmodernism, but I think that's changing. I think there's a converse danger now, that every interpretive opinion becomes so equivalent to every other interpretive opinion that it's difficult to say what's right or what's wrong. There are, nevertheless, some people who still take the other stance. Culture is always highly diverse; people come from different backgrounds to any seminary. There is a sense in which, again, I want to be sympathetic. It is possible for your system—or, for that matter, for your epistemology—to be so well in place that it is incorrigible. It cannot be corrected by Scripture; it no longer really listens, and everything gets filtered through it. Even the best interpreters, the most experienced pastors, all of us, do

this sometimes unwittingly. Three years later I could be studying the same passage again and think, “Uh-oh, I really blew that one,” and I realize I brought my baggage with me. So there is a danger along those lines.

But the converse danger of thinking you can do it all yourself from scratch is no less pernicious, and maybe more so. Take an analogy from science: no scientist has to start proving the existence of molecules every time he or she begins an experiment in chemistry. There are all kinds of givens based on what has already been thought through, discovered, or demonstrated before; but every once in a while, one of the scientific theories gets overturned because of new evidence. Nevertheless, any scientist brings an awful lot of presupposition to the next round of experimentation or the like. Similarly, no one, absolutely no one, can read the Bible without some pre-understanding, for example, of God; even if the person is an atheist, the god whose existence he or she is denying is still some kind of god. So you cannot approach the text without bringing baggage with you, in terms of what words mean, in terms of values—whether you think this is serious or not, whether it’s right or wrong—it affects all of it. Then on top of that, it’s sometimes the person who claims to be independent of systems who is, in fact, most shanghaied by a system. So that someone in the West, for example, who is steeped in individualism, will come to a text such as Galatians 3 and interpret the function of the law as a *paidagogos*, a schoolmaster, a tutor to lead us to Christ entirely in individualistic terms because we live in the individualistic world of the West. Whereas the context shows that Paul is thinking primarily of salvation historically; that is, of the function of the law from the giving of the law all the way to Christ. He’s thinking of its function across history, and no doubt that has a bearing on how we think of the

law’s function today. But it’s not primarily talking about the application of the law to the individual; it’s primarily talking about how we should think about the law in its role in redemptive history. We might miss that simply because we’re individualists steeped in Western heritage.

**Do you think there has been a lot of polarization where systematians aren’t always very good exegetes and exegetes aren’t very good systematians? These groups are sort of suspicious of each other, and sometimes that filters into the ministry and the pulpit. Is the forest and the trees analogy useful here? You either sacrifice the trees to the forest in some systematic approaches, or you have painstaking detail on this tree and that tree, but no sense of a forest. Is that the balance we need to strike?**

That’s certainly part of it. I think also that the danger springs from a culture of specialization—more and more knowledge about less and less—so that a person who really is on top of the exegetical literature quite frankly just doesn’t have time to be right on top of the systematic literature, and vice versa. I’ve sometimes told students who say they want to do a Ph.D. in systematic theology, that one doctorate won’t do—they’ll need at least five: one or two in New Testament, at least one in Old Testament, a couple in church history, one in philosophy, and then they can do one in systematics. That’s the problem—the nature of the discipline is integrative and synthetic. If instead people do systematics without any grasp of Scripture, they’re likely to cut themselves off from what they confess to be their authority base, and so they’re not really rigorous.

On the other hand, it has to be said that there are large numbers of New Testament scholars and writers who think so atomistically that they’re ashamed to link two thoughts together. Everything has

to be peculiarly narrow. If they can’t find a whole system in a particular text, they don’t dare link it to some other text where they might help to construct a system. Everything is atomistic.

**So if we end up having suspicions of any kind of organization of Scripture, then we’re going to have trouble with the analogy of Scripture interpreting Scripture—we’re going to become masters of irony in Matthew or experts on the Johannine understanding of “X.” But to see the Bible as a canonical unity is what is increasingly difficult these days and that affects systematic theology.**

It not only affects systematic theology but is implicitly a denial without explicitly saying so; it is an implicit denial of God’s authorship of Scripture. If there’s one mind behind Scripture, then even after you’ve put in all of the explanations about the diversity of genre, vocabulary, idiolect, historical position and stance, and all the rest, there is still one mind behind Scripture. And unless that mind is schizophrenic or utterly confused or terribly fragmented, none of which presumably we want to postulate about God, then there is some sort of cohesion to Scripture, and thus a purely atomistic exegesis is in fact an implicit denial of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. That, in my view, is really frightening.

**So in your estimation, Old and New Testament scholars ought to be at least good enough systematic theologians to see the unity of the canon.**

Yes, absolutely. Not only does Scripture warrant you to construct some sort of system or cohesion, the system—whether you like it or not—is going to help you or hinder you in your interpretation of Scripture. In other words, the Christian who believes that Scripture teaches the deity of Christ does not have to prove that point every time he or

she comes back to the text—that’s part of the given; whereas a naturalist interpreter of Scripture denies that point and therefore will inevitably not see what other people see in Scripture. So your systematic theology needs to be good because—again, whether you like it or not—it is filtering your reading of Scripture. There is a sense in which Scripture shapes your systematic theology, and that is the direction in which things should ultimately go; nevertheless, your theology—how rigorously and carefully it is constructed, the baggage you bring—is your systematic. Whether it’s a nicely thought through systematic or not, you bring baggage. And this helps you or hinders you in your interpretation of Scripture: the questions you put to a text, the kinds of answers you give, your knowledge of how the text has been interpreted in the past by other Christians and so on—all of these filter into how good an exegete you are. And I would want to argue that ideally, provided we still let Scripture speak and the ultimate authority base is in Scripture, responsible knowledge of historical theology and responsible knowledge of systematics will enrich our exegesis of Scripture rather than limit it.

You mentioned a sort of neo-fundamentalism on the right as a problem initially. Do you think when it comes to this question of systematic theology, there is a suspicion for different reasons both on the left and on the right of systematic theology—that the suspicion on the right is something close to what we generally refer to as biblicism, where certainly anybody who thought that just by finding a doctrine taught on the surface of a cluster of texts is the only way you could justify believing in a particular doctrine? You run into problems with the Trinity. You run into problems with the two natures of Christ. Here you have to engage in a synthetic

operation where you’re taking the fruit of exegesis and analyzing it in its logical connections. Do you think this is too little understood, that there are so many assumptions, such as belief in the Trinity, that are really the product of the church’s reflection on the implications of what is taught in Scripture, rather than a lot of direct references?

Where systematic theology tries to bring together what is genuinely taught in Scripture to make sense of them, then you’re talking about the implications of Scripture. So it is important to see that in any systematic system there are different levels of authority base grounded in Scripture. In other words, I think I should always be open to thinking afresh about how some bits can be put together, just as I should always be open to correction in exegesis. It is what Scripture says that has the final voice, rather than precisely how I’ve got the bits together.

There is a good analogy from computers. You want the direct line of flow to be from Scripture through biblical theology with input from historical theology to construct your systematic theology. But the fact of the matter is, there are also feedback loops—information loops that go back and reshape how you do any bit of it. Now, you don’t want the loops to take over the final voice. But at the same time, those loops do shape you whether you like it or not, and therefore you need to use them intelligently.

Does that also suggest that a systematic theological reading of Scripture is no less a reading of Scripture than any other approach?

That’s true. The danger is that sometimes a systematic reading of Scripture that tends to be atemporal—it’s looking for the logical cohesions—may start overlooking the historical grounding of texts. So it is a reading of Scripture, but just

because it is systematic does not necessarily mean it is correct. It has to be, in principle, revisable. Or it might be one lens, but it’s not the only thing that’s to be said.

Let’s take the current debates, for example, about justification by grace through faith and the whole New Perspective on Paul. There is no doubt in my mind that the New Perspective has brought up some weaknesses in some systematics that have developed especially in the last century or so, not least in German Lutheranism and so forth—questioned rightly from the basis of sources whether or not the simple merit theology we have read into Second Temple Judaism is exactly right. There’s no doubt that this is correct. On the other hand, when it has gone as far as it has to construct whole new systems of theology, in my view not only is the exegesis wrong but the history is wrong and now the systematics are wrong as well. Some of the debates talk as if nobody has ever thought about this before. Whereas careful reading of history shows they have been thrashed through at deep levels, without anybody wanting to say that Luther or Melancthon or Calvin got it all right, nevertheless it’s important to recognize that there has been deep analysis of this before. Thus, there is a kind of a tension until you sort it out and come to grips with whatever new historical insight has been provided, while at the same time not losing what has been genuinely found in Scripture and promulgated as the confession of the church.

What do you think of Geerhardus Vos’s comment: “Biblical theology draws a line”—meaning the historical unfolding of redemption and revelation—“and systematic theology draws a circle,” showing the logical relations? Is that a fair description, do you think, of the differences and are both needed? The circle part of the analogy is less tight as an analogy. But it seems to

me he is right to say that biblical theology organizes its material first and foremost in a linear way. That is to say, it takes into account time; it is working things out across redemptive history. There are other elements to biblical theology as well. Instead of asking what the doctrine of God is, it is more likely to ask about the contribution of the book of Isaiah to the doctrine of God. In other words, it listens more closely to the peculiar contributions of individual books and corpora and so on. In that sense, it is more textually driven. Whereas systematic theology—precisely because it is looking at the whole and tends to be more interested also in relating the whole to the contemporary culture—does that better than biblical theology. It nevertheless is, for the same reason, one step removed from the text, and there is a sense in which one needs to be mature in the arena of biblical theology—there’s another Ph.D. to throw in there—before one constructs a really text-sensitive systematic theology. I think it’s one of the reasons a fair number of systematic theologians today are really less biblically driven than historically driven. They say they’re doing systematic theology, but what they’re really doing is throwing in a few texts here and there and then interacting deeply with the Reformed tradition or the Lutheran tradition or the Wesleyan tradition or whatever, and not really interacting all that much with the text. I think we need more systematicians who, though informed by historical theology, are steeped in biblical theology and have a good competence in basic exegesis and historical questions as well.

**There are going to be a lot of people who think this is fairly interesting, but that it’s like listening to a conversation on NPR about physics. It’s interesting, but it’s not my field. Why should the average Christian not say that about systematic theology?**

Because every Christian—I don’t care how old you are in the Lord or how learned you are or how much schooling you’ve had—every time he or she opens the Bible is bringing baggage to the text. In that sense, all of us are systematicians, whether we like it or not. That is simply inescapable. It is part of being a thinking, sentient being. Therefore the only question is whether or not it’s good theology that we bring to the text.

One thing you can do if you’re a reading Christian is make sure you mix your reading; in other words, you ought to read some commentaries. If you’ve never read a commentary, start at a light level with “The Bible Speaks Today” series—things that actually work from the text, that are edifying, informed, godly. But you also need to read some biblical theology and some systematic theology, just as you also need to read some books on prayer and on mission as well. In other words, I think serious reading Christians need to read broadly rather than to read only one kind of literature. If you read only one kind of literature, that shapes you too in a way that may not be all that helpful.

**I think of the person sitting at home thinking about the benefits of doing what you’re talking about here but doesn’t have the foggiest idea of where to begin, and so just reading the one-minute Bible devotional every day is about as much as can be handled at this point. How do you stretch that person to go the next step and what resources would you recommend?**

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once spoke with a group of medical students who complained that in the midst of their training and the ferocious work hours they really didn’t even have time to read the Bible and have their devotions and so on. He bristled and said, “I am a doctor. I have been where you are. You have time for what you want to

do.” After a long pause he said, “I make only one exception: the mother of preschool-aged children does not have time and emotional resources.”

It is important to recognize, too, that there are stages of life where you really don’t have time to do much, and you shouldn’t feel guilty about it. Children will sap you. If you have three children under the age of six, forget serious reading unless you have the money for a nanny. When our youngest finally went off to kindergarten, we celebrated that day—I took my wife out for lunch. Only then could she get back into reading again. It’s the way life is. You have to be realistic.

Having said that, I think for a lot of laypeople it’s important to read more than a verse a day—a verse a day to keep the devil away. It’s important to read large chunks of Scripture, to read the Bible through. And at the risk of wanting to become a peddler, that’s really why I wrote the two-volume set *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God’s Word* (Crossway, 2006). It’s based on the Bible reading system by Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–43), so that a person is reading through the whole Bible but at the same time reading some edifying material that is building a whole biblical theology.

McCheyne’s reading is four chapters a day, which is probably too much for some people. On January 1, you would read Genesis 1, Ezra 1, Matthew 1, and Acts 1. After one year of this, you would have gone through the New Testament and the Psalms twice, and the rest of the Old Testament once. But if, on the other hand, you were simply to read two of the four columns a day, then you would cover that same amount of material over two years, which is doable. So in volume 1, I wrote a one-page meditation on one of the chapters in the first two columns, and volume 2 is on one of the chapters in

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the second two columns. This way you are actually reading through all of Scripture but getting some biblical-theological meditation, reflection that aims to be edifying but also aims to give you a way of looking at the whole Bible—a whole interpretative grid rather than simply a kind of disparate verse to give you an instant edifying kick but isn't teaching you how to think. So there are tools like that around; mine is certainly not the only one.

If a person is beginning to look for commentaries, I think this is one area where good pastors can help. If I were returning to pastoral ministry today, one of the first things I would try to get hold of would be the bookstall, because often churches with bookstalls have the most amazing sentimental rubbish there. It really is important

either to control that yourself or to give it to somebody with really good judgment. This can become an immense resource.

There are resources for pastors, too—books that survey New Testament commentaries, for example, at all kinds of levels. If you become interested in a study in Romans or in Habakkuk, a good pastor can tell you—or if they don't know, they can find out in fifteen minutes on a computer—what books to start with if you've never read anything at all in the area. It really is important to talk to people about that. Even a junior pastor or someone with seminary training who feels constrained to start preaching from the Psalms might well ask a more experienced pastor: "What are the best three commentaries I must read to get going on this? Where do I start?" Ask questions. Nobody

knows everything, but there's always somebody around who either knows the answers or knows somebody who does know the answers.

The same needs to be said in the arena of systematic theology. If you've never read anything, then a one-volume work on systematic theology designed for laypeople by someone like J. I. Packer is one way to go. There are lots of know-what-you-believe sorts of books to start you off thinking synthetically, and then you can move up to the more serious ones.