



**Theme Classic:
Johann Philipp
Gabler: “On the
Proper Distinction
Between Biblical and
Dogmatic Theology”
(1787)**

In 1787 Johann Philipp Gabler gave his inaugural address, *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*, at the University of Altdorf. In what Gabler judged a “brief speech” (and surely it was), he attempted to distinguish between biblical theology and dogmatic theology—the former an attempt in understanding the “sacred authors” on their own terms (and subsequently in relation to one another) using historical methods and reason; the latter an attempt to systematize those universal truths mined by biblical theology for application in a contemporary time and situation. Though Gabler’s ideas were shared by others during his time, his address crystallized a viewpoint and shift in thought in his day that continues to be observed by many theologians today: not only is biblical theology distinct from dogmatic theology, it should be the foundation on which dogmatic theology is built. Most scholars recognize the address as significant in the development of biblical theology as a discipline in and of itself. Not all are equally impressed with Gabler’s distinction, but in any case, it surely raises important questions inherent to biblical interpretation and theology. Further, what Gabler delineated as the task of biblical theology is the sort of undertaking that G. K. Beale and James Hamilton have each respectively attempted in their recent scholarly works, the ideas of which appear in their respective articles in this issue of the *MJT*. The English translation is reprinted here with the kind permission of Professor John Sandys-Wunsch.¹ Here, then, is the famous address of J. P. Gabler who is known by some as the father of biblical theology.

¹ The translation, along with an extensive analysis of its history and significance, originally appeared in John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” *SJT* 33 (1980): 135-158 (esp. 134-44).

An Oration

ON THE PROPER DISTINCTION BETWEEN BIBLICAL AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY AND THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF EACH

[W]hich was given on March 30, 1787, by Magister Johann Philipp Gabler as part of the inaugural duty of the Professor Ordinarius of Theology in Alma Altorfina

Magnificent Lord, Rector of the Academy;
Most Generous Lord, prefect of this town and surrounding area; Most revered, learned, experienced and esteemed men;
Most excellent and most celebrated professors of all faculties;
Patrons of the college, united in your support; and you, students, a select group with respect to your nobility of both virtue and family;
Most splendid and worthy audience of all faculties:

All who are devoted to the sacred faith of Christianity, most worthy listeners, profess with one united voice that the sacred books, especially of the New Testament, are the one clear source from which all true knowledge of the Christian religion is drawn. And they profess too that these books are the only secure sanctuary to which we can flee in the face of the ambiguity and vicissitude of human knowledge, if we aspire to a solid understanding of divine matters and if we wish to obtain a firm and certain hope of salvation. Given this agreement of all these religious opinions, why then do these points of contention arise? Why these fatal discords of the various sects? Doubtless this dissension originates in part from the occasional obscurity of the sacred Scriptures themselves; in part from that depraved custom of reading one's own opinions and judgments into the Bible, or from a servile manner of interpreting it. Doubtless the dissension also arises from the neglected distinction between religion and theology; and finally it arises from an inappropriate combination of the simplicity and ease of biblical theology with the subtlety and difficulty of dogmatic theology.

Surely it is the case that the sacred books, whether we look at the words alone or at the concepts they convey, are frequently and in many

places veiled by a deep obscurity—and this is easily demonstrated; for one thing it is self-evident and for another a host of useless exegetical works proclaims it. The causes of this state of affairs are many: first the very nature and quality of the matters transmitted in these books; second, the unusualness of the individual words and of the mode of expression as a whole; third, the way of thinking behind times and customs very different from our own; fourth and finally, the ignorance of many people of the proper way of interpreting these books, whether it is due to the ancient characteristics of the text as a whole or to the language peculiar to each scriptural writer. But before this audience it is of little importance to describe each and every one of these causes, since it is self-evident that the obscurity of the Holy Scriptures, whatever its source, must give rise to a great variety of opinion. Also one need not discuss at length that unfortunate fellow who heedlessly dared to attribute some of his own most insubstantial opinions to the sacred writers themselves—how he increased the unhappy fate of our religion! There may even be some like him who would like to solidify the frothiness of such opinions about the sacred authors; for it is certainly something to give a divine appearance to their human ideas. Those completely unable to interpret correctly must inevitably inflict violence upon the sacred books; truly we even notice that often the wisest and most skilled of interpreters goes astray, so much so that, disregarding the laws of correct interpretation, they indulge their own ingenuity for its own sake. And let us not think then that it is suitable and legitimate for those who use the sacred words to tear what pleases them from its context in the sacred Scriptures; for it happens again and again that, when they cling to the words and do not pay attention to the mode of expression peculiar to the sacred writers, they express something other than the true sense of these authors. And if they continue to use metaphors when the context demands universal notions, then they may persuade themselves to say that some meaning which they brought to the sacred texts in the first place, actually comes from the sacred texts.²

Another cause of discord, a most serious one, is the neglected distinction between religion and theology; for if some people apply to

² The best things to read in this connection are the observations truly and learnedly made by the late immortal J. A. Ernesti in his learned work *Pro grammatica interpretatione librorum sacrorum* and *De vanitate philosophantium in interpretatione librorum sacrorum*, in *Opuscula Philologica* (2nd ed.; Leiden, Luchtman, 1764), 219-32 and 233-51; and the very distinguished Morus in *Prolus. de discrimine sensus et significationis in interpretando* (Leipzig, 1777).

religion what is proper to theology, it is easy to understand that there would be enormous room for the sharpest differences of opinion, and these differences will be even more destructive because each party to the quarrel will only with great reluctance surrender what he considers to pertain to religion. However, after the work of Ernesti, Semler, Spalding, Toellner, and others, most recently the venerable Tittmann³ has shown us brilliantly that there is considerable difference between religion and theology. For, if I may quote this excellent scholar, religion is passed on by the doctrine in the Scriptures, teaching what each Christian ought to know and believe and do in order to secure happiness in this life and in the life to come. Religion then, is every-day, transparently clear knowledge; but theology is subtle, learned knowledge, surrounded by a retinue of many disciplines, and by the same token derived not only from the sacred Scripture but also from elsewhere, especially from the domain of philosophy and history. It is therefore a field elaborated by human discipline and ingenuity. It is also a field that is advanced by careful and discriminating observation that experiences various changes along with other fields. Not only does theology deal with things proper to the Christian religion, but it also explains carefully and fully all connected matters; and finally it makes a place for them with the subtlety and rigor of logic. But religion for the common man has nothing to do with this abundance of literature and history.

But this sad and unfortunate difference of opinion has always been and, alas, always will be associated with that readiness to mix completely diverse things, for instance the simplicity of what they call biblical theology with the subtlety of dogmatic theology; although it certainly seems to me that the one thing must be more sharply distinguished from the other than has been common practice up to now. And what I should like to establish here is the necessity of making this distinction and the method to be followed. This is what I have decided to expound in this brief speech of mine in so far as the weakness of my powers allows and in so far as it can be done. Therefore, most honored listeners of all faculties⁴ I strongly beg your indulgence. Would you grant me open ears and minds and be so kind as to follow me as I venture to consider these increasingly important matters. I pray and ask each and every one of you for your attention as far as is necessary so that I may speak my mind as clearly as possible.

³ C. C. Tittmann, *Progr(amm) de discrimine theologiae et religionis* (Wittemberg, 1782).

⁴ [A.O.O.H. Presumably an abbreviation for *Auditores omnium ordinum honorabilis.*]

There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors. Biblical theology, as is proper to historical argument, is always in accord with itself when considered by itself—although even biblical theology when elaborated by one of the disciplines may be fashioned in one way by some and in another way by others. But dogmatic theology is subject to a multiplicity of change along with the rest of the humane disciplines; constant and perpetual observation over many centuries shows this enough and to spare. How greatly the churches of the learned differ from the first beginnings of the Christian religion; how many systems the fathers attributed to each variety of era and setting!⁵ For history teaches that there is a chronology and a geography to theology itself. How much the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages, covered with the thick gloom of barbarity, differs from the discipline of the fathers! Even after the light of the doctrine of salvation had emerged from these shadows, every point of difference in theology was endured even in the purified church, if I may refer to Socinian and Arminian factions. Or if I may refer to the Lutheran church alone, the teaching of Chemnitz and Gerhard is one thing, that of Calov another, that of Museus and Baier another, that of Budde another, that of Pfaff and Mosheim another, that of Baumgarten another, that of Carpov another, that of Michaelis and Heilmann another, that of Ernesti and Zachariae another, that of Teller another, that of Walch and Carpzov another, that of Semler another, and that of Doederlein finally another. But the sacred writers are surely not so changeable that they should in this fashion be able to assume these different types and forms of theological doctrine. What I do not wish to be said, however, is that all things in theology should be considered uncertain or doubtful or that all things should be allowed according to human will alone. But let those things that have been said up to now be worth this much: that we distinguish carefully the divine from the human, that we establish some distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, and after we have separated those things which in the sacred books refer most immediately to their own times and to the men of those times from those pure notions which divine providence wished to be characteristic of all times and places, let us then construct the foundation of our philosophy upon religion and let us designate with

⁵ [The translation here represents a conjectural emendation of the untranslatable Latin text. *Quanta* has been added before *Patres*.]

some care the objectives of divine and human wisdom. Exactly thus will our theology be made more certain and more firm, and there will be nothing further to be feared for it from the most savage attack from its enemies. The late Professor Zachariae did this very capably,⁶ but I hardly need to remind you of the fact that he left some things for others to emend, define more correctly, and amplify. However, everything comes to this, that on the one hand we hold firmly to a just method for cautiously giving shape to our interpretations of the sacred authors; and on the other that we rightly establish the use in dogmatics of these interpretations and dogmatics' own objectives.

The first task then in this most serious matter is to gather carefully the sacred ideas and, if they are not expressed in the sacred Scriptures, let us fashion them ourselves from passages that we compare with each other. In order that the task proceed productively and that nothing is done fearfully or with partiality, it is necessary to use complete caution and circumspection in all respects. Before all else, the following will have to be taken into account: in the sacred books are contained the opinions not of a single man nor of one and the same era or religion. Yet all the sacred writers are holy men and are armed with divine authority; but not all attest to the same form of religion; some are doctors of the Old Testament of the same elements that Paul himself designated with the name 'basic elements';⁷ others are of the newer and better Christian Testament. And so the sacred authors, however much we must cherish them with equal reverence because of the divine authority that has been imprinted on their writings, cannot all be considered in the same category if we are referring to their use in dogmatics. I would certainly not suggest that a holy man's own native intelligence and his natural way of knowing things are destroyed altogether by inspiration. Finally since especially in this context it is next asked what each of these men felt about divine things (this can be understood not from any traditional appeal to divine authority but from their books) I should judge it sufficient in any event that we do not appear to concede anything which lacks some proof. I should also judge that when it is a case of the use in dogmatics of biblical ideas, then it is of no consequence under what authority these men wrote, but what they perceived this occasion of divine inspiration clearly transmitted and what they perceived it finally meant. That being the case

⁶ G. T. Zachariae in his noted work *Biblische Theologie* (5 vols.; Göttingen and Kiel, 1771, 1772, 1774, 1775, 1786).

⁷ [The expression from Gal 4.9 is cited in Greek in Gabler's text. It is translated here as Gabler understood it but many modern commentators would interpret it otherwise.]

it is necessary, unless we want to labor uselessly, to distinguish among each of the periods in the Old and New Testaments, each of the authors, and each of the manners of speaking which each used as a reflection of time and place, whether these manners are historical or didactic or poetic. If we abandon this straight road, even though it is troublesome and of little delight, it can only result in our wandering into some deviation or uncertainty. Therefore we must carefully collect and classify each of the ideas of each patriarch—Moses, David, and Solomon, and of each prophet with special attention to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Zachariah, Haggai, Malachi, and the rest; and for many reasons we ought to include the apocryphal books for this same purpose; also we should include the ideas from the epoch of the New Testament, those of Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, and James. Above all, this process is completed in two ways: the one is in the legitimate interpretation of passages pertinent to this procedure; the other is in the careful comparison of the ideas of all the sacred authors among themselves.

The first of these two involves many difficulties.⁸ For not only must we consider here the linguistic problem of the language then in use, which in the New Testament is both graeco-Hebrew and the vulgar Greek of the time; we must also consider that which is peculiar to each writer; that is, the uses of the meaning that a particular word may have in one certain place whether that meaning be broader or narrower. Also we should add the reason for the divergence of these uses and explain, if possible, the common meaning in which several instances of the same word fall together.⁹ But we must also investigate the power and reason of the meaning itself; what is the primary idea of the word, and what merely added to it. For the interpreter who is on his guard must not stop short at the primary idea in the word, but he must also press on to the secondary idea which has been added to it either through long use or through ingenuity or through scholarly use of the word, and in so doing one may certainly make the most egregious of blunders. Let us not by applying tropes¹⁰ forge new dogmas about which the authors themselves

⁸ The late Professor Ernesti warned us of this problem in his distinguished fashion in his two works *De difficultatibus N.T. recte interpretandi* and *De difficultate interpretationis grammatica N.T.*, in *Opuscula Philologica*, 198-218 and 252-87.

⁹ That excellent man S. F. N. Morus in his *Prolus. de nexu significacionum eiusdem verbi* (Leipzig, 1776) has taught us what caution must be observed in interpreting the relationship amongst meanings of the same word.

¹⁰ [This is a technical term referring to allegorical or similar methods of extracting a ‘spiritual’ meaning from a text.]

never thought. Not only in prophetic or poetic books but also in the writings of the Apostles there are often improper uses of words which should be traced either to an abundance of genius or to the traditional usage of opponents, or to the use of words familiar to the first readers.¹¹ Up to now this is mostly done when we are comparing carefully many opinions of the same author, such as Paul; in comparing many things and words, we reduce to one idea and thing the many passages which, although variously expressed, show the same meaning. Morus¹² recently showed and illustrated all this in a distinguished fashion—a very great man whose reputation is his monument. Finally one must properly distinguish whether the Apostle is speaking his own words or those of others; whether he is moved only to describe some opinion or truly to prove it; and if he wants to do the latter, does he repeat the argument from the basic nature of the doctrine of salvation, or from the sayings of the books of the Old Testament, and even accommodating them to the sense of the first readers? For although the opinions of the Apostles deserve our trust, so that we may easily get along without some part of their argument, the first readers nonetheless wanted the proofs that were appropriate to their own sense and judgment. Therefore, it is of great interest whether the Apostle proposes some opinion as a part of Christian doctrine or some opinion that is shaped to the needs of the time, which must be considered merely premises, as the logicians call them. If we rightly hold on to all these things, then indeed we shall draw out the true sacred ideas typical of each author; certainly not all the ideas, for there is no place for everything in the books that have come down to us, but at least those ideas which the opportunity or the necessity for writing had shaped in their souls. Nonetheless, there is a sufficient number of ideas, and usually of such a kind that those that have been omitted can then be inferred without difficulty, if they constitute a single principle of opinion expressly declared, or if they are connected to the ideas that are stated in some necessary fashion. This process, however, requires considerable caution.

At this point we must pass on to the other part of the task, namely to a careful and sober comparison of the various parts attributed to each testament. Then, with Morus, the best of men, as our guide, each single

¹¹ The distinguished J. A. Noesselt did this in his *Disp. de discernenda propria et topica dictione* (Halle, 1762).

¹² That great man dealt with this first in his *Disp. de notionibus universis in Theologia* and then in his *Prog. de utilitate notionum universarum in Theologia* (Leipzig, 1782).

opinion must be examined for its universal ideas, especially for those which are expressly read in this or that place in the Holy Scriptures, but according to this rule: that each of the ideas is consistent with its own era, its own testament, its own place of origin, and its own genius. Each one of these categories which is distinct in cause from the others should be kept separate. And if this cautionary note is disregarded, it may happen that the benefit from the universal ideas will give way to the worst sort of damage to the truth, and it will render useless and will destroy all the work which had been brought together in diligently isolating the opinions of each author. If, however, this comparison with the help of the universal notions is established in such a way that for each author his own work remains unimpaired, and it is clearly revealed wherein the separate authors agree in a friendly fashion, or differ among themselves; then finally there will be the happy appearance of biblical theology, pure and unmixed with foreign things, and we shall at last have the sort of system for biblical theology that Tiedemann elaborated with such distinction for Stoic philosophy.

When these opinions of the holy men have been carefully collected from Holy Scripture and suitably digested, carefully referred to the universal notions, and cautiously compared among themselves, the question of their dogmatic use may then profitably be established, and the goals of both biblical and dogmatic theology correctly assigned. Under this heading one should investigate with great diligence which opinions have to do with the unchanging testament of Christian doctrine, and therefore pertain directly to us; and which are said only to men of some particular era or testament. For among other things it is evident that the universal argument within the holy books is not designed for men of every sort; but the great part of these books is rather restricted by God's own intention to a particular time, place, and sort of man. Who, I ask, would apply to our times the Mosaic rites which have been invalidated by Christ, or Paul's advice about women veiling themselves in church? Therefore the ideas of the Mosaic law have not been designated for any dogmatic use, neither by Jesus and his Apostles nor by reason itself. By the same token we must diligently investigate what in the books of the New Testament was said as an accommodation to the ideas or the needs of the first Christians and what was said in reference to the unchanging idea of the doctrine of salvation; we must investigate what in the sayings of the Apostles is truly divine, and what perchance merely human. And at this point finally the question comes up most opportunely of the whys

and wherefores of theopneustia.¹³ This matter, to be sure very difficult, is, in my opinion at least, rather incorrectly inferred from the sayings of the Apostles, in which they make mention of a certain divine inspiration, since these individual passages are very obscure and ambiguous. However, we must beware, if we wish to deal with these things with reason and not with fear or bias, not to press those meanings of the Apostles beyond their just limits, especially since only the effects of the inspirations and not their causes, are perceived by the senses. But if I am judge of anything, everything must be accomplished by exegetical observation only, and that with constant care, and compared with the things spoken of and promised by our Savior in this matter. In this way it may finally be established whether all the opinions of the Apostles, of every type and sort altogether, are truly divine, or rather whether some of them, which have no bearing on salvation, were left to their own ingenuity.

Thus, as soon as all these things have been properly observed and carefully arranged, at last a clear sacred Scripture will be selected with scarcely any doubtful readings, made up of passages which are appropriate to the Christian religion of all times. These passages will show with unambiguous words the form of faith that is truly divine; the *dicta classica*¹⁴ properly so called, which can then be laid out as the fundamental basis for a more subtle dogmatic scrutiny. For only from these methods can those certain and undoubted universal ideas be singled out, those ideas which alone are useful in dogmatic theology. And if these universal notions are derived by a just interpretation from those *dicta classica*, and those notions that are derived are carefully compared, and those notions that are compared are suitably arranged, each in its own place, so that the proper connection and provable order of doctrines that are truly divine may stand revealed; truly then the result is biblical theology in the stricter sense of the word which we know the late Zachariae to have pursued in the preparation of his well-known work.¹⁵ And finally, unless we want to follow uncertain arguments, we must so

¹³ [This is a transcription of the term Gabler uses in Greek script. ‘Theopneustia’ was often used for ‘inspiration’ in the eighteenth-century debates on the subject.]

¹⁴ [This is a technical expression that refers to the standard collection of proof texts in the orthodox theology of the eighteenth century. G. T. Zachariae had been the first to challenge the usefulness of these lists of texts isolated from their context.]

¹⁵ [The remainder of Gabler’s address is not concerned with biblical theology but with the polite formalities of the occasion. Merk translates this section in his work.]

build only upon these firmly established foundations of biblical theology, again taken in the stricter sense as above, a dogmatic theology adapted to our own times. However, the nature of our age urgently demands that we then teach accurately the harmony of divine dogmatics and the principles of human reason; then, by means of art and ingenuity by which this can happen, let us so elaborate each and every chapter of doctrine that no abundance is lacking in any part—neither subtlety, whether in proper arrangement of passages or the correct handling of arguments, nor elegance in all its glory, nor human wisdom, primarily philosophy and history. Thus the manner and form of dogmatic theology should be varied, as Christian philosophy especially is,¹⁶ according to the variety both of philosophy and of every human point of view of that which is subtle, learned, suitable and appropriate, elegant and graceful; biblical theology itself remains the same, namely in that it deals only with those things which holy men perceived about matters pertinent to religion, and is not made to accommodate our point of view.¹⁷

¹⁶ J. G. Toellner, *Theologische Untersuchungen* (Riga, 1772) I. 264ff.

¹⁷ [Here our translation differs from Merk's 'biblical theology in a stricter sense than Zachariae followed'. The Latin is ambiguous at this point, but in the next sentence the expression 'stricter sense' is used without any direct comparison. Furthermore, Gabler is very dependent on Zachariae here in his reference to the *dicta classica* and therefore he seems to be making this remark in connexion with rather than as a contrast to Zachariae's position. At all events there is no real difference between Gabler's and Zachariae's approach to biblical theology on this point.]