

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#1—Introduction¹

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A theology is a system of belief about God or a god or even multiple gods. Everyone has a theology. The Buddhist has a theology. The Christian Scientist has a theology. The atheist has a theology (it's very concise: "I believe that God doesn't exist"). For the person who claims to be under the saving work of Christ, however, the question is whether or not his system of belief matches what the Bible says. David Wells has written a powerful and perceptive book on the devaluation of theology among evangelicals—*No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*. Concerning the universality of theologies he says:

We all have our theologies, for we all have a way of putting things together in our own minds that, if we are Christian, has a shape that arises from our knowledge of God and his Word. We might not be conscious of the process. Indeed, we frequently are not. But at the very least we will organize our perceptions into some sort of pattern that seems to make sense to us. The question at issue, then, is not *whether* we will have a theology but whether it will be a good or bad one, whether we will become conscious of our thinking processes or not, and more particularly, whether we will learn to bring all of our thoughts into obedience to Christ or not. (3)

Some people believe that there is something unbiblical about doctrine or theology. They say something like, "Just give me the Bible. Don't give me human opinions." The problem with this is that as soon as anyone speaks about the Bible (unless he simply reads verses, in which case he is reflecting the decisions of translators, which in turn involve opinions about the Bible), he is rendering an opinion. When a person says "Don't give me doctrine" he is really saying "Don't give me your doctrine, for I prefer mine (although I won't call it that)."

My purpose in this series of studies, which will cover the whole range of systematic theology, will be to help you to make your belief system come into line with what the Bible actually says.

The definition of systematic theology

A frightening term to some, systematic theology is simply the attempt to draw together in our own words all that we understand about the Bible and its relation to humanity. Here is a definition:

Systematic theology is the organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.*

A theological statement or point organizes and summarizes what we believe the Bible says. All of these together become a whole theology. Done carefully and with organization, it is systematic theology.

(You should master definitions in this series that are marked with an asterisk.)

The practicality of systematic theology and its value in the evangelical world today

Systematic theology was once called the queen of the sciences. It has long since fallen on hard times. It is not that people are not talking about spiritual things. They are. It is not that they are not writing books and making formulations of beliefs. They are. What we don't see enough of are 1) a respect for the Bible as

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revealed truth, 2) the organized study of what the Bible says and 3) the willingness to apply conclusions to life. Satan is always active and is most happy when we disregard what the Bible actually says. The results for the life of an individual and for the lives of all those in the evangelical world are the same: increased conformity to the world and decreased love for God and effectiveness for Him. Because we always want to believe something, we fill the biblical theology vacuum with what the world tells us to believe.

S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., says that “Christian morality and life is the fruit that grows from the tree of Christian doctrine. Wrong doctrine leads to wrong living, right doctrine leads to right living.” (“The Idea, Material and Method of Systematic Theology”)

Bruce Ware speaks of the lack of biblical conviction prevalent today:

Our day certainly is not known for its strong backbone or sharp boundary lines. To the contrary, we live in an era that likes to be defined more by what we hold in common in the center of our faith than by doctrines that distinguish us. (Ware, *Their God Is Too Small*, 8)

Similarly, David Wells speaks of the evangelical Church “plunging into astounding theological illiteracy.” (4) He rightly believes that “theology is a knowledge that belongs first and foremost to the people of God and that the proper and primary audience for theology is therefore the Church, not the learned guild.” (6) He observes that “many in the Church have now turned in upon themselves and substituted for the knowledge of God a search for the knowledge of self.” (7)

He points out that

We are seeing on a social scale that is without precedent the mass experimentation with and adoption of the values of modernity. . . .

The Christian mind in the midst of modernity is like the proverbial frog in the pot beneath which a fire has been kindled. Because the water temperature rises slowly, the frog remains unaware of the danger until it is too late. In the same way, the Church often seems to be blithely unaware of the peril that now surrounds it. (91-92)

And so because biblically sound theology has been divorced from the way Christians live and has thus lessened their impact on society, Wells asserts

It may be the case that Christian faith, which has made many easy alliances with modern culture in the past few decades, is also living in a fool’s paradise, comforting itself about all of the things that God is doing in society (which is the most commonly heard religious version of this idea of progress) while it is losing its character, if not its soul. (68)

Wells’ key point about theology is that

[It] is disappearing in the sense that while its articles of belief are still professed, they are no longer defining what it means to be an evangelical or how evangelicalism should be practiced. At its center there is now a vacuum into which modernity is pouring, and the result is a faith that, unlike historic orthodoxy, is no longer defining itself theologically. (109)

Speaking of the detail of biblical theology and its neglect today, which he summarizes as a disappearance of conviction (132), Wells says:

In an extraordinary fashion, then, the theological wheel has turned full circle. Evangelicals, no less than the Liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in

favor of “life.” . . . Evangelicals today only have to believe that God can work dramatically within the narrow fissure of internal experience; they have lost interest (or perhaps they can no longer sustain interest) in what the doctrines of creation, common grace, and providence once meant for Christian believers, and even in those doctrines that articulate Christ’s death such as justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. It is enough for them simply to know that Christ somehow died for people. (131)

The result of the lack of biblical theology in the lives of Christians is that

The virtues of the old privacy, such as reticence and modesty, are looked upon today as maladies. What was once unseemly is now commonplace. What was once instinct is now truth. What was once feeling is now belief. Then the best were always people of conviction; now they seldom are. Then self-control was virtue; now it is bondage. . . . In short, whereas once we were directed by a culture that had originally learned its habits from the Christian faith, we are now being directed by a culture that has learned its habits from the psychologists—and evangelicals in large numbers have come to assume that this is actually what faith is all about. (168-169)

Where self is dominant as it is in our culture, the effect on Christians is profound:

Where God’s place in the world is reduced to the domain of private consciousness, his external acts of redemption are trimmed to fit the experience of personal salvation, his providence in the world diminishes to whatever is necessary to ensure one’s having a good day, his Word becomes intuition, and conviction fades into evanescent opinion. Theology becomes therapy, and all the telltale symptoms of the therapeutic model of faith begin to surface. The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one’s self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self. (183)

The Bible clearly links sound teaching with lives that please God. Perhaps the most powerful passage on this is 2 Tim. 3:14-17:

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Key related terms

The word *doctrine* is used by some to describe systematized statements about the Bible. This word can actually be used with regard to any subject. It simply denotes any portion of a system of ideas, belief, or study. There is doctrine in the field of sociology, in particle physics, in microbiology and in literary criticism. In a sense, doctrine (when it refers to biblical studies) and theology amount to the same thing. Both are concerned with making organized summary statements about what we believe the Bible is saying.

There are different uses of the word *theology*. Systematic theology, as defined by a conservative Protestant, attempts to organize data from the Bible about God and His activities. It may draw on history, philosophy and other fields. It is important to note that in the last hundred years or so many non-conservatives have attempted to write about God without significant reference to the Bible. The word *theology* may be used for this, but its connection with the Bible varies, and sometimes it is not biblical at all, dealing almost

exclusively with philosophical, linguistic or sociological matters. Anyone can label as theology anything he wishes. But for our purposes it is important to realize that theology, as the field that ought to make comprehensive statements about God and His activities, is most fruitful if it centers on the revelation He has given of Himself in Scripture.

Some have spoken of *exegetical theology* that in its summarizing and explanatory work consciously keeps the careful examination of minute parts of Scripture in the center of its attention (for a fine example, see S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology”).

We would be practicing *biblical theology* if we studied Paul’s theology as opposed to Luke’s, or just Isaiah’s alone.

Historical theology is the field that traces beliefs, particularly in the Christian Church, through the centuries. It attempts to form a history of conclusions about the Bible. Such history of theology is indispensable for doing theological work in any age, for the errors and insights of the past should always form the background of current thinking. The history of any field of study is always relevant to new formulations.

On hearing the term *practical theology* some might conclude that it is simply the useful application of otherwise dry studies. But this term denotes the employment in life of what is concluded from the Bible, and is used especially of ministry in the Body of Christ. It is, in the highest sense, the fruitful outcome of what the mind has concluded about the Bible, the everyday application of systematic theology.

There is at least one other term using the word theology that we should note—*theology proper*. This refers to a narrow portion of theological study that is centered on the nature of God as a trinitarian Being. In a real sense it is the place to begin in our thinking as we summarize the Bible, since God Himself is the reference point for all things and without His revelation we would know nothing about Him. Many theological studies since the nineteenth century have turned theology into expositions of humanity and have put man at the center of the universe, often asserting that we cannot know much about God anyway. These have missed the all-important truth that we are beings who owe our existence to a personal God to whom we are responsible for all that we do.

The divisions of systematic theology

Systematic theology presented by evangelicals is often divided into the following sections:

Bibliology: the study of the nature of the Bible

Theology Proper: the study of God

Christology: the study of Jesus Christ, His nature and works

Pneumatology: the study of the Holy Spirit

Anthropology: the study of human beings as creations of God

Angelology: the study of angelic beings

Hamartiology: the study of sin and its effects on the human race

Soteriology: the study of the provision and application of salvation and the life of the believer before God

Ecclesiology: the study of the universal Church and the local church

Eschatology: the study of last things; usually includes the study of the covenants and the plan of the ages

The need for systematic theology and the biblical bases for organization

Jesus Himself set the pattern for us with regard to systematic presentation of the Scriptures when he took the disciples on the Emmaus Road through the whole range of the Old Testament, explaining to them what was written about Him. In Romans 6:15-17 Paul speaks of “the form of teaching to which you were entrusted”—

a specialized system of truth. Paul had a form of teaching and he was interested in what people in the churches believed. There was a pattern that was to be understood and applied to life.

Ephesians 4:11-16 forms an exhortation to grow to maturity and unity in doctrine. This implies that there is a body of teaching that is to be passed down from one generation to the next. This is the content of biblically sound systematic theology. Passages such as the following teach the existence of a body of truth that is to be studied, understood and lived out: 1 Cor. 15:2; Col. 2:6; 1 Tim. 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; Tit. 1:9; Heb. 2:1; Jude 3.

The general need for organization

When we make doctrinal summaries that together make up our theology, we are organizing in our own words what we believe the message of the Bible is. This is a great aid to our understanding, because we have difficulty grasping or considering many things at once. Further, we can compare points more easily and find out where we are inconsistent.

Any field of study demands summaries, comprehensive statements and practical overviews. For example, a physicist works with little pieces of information to begin with, attempting to understand what he has observed, but eventually at some point has to make organized conclusions about all his findings. A summary of all the areas of physics would include all that is believed to be true in the realm of physics. It should be up-to-date, orderly, and cover every area touched on by physics.

The place of theological teaching in the local church

Systematic theology is crucial for the vitality of the local church. Errors in theology lead to errors in the local church. Lewis Johnson points out that many apparently sound local churches have gone down the drain after well known preachers have left, often because people have not become grounded systematically in the truths of Scripture. There is everything right about studying systematic theology in the local church.

The orientation of this series

This series will be Reformed and Calvinistic regarding God, Scripture, Anthropology, Hamartiology and the meaning and application of the cross. However, the series will differ from Reformed teaching particularly with regard to the universal Church, the local church and the plan of the ages and eschatology.

For next time:

Read Reymond, Introduction.

Study questions

1. Study Rom. 5:1-11 and write down at least five theological points.
Examples: Justification is obtained through faith; Jesus died for his enemies.

- 1.

- 2.

- 3.

- 4.

- 5.

2. Give at least three features of Peter's theology of suffering:

- 1.

- 2.

- 3.

3. Give at least three theological points that are important for the local church.

- 1.

- 2.

- 3.