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Introduction to Systematic Theology

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DEFINITION OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

1

The term *theology* is derived from the Greek *theos*, meaning “God,” and *logos*, meaning “word” or “discourse”; hence, “discourse about God.” The word *systematic* comes from the Greek verb *sunistano*, which means “to stand together” or “to organize”; hence, systematic theology emphasizes the systematization of theology. Chafer provides a suitable definition of systematic theology: “Systematic Theology may be defined as the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works.”¹

In an alternate definition, Charles Hodge defines theology as “the science of the facts of divine revelation so far as those facts concern the nature of God and our relation to Him, as His creatures, as sinners, and as the subjects of redemption. All these facts, as just remarked, are in the Bible.”²

It is apparent in these two contrasting definitions of systematic theology that Chafer holds to a wider view, emphasizing that systematic theology assimilates information about God from “any and every source” — including information outside of the Bible. Hodge restricts his definition about systematic theology to information gained from the Bible alone. Millard Erickson provides a good comprehensive definition of theology as “that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life.”³ Erickson suggests five ingredients in a definition of theology.⁴ (1) Theology is *biblical*, utilizing the tools and methods of biblical research (as well as employing insights from other areas of truth). (2) Theology is *systematic*, drawing on the entirety of Scripture and relating the various portions to each other. (3) Theology is *relevant* to culture and learning, drawing from cosmology, psychology, and philosophy of history. (4) Theology must be *contemporary*, relating God’s

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1947), 1:6.

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Reprint. London: Clarke, 1960), 1:21.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:21–22.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

truth to the questions and challenges of today. (5) Theology must be *practical*, not merely declaring objective doctrine, but relating to life itself.

DISTINCTION OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Systematic theology is distinguished from other classifications of theology. The other classifications can be differentiated as follows.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Biblical theology is a narrower focus of study, emphasizing the study of a particular era or writer (e.g., the prophetic era or Johannine [John's] theology).

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

Historical theology is the study of the historical development and unfolding of theology. For example, historical theology observes the development of Christology in the early centuries of the Christian church, when the church councils formulated their position on a great many doctrines (such as the two natures of Jesus Christ).

DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

Dogmatic theology is sometimes confused with systematic theology, and some outstanding theology works have been entitled, "dogmatic theology" (cf. W. G. T. Shedd). Dogmatic theology is normally understood to denote the study of a creedal system as developed by a denomination or a theological movement.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Christian theology is another categorization that is sometimes used synonymously with systematic theology. The most recent work by Millard J. Erickson is so designated. Theological books by Emery H. Bancroft and H. Orton Wiley are other examples. While also systematizing theology, this designation emphasizes that it is written from a decidedly Christian perspective (but not suggesting that works designated systematic theology are not).

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THEOLOGY PROPER

Theology proper is a category of study within systematic theology; it denotes the study of the nature and existence of God. To distinguish the study of God specifically (in contrast to the study of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, etc.), the term *proper* is used to distinguish the study of God from theology in general.

3

NECESSITY OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

AS AN EXPLANATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Systematic theology is necessary as a researched and studied explanation as well as a systematic organization of the doctrines that are foundational and necessary to Christianity. As a result of systematic theology, Christians are able to have a clear understanding about the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. The Bible was not written in a doctrinal outline; hence, it is important to systematize the parts of the Bible to understand the doctrinal emphasis of the entire Bible.

AS AN APOLOGETIC FOR CHRISTIANITY

Systematic theology enables Christians to defend their beliefs rationally against opponents and antagonists to the faith. Early in the Christian church believers used their systematized beliefs to address opponents and unbelievers. This is perhaps even more important today with the emergence of humanism, Communism, cults, and Eastern religions. The systemized doctrines of the Christian faith must be researched, delineated, and presented as a defense of historic Christianity.

AS A MEANS OF MATURITY FOR CHRISTIANS

Systematic theology is an assertion of Christian truth; these same truths are essential to the maturity of believers (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Paul's writings make it clear that doctrine (theology) is foundational to Christian maturity, inasmuch as Paul normally builds a doctrinal foundation in his epistles (e.g., Eph. 1–3) before he exhorts believers to live correctly (e.g. Eph. 4–6). Also many Christians have faithfully attended church services for decades and yet have little understanding of the major doctrines of the Christian faith. Yet a knowledge of correct doctrine is important in Christian maturity; moreover, it protects the believer from error (cf. 1 John 4:1, 6; Jude 4).

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REQUIREMENTS OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

No adequate theology is possible without a belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. If this doctrine is abandoned, reason becomes the source of authority and reason sits in judgment upon the text of Scripture.



APPLICATION OF PROPER HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

The application of hermeneutical principles will reinforce objectivity, forcing the interpreter to set aside biases and extremes.

SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

Theology should be scientific, in the sense of employing the general arts, culture, and biblical languages in drawing theological conclusions.⁵

Theology must be based on inductive research and conclusions, not deductive reasoning. The theologian must approach the Scripture with a *tabula rasa*, an open mind, allowing the Scripture to speak for itself without forming prejudicial opinions about what the Scripture should say.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Although both the Old and New Testaments are inspired, it is a canon of interpretation that revelation is progressive. Therefore, in formulating truths about God and His dealing with man, the New Testament has priority over the Old Testament.

ILLUMINATION

Even while applying proper hermeneutics and methodology, there is a divine element to understanding God's truth. The believer is aided by the Holy Spirit's ministry of illumination in guiding the believer to an understanding of divine truth (1 Cor. 2:11–13).

⁵ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (Reprint. Nashville: Nelson, 1980), 1:20ff.

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RECOGNITION OF HUMAN LIMITATIONS

While employing a proper methodology, the student must nonetheless recognize the limitations of finite beings. Man will never be able totally to comprehend God. He must be satisfied with limited knowledge.

5

SOURCES OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

PRIMARY SOURCES

The Scriptures provide a primary source of theology in their revelation of God and man's relationship to Him. If God has revealed Himself (and He has), and if that self-revelation is accurately encoded in the sixty-six books of Scripture (and it is), then the Scriptures are the primary source of man's knowledge of God.

Nature is also a primary source of a knowledge of God (Ps. 19). Nature, in its harmonious revelation, is a constant witness concerning God's attributes, eternal power, and divine nature (Rom. 1:20).

SECONDARY SOURCES

The doctrinal confessions, such as the Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confessions, and many others, are important in understanding how other Christians over the centuries have understood theological concepts.

Tradition, in spite of its fallibility, is important in understanding affirmations about the Christian faith. What individuals, churches, and denominations have taught is a necessary consideration in formulating theological statements.

Reason, as guided by the Holy Spirit, is also a source of theology. Reason, however, must submit to the supernatural, rather than attempting to define it.⁶

⁶ Enns, P. P. (1989). *The Moody handbook of theology* (pp. 147–151). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

FOR FURTHER STUDY ABOUT SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

- * Emery H. Bancroft. *Christian Theology*, 2d rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976. pp. 13–20.
- ** Bruce A. Demarest. *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.
- ** Millard J. Erickson. *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983. 1:17–149.
- * Charles C. Ryrie. *Basic Theology*. Wheaton: Victor, 1986. pp. 13–22.
- ** A. H. Strong. *Systematic Theology*. Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1907. pp. 151.
- * Henry C. Thiessen. *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, revised by Vernon D. Doerksen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. pp. 1–20.