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What is Systematic Theology?

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The word Theology means literally a “discourse concerning God” but in analogy with other words, such as geology, chronology and biology, it means the “science which treats of God.”¹

Theology naturally concerns itself with such questions as these: Is there a God; can He be known; what is His nature, and character; what are the relations He sustains to the universe, particularly to intelligent beings possessed of spiritual natures, and above all, as most important to us, to men; in what ways has He made himself known; and especially in what aspect does he reveal himself to them as sinner. *This is Theology Proper.*

In connection with this last relation it treats, particularly, of man as a creature of God placed under the government of his moral law. It inquires into his original condition of innocence, and happiness; the manner in which he fell there from; and his present state of sinfulness, and condemnation and inability for self-rescue. *This is Anthropology.*

Theology is thus led, also, to discuss the nature of the salvation which God has provided as seen in the person and character of Jesus Christ, through whom it has come, and in the works of active and passive obedience, by which He has wrought out reconciliation to God. *This is Soteriology.*

In like manner, also, does it consider the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, through whom man is led to accept the provisions of God's grace, and to attain through penitence and faith unto a salvation in Christ, which consists in freedom, not from condemnation only, but also from the dominion and defilement of sin, and in attainment of the holiness and happiness of children of the Heavenly Father. *This is Pneumatology.*

It follows man also beyond the death of the body, and makes known the future state of both the righteous and the wicked, as we before as after the resurrection of the body, together with the final judgment of both these classes, and the heaven and hell which shall be their respective abodes forever. *This is Eschatology.*

¹ Boyce, J. P. (2010). *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (p. 1). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

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Finally, it teaches the great end which God is accomplishing through all his works, in the manifestation to all his creatures of his own glory, as seen in its twofold aspect of mercy and justice in his dealings with this fallen race of man. *This is Teleology.*

Boyce observes that the term "theology" is applied, not only to the science itself, but to any treatise on that science. This is true, not only of a discourse upon the one true God, but even of one upon the many false gods of the heathen. It is also true, though the treatise be not a scientific discussion, but simply an imaginative narrative or poem. Thus "Orpheus and Homer were called theologians among the Greek, because their poems treated of the nature of the gods."² Even the poems of Ossian, though probably written in England within the past century, is a book of theology. Mythology is not less theology because it treats of false gods, and in works of the imagination.

The term "theology" is, however, especially applicable to learned and scientific works upon God, or the gods. Of these, many are to be found connected with Heathenism. Such are the Vedas, the most ancient of the sacred books of the Hindoos [sic]. Such is the Zendavesta of the ancient Persians. The Edda, which sets forth the Scandinavian mythology, consists of poetic songs, and also of dialogues on the origin of the gods, on the creation of the world, and other like topics.^{3 4}

Simply stated: Theology is the science of God; the formulation and exposition of the scriptural revelation concerning God and His relations to His creatures.⁵ Today, however, it is frequently defined as the science of religion, dwelling mainly on man's worship and relation to God. As a definition this is defective, because God, who should be the chief

² Hodge, C. (1997). *Systematic theology* (Vol. 1, p. 19). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

³ Gardner, James (1858). *Faiths of the World* (Vol. 1, p. 795). London: A. Fullerton.

⁴ Boyce says that the most valuable discussions among the heathen, however, are to be found in the works of the Greek philosophers, the greater part of which, when not directly upon the nature of the gods, involved questions as to the origin of the world, and the presence therein of a divine controlling Spirit, as well as upon the nature of the soul, and its duties, and its immortality. Of their works many have come down to us in fragments only, while a large portion of what they taught is found only in the records and reports made by others: but there are also many complete works which profess to have been written by the authors of these speculations. Confessedly the most important of these Greek writings are Xenophon's Memorabilia of Socrates, and the works of Plato, and Aristotle. But from the beginning of Grecian philosophy in Thales and Pythagoras to its culmination in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, was not quite two hundred years, while its whole history covers a period of six centuries and a half before, and five centuries after the coming of Christ. No human mind can estimate the value of these contributions, nor the influence they have exerted even over those possessed of the Christian Revelation. The Latin writers also produced several works of a theological character, pre-eminent among which is that of Cicero "Concerning the nature of the Gods." Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (pp. 2-3).

⁵ Cairns, A. (2002). In *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (p. 444). Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International.

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object and theme in all theological investigation, is included only by inference. The use of the word *science* is important in the definition of theology. William G.T. Shedd writes, "Science is profound and self-consistent knowledge."⁶ Systematic theology, or dogmatic theology as it is also called, is the systematic statement of doctrinal propositions formulated from the data afforded by God Himself in His own inspired word. It is thoroughly Biblical, or it ceases to be what it claims.

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The true method, therefore, of systematic theology is theocentric (God-centred). It starts with God, making the Trinity its basis. All other methods are fractional and open to great abuse. Schleiermacher's consciousness theology, for example, is anthropocentric (man-centred), as are most modern treatments of the subject. However, the only truly Christian and comprehensive method is to make the Trinity the starting point and the inspired revelation of Scripture the data.

Shedd rejects a Christological approach as fractional and not truly systematic, but theologians such as Witsius, Edwards, and Chalmers have employed it.⁷ However, there is no good reason why, accepting the basic premise that the Trinity is our starting point and Scripture our data, the Christological method should not be adopted. Our knowledge of God consists in a knowledge of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). Apart from Him we cannot even read the revelation in nature aright. Thus, the Trinity is not to be understood apart from Christ.

That makes the Christological method truly theological. Since all God's revelation and work culminate in, and are in order to, His redemptive purpose, and since it is in this redemptive purpose that the glory of God is most fully revealed (cf. Ephesians 3:10-11), it is possible to view redemption as the great unifying principle in all theological study, with the eminent advantage that the purpose of God in redemption is kept before us at every step.

This is no mean advantage and may well serve to avoid the tendency of some theologians to abstract (and even idle) speculation. No part of divine revelation is meant to portray truth in the abstract. All special revelation is redemptive, and thus to read each part of it in the light of redemption is logical and, most important of all, scriptural. It could indeed be argued that a systematic approach to theology finds its highest expression in the Christological method, because it starts off with the open acknowledgement of the light

⁶ Shedd, W. G. T. (2003). *Dogmatic theology*. (A. W. Gomes, Ed.) (3rd ed., p. 53). Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

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of the complete Biblical revelation—and of course that complete revelation is aglow with the centrality of the Redeemer and His work.⁸

Wayne Grudem defines systematic theology as *any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?” about any given topic.*⁹ This definition indicates that systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic. However, it is important to state at once that the study of *church history* (including the great creeds of the church and the writings of major theologians in church history) and the study of *philosophy* can often be of great benefit in helping us understand what the whole Bible in fact does teach about various topics. But they do not contain any authority greater than or equal to the authority of Scripture.¹⁰

Furthermore, systematic theology focuses on summarizing each doctrine as it should be understood by present-day Christians. This will sometimes involve the use of terms and even concepts that were not used by any individual biblical author but that are the proper result of combining the teachings of two or more biblical authors on a particular subject. The terms *Trinity*, *incarnation*, and *deity of Christ*, for example, are not found in the Bible, but they usefully summarize biblical concepts.

Defining systematic theology to include “what the whole Bible *teaches us today*” implies that application to life is a necessary part of the proper pursuit of systematic theology. Thus, a doctrine under consideration is seen in terms of its practical value for living the Christian life. Nowhere in Scripture do we find doctrine studied for its own sake or isolated from life. The biblical writers consistently apply their teaching to life. Even those books of the Bible that have the most doctrinal content (such as Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews) contain much material that is also directly applicable to the Christian life. Therefore, any Christian reading this book should find his or her Christian life enriched and deepened during this study; indeed, if personal spiritual growth does not occur, then

⁸ Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (p. 444).

⁹ This definition of systematic theology is taken from Professor John Frame, now emeritus professor at Reformed Theological Seminary of Orlando, Florida, under whom I was privileged to study in 1971–73 (at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia). Though it is impossible to acknowledge my indebtedness to him at every point, it is appropriate to express gratitude to him at this point, and to say that he has probably influenced my theological thinking more than anyone else, especially in the crucial areas of the nature of systematic theology and the doctrine of the Word of God. Many of his former students will recognize echoes of his teaching in the following pages, especially in those two areas.

¹⁰ Grudem, W. (2020). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Second Edition, p. 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic.

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the book has not been written properly by the author or the material has not been rightly studied by the reader.¹¹

Boyce reminds us that the fundamental doctrine of Theology is that there is a God; for if this is not true, there can be no science of God. The first duty of Theology, therefore, is to set forth the reasons men have for believing that such a being exists, and is a true object of dependence and worship.¹²

¹¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, pp. 3–4.

¹² Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, p. 8.