

What are the Various Ways in which Christian Theology can be Classified?

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1

Christian theology, or the study of God from a Christian perspective, can be classified into various categories. They include the following:

1. Old Testament Theology

Old Testament theology concentrates on what the Old Testament has to say on a particular topic. For example, one could study what the Old Testament says about the subject of sacrifice. The topic would be considered only within the bounds of the Old Testament, and any conclusions drawn would be from that source alone. Therefore, this branch of study deals exclusively on how the entire Old Testament treats a particular topic.

2. New Testament Theology

In the same manner, New Testament theology considers a topic exclusively from what the New Testament says about it. Topics would be examined and summarized solely from a study of the New Testament. No other source is considered.

3. Biblical Theology

Biblical theology is also limited in its scope. It concentrates upon what a particular writer says about a subject or what the belief was in a particular era (such as the time of Moses).

For example, biblical theology might look at John's view of Jesus' nature, Paul's view of Christ's death, or what the letter to the Hebrews says about faith. Biblical theology would also investigate the theology at the time of Abraham or Moses. The concern of Biblical theology is the circumstances that led the writers to compose their work. For example, "Why did Mark write his gospel? What was the background for Paul writing to the Galatians?" These are the concerns of Biblical theology.

Biblical theology, therefore, looks at a particular portion of Scripture, or at an historical era, and notes how the writer understands a particular topic. Consequently, a person could discover what the individual authors of Scripture taught about God, salvation, the afterlife, etc.

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4. Systematic Theology

Systematic theology is broader in scope than Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, or Biblical theology. It arranges what the entire Bible teaches about its various topics in a scientific and orderly manner. The results are placed into a theological system.

The totality of Scripture is considered when setting forth these conclusions. The concern in systematic theology is with the final result of God's revelation—the written Word, the Bible.

Systematic theology attempts to discover what the entire Bible teaches on any particular topic. It examines all passages that relate to a particular topic. The topic is thoroughly examined and conclusions are drawn.

There are differences of opinion among Christian teachers as to the source, or sources, of information one should use in forming a systematic theology.

Some writers contend that knowledge from every source should be considered. However, they believe the primary source is the Bible. Others believe that the facts should only come from the Bible. They do not believe secondary sources should be considered at all.

The Bible is certainly the only infallible source to build a systematic theology. Secondary sources such as the testimony of nature, church creeds, confessions of faith, tradition, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit have their place in evaluating what the Bible says. However, any conclusion will have to be based upon what the Scriptures, and they alone, teach on a particular subject.

Some Differences Between Biblical and Systematic Theology

There are differences between Biblical theology and systematic theology. They can be summarized as follows:

- A. Biblical theology limits its study to portions of Scripture while systematic theology is concerned with the entirety of Scripture.
- B. Biblical theology gathers information about teachings from specific writers, such as Moses or Peter, or from a particular historical era such as the time of Abraham. Systematic theology gathers its information from the entire Bible.
- C. Biblical theology attempts to discover why a particular belief developed. The concern of systematic theology is on the final product of the writing—the Bible.

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D. Biblical theology is interested in how doctrine progressed throughout time, while systematic theology is concerned with what was ultimately written.

These are some of the basic differences between biblical theology and systematic theology.

5. Dogmatic Theology

Although the terms, “dogmatic theology,” and “systematic theology” are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a difference between them. Dogmatic theology looks at the basic beliefs of the faith as they have been stated in the various creeds in which the church has set forth. The word, “dogma” is used of doctrine that has official church endorsement. Roman Catholics and Lutherans, for example, use the terms, “dogma,” and “dogmatic theology.”

Systematic theology is concerned with what the Scriptures actually say about a particular topic without any reference to creeds or official church sanction.

6. Exegetical Theology

The term, “exegetical” comes from a Greek word meaning, “to draw out or explain.” For example, this same word is used in the first chapter of the Gospel of John to describe the purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world. It says:

No one has ever seen God. But his only Son, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart; he has told us about him. ([John 1:18 NLT](#))

Jesus came into the world to “explain” to us what God is like. He has told us about God the Father.

In a similar way, exegetical theology seeks to understand the true meaning of the text of Scripture by explaining what the text says. A thorough knowledge of the original languages of Scripture is usually involved in this task.

7. Historical Theology

Historical theology traces the history of doctrine. It looks at how the interpretation of Christian doctrines developed in the history of the church. This is an important field of study. One should not ignore two thousand years of debates, creeds, church councils, and confessions of faith when attempting to understand Bible doctrine.

History of doctrine, or historical theology, traces how different doctrines have developed throughout the history of the church. It is not the same as studying systematic theology.

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8. Apologetic Theology – the Defense of the Faith

The defense of the central beliefs of the Christian faith is called apologetics. It is mainly concerned with giving reasons why the Christian faith is true and answering the objections that critics may have. This is not the same as systematic theology, although there may be some overlap between these two approaches of study.

9. Contemporary Theology

This is the study of the beliefs of Christian groups that have developed within the last few years. It concerns itself with the latest trends in theology. Consequently, it is a subject that is constantly changing.

10. Practical Theology

Practical theology puts into practice what is learned in the other branches of theology. Under the heading of practical theology would be such things as preaching, missions, and the day-to-day running of the local church.

These categories sum up the various ways in which Christian theology is classified. It is important that we realize the distinction between them.

SUMMARY

What Are the Various Ways in Which Christian Theology Has Been Classified?

The study of Christian theology can be divided into a number of categories or fields of study. These include the following:

- ☞ Old Testament theology deals with specific teachings that are limited to the Old Testament. It deals with what is taught in the Old Testament alone.
- ☞ Likewise, New Testament theology limits its understanding of specific doctrines to the New Testament. The New Testament is the only source used for this discipline.
- ☞ Biblical theology looks at what a particular author says about a topic or what was taught in a particular era about a topic; such as the Apostle John or Simon Peter.

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- ✧ Systematic theology considers what the entire Scripture has to say about a particular topic. The conclusions are based upon what the Bible says about the subject under consideration.
- ✧ Dogmatic theology consists of beliefs that have had official church endorsement.
- ✧ Exegetical theology is concerned with finding the true meaning of the text of Scripture.
- ✧ Historical theology traces the history of the development of doctrine. It examines how different theologies have developed.
- ✧ Apologetic theology concerns the defense of the faith. It answers the objections of skeptics as well as giving reasons for faith.
- ✧ Contemporary theology deals with modern theological developments. Thus, it is constantly evolving.
- ✧ Practical theology puts into practice the things learned from the other branches of theology.

All of these are valid disciplines for the Christian to study.

Don Stewart has written over twenty books on the subject of evidences for the Christian faith. These include, *The Basic Bible Study Series*, *You Be the Judge*, *10 Reasons To Trust the Bible*, and *The Coming Temple*. In the last fifteen years, he has spoken in over thirty countries proclaiming the message that the Christian faith is both reasonable and intelligent.

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