

Systematic Theology

Theology is, in essence, 'faith seeking understanding', and Systematic Theology is the discipline that seeks to bring together scriptural and church Faith in an organised and life-relevant way. God did not design the Bible as a comprehensive theological dictionary and so Systematic Theology plays an important role in making biblical truth accessible in a holistic and comprehensive fashion. As a discipline, it links with Biblical and Practical Theology to form a theological educational trinity. However, Systematic Theologies are written from historic, cultural, and dogmatic perspectives and so should be carefully evaluated against biblical truth. Good evangelical Systematic Theology is an indispensable part of any serious study of the nature, purposes, and ways of Almighty God.

The word 'theology' comes from the Greek *theologia* which is a compound of two words, *theos*, meaning God, and *logos* meaning word. The word theology can therefore mean 'words concerning God'. However, theology is better understood as the reflection on, and the articulation of faith. More particularly, Christian Theology is the coherent presentation of the themes of the Christian Faith. It is the study and appreciation of God's revelation of Himself, His creation, and His ways.

Sometimes the word theology describes one particular doctrine, the doctrine of God; this is generally known as Theology Proper. However, the word is most often used to describe the full range of teachings concerning the Christian Faith. Systematic Theology is one of the disciplines of Christian Theology that attempts to formulate an orderly, rational, and coherent account of Christian faith and beliefs.

Definitions

There are numerous definitions of Systematic Theology ranging from the succinct to the comprehensive. In the Glossary to his *Moody Handbook of Theology* Paul Enns draws on L.S. Chafer by defining Systematic Theology as "the gathering and

systematizing of truth about God from any and every source.” (1989:648) He goes on to qualify this by pointing out that “some restrict the gathering of truth for Systematic Theology to the Bible alone, whereas others allow for information from outside sources such as the natural and psychological sciences.’ Enns’ definition exposes the key issue of valid sources for developing Systematic Theology and begs the question, ‘should the Bible be the only first-order source for doing theology?’ Liberal theologians typically answer “no” to that question and draw freely from philosophy, culture, history, the natural order, and even other religious belief systems. Roman Catholic theologians, whilst acknowledging the importance of scripture, incorporate additional sources such as church tradition, papal declarations, and apocryphal writings. Evangelical theologians, in the main, acknowledge only the Bible as the prime source of theological construction.

Millard Erickson defines (Systematic) Theology, more comprehensively than Enns, 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” (1987:21) This definition takes into consideration the scope of Systematic Theology and its application to Christian life. Most evangelical definitions of Systematic Theology are similar to this.

Theology is, as already pointed out, a word used to describe the entire scope of Christian doctrine. The prefix ‘systematic’ is the key differentiator of Systematic Theology and identifies it as a discipline that seeks to bring together scriptural and ecclesiastical teachings under a number of major headings. For instance, a typical Systematic Theology will have the following major sections:

Theology Proper (the doctrine of God) – the study of the being, attributes, and works of God. It includes such topics as the greatness and goodness of God, Immanence and transcendence, and the Trinity.

Bibliology (the doctrine of the Bible) - the study of the nature of the Bible as divine revelation. It includes such topics as inspiration, inerrancy, canonicity, textual criticism, illumination, and interpretation.

Christology (the doctrine of Christ) - the study of the Person, words, and works of the Lord Jesus Christ. It includes such topics as the deity and humanity of Christ, the unity of the person of Christ, and the virgin birth. It sometimes also includes the atonement.

Pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) - the study of the person and work of God the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity.

Angelology (the doctrine of spiritual beings) - the study of how the angels relate to humanity and serve God's purposes.

Anthropology (the doctrine of man) – the study of the nature of humanity. Topics usually include the origin of humanity, the image of God, the constitutional nature of the human, and the universality of humanity.

Hamartiology (the doctrine of sin) – the study of the nature, cause, and effects of sin.

Soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) - the study of the source, meaning and scope of salvation.

Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the Church) - the study of the nature, role, government, rites, and unity of the Christian church.

Eschatology (the doctrine of Last Things) - the study of ultimate or final things, such as death, the destiny of humanity, the Second Coming, and the Last Judgment.

Different theologians may include different sub-headings under each major area, and some may even devise non-standard major categories, but the ten listed will be found, in one form or another, in most Christian Systematic Theologies.

Systematic Theology is one of several theological disciplines. It does not stand alone yet it exerts a key influence on the theological enterprise in general. Its power to influence is that it seeks to integrate biblical and ecclesiastical data into a worldview-forming synthesis. (Carson 2000:89-104)

Relationship to other disciplines

Systematic Theology draws on, and interfaces with, several other disciplines such as Historical Theology and Philosophical Theology, but essentially it sits between Biblical Theology and Practical Theology. Biblical Theology considers the scriptural historic development of the various doctrines identified explicitly in the Old and New Testaments. Practical Theology focuses on the formation and application of doctrines and principles regarding the church's life and witness. To put it another way, Biblical Theology seeks to discover what the inspired biblical writers believed, described, and taught, in the context of their own times, while Practical Theology seeks to form and apply doctrine in the context of the church of our times.

Systematic Theology seeks to present doctrine in both an organised and life-relevant fashion. It utilises the results of Biblical Theology as its basic building blocks, and it provides Practical Theology with results which can be applied to areas such as preaching, counselling, and so on.

All theology is systematic to at least some extent and so Systematic Theology's roots go back to the earliest formulations of Christian doctrine.

Historic development of Systematic Theology

The endeavour to systematise the doctrines of the Bible started early in the church's history. Origen of Alexandria was probably the first recognised systematic theologian. His four volume systematic work was titled *De Principiis* and is still available today. In the 8th century the Eastern Orthodox scholar John of Damascus produced a Systematic Theology called *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. In the western church the precursor to a comprehensive Systematic Theology was produced by Peter Lombard in the 12th century. Thomas Aquinas produced his work *Summa Theologia* in the mid-13th century. Phillip Melanchthon wrote the first Systematic Theology of the Protestant Reformation under the title of *Loci Communes*, and this was followed in 1536 by John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

The rich and enduring history of Systematic Theology is evidence of its perceived need among Christian scholars of all ages. Theologians have produced major systematic works from the earliest days of the church right through to our day.

The Need for Systematic Theology

Early in the 19th century Systematic Theology moved from the domain of church-based 'faith seeking understanding' to academic institution-based 'understanding defining faith'. Academic theology became more and more liberal and increasingly removed from Christian life and church practice. As a result, many devout believers, especially Pentecostals, started to regard Systematic Theology as a negative influence and something to be avoided. Roger Olson quotes someone who, when he was a young man, admonished him not to let his theology professor destroy his faith (Grenz and Olson 1996:50). This sort of reaction to what had become 'bad theology' influenced some church groups to such an extent that they removed Systematic Theology from their curricula.

Of course every Christian is a theologian to some extent or another and the answer to bad theology is not to abandon any sort of systematic approach but rather to restore good theology to Christendom's academic institutions.

Those who passionately confess that the Bible alone is all we need for faith and life must surely recognise that the Bible is not designed as a dictionary of any sort. It does not set out truth in a systematically ordered fashion. It is rather a compendium of sixty-six books of different literary styles, historical contexts, and purposes. Each book is part of God's written revelation to humanity. Some parts of the Bible are rich in propositional truths, others are narrative in orientation, and yet others are poetic, prophetic, or apocalyptic. The biblical record is both an interwoven and multifaceted revelation of God's nature, purposes, and pronouncements. It is also an exposure of man's condition both before and after encountering God. In addition, it is a medium for communing with the God it reveals. The Bible is so much more than a systematic presentation of doctrines and applications, and because of this it is helpful to gather together its propositional truth into convenient categories. This is Systematic Theology's essential role. It is necessary so that we can appreciate the scope and interrelatedness of the doctrines of the Christian Faith. It is helpful for instructing believers and for presenting the truth claims of scripture to those outside The Faith.

Systematic Theology's focus on logical categorisation is its greatest strength but also its potential weakness.

Cautions Concerning Systematic Theology

Some of the 20th century definitions of Systematic Theology contain the word 'science' because many of the earlier theologians maintained that theology is part of the broad scientific endeavour. For instance, Charles Hodge defined theology as "the science of the facts of divine revelation..." (1960:1:21) The attribute 'queen of sciences' reflects this understanding of theology as a systematically organised body of 'scientific' knowledge. In one sense, Systematic Theology can legitimately be regarded as a science because it follows a "method of research that observes, records data, formulates hypotheses, tests the hypotheses, and finally relates the resultant body of knowledge to life." (Demarest 1984:1066). Yet theology should not be regarded only as an objective analysis of propositional data, but also as a means of knowing God and participating in His purposes. By reducing Systematic Theology purely to an exercise in logical analysis and categorisation we rob it of much of its power to help us encounter God.

We should also not view Systematic Theology as a method of generating a self-contained system or schema of doctrinal propositions used to support a particular philosophical position. The dispensationalist schema is an example, as is the famous TULIP acrostic associated with modern Calvinism (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints). Systematic Theology should not so much be a means of understanding which in turn defines faith, but should rather be, as Anselm described it "faith seeking understanding".

Another caution is to recognise that Systematic Theology imposes a structure that is not transparently presented in the Bible itself. (Carson 2000:89-104) Because the overriding structure of a Systematic Theology is not deduced directly from the biblical text, there is the danger of large scale eisegesis whereby the categories and divisions of Systematic Theology influence the selection and interpretation of the biblical texts referenced. There is also an inherent danger of selective proof-texting in order to conform the biblical data to the chosen theological system and divisions.

Carson also points out that because most Systematic Theologies include the thoughts of earlier theologians “it is very hard work to be informed by them without being controlled by them.” (2000:89-104)

Whilst we should appreciate the important contribution that Systematic Theology makes, we should not expect more from it than it is intended to offer. Systematic Theology does not replace the Bible as the prime written form of truth. We need to be cognisant of the interpretive schemes inherent in the systematising of biblical truth. In addition, we need to recognise that Systematic Theologies typically draw on more than the direct biblical revelation.

The Sources of Systematic Theology

The decisions concerning the legitimacy and ordering of the sources of Systematic Theology profoundly influence the type of theology produced. A theology based largely on L.S.Shafer’s definition of “all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works” (1993:1:16) might well be very different to a theology based on the understanding that only the Bible is a legitimate first-order source. Liberal theologians generally regard human reasoning and scientific findings as first-order sources. Most Process theologians take philosophy as well as mathematical and scientific hypotheses as first-order sources. Liberation theologians take the history and condition of the underprivileged as a major source of Systematic Theology. On the other hand, the majority of Evangelical theologians regard only the Protestant canon of scripture as the primary source of theology, and regard nature (General Revelation), historic church confessions and creeds as secondary sources. They also relegate church tradition, human reason, and philosophy to this subordinate category.

Having said this, most Systematic Theologies, Evangelical or otherwise, draw on sources other than the direct biblical revelation. Christian tradition, including the history of dogma, features to some extent, either overtly or covertly. The same can be said for life context because Systematic Theology is produced within the context

of current culture and seeks to apply its findings to that culture. Inevitably, therefore, there must be a certain amount of 'reading back' from cultural context to theological understanding. However, a key presupposition of Evangelical theology is that the Bible constitutes both the prime first-level source and norm of theology.

In recent years the 'Wesleyan quadrilateral' has regained recognition. This formulation accepts four sources for theology – the Bible, reason, experience, and tradition. Some argue that experience is wholly subjective and that there should only be a threefold norm of theology – the biblical message, the theological traditions of the church, and reason. The Bible is accorded the status of a norming norm by most proponents of this way of thinking. This is just another way of saying that the Bible is the only first-order source whilst all others are secondary.

Because Systematic Theologies are produced by theologians of differing perspectives, theological dogmas, and philosophies concerning source and method, it is wise to carefully evaluate the different offerings available. Students are often required to study a limited range of theological writings and they should therefore be able to determine the particular dogmatic flavour or interpretive schema of these works.

Evaluation of Systematic Theologies

Few students of theology will be expected to produce a Systematic Theology but all will be expected to interact with the Systematic Theologies produced by major theologians of this and previous generations. Some theological works are 'dogmatic' in that they discuss the major doctrines of the Christian Faith from a particular theological stance or official denominational position. In his book *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem includes a bibliography at the conclusion of each chapter where he groups Evangelical Systematic Theologies under headings such as Anglican, Arminian, Baptist, Dispensational, Reformed, and Renewal. This is a useful aid but, as Grudem points out, the categories "are not airtight, for there is often overlap – many Anglicans and many Baptists are theologically 'Reformed' while others in those groups are theologically 'Arminian'..." (1994:39) Therefore, it is helpful for a student of theology to have an idea of an author's doctrinal

predispositions and convictions because these will influence both the conclusions and applications of the theology presented.

Some systematic theologies identify their essential positioning in their titles. For instance, the work by Duffield and Van Cleave is called *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, and J. Rodman Williams' *Renewal Theology* is sub-titled 'Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective'. However, the line a theologian takes through his/her work is often not immediately apparent, so a good practice is to read through any Preface provided. For instance, Grudem states in his Preface that he holds to a traditional Reformed position with regard to questions of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, the extent of the atonement, predestination, and perseverance. (1994:16). He therefore identifies himself as an essentially Calvinist theologian. In his Preface to *Christian Theology* Millard J Erickson describes his approach as that of 'classical orthodoxy' (1983:11). Further on in the same paragraph he refers to this as being a form of 'fundamentalism'. He is not as helpful as Grudem because we have to interpret what he means by classical orthodoxy and fundamentalism, but it at least gives an idea of his general positioning. In his Preface to *Theology for the Community of God*, Stanley J Grenz characterises his Systematic Theology as "avowedly evangelical and unabashedly Baptist" (1994:ix). In his preface to *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* Donald Bloesch sets out his approach and essential position in considerable detail and as a result any reader knows from the start where he stands on key doctrines.

These disclosures all help us form a preliminary opinion concerning the kind of theology contained in any particular work. An alert student can then frame questions that will facilitate the process of evaluating and assimilating the theology presented. A book that will help a student to get a good idea of the 'flavour' of any of the major Evangelical theologians is *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* edited by Walter A. Elwell (ISBN 0-8010-3212-1).

The sorts of theologies referenced so far in this article all come out of a typical 20th century modernist approach. However, the world is changing exponentially and a new generation of theologians are emerging, a post-modern generation.

Postmodern Systematic Theology

What we generally understand as Systematic Theology only really came to the fore in the 19th century. Most theologians in the 20th century built on the already established models and formulations of the previous century, and so Systematic Theology is essentially a 'modern' enterprise typical of the deconstructionist approach of the modern era. However, we are entering what many describe as a Post-modern era in which new theologians are revising and reforming many of the foundational concepts of Systematic Theology. Their agenda is to design "a comprehensive metaphysical scheme in which faith can be fitted into the framework of how we actually experience the world on many different levels." (Herholdt 1998:218) A Post-modern conviction is that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The focus is therefore on a holistic view of reality. Rather than attempting to reduce reality into component parts which can then be systematised, post-modern theology seeks to accent process and self-organisation. Marius Herholdt writes in 'Initiation into Theology' that "postmodernism will view every aspect of theology as an expression of the whole from a specific perspective. To avoid fragmentation, one will have to show how every subdivision of Systematic Theology, that is, ecclesiology, pneumatology, Christology, eschatology, etc. also includes the others" (1998:223)

Post-modern theology reflects the current direction of the sciences (Quantum Physics etc.) and is therefore likely to exert an increasing influence on future approaches to theology. A challenge facing Systematic Theology is how to reform itself in a theological landscape that is becoming increasingly holistic rather than reductionist. On the face of it, the post-modern approach appears antithetical to Systematic Theology. However, it would be a mistake to think that Systematic Theology is on the way out. Commenting on foundationalism, an epistemological foundational concept for modern as opposed to postmodern theology, Grenz and Franke write; "foundationalist theology is not dead. On the contrary, a large cadre of theological modernists appear content to engage in theology in a manner that presupposes the older foundationalist epistemology" (2001:46) Perhaps this is due in part to the fact that many, if not most, Systematic Theologies, are developed around an integrative motif. For instance, Martin Luther built his theology around the motif of

Justification by faith, John Calvin built his around the Glory of God, John Wesley's central motif was Responsible Grace, and Stanley Grenz's is the Community of God. In a sense, these structural central motifs provide a certain holism to a Systematic Theology that make it more acceptable to the post-modern mind.

Theological post-modernism is currently in a formative phase. Some (Carson and co.) regard it as a passing oddity that will soon collapse. Some current post-modern theological thinking is moving beyond the parameters of Evangelical theology and will most likely marginalize itself. However, today's students should be alert to the changes that post-modern thinking is bringing into the theological mix.

Conclusion

Good evangelical Systematic Theology is an indispensable part of any serious study of the nature, purposes and ways of Almighty God. It forms a theological trinity in conjunction with Biblical and Practical theological studies. It gives holistic form and comprehension to theological reflection and constitutes an effective bridge between an understanding of the biblical text and the application of scripture in church and personal Christian life. Systematic Theology may not be a hard science but it certainly is the 'queen' of the theological royal family.

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