

# Christian Theology 1

## Systematic Theology & The Doctrine of the Word

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How many have taken a Systematic Theology course before? How many have read a Systematic Theology book? How many know what Systematic Theology is?

### I. Introduction to Systematic Theology

#### A. What is Systematic Theology?

#### B. Advantages of Studying Theology Systematically & a Caution

So now that we have distinguished between the different studies of theology, what are the advantages of studying theology systematically? Well, there are several:

- 1) We are able to see what the whole of the Bible teaches on a given topic (e.g. creation, sin, scripture (today's topic));
- 2) We are able to explore the logical relationships between the various Biblical doctrines (e.g. We see how election, regeneration, conversion, justification, sanctification, and glorification are all part of God's redemption of man);
- 3) We are brought face to face with the fact that our knowledge is bounded by God's revelation, and are led to acknowledge the Bible as our source of knowledge about God;
- 4) We see the harmony and consistency of the doctrines which teaches us about the unity of Scripture and proves to our hearts that Scripture has its origin in God;<sup>1</sup>
- 5) We have a tool for helping to transform a secular worldview into a Biblical worldview. Systematic theology aims to change the way that we think about God and the way we think about ourselves. It's a good discipline in bringing together Biblical exegesis, Biblical theology, apologetics, and ethics. It produces creeds and statements of faith, and has great power to build up the church and encourage individual believers. A great example of this is Al Mohler's Henry Forum on the Nature of True Beauty. Dr. Mohler took a topic – beauty – and summarized Scripture's teachings on it in such a way as to challenge our secular worldview and apply it to our lives in a distinctly Christian way.

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<sup>1</sup> See James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*.

We must admit, though, that there are potential dangers of studying theology systematically. Please note that we do not think that a systematic theology textbook, creeds, or statements of faith take the authoritative place of Scripture. Those things are extracted from and are subject to Scripture. That said, there are two pitfalls of studying theology systematically that need to be mentioned and are somewhat related:

- 1) There is a danger of taking and understanding things out of context. It has often been noted that **“a text without a context becomes a pretext for a prooftext.”**<sup>2</sup> This can generate “appeals to selective evidence that enable the interpreter to say what he or she wants to say, without really listening to what the Word of God says.”<sup>3</sup>
- 2) It’s possible that the “system” in systematic theology may distort Biblical truth. Don Carson has noted that “even to choose topics, to hierarchialize them, is to impose a structure not transparently given in Scripture itself.” So there is a danger that the choosing and ordering of topics can dictate the conclusions of those topics. For example, we could begin study on the topic of the divine authorship of Scripture and conclude that the Bible is infallible. Likewise, we could begin study on the topic of the human authorship of Scripture by looking at the people who physically wrote out Scripture and conclude that the Bible contains errors. In other words, our starting point could determine our conclusion.

In order to guard against these dangers, we’ll try to fill these classes with as much Scripture as possible. We want this class to be a faithful portrayal of what the Bible says. But it should be clear to you that you need to listen with discernment. We must be like the Bereans spoken of in Acts 17:11 who **“received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”** We must pray for discernment. Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit we’ll never know God as we should.

#### **D. Why Study Theology?**

So, without looking at your outline, why should we study theology? What are some reasons?

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- 2.
- 3.

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

4.

## How Do We Study Theology?

### 1. The Need for an Authority

Throughout our course we will maintain two assumptions, or presuppositions: (1) that the Bible is true and that it is, in fact, our only absolute standard of truth; and (2) that the God who is spoken of in the Bible exists, and that he is who the Bible says He is: the Creator of heaven and earth and all things in them. We will, of course, examine these presuppositions and our reasons for asserting them in greater detail as we progress through this seminar, but these are the principles that underlie all that we will discuss.

## The Doctrine of the Word

### A. The Case for the Bible as our Authority

**“How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word...I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you...I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.”**

#### 1. Old Testament

#### 2. New Testament

In II Peter 3:16 Peter says of Paul’s writings that, **“He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures...”**  
The Apostle Paul’s letters are equated with Scripture.

In I Timothy 5:18 Paul says, **“For the Scripture says...”** and then quotes Deuteronomy *and* the gospel of Luke, which was not written by an apostle but was clearly approved and affirmed by those apostles who were still alive.

### 3. Credibility of Scripture

## The Canon of Scripture

The following are helpful principles used to determine whether or not a book is considered Scripture. "Grounds for canonicity are to be found in an interplay of subjective and objective factors over-ruled by Divine Providence."<sup>4</sup>

#### **It is authoritative and comes from God**

- A. The meaning of the Old Testament stood in the New, and the foundation of the New Testament was concealed in the Old. Both Testaments show continuity and were all of a piece (John 10:35).
- B. Jesus defended, submitted to, and fulfilled the Old Testament, even by dying in obedience to Scripture (Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:44).
- C. Ministers of the new covenant spoke with words given by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 2:13), were of divine authority (I Thes. 4:2; II Thes. 2:15), and were to be read with other Scripture (I Thes. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3).
- D. "There was nothing manifestly supernatural about the Babylonian captivity, but it was rightly seen as an act of God. There was nothing manifestly supernatural about the formation of the canon, but by the way it came about and by its results it too can reasonably be seen as an act of God."<sup>5</sup>

#### **It was written by a man of God (e.g., a prophetic or an apostolic authorship or approval)**

- A. Many prophets directed that their oracles be written down (Jer. 36; Is. 8:16).
- B. Many prophets quote earlier prophets showing their authority (Dan. 9:2; Zech. 1:4-6, 7:7, 12).
- C. David's words were from the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:25).
- D. The words of Christ in the gospels were regarded as authoritative right away.
- E. The apostles words were inspired by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; I Cor. 2:13; John 16:12-15).
- F. The non-apostolic books written would have been affirmed in their authenticity by the then-living apostles (e.g. Paul would have affirmed Luke and Acts and Peter would have affirmed Mark).
- G. Paul's writings are considered as other Scripture (II Pet. 3:16, 2) and read among Christians (Col. 4:16).
- H. Luke is considered with Deuteronomy as Scripture (I Tim. 5:18).

#### **It had continuous and widespread approval amongst Christians**

- A. The canon was never created by men but was recognized.
- B. The Law of Moses pervades the whole history of Israel.
- C. The Greek translation of the Septuagint (completed around 132BC), which was available at the time of Christ, seemed to contain various books of the Apocrypha depending on which copy of the Septuagint is read (the most dependable copies come from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). But this does not mean that these books were understood to be canon along with the other

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<sup>4</sup> J. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> J. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p. 161.

undisputed books of the Old Testament, as pointed out with Philo, Josephus, and Christ.

- D. There is no dispute between Jesus and the Jews about the extent of the Old Testament canon.
- E. Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher (20BC – 40AD) quoted the Old Testament a lot and recognized its threefold division, but he never quoted from the Apocrypha as inspired.
- F. Josephus (born in 37AD) was likely the most learned Jew of his day and overly qualified to report on Jewish beliefs. He said that “From Artaxerxes (435BC – Malachi) until our time everything has been recorded, but has not been deemed worthy of like credit with what preceded, because the exact succession of the prophets ceased.” With this he rules out the Apocrypha as authoritative.
- G. The number of canonical books during Josephus’ time was considered fixed and the Old Testament had a threefold classification (law, writings, prophets – Luke 24:44).
- H. Irenaeus was trained under Polycarp, who was a disciple of the Apostles. He quotes from almost all the New Testament on the basis of its authority.
- I. There are no quotations from the Apocrypha in the New Testament, yet there are around 300 quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament. (Jude 9 cites the *Assumption of Moses* & verse 14 cites *1 Enoch* for illustrative purposes, but it does not mean he believed that they were inspired, just as Paul when he quotes Greek poets (Acts 17:28, I Cor. 15:33, Titus 1:12). They are also not part of the Apocrypha.)
- J. Jerome (around 400AD) translated most of the Bible into Latin (the *Vulgate*) but rejected the Apocrypha (although it was later added in after his death) even though he did translate a few of the books before his death. Theoretical distinction between the Old Testament and the Apocrypha was always known in the East and West church, yet the West needed to define the canon as a result of the Reformation and held tightly to them because they support Rome’s view of justification and purgatory. However, other false doctrines appear in the Apocrypha, such as creation out of pre-existent matter, and there are historical and geographical mistakes (Tobit, 1 Esdras).
- K. The heresy of Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament and drew up a new list of sacred Christian writings, encouraged the setting of a new canon (i.e., the New Testament), and the heresy of Montanus, who claimed new revelations, encouraged the idea of a closed canon.
- L. Not every apostolic writing was immediately recognized as Scripture. Evidence suggests that there was very early, widespread acceptance of the Gospels, Acts, Paul’s letters, I Peter, and I John as authoritative. The others were questioned, but not rejected, because of the question of authorship. These other books were tested with severe scrutiny and recognized for their worth and acceptance by the people of God. This is probably due in part to the writings being written in different geographical regions, which brought some lag in uncertainty. This

also shows that acceptance was not being dictated by councils but came through a normal positive response from the circulation.

- M. The New Testament was not a collection of books blown together by chance nor one that forced itself on the church. Instead, it quietly and unhurriedly established itself in the life of the church.
- N. The New Testament writings were circulated among the early churches and the canon was what ended up guided by the Holy Spirit.
- O. Circulation was meant to happen (I Thess. 5:27).
- P. Athanasius of Alexandria (367AD) gives us the earliest list of New Testament books, which is like ours today.
- Q. The Reformation opened all theological questions, including the canon, for debate. Luther and Zwingli questioned books such as James and Revelations, but such views were rejected by the Reformed churches as a whole.
- R. The East church did not need to make a clear distinction of New Testament canon.
- S. There is no reasonable alternative to the New Testament and no large dissent to change it.
- T. Those who are God's people will acknowledge God's Word (I Cor. 14:36-38; II Thes. 2:15).

## Attributes of Scripture

### Authority

#### 1. Divine Inspiration

First, we see that Scripture is divinely inspired. In 2 Timothy 3:16, we read that, **“all Scripture is God-breathed”**, literally breathed out by God. However, “it is customary to use the term “inspiration” to refer to the divine origin of Scripture.”<sup>6</sup> Inspiration, then, may be “defined as a supernatural, providential influence of God’s Holy Spirit upon the human authors, which caused them to write what He wished to be written for the communication of revealed truth to others.”<sup>7</sup>

**“Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”** (II Pet. 1:21). Here we understand that prophecy of Scripture was not finally rooted in the prophet’s own interpretation or ideas, but rather the will of God. This does not mean that God obliterated the personality or will of the prophet, nor does this require us to take a ‘dictation’ view of the Bible. Rather, it means that the end result of God’s providential and supernatural activity is a word-for-word, God-given revelation of propositional truths. The Bible is not fundamentally a record of other people’s experience of God, nor is it creatively inspired religious literature. Rather, it is the revelation of saving truth.

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<sup>6</sup> Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## 1. Self-Attesting

The words of Scripture are self-attesting. They cannot be “proved” by appealing to a higher court of authority. Scripture is the highest court of authority. While some may say this is a circular argument, the reality is that all arguments are circular. They all appeal to one’s highest source

## Biblical Inerrancy

Second, we find that Scripture is inerrant. The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the *original* manuscripts<sup>8</sup> does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact. In other words, the Bible always tells the truth regarding everything it talks about. **“It is impossible for God to lie”** (Heb. 6:18). So it would naturally fit that, as Proverbs 30:5 states, **“Every word of God proves true.”**

Making absolute claims of truth in this postmodern age comes across as arrogant to others, but if we give up any ground here, then every claim that Scripture makes is open to dispute, and we will know the power of God’s word less and less.

## 3. Biblical Infallibility

Third, we see that Scripture is infallible, which is closely related to inerrancy. “‘Infallible’ denotes the quality of never deceiving or misleading, and so means ‘wholly trustworthy and reliable’. Inerrant means ‘wholly true.’”<sup>9</sup>

## 4. The Clarity of Scripture

Fourth, we see that Scripture is clear. It is rational. The clarity of Scripture means ordinary people are able to read and rightly understand the Bible. While we know that some Scripture can be difficult to understand (II Pet. 3:16), the reason for this is generally placed on spiritual discernment (I Cor. 2:14) rather than the Scriptures being unclear or contradictory.

In Psalm 19:7, David writes that, **“The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.”** Failure to understand what the Bible is saying is not placed on Scripture but on those who misunderstand or reject what is written. It was the recognition of this principle that led Luther to work on a German translation of the Bible because he believed that everyone can know the truths of Scripture.

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<sup>8</sup> Even though we don’t have the original manuscripts, the ancient copies that we do have attest to the faithful passing down of God’s Word.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 95. Some people oppose the truthfulness, or inerrancy, of the Bible and say that the Bible is only infallible. Before the 1960s, inerrant and infallible tended to be used interchangeably, but now infallible seems to imply in a weaker sense that the Bible will not lead us astray in matters of faith and practice and allows the possibility of false statements.

## 5. The Necessity of Scripture

Fifth, we see that Scripture is necessary. The necessity of Scripture means that the Bible is necessary for knowing the gospel, for maintaining spiritual life, and for knowing God's will. But it is not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about God's character and moral laws. These can be seen from general revelations of nature itself (Rom. 1:19) or one's own conscience (Rom. 2:14).

## 6. The Sufficiency of Scripture

Finally, we see that Scripture is sufficient. The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God that God intended His people to have at each stage of redemption history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting Him perfectly, and for obeying Him perfectly. As Paul writes in II Timothy 3:16-17, "**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**"

So why is it important for us to understand each of these attributes?

- **Divinely Inspired** – It is the primary source of our revelation about God; If it is of human origin, it can always be replicated and improved upon ("to err is human"); It therefore stands over us as our judge, and not the other way around. We need to repent of our tendency to obey Scripture only when it seems reasonable.
- **Inerrant & Infallible** – We can use it for direction and guidance in life; Helps us to see ourselves and God correctly since we are inclined to try to wrongly justify ourselves and fit God into our own mold
- **Clarity** – Studying Scripture is not a fruitless venture, and we can grow in our study of it with the Holy Spirit's aid; Missions and translation work; Also, we should approach it assuming its unity and coherence. "Our own intellectual competence is not the test and measure of divine truth. It is not for us to stop believing because we lack understanding [of how to resolve seeming contradictions], or to postpone believing till we can get understanding, but to believe in order that we may understand...Faith first, sight afterwards, is God's order, not *vice versa*; and the proof of the sincerity of our faith is our willingness to have it so."<sup>10</sup>
- **Necessity** – It is through Scripture that we know salvation
- **Sufficiency** – God did not leave us lacking in his revelation and so we do not need to be afraid of "new" revelations being proposed; We should also repent of our spiritual pragmatism, that substitutes 'what works' for what God has said. This applies to everything from the way we approach evangelism and corporate worship, to the means we pursue for spiritual growth, to the way we think about marriage, or work, or parenting, etc.

## C. Experience v. Scripture

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 109.



## **Commonly Asked Questions:**

**Question:** How are we to understand the variant texts in our Bibles, such as John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20? **Answer:** These texts are noted in most Bibles as not being part of the most reliable early manuscripts. They are not Scripture, but they are tradition – very early and possibly very good tradition. Other smaller variants, such as Luke 23:34, are included in some of the best manuscripts and omitted from others.

**Question:** How are we to understand quotes in Scripture taken from non-canon literature, such as the Book of Enoch (Jude) or secular Greek authors (Paul)? **Answer:** Because a writer of canon quotes from a secular source, it does not mean that they hold that source to be elevated to Scripture. We must also hold that a writer of canon can use quotes outside of Scripture, as long as he does not unequivocally quote them as Scripture. For example, in Jude 14 the Book of Enoch is quoted likely because it was a writing well known among his audience and it got the point across that God will judge the ungodly. We often use non-canonical writings to get a truly Biblical point across to others in our own conversations.

**Question:** Why are some quotes in the New Testament of the Old Testament different from the Old Testament text? **Answer:** We must not require that quotes of Scripture be verbatim because it was written in another language and only needs to be sufficiently accurate in translation and not misrepresenting the text.

**Question:** If Scripture is clear, then why do we have different interpretations of what various passages mean? **Answer:** While God's Word is perfect, the people He gave it to aren't. The clarity of Scripture does not mean that all believers agree on every teaching of Scripture. Generally, Evangelical Christians are largely in agreement on the essential matters (e.g. the gospel) and differ on the non-essentials (millennium).

## **For Class Credit:**

**Pick one Apocryphal book (you can find these online) and read it. Write a paragraph or two regarding the differences you see between it and the books that are part of the Bible.**