

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

• An Introduction to Bible Doctrine •

WAYNE  
GRUDEM

## SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY.

Copyright © 1994 by Wayne Grudem.

Appendix 6 and glossary copyright © 2000 by Wayne Grudem.

This book is published jointly by Inter-Varsity Press, 38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP, Great Britain, and by Zondervan Publishing House, 5300 Patterson Avenue S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, and are used by permission. However, the author has, with permission, modernized archaic personal pronouns and has changed the verbs accordingly. Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible, © copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972 by the Lockman Foundation, La Habra, California. Used by permission. Those marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd. and Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Use of italic in Scripture quotations indicates Wayne Grudem's emphasis.

### *British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

GB ISBN 0-85110-652-8

### *Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Grudem, Wayne.

Systematic theology : an introduction to biblical doctrine / Wayne Grudem.

p. cm.

Includes index.

USA ISBN 0-310-28670-0

1. Theology, Doctrinal. I. Title.

BT75.2.G78 1994 / 94-8300

230'.046—dc20 / CIP

*Inter-Varsity Press, England, is the book-publishing division of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (formerly the Inter-Varsity Fellowship), a student movement linking Christian Unions in universities and colleges throughout the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and a member of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students.*

*For information about local and national activities, write to UCCF, 38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP, England.*

## Dedication

*This book is dedicated to eight people  
whom God sovereignly brought into my life:  
Arden and Jean Grudem, my parents,  
who taught me to believe the Bible,  
to trust in God,  
and to speak and write clearly;  
A. Kenneth Ham, my Baptist pastor,  
who awakened in me a love for systematic theology  
by teaching a class on Christian doctrine  
when I was thirteen years old,  
and who taught me by example to believe  
every word of Scripture;  
Edmund Clowney, John Frame, and Vern Poythress,  
Westminster Seminary professors and friends,  
who influenced my theological understanding  
more than anyone else,  
and who taught me Reformed theology in  
humble submission to every word of Scripture;  
and Harald Bredesen and John Wimber,  
pastors and friends,  
who, more than anyone else,  
taught me about the power and work  
of the Holy Spirit.*

## Abbreviations

- BAGD** *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* Ed. Walter Bauer. Rev. and trans. Wm. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F. Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- BDB** *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C. Briggs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907; reprinted, with corrections, 1968.
- BETS** *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- BibSac** *Bibliotheca Sacra*
- cf. compare
- CRSQ** *Creation Research Society Quarterly*
- CT** *Christianity Today*
- CThRev** *Criswell Theological Review*
- DPCM** *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements.* Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, eds. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988.
- EBC** *Expositor's Bible Commentary.* Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976.
- ed. edited by, edition
- EDT** *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology.* Walter Elwell, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.
- et al. and others

- IBD* *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Ed. J.D. Douglas, et al. 3 vols. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, and Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1980.
- ISBE* *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Revised edition. G.W. Bromiley, ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- JAMA* *Journal of the American Medical Association*
- JBL* *Journal of Biblical Literature*
- JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- JSOT* *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
- KJV King James Version (Authorized Version)
- LSJ *A Greek-English Lexicon* ninth edition. Henry Liddell, Robert Scott, H.S. Jones, R. McKenzie. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940.
- LXX Septuagint
- mg. margin or marginal notes
- n. note
- N.d. no date of publication given
- N.p. no place of publication given
- NASB New American Standard Bible
- NDT* *New Dictionary of Theology*. S.B. Ferguson, D.F. Wright, J.I. Packer, eds. Leicester and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988.
- NIDCC* *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Ed. J.D. Douglas et al. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974.
- NIDNTT* *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. 3 vols. Colin Brown, gen. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-78.
- NIGTC New International Greek Testament Commentaries
- NIV New International Version
- NKJV New King James Version
- NTS* *New Testament Studies*
- ODCC* *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Ed. F.L. Cross. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- rev. revised
- RSV Revised Standard Version
- TB* *Tyndale Bulletin*
- TDNT* *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. 10 vols. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds.; trans. G.W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76.
- TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
- TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
- trans. translated by
- TrinJ* *Trinity Journal*
- vol. volume
- WBC Word Biblical Commentary
- WTJ* *Westminster Theological Journal*

## Preface

I have not written this book for other teachers of theology (though I hope many of them will read it). I have written it for students—and not only for students, but also for every Christian who has a hunger to know the central doctrines of the Bible in greater depth.

This is why I have called the book “An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine.” I have tried to make it understandable even for Christians who have never studied theology before. I have avoided using technical terms without first explaining them. And most

of the chapters can be read on their own, so that someone can begin at any chapter and grasp it without having read the earlier material.

Introductory studies do not have to be shallow or simplistic. I am convinced that most Christians are able to understand the doctrinal teachings of the Bible in considerable depth, provided that they are presented clearly and without the use of highly technical language. Therefore I have not hesitated to treat theological disputes in some detail where it seemed necessary.

Yet this book, despite its size, is still an *introduction* to systematic theology. Entire books have been written about the topics covered in each chapter of this book, and entire articles have been written about many of the verses quoted in this book. Therefore each chapter is capable of opening out into additional study in more breadth or more depth for those who are interested. The bibliographies at the end of each chapter give some help in that direction.

The following six distinctive features of this book grow out of my convictions about what systematic theology is and how it should be taught:

**1. A Clear Biblical Basis for Doctrines.** Because I believe that theology should be explicitly based on the teachings of Scripture, in each chapter I have attempted to show where the Bible gives support for the doctrines under consideration. In fact, because I believe that the words of Scripture themselves have power and authority greater than any human words, I have not just given Bible references; I have frequently *quoted* Bible passages at length so that readers can easily examine for themselves the scriptural evidence and in that way be like the noble Bereans, who were “examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). This conviction about the unique nature of the Bible as God’s words has also led to the inclusion of a Scripture memory passage at the end of each chapter.

**2. Clarity in the Explanation of Doctrines.** I do not believe that God intended the study of theology to result in confusion and frustration. A student who comes out of a course in theology filled only with doctrinal uncertainty and a thousand unanswered questions is hardly “able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). Therefore I have tried to state the doctrinal positions of this book clearly and to show where in Scripture I find convincing evidence for those positions. I do not expect that everyone reading this book will agree with me at every point of doctrine; I do think that every reader will understand the positions I am arguing for and where Scripture can be found to support those positions.

I think it is only fair to readers of this book to say at the beginning what my own convictions are regarding certain points that are disputed within evangelical Christianity. I hold to a conservative view of biblical inerrancy, very much in agreement with the “Chicago Statement” of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (chapter 5 and appendix 1, pp. 1203–6), and a traditional Reformed position with regard to questions of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility (chapter 16), the extent of the atonement (chapter 27), and the question of predestination (chapter 32). Consistent with the Reformed view, I hold that those who are truly born again will never lose their salvation (chapter 40). With regard to male-female relationships, I argue for a view that is neither traditional nor feminist, but “complementarian”—namely, that God created man and woman equal in value and personhood, and equal in bearing his image, but that both creation and redemption indicate some distinct roles for men and women in marriage (chapter 22) and in the church (chapter 47). On church government, I advocate a modified congregational form of government, with plural elders in governing positions (chapter 47). I argue for a baptistic view of

baptism, namely, that those who give a believable profession of personal faith should be baptized (chapter 49). I hold that “baptism in the Holy Spirit” is a phrase best applied to conversion, and subsequent experiences are better called “being filled with the Holy Spirit” (chapter 39); moreover, that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are still valid for today, but that “apostle” is an office, not a gift, and that office does not continue today (chapters 52, 53). I believe that Christ’s second coming could occur any day, that it will be premillennial—that is, that it will mark the beginning of his thousand-year reign of perfect peace on the earth—but that it will be post-tribulational—that is, that many Christians will go through the great tribulation (chapters 54, 55).

This does not mean that I ignore other views. Where there are doctrinal differences within evangelical Christianity I have tried to represent other positions fairly, to explain why I disagree with them, and to give references to the best available defenses of the opposing positions. In fact, I have made it easy for students to find a conservative evangelical statement on each topic from within their own theological traditions, because each chapter contains an index to treatments of that chapter’s subject in thirty-four other theology texts classified by denominational background. (If I have failed to represent an opposing view accurately I would appreciate a letter from anyone who holds that view, and I will attempt to make corrections if a subsequent edition of this book is published.)

**3. Application to Life.** I do not believe that God intended the study of theology to be dry and boring. Theology is the study of God and all his works! Theology is meant to be *lived* and *prayed* and *sung*! All of the great doctrinal writings of the Bible (such as Paul’s epistle to the Romans) are full of praise to God and personal application to life. For this reason I have incorporated notes on application from time to time in the text, and have added “Questions for Personal Application” at the end of each chapter, as well as a hymn related to the topic of the chapter. True theology is “teaching which accords with godliness” (1 Tim. 6:3), and theology when studied rightly will lead to growth in our Christian lives, and to worship.

**4. Focus on the Evangelical World.** I do not think that a true system of theology can be constructed from within what we may call the “liberal” theological tradition—that is, by people who deny the absolute truthfulness of the Bible, or who do not think the words of the Bible to be God’s very words (see chapter 4, on the authority of Scripture). For this reason, the other writers I interact with in this book are mostly within what is today called the larger “conservative evangelical” tradition—from the great Reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther, down to the writings of evangelical scholars today. I write as an evangelical and for evangelicals. This does not mean that those in the liberal tradition have nothing valuable to say; it simply means that differences with them almost always boil down to differences over the nature of the Bible and its authority. The amount of doctrinal agreement that can be reached by people with widely divergent bases of authority is quite limited. I am thankful for my evangelical friends who write extensive critiques of liberal theology, but I do not think that everyone is called to do that, or that an extensive analysis of liberal views is the most helpful way to build a positive system of theology based on the total truthfulness of the whole Bible. In fact, somewhat like the boy in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale who shouted, “The Emperor has no clothes!” I think someone needs to say that it is doubtful that liberal theologians have given us any significant insights into the doctrinal teachings of Scripture that are not already to be found in evangelical writers.

It is not always appreciated that the world of conservative evangelical scholarship is so rich and diverse that it affords ample opportunity for exploration of different viewpoints and insights into Scripture. I think that ultimately we will attain much more depth of understanding of Scripture when we are able to study it in the company of a great number of scholars who all begin with the conviction that the Bible is completely true and absolutely authoritative. The cross-references to thirty-four other evangelical systematic theologies that I have put at the end of each chapter reflect this conviction: though they are broken down into seven broad theological traditions (Anglican/Episcopalian, Arminian/Wesleyan/Methodist, Baptist, Dispensational, Lutheran, Reformed/Presbyterian, and Renewal/Charismatic/Pentecostal), they all would hold to the inerrancy of the Bible and would belong to what would be called a conservative evangelical position today. (In addition to these thirty-four conservative evangelical works, I have also added to each chapter a section of cross-references to two representative Roman Catholic theologies, because Roman Catholicism continues to exercise such a significant influence worldwide.)

**5. Hope for Progress in Doctrinal Unity in the Church.** I believe that there is still much hope for the church to attain deeper and purer doctrinal understanding, and to overcome old barriers, even those that have persisted for centuries. Jesus is at work perfecting his church “that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27), and he has given gifts to equip the church “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). Though the past history of the church may discourage us, these Scriptures remain true, and we should not abandon hope of greater agreement. In fact, in this century we have already seen much greater understanding and some greater doctrinal agreement between Covenant and Dispensational theologians, and between charismatics and noncharismatics; moreover, I think the church’s understanding of biblical inerrancy and of spiritual gifts has also increased significantly in the last few decades. I believe that the current debate over appropriate roles for men and women in marriage and the church will eventually result in much greater understanding of the teaching of Scripture as well, painful though the controversy may be at the present time. Therefore, in this book I have not hesitated to raise again some of the old differences (over baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church government, the millennium and the tribulation, and predestination, for example) in the hope that, in some cases at least, a fresh look at Scripture may provoke a new examination of these doctrines and may perhaps prompt some movement not just toward greater understanding and tolerance of other viewpoints, but even toward greater doctrinal consensus in the church.

**6. A Sense of the Urgent Need for Greater Doctrinal Understanding in the Whole Church.** I am convinced that there is an urgent need in the church today for much greater understanding of Christian doctrine, or systematic theology. Not only pastors and teachers need to understand theology in greater depth—the *whole church* does as well. One day by God’s grace we may have churches full of Christians who can discuss, apply, and *live* the doctrinal teachings of the Bible as readily as they can discuss the details of their own jobs or hobbies—or the fortunes of their favorite sports team or television program. It is not that Christians lack the *ability* to understand doctrine; it is just that they must have access to it in an understandable form. Once that happens, I think that many Christians will find that understanding (and living) the doctrines of Scripture is one of their greatest joys.

Many people have helped me in the writing of this book. First I should mention my students, past and present, both at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota (1977-

81), and then at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1981-present). Their thoughtful, insightful contributions during classroom discussions have influenced every chapter of this book.

God has blessed me with help from some excellent typists. The typing of the manuscript was started by Sherry Kull several years ago. Later, Mary Morris, Ron Tilley, Kathryn Sheehan, Shelly Mills, Rebecca Heidenreich, Jenny Hart, and Carol Pederson typed several portions. Then the largest part of the manuscript was typed with great skill and care by Tammy Thomas, who also helped with some editing. Andi Ledesma and Joyce Leong cheerfully helped with photocopying many times. Finally, Kim Pennington faithfully and accurately typed in the many corrections and changes that came during the editorial process. I am grateful to all of them for their help.

John O. Stevenson did excellent work in compiling the bibliographies, and Don Rothwell completed a significant portion of the cross-references to other theology texts. H. Scott Baldwin, Tom Provenzola, and Mark Rapinchuk were a great help in proofreading and in library research. Mark Rapinchuk also compiled the indexes of authors and Scripture references. Beth Manley provided excellent help in proofreading. George Knight III, Robert Reymond, Harold Hoehner, Robert Saucy, Doug Moo, Tom Nettles, Tom McComiskey, Doug Halsne, Steve Nicholson, Doug Brandt, Steve Figard, Gregg Allison, Ellyn Clark, and Terry Mortenson provided detailed comments on different portions. Raymond Dillard kindly provided me with a computerized text of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Bruce Shauger solved my computer problems several times, and Tim McLaughlin repaired my computer at a crucial time. My long-time friend John Hughes gave me needed advice on computers and manuscript publication several times. My sons also helped me when deadlines approached: Elliot with library research, and Oliver and Alexander (and Alexander's friend Matt Tooley) with compiling and correcting the indexes.

One person has had greater influence on the final form of this book than any other: David Kingdon, Theological Books Editor at Inter-Varsity Press, England, has been helpful far beyond my expectations in his work as an astute, conscientious, and wise editor. He has worked through every chapter with great care, suggesting corrections, additions, and deletions, and interacting with my arguments in extensive memos. His wide-ranging knowledge of theology, biblical studies, and the history of doctrine has been of immense value to me, and the book is much better as a result of his work. Moreover, Frank Entwistle of Inter-Varsity Press and Stan Gundry, Jim Ruark, and Laura Weller of Zondervan have been gracious and patient with me about many details regarding publication of the book.

I could not have completed this work without the generous provision of sabbaticals from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the fall of 1983, the fall of 1985, the winter of 1989, and the fall of 1991, and I am grateful to Trinity's board of directors for allowing me this time to write. I am also very thankful for the support of my parents, Arden and Jean Grudem, who generously provided financial help that enabled me to write during these and other times, and who have also been a constant encouragement to me along the way, both in their prayers and in their unwavering belief that a book like this—written in nontechnical language so that they and thousands of Christians like them could understand it—would be valuable for the church.

I think that almost everyone who knew me was praying for this project at some time or other—especially my student advisees over several years at Trinity, and many friends in my church. I have frequently been aware of the Lord's help in response to

those prayers, giving me health and strength, freedom from interruptions, and an unwavering desire to complete the book.

Most of all, I am thankful for the support of my wife, Margaret, and my sons, Elliot, Oliver, and Alexander. They have been patient and encouraging, have prayed for me and loved me, and continue to be a great source of joy in my life, for which I thank God.

I am sure that this book, like all merely human books, has mistakes and oversights, and probably some faulty arguments as well. If I knew where they were, I would try to correct them! Therefore I would be grateful if any interested readers would send me suggestions for changes and corrections. I do not guarantee that I can acknowledge every letter, but I will give consideration to the material in every letter and make corrections where I can.

*“O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!”* (Ps. 118:29).

*“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory”* (Ps. 115:1).

Wayne Grudem  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
2065 Half Day Road  
Deerfield, Illinois 60015  
USA

# Introduction

## Chapter 1

# Introduction to Systematic Theology

*What is systematic theology? Why should Christians study it?*

*How should we study it?*

## EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

### A. Definition of Systematic Theology

What is systematic theology? Many different definitions have been given, but for the purposes of this book the following definition will be used: *Systematic theology is any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?” about any given topic.*<sup>1</sup>

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.

**1. Relationship to Other Disciplines.** The emphasis of this book will not therefore be on *historical theology* (a historical study of how Christians in different periods have

---

<sup>1</sup> 1. This definition of systematic theology is taken from Professor John Frame, now of Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California, under whom I was privileged to study in 1971–73 (at Westminster 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.

understood various theological topics) or *philosophical theology* (studying theological topics largely without use of the Bible, but using the tools and methods of philosophical reasoning and what can be known about God from observing the universe) or *apologetics* (providing a defense of the truthfulness of the Christian faith for the purpose of convincing unbelievers). These three subjects, which are worthwhile subjects for Christians to pursue, are sometimes also included in a broader definition of the term *systematic theology*. In fact, some consideration of historical, philosophical, and apologetic matters will be found at points throughout this book. This is because historical study informs us of the insights gained and the mistakes made by others previously in understanding Scripture; philosophical study helps us understand right and wrong thought forms common in our culture and others; and apologetic study helps us bring the teachings of Scripture to bear on the objections raised by unbelievers. But these areas of study are not the focus of this volume, which rather interacts directly with the biblical text in order to understand what the Bible itself says to us about various theological subjects.

If someone prefers to use the term *systematic theology* in the broader sense just mentioned instead of the narrow sense which has been defined above, it will not make much difference.<sup>2</sup> Those who use the narrower definition will agree that these other areas of study definitely contribute in a positive way to our understanding of systematic theology, and those who use the broader definition will certainly agree that historical theology, philosophical theology, and apologetics can be distinguished from the process of collecting and synthesizing all the relevant Scripture passages for various topics. Moreover, even though historical and philosophical studies do contribute to our understanding of theological questions, only Scripture has the final authority to define what we are to believe,<sup>3</sup> and it is therefore appropriate to spend some time focusing on the process of analyzing the teaching of Scripture itself.

Systematic theology, as we have defined it, also differs from *Old Testament theology*, *New Testament theology* and *biblical theology*. These three disciplines organize their topics historically and in the order the topics are presented in the Bible. Therefore, in Old Testament theology, one might ask, “What does Deuteronomy teach about prayer?” or “What do the Psalms teach about prayer?” or “What does Isaiah teach about prayer?” or even, “What does the whole Old Testament teach about prayer and how is that teaching developed over the history of the Old Testament?” In New Testament theology one might ask, “What does John’s gospel teach about prayer?” or “What does Paul teach about prayer?” or even “What does the New Testament teach about prayer and what is the historical development of that teaching as it progresses through the New Testament?”

“Biblical theology” has a technical meaning in theological studies. It is the larger category that contains both Old Testament theology and New Testament theology as

---

<sup>2</sup> 2. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest have coined a new phrase, “integrative theology,” to refer to systematic theology in this broader sense: see their excellent three-volume work, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987–94). For each doctrine, they analyze historical alternatives and relevant biblical passages, give a coherent summary of the doctrine, answer philosophical objections, and give practical application.

<sup>3</sup> 3. Charles Hodge says, “The Scriptures contain all the Facts of Theology” (section heading in *Systematic Theology* 1:15). He argues that ideas gained from intuition or observation or experience are valid in theology only if they are supported by the teaching of Scripture.

we have defined them above. Biblical theology gives special attention to the teachings of *individual authors and sections* of Scripture, and to the place of each teaching in the *historical development* of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> So one might ask, “What is the historical development of the teaching about prayer as it is seen throughout the history of the Old Testament and then of the New Testament?” Of course, this question comes very close to the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today about prayer?” (which would be *systematic theology* by our definition). It then becomes evident that the boundary lines between these various disciplines often overlap at the edges, and parts of one study blend into the next. Yet there is still a difference, for biblical theology traces the historical development of a doctrine and the way in which one’s place at some point in that historical development affects one’s understanding and application of that particular doctrine. Biblical theology also focuses on the understanding of each doctrine that the biblical authors and their original hearers or readers possessed.

Systematic theology, on the other hand, makes use of the material of biblical theology and often builds on the results of biblical theology. At some points, especially where great detail and care is needed in the development of a doctrine, systematic theology will even use a biblical-theological method, analyzing the development of each doctrine through the historical development of Scripture. But the focus of systematic theology remains different: its focus is on the collection and then the summary of the teaching of all the biblical passages on a particular subject. Thus systematic theology asks, for example, “What does the whole Bible teach us today about prayer?” It attempts to summarize the teaching of Scripture in a brief, understandable, and very carefully formulated statement.

**2. Application to Life.** 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 themselves 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 in isolation from life. The biblical writers consistently apply their teaching to 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 the book has not been written properly by the author or the material has not been rightly studied by the reader.

**3. Systematic Theology and Disorganized Theology.** If we use this definition of systematic theology, it will be seen that most Christians actually do systematic theology (or at least make systematic-theological statements) many times a week. For example: “The Bible says that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved.”

---

<sup>4</sup> 4. The term “biblical theology” might seem to be a natural and appropriate one for the process I have called “systematic theology.” However, its usage in theological studies to refer to tracing the historical development of doctrines throughout the Bible is too well established, so that starting now to use the term *biblical theology* to refer to what I have called *systematic theology* would only result in confusion.

“The Bible says that Jesus Christ is the only way to God.” “The Bible says that Jesus is coming again.” These are all summaries of what Scripture says and, as such, they are systematic-theological statements. In fact, every time a Christian says something about what the whole Bible says, he or she is in a sense doing “systematic theology—according to our definition—by thinking about various topics and answering the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?”<sup>5</sup>

How then does this book differ from the “systematic theology” that most Christians do? First, it treats biblical topics in a *carefully organized way* to guarantee that all important topics will receive thorough consideration. This organization also provides one sort of check against inaccurate analysis of individual topics, for it means that all other doctrines that are treated can be compared with each topic for consistency in methodology and absence of contradictions in the relationships between the doctrines. This also helps to ensure balanced consideration of complementary doctrines: Christ’s deity and humanity are studied together, for example, as are God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, so that wrong conclusions will not be drawn from an imbalanced emphasis on only one aspect of the full biblical presentation.

In fact, the adjective *systematic* in systematic theology should be understood to mean something like “carefully organized by topics,” with the understanding that the topics studied will be seen to fit together in a consistent way, and will include all the major doctrinal topics of the Bible. Thus “systematic” should be thought of as the opposite of “randomly arranged” or “disorganized.” In systematic theology topics are treated in an orderly or “systematic” way.

A second difference between this book and the way most Christians do systematic theology is that it treats topics in *much more detail* than most Christians do. For example, an ordinary Christian as a result of regular reading of the Bible may make the theological statement, “The Bible says that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved.” That is a perfectly true summary of a major biblical teaching. However, in this book we devote several pages to elaborating more precisely what it means to “believe in Jesus Christ,”<sup>6</sup> and twelve chapters (chapters 32–43) will be devoted to explaining what it means to “be saved” in all of the many implications of that term.

Third, a formal study of systematic theology will make it possible to formulate summaries of biblical teachings with *much more accuracy* than Christians would normally arrive at without such a study. In systematic theology, summaries of biblical teachings must be worded precisely to guard against misunderstandings and to exclude false teachings.

Fourth, a good theological analysis must find and treat fairly *all the relevant Bible passages* for each particular topic, not just some or a few of the relevant passages.

---

<sup>5</sup> 5. Robert L. Reymond, “The Justification of Theology with a Special Application to Contemporary Christology,” in Nigel M. Cameron, ed., *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology: Essays in Approach and Method* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1987), pp. 82–104, cites several examples from the New Testament of this kind of searching through all of Scripture to demonstrate doctrinal conclusions: Jesus in Luke 24:25–27 (and elsewhere); Apollos in Acts 18:28; the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15; and Paul in Acts 17:2–3; 20:27; and all of Romans. To this list could be added Heb. 1 (on Christ’s divine Sonship), Heb. 11 (on the nature of true faith), and many other passages from the Epistles.

<sup>6</sup> 6. See chapter 35, pp. 709–21, on saving faith.

This often means that it must depend on the results of careful exegesis (or interpretation) of Scripture generally agreed upon by evangelical interpreters or, where there are significant differences of interpretation, systematic theology will include detailed exegesis at certain points.

Because of the large number of topics covered in a study of systematic theology and because of the great detail with which these topics are analyzed, it is inevitable that someone studying a systematic theology text or taking a course in systematic theology for the first time will have many of his or her own personal beliefs challenged or modified, refined or enriched. It is of utmost importance therefore that each person beginning such a course firmly resolve in his or her own mind to abandon as false any idea which is found to be clearly contradicted by the teaching of Scripture. But it is also very important for each person to resolve not to believe any individual doctrine simply because this textbook or some other textbook or teacher says that it is true, unless this book or the instructor in a course can convince the student from the text of Scripture itself. It is Scripture alone, not “conservative evangelical tradition” or any other human authority, that must function as the normative authority for the definition of what we should believe.

**4. What Are Doctrines?** In this book, the word *doctrine* will be understood in the following way: *A doctrine is what the whole Bible teaches us today about some particular topic.* This definition is directly related to our earlier definition of systematic theology, since it shows that a “doctrine” is simply the result of the process of doing systematic theology with regard to one particular topic. Understood in this way, doctrines can be very broad or very narrow. We can speak of “the doctrine of God” as a major doctrinal category, including a summary of all that the Bible teaches us today about God. Such a doctrine would be exceptionally large. On the other hand, we may also speak more narrowly of the doctrine of God’s eternity, or the doctrine of the Trinity, or the doctrine of God’s justice.<sup>7</sup>

The book is divided into seven major sections according to seven major “doctrines” or areas of study:

- Part 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God
- Part 2: The Doctrine of God
- Part 3: The Doctrine of Man
- Part 4: The Doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit
- Part 5: The Doctrine of the Application of Redemption
- Part 6: The Doctrine of the Church
- Part 7: The Doctrine of the Future

Within each of these major doctrinal categories many more specific teachings have been selected as appropriate for inclusion. Generally these meet at least one of the following three criteria: (1) they are doctrines that are most emphasized in Scripture; (2) they are doctrines that have been most significant throughout the history of the church and have been important for all Christians at all times; (3) they are doctrines that have become important for Christians in the present situation in the history of the church (even though some of these doctrines may not have been of such great interest earlier in church history). Some examples of doctrines in the third category would be the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, the doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit,

---

<sup>7</sup>7. The word *dogma* is an approximate synonym for *doctrine* but I have not used it in this book. *Dogma* is a term more often used by Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians, and the term frequently refers to doctrines that have official church endorsement. *Dogmatic theology* is another term for *systematic theology*.

the doctrine of Satan and demons with particular reference to spiritual warfare, the doctrine of spiritual gifts in the New Testament age, and the doctrine of the creation of man as male and female in relation to the understanding of roles appropriate to men and women today. Because of their relevance to the contemporary situation, doctrines such as these have received more emphasis in the present volume than in most traditional textbooks of systematic theology.

Finally, what is the difference between systematic theology and *Christian ethics*? Although there is inevitably some overlap between the study of theology and the study of ethics, I have tried to maintain a distinction in emphasis. The emphasis of systematic theology is on what God wants us to *believe* and to *know* while the emphasis in Christian ethics is on what God wants us to *do* and what *attitudes* he wants us to have. Such a distinction is reflected in the following definition: *Christian ethics is any study that answers the question, "What does God require us to do and what attitudes does he require us to have today?" with regard to any given situation.* Thus theology focuses on ideas while ethics focuses on situations in life. Theology tells us how we should think while ethics tells us how we should live. A textbook on ethics, for example, would discuss topics such as marriage and divorce, lying and telling the truth, stealing and ownership of property, abortion, birth control, homosexuality, the role of civil government, discipline of children, capital punishment, war, care for the poor, racial discrimination, and so forth. Of course there is some overlap: theology must be applied to life (therefore it is often ethical to some degree). And ethics must be based on proper ideas of God and his world (therefore it is theological to some degree).

This book will emphasize systematic theology, though it will not hesitate to apply theology to life where such application comes readily. Still, for a thorough treatment of Christian ethics, another textbook similar to this in scope would be necessary.

## **B. Initial Assumptions of This Book**

We begin with two assumptions or presuppositions: (1) that the Bible is true and that it is, in fact, our only absolute standard of truth; (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. These two presuppositions, of course, are always open to later adjustment or modification or deeper confirmation, but at this point, these two assumptions form the point at which we begin.

## **C. Why Should Christians Study Theology?**

Why should Christians study systematic theology? That is, why should we engage in the process of collecting and summarizing the teachings of many individual Bible passages on particular topics? Why is it not sufficient simply to continue reading the Bible regularly every day of our lives?

**1. The Basic Reason.** Many answers have been given to this question, but too often they leave the impression that systematic theology somehow can "improve" on the Bible by doing a better job of organizing its teachings or explaining them more clearly than the Bible itself has done. Thus we may begin implicitly to deny the clarity of Scripture (see chapter 6) or the sufficiency of Scripture (see chapter 8).

However, Jesus commanded his disciples and now commands us also to *teach* believers to observe all that he commanded:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them* to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Matt. 28:19–20)

Now to teach all that Jesus commanded, in a narrow sense, is simply to teach the content of the oral teaching of Jesus as it is recorded in the gospel narratives.

However, in a broader sense, “all that Jesus commanded” includes the interpretation and application of his life and teachings, because in the book of Acts it is implied that it contains a narrative of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through the apostles after his resurrection (note that 1:1 speaks of “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach”). “All that Jesus commanded” can also include the Epistles, since they were written under the supervision of the Holy Spirit and were also considered to be a “command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37; see also John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Peter 3:2; and Rev. 1:1–3). Thus in a larger sense, “all that Jesus commanded” includes all of the New Testament.

Furthermore, when we consider that the New Testament writings endorse the absolute confidence Jesus had in the authority and reliability of the Old Testament Scriptures as God’s words (see chapter 4), and when we realize that the New Testament epistles also endorse this view of the Old Testament as absolutely authoritative words of God, then it becomes evident that we cannot teach “all that Jesus commanded” without including all of the Old Testament (rightly understood in the various ways in which it applies to the new covenant age in the history of redemption) as well.

The task of fulfilling the Great Commission includes therefore not only evangelism but also *teaching*. And the task of teaching all that Jesus commanded us is, in a broad sense, the task of teaching what the whole Bible says to us today. To effectively teach ourselves and to teach others what the whole Bible says, it is necessary to *collect* and *summarize* all the Scripture passages on a particular subject.

For example, if someone asks me, “What does the Bible teach about Christ’s return?” I could say, “Just keep reading your Bible and you’ll find out.” But if the questioner begins reading at Genesis 1:1 it will be a long time before he or she finds the answer to his question. By that time many other questions will have needed answers, and his list of unanswered questions will begin to grow very long indeed. What does the Bible teach about the work of the Holy Spirit? What does the Bible teach about prayer? What does the Bible teach about sin? There simply is not time in our lifetimes to read through the entire Bible looking for an answer for ourselves every time a doctrinal question arises. Therefore, for us to learn what the Bible says, it is very helpful to have the benefit of the work of others who have searched through Scripture and found answers to these various topics.

We can teach others most effectively if we can direct them to the most relevant passages and suggest an appropriate summary of the teachings of those passages. Then the person who questions us can inspect those passages quickly for himself or herself and learn much more rapidly what the teaching of the Bible is on a particular subject. Thus the necessity of systematic theology for teaching what the Bible says comes about primarily because we are finite in our memory and in the amount of time at our disposal.

The basic reason for studying systematic theology, then, is that it enables us to teach ourselves and others what the whole Bible says, thus fulfilling the second part of the Great Commission.

**2. The Benefits to Our Lives.** Although the basic reason for studying systematic theology is that it is a means of obedience to our Lord’s command, there are some additional specific benefits that come from such study.

First, studying theology helps us *overcome our wrong ideas*. If there were no sin in our hearts, we could read the Bible from cover to cover and, although we would not immediately learn everything in the Bible, we would most likely learn only true things about God and his creation. Every time we read it we would learn more true things

and we would not rebel or refuse to accept anything we found written there. But with sin in our hearts we retain some rebelliousness against God. At various points there are—for all of us—biblical teachings which for one reason or another we do not want to accept. The study of systematic theology is of help in overcoming those rebellious ideas.

For example, suppose there is someone who does not want to believe that Jesus is personally coming back to earth again. We could show this person one verse or perhaps two that speak of Jesus' return to earth, but the person might still find a way to evade the force of those verses or read a different meaning into them. But if we collect twenty-five or thirty verses that say that Jesus is coming back to earth personally and write them all out on paper, our friend who hesitated to believe in Christ's return is much more likely to be persuaded by the breadth and diversity of biblical evidence for this doctrine. Of course, we all have areas like that, areas where our understanding of the Bible's teaching is inadequate. In these areas, it is helpful for us to be confronted with the *total weight of the teaching of Scripture* on that subject, so that we will more readily be persuaded even against our initial wrongful inclinations.

Second, studying systematic theology helps us to be *able to make better decisions later* on new questions of doctrine that may arise. We cannot know what new doctrinal controversies will arise in the churches in which we will live and minister ten, twenty, or thirty years from now, if the Lord does not return before then. These new doctrinal controversies will sometimes include questions that no one has faced very carefully before. Christians will be asking, "What does the whole Bible say about this subject?" (The precise nature of biblical inerrancy and the appropriate understanding of biblical teaching on gifts of the Holy Spirit are two examples of questions that have arisen in our century with much more forcefulness than ever before in the history of the church.)

Whatever the new doctrinal controversies are in future years, those who have learned systematic theology well will be much better able to answer the new questions that arise. The reason for this is that everything that the Bible says is somehow related to everything else the Bible says (for it all fits together in a consistent way, at least within God's own understanding of reality, and in the nature of God and creation as they really are). Thus the new question will be related to much that has already been learned from Scripture. The more thoroughly that earlier material has been learned, the better able we will be to deal with those new questions.

This benefit extends even more broadly. We face problems of applying Scripture to life in many more contexts than formal doctrinal discussions. What does the Bible teach about husband-wife relationships? About raising children? About witnessing to a friend at work? What principles does Scripture give us for studying psychology, or economics, or the natural sciences? How does it guide us in spending money, or in saving, or in tithing? In every area of inquiry certain theological principles will come to bear, and those who have learned well the theological teachings of the Bible will be much better able to make decisions that are pleasing to God.

A helpful analogy at this point is that of a jigsaw puzzle. If the puzzle represents "what the whole Bible teaches us today about everything" then a course in systematic theology would be like filling in the border and some of the major items pictured in the puzzle. But we will never know everything that the Bible teaches about everything, so our jigsaw puzzle will have many gaps, many pieces that remain to be put in. Solving a new real-life problem is analogous to filling in another section of the jigsaw puzzle: the more pieces one has in place correctly to begin with, the easier it is