

WHAT IS THEOLOGY

“things into which angels long to look”

Key question

How can the study of systematic theology be helpful and / or harmful to the development of a healthy Christian life?

Key text

II Timothy 2

“¹⁴ Remind {them} of these things, and solemnly charge {them} in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, {and leads} to the ruin of the hearers. ¹⁵ Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. ¹⁶ But avoid worldly {and} empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness,”

Key Definition

Systematic Theology

(as we will use the term in these notes)

It is the discipline which strives to accurately articulate the teachings of the Christian faith -

- in a coherent, orderly, comprehensive, and internally consistent manner,
- drawing primarily upon a careful study of Scripture,
- with sensitivity to the idioms of modern life,
- so that the believer will come to know, trust and obey God.

Introduction

Contrasting responses

On Paul’s second missionary journey he came to Thessalonica and although there were some converts, the Jewish community stirred up the whole area to run Paul out of town. There was a hard heart and a closed mind among the Jews in this place. Jason, Paul’s host came under pressure to not support Paul so Paul had to escape by night. Paul went on to Berea where he had a very different response.

“¹⁴ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.” Acts 17

They were willing to listen but were careful to critically examine what they were hearing. They had a soft-heart but an open inquiring mind. This seemed to have made the difference. This is the pattern for all good systematic theology – examining the Scriptures to see what is taught and what is not. We are called to have a hard-mind and a soft- heart not visa versa.

A study in contrasts

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|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Thessalonica | Berea |
| Soft-minds and hard-hearts | Hard-minds and soft-hearts |

The point of systematic theology

- A. **Systematic Theology is - the message of the Grace of God in Christ** - “14 Remind {them} of these things,”
1. It is significant to note what “*these things*” are not:
 - The Law
 - An easy life here and now (vs.18)
 - Temporal hope
 2. It is important to be reminded of what “*these things*” are:
 - **Grace** - “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” vs.1
 - **Cross** - “suffer hardship (now)” vs.3
 - **Resurrection** - waiting for the resurrection “if we died with him we will live with him” vs.11
 3. **Biblical truth is to be treated with high respect. I Peter 1:10-12** “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person, or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow . . . **Things into which angels long to look.**”

The peril of systematic theology

- B. **- unpacked as a part the greater Biblical story** - “14 . . . not to wrangle about words, which is useless, {and leads} to the ruin of the hearers.”
1. **Spiritual health involves an integration of three areas of life. I Timothy 1** “13 Retain the standard of **sound words** which you have heard from me, in the **faith** and **love** which are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.”
 - a. **Explanations** or doctrinal beliefs, confessions, understanding of truth. “*sound words*”
 - Sound words are an important part of our faith.
 - These sound words are to be guarded as a treasure.
 - We are stewards of these sound words.
 - b. **Experiences** or feelings, passions, attitudes. “*faith*” There are two levels of faith.
 1. **Primary** - basic, heart, motivation, belief, etc. This is what we really believe.

2. **Secondary** – systematic doctrine. This is what we say we are (ideally) committed to follow.

c. **Ethics** or behaviors, way of living, action. “*love*”

Note that there is a tendency for those who prefer to define Christianity in terms of only one of the above characteristics to:

- marginalize the other characteristics as relatively unimportant.
- feel threatened by each of the other areas when they present a challenge.
- view the other areas as dangerous or even evil because they challenge “a preferred way of defining the Christian life.”
- avoid any contact with other ways of defining the Christian faith.

2. **Systematic theology is valuable for several reasons.**

a. An overview of the entire teaching of the Bible, respecting its details is the task of systematic theology.

Systematic Theology is the discipline which strives to accurately articulate the teachings of the Christian faith -

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- *drawing primarily upon a careful study of Scripture,*
- *with sensitivity to the idioms of modern life,*
- *so that the believer will come to know, trust and obey God.*

b. The **Great Commission** calls us to teach all believers the things that Jesus revealed to the apostles.

c. The **alternative heretical teachings** in a fallen environment prompt a response from the Christian community that is systematic in its form.

d. The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the scientist, - a body of unorganized or only partially organized facts that **need to be brought to bear, in a consistent and all inclusive way upon contemporary life.**

e. The **development of Biblical wisdom and effective Christian service** is dependent (in part) upon a comprehensive and integrated understanding of God’s revelation.

f. Knowing about God does not always lead to knowing God but it is a **vital part of the process.**

g. The human intellect invariably seeks for a **unification and systematization** of its knowledge, so as to insure internal consistency.

h. The **people of God** have always had a love for the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures.

- **Psalm 119:72** “The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.”
- **Psalm 119:127** “Therefore I love Thy commandments above gold, yes, above fine gold.”
- **Prov. 23:23** “Buy the truth, & sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction & understanding.”
- **Psalm 86:11** “Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth; unite my heart to fear thy name.”

Note: Examples of eagerness for Truth

1. Temple worshippers in the time of Christ: Luke 21:37,38
2. Samaritans: John 4:39-42
3. Cornelius: Acts 10:30-33
4. Bereans: Acts 17:10-13
5. Col. 1:9-13, 21-23; 2:1-8
6. Eph. 1:17-23; 3:14-19; 4:11-16

3. Systematic theology can be misused.

- a. Christianity can be **reduced to a rationalistic system** of intellectual ideas only. John Stott struck a balance when he said, "We cannot pander to a man's intellectual arrogance, but we must cater to his intellectual integrity."
- b. As we strive for philosophical unity in our system, we risk creating and embracing as God's Word that which **goes beyond the clear and fundamental teaching of Scripture**.
- c. We may **fail to properly discern and emphasize the "weightier"** matters of God's revelation in our systems. (Rapture of the church, role of women, Sabbath, Baptismal form, Lord's Supper, etc.)
- d. Theological systems can be used in such a way so as to **create divisions** within the Body of Christ that are unnecessary. Calvinists / Arminians, Covenant / Dispensational, High church / Low church, Charismatic / Charisphobic, etc.
- e. Christians can error on the side of distorting grace so as to ignore Biblical ethics (Jude addresses this problem). Christians can also distort the law so as to become legalistic (Galatians addresses this problem).

The process of systematic theology

C. - ***through careful study of all sources of truth.*** "15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth"

1. We must respect the dual authorship of the Bible.

- a. The Scripture is the Word of God in Human language.
 1. Laws of the Spirit.
 2. Laws of human language.
- b. Laws of human language.
 1. Context, context, context.
 2. Literary forms.
 3. Systematic theology

2. Christian faith that does not start in the mind does not start. Christianity that ends in the mind, ends.

- a. **Systematic, logical understanding of our faith has always been important.**
Luke 1:1-4 "1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as those who from the beginning were

eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write {it} out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”

- Oral tradition predated Scripture. The earliest NT documents are dated to about 45AD. Luke was not a first hand observer but he was in personal contact with those who were.
 - There is a need for an orderly and comprehensive accounting of the nature of our hope, the gospel, faith, God, and His Kingdom.
 - Intellectual understanding is an important part of our faith.
 - Christianity is a system based on historic facts not on an ethical philosophy or a private personal religious experience.
 - Teachers play an important role in Christian community.
- b. **The Christian faith must not end with the head. II Timothy 3** *“13 But evil men and impostors will proceed {from bad} to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 14 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned {them}; 15 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”*
- The Christian faith involves understanding truth not just experiencing God. Christianity can stop at the neck from both directions.
 - Doctrine is a means to an end – encounter with God and obedience to God.
 - Deception is a real threat to true believers.

Pastoral advice

What can you do to make a study of systematic theology an edifying experience?

1. Commit yourself to **learn as much as you can about the God you love** knowing that He has revealed much about himself that can be learned by a careful reading of Scripture and observation of nature.
2. Respect the work of **those who have gone before** you and take advantage of what they have discovered. Just as the scientist can help us appreciate God’s creation so the systematic theologian can help us appreciate the self-revealing God.
3. Set **realistic goals** for yourself. If this is your first exposure to this kind of study, don’t try to comprehend everything. Concentrate on learning the ropes, vocabulary, issues, etc.
4. Each time you study **pray** that God will show you one truth, perspective, insight, text, etc. that will constitute His word for you that day.
5. Study with a **group**. Expect that your interactions will add life to your own study.