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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to Systematic Theology

- + *What is systematic theology?*
 - + *Why should Christians study it?*
 - + *How should we study it?*
-

I. EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

A. Definition of Systematic Theology

What is systematic theology? Many 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.*¹ 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 be on *historical theology* (a historical study of how Christians in different time periods have 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 in the past 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. While these other areas of study help us to understand theological questions, only Scripture has the final authority to define

¹This 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).

what we are to believe, and it is therefore appropriate to spend some time focusing on the teaching of Scripture itself.

This book will also not emphasize *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 life situations. 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, capital punishment, war, birth control, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, lying, racial discrimination, alcohol use, the role of civil government, use of money and private property, care for the poor, and so forth. Such topics belong to the study of ethics and are not covered in this book. However, this book will not hesitate to suggest application of theology to life where such application comes readily.

Systematic theology, as defined above, 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. 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. 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 the above definition). It then becomes evident that the boundary lines between these various disciplines often overlap, 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, concentrates on the collection and then the summary of the teaching of *all* the biblical passages on a particular subject. It therefore makes use of the results of biblical theology and often builds upon them. 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 sometimes involves the use of terms and even concepts that were not themselves used by any individual biblical author but 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, all doctrines should be seen in terms of their 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.” “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 the above definition—by thinking about various topics and answering the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?”

How then does this book differ from this kind of “systematic theology” that most Christians do? It does so in at least four ways. First, this book treats biblical topics in a *carefully organized way* to guarantee that all important topics will receive thorough consideration. This organization also helps to prevent inaccurate analysis of individual topics, for it means that all 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,”² and nine chapters (chs. 20–28) 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. In fact, one of the marks of maturity in understanding systematic theology is precision in the use of words to summarize the teachings of the Bible.

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. 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 interpretation of Bible verses 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 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 to abandon as false any idea 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 any 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, the doctrine of the Trinity, or the doctrine of God’s justice.

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 Doctrine of Christ
- Part 5: The Doctrine of the Application of Redemption

²See ch. 21, pp. 307–9, on saving faith, and chs. 14–16, pp. 229–69, on the person and work of Christ.

- 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 included. 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. 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, 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.

5. Major and minor doctrines. People sometimes ask what the difference is between a “major doctrine” and a “minor doctrine.” Christians often say they want to seek agreement in the church on major doctrines but also allow for differences on minor doctrines. I have found the following guideline useful:

A major doctrine is one that has a significant impact on our thinking about other doctrines or that has a significant impact on how we live the Christian life. A minor doctrine is one that has very little impact on how we think about other doctrines and very little impact on how we live the Christian life.

By this standard, doctrines such as the authority of the Bible (ch. 2), the Trinity (ch. 6), the deity of Christ (ch. 14), justification by faith (ch. 22), and many others would rightly be considered major doctrines. People who disagree with the historic evangelical understanding of any of these doctrines will have wide areas of difference with Christians who affirm these doctrines. By contrast, it seems to me that differences over forms of church government, or some details about the Lord’s Supper (ch. 28), or the timing of the great tribulation (ch. 32), concern minor doctrines. Christians who differ over these things can agree on perhaps every other area of doctrine, and can live Christian lives that differ in no important way, and can have genuine fellowship with one another.

Of course, we may find doctrines that fall somewhere between “major” and “minor” according to this standard. That is only natural, because many doctrines have *some* influence on other doctrines or on life, but we may differ over whether we think it to be a “significant” influence. In such cases, Christians will need to ask God to give them mature wisdom and sound judgment as they try to determine to what extent a doctrine should be considered major in their particular circumstances.

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 assumptions, of course, are always

open to later reconsideration or deeper confirmation, but at this point, these 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 regularly reading the Bible every day of our lives?

1. The basic reason. The most important reason for studying systematic theology is that it enables us to obey the command of Jesus 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).

To teach all that Jesus commanded means more than merely teaching the words he spoke while he walked on the earth. Luke implies that the book of Acts contains the story of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through the apostles after his resurrection (note that Acts 1:1 speaks of Luke’s gospel as recording “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; 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 exhibit the absolute confidence Jesus and the New Testament writers had in the authority and reliability of the Old Testament Scriptures as God’s words (see ch. 2), 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. This is where systematic theology becomes necessary: To effectively teach ourselves and others what the whole Bible says, it is necessary to *collect* and *summarize* all the Scripture passages on a particular subject.

Because no one will have the time to study what the entire Bible says about every doctrinal question that may arise, it is very helpful to have the benefit of the work of others who have searched Scripture and found answers to various topics. This work enables us to teach others more effectively by directing them to the most relevant passages and suggesting 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*. Because there is sin in our hearts, and because we have incomplete knowledge of the Bible, all of us from time to time resist or refuse to accept certain teachings of Scripture. For example, we may have only a vague understanding about a doctrine, which makes it easier to resist, or perhaps we know only one verse about a topic and we then try to explain away that verse. It is helpful for us to be confronted with the total weight of the teaching of Scripture on that subject so that we will be persuaded more readily 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 future. These new controversies will sometimes include questions that no one has faced very carefully before. To properly answer these questions, Christians will be asking, "What does the whole Bible say about this subject?"

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. This is because of the Bible's great consistency; everything that the Bible says is somehow related to everything else the Bible says. 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, economics, or the natural sciences? How does it guide us in spending money, in saving, or in tithing? The Bible gives us principles that apply to every area of our lives, 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 in these practical ethical areas as well.

Third, studying systematic theology will *help us grow as Christians*. The more we know about God, about his Word, about his relationships to the world and mankind, the better we will trust him, the more fully we will praise him, and the more readily we will obey him. Studying systematic theology rightly will make us more mature Christians. If it does not do this, we are not studying it in the way God intends.

In fact, the Bible often connects sound doctrine with maturity in Christian living: Paul speaks of "*the teaching which accords with godliness*" (1 Tim. 6:3), and says that his work as an apostle is "to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of *the truth which accords with godliness*" (Titus 1:1). By contrast, he indicates that all kinds of disobedience and immorality are "contrary to sound doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10).

D. How Should Christians Study Systematic Theology?

How then should we study systematic theology? The Bible provides some guidelines for answering this question.

1. *We should study systematic theology with prayer.* If studying systematic theology is simply a certain way of studying the Bible, the passages in Scripture that talk about the way in which we should study God's Word give guidance to us in this task. Just as the psalmist prays in Psalm 119:18, "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law," so we should pray and seek God's help in understanding his Word. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "the unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." Studying theology is therefore a spiritual activity in which we need the help of the Holy Spirit.

No matter how intelligent, if the student does not continue to pray for God to give him or her an understanding mind and a believing and humble heart, and the student does not maintain a personal walk with the Lord, the teachings of Scripture will be misunderstood and disbelieved, doctrinal error will result, and the mind and heart of the student will not be changed for the better but for the worse. Students of systematic theology should resolve at the beginning to keep their lives free from any disobedience to God or any known sin which would disrupt their relationship with him. They should resolve to maintain with great regularity their own personal devotional lives. They should continually pray for wisdom and understanding of Scripture.

Since it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability to understand Scripture, we need to realize that the proper thing to do, particularly when we are unable to understand some passage or some doctrine of Scripture, is to pray for God's help. Often what we need is not more data but more insight into the data we already have available. This insight is given only by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 1:17–19).

2. *We should study systematic theology with humility.* Peter tells us, "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Peter 5:5). Those who study systematic theology will learn many things about the teachings of Scripture that are perhaps not known or not known well by other Christians in their churches or by relatives who are older in the Lord than they are. They may also find that they understand things about Scripture that some of their church officers do not understand, and that even their pastor has perhaps forgotten or never learned well.

In all of these situations, it would be very easy to adopt an attitude of pride or superiority toward others who have not made such a study. But how ugly it would be if anyone were to use this knowledge of God's Word simply to win arguments or to put down a fellow Christian in conversation, or to make another believer feel insignificant in the Lord's work. James' counsel is good for us at this point: "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:19–20). He tells us that one's understanding of Scripture is to be imparted in humility and love. "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. . . . But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:13, 17–18). Systematic theology rightly studied will not lead to the knowledge that "puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1), but to humility and love for others.

3. *We should study systematic theology with reason.* We find in the New Testament that Jesus and the New Testament authors will often quote a verse of Scrip-