

# **SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO  
CHRISTIAN BELIEF**

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**P U B L I S H I N G**  
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# FOREWORD

REFORMED THEOLOGY PRESENTS itself (as Roman Catholic theology also does) as a comprehensive, thoroughgoing embodiment of universal Christian truth. The taproot for all versions of it has been John Calvin's catechetical treatise for preachers and adult believers, the fifth and final edition of his *Institutes*, where the wealth of truth uncovered by Martin Luther's biblical minings is consolidated for all time. Since then, three parts of the world have made major contributions to the Reformed heritage, each engendering its own conflicts and loyalties. England saw the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan development, from William Perkins to John Owen, exploring life in Christ in and through the Holy Spirit; nineteenth-century Holland produced the Kuyperian theology of human and Christian culture within a Reformed frame; and the twentieth century witnessed, within the conservative Presbyterian world, the ongoing quest for Reformed methodological authenticity, in which B. B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, J. Gresham Machen, and Cornelius Van Til are, by common consent, the leading names. I'd like to think that tomorrow's Reformed leaders will add John Frame's name to that list; I believe they should.

The church must ever seek in its theological life to verbalize biblically affirmed realities and biblically approved attitudes—to make clear to itself what is and will be involved in holding fast to these things and living in their light and power, and to detect and reject inauthentic alternatives. That, of course, involves interacting both with the words and ways of the surrounding world and with the heritage of the Christian past. In the nature of the case, theology is a cumulative enterprise in which each generation of thinkers stands on the shoulders of those who went before, and reflects on its intellectual legacy in the spirit of a grateful, though critical, trustee. This requires discernment and may call for challenges to what is customary, for the church's heritage contains, along with truth and wisdom, limitations and mistakes and anachronisms, so that it can not only inspire but also mislead our minds and put damaging blinders on them. That is why wise men say that the Reformed church must always be reforming (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*; actually, the Latin is passive: "needs always to be reformed" is the precise translation). To the church's head, our living Lord Jesus Christ, the church's well-being is a matter of abiding concern, so those who theologize in his name should always see active service in and to the church as part of their vocation.

Concern for a clear theological method and concern for the church's well-being are evident as two driving forces in John Frame's theological work, all of which anchors itself within the territory mapped out by the Westminster Standards. In the world of separatist American Presbyterianism, he has sometimes come under fire as a left-wing reformist; in the wider world of mainstream conservative Protestantism, which has the Reformed heritage at its center, he is not as well known as he should be; but where his work is noticed, he is recognized as one of the most clearheaded and best disciplined biblical systematists of our time. His status here will become apparent to anyone who takes time to study this, his magnum opus, and it is a matter for thanksgiving that he has been able to crown his career as teacher and writer by composing it. He seems to have feared lest it be unwittingly uneven, because he had not taught in the seminary classroom all the topics he covers here—but he need not have worried. At every point his probing, lucid, patient, thoroughly resourced reflections display mastery, and the easy friendliness of his style becomes the spoonful of sugar that makes the mixture go down into mind and heart in the pleasantest way possible, every time.

Clearly, the ideal reader whom Frame has in mind is the seminary or Bible college student who will one day be teaching in the church, and his aim throughout is to render that person a humble, faithful, Bible-soaked, Christ-loving, reverent communicator of the revealed truth of God. The thoroughness with which he searches the Scriptures, the firmness of his insistence that on all matters canonical Scripture must be allowed to speak the last word, and his quickness to discern where this is not being done, or not done well enough, give his discussions hermeneutical significance that his academic peers will appreciate. Also, his presentations reveal something yet more precious in a teacher of theology, namely, an awareness that it is natural for the children of God to want to know all they can learn about their heavenly Father. Over and above his primary audience, Frame writes for all who have this instinct and are willing to think about divine things at some length.

The goal of theology, as Frame understands it (and there is nothing out of the ordinary here), is the organized knowledge of God and ourselves together, in the context of our past, present, and future lives. This knowledge, which is both cognitive and relational, must be drawn, first to last, as we have already observed, from the written Word of God—the Bible. Frame sees, and stresses, that since God is infinite and we are finite, our knowledge of him and of our relationship to him cannot be other than, and so at best will be, perspectival, that is, made up of a set of distinct but correlated perspectives, each providing a thematic focus complementary to what other perspectives yield. Anyone who has driven, or can imagine driving, the sixty miles or so around the foot of Washington State's mighty Mount Rainier, stopping every few miles to view the mountain from a new angle, will appreciate what this means. Within this carefully constructed commitment to perspectivalism as the scaffolding, Frame opts for a regular procedure of what may be called heuristic triadic analysis, which opens up each point of theological substance by subdividing it into three. The procedure seems to grow out of the demonstrable advance in understanding that Frame first achieved

by his archetypal analysis of God's lordship (that is, his sovereignty) in terms of control, authority, and presence. While not categorically claiming a connection between triperspectivalism and the truth of the Trinity, Frame habitually practices it as an unfailing didactic technique (in his own words, "a good pedagogical device, a set of hooks on which to hang the doctrines of the faith"). He is a master at it, and presents us with no fewer than 110 cogent triadic analyses in the course of this work, all neatly listed at the back as Appendix A. The proof of the pudding, they say, is in the eating, and there is no doubt that Frame's triads, all achieved by separating out situational / normative / existential factors in the reality, or phenomenon, under analysis, do again and again bring into his discourse a degree of clarity that is quite stunning. Familiar, faded doctrines become fresh; fuzzy doctrines become precise; dull doctrines become stimulating and exciting. History will perhaps see this technique as John Frame's major contribution to the conceptual toolkit with which systematic theology works.

Briefly, now: *Systematic Theology* brings together, slims down, sums up, and augments all the wisdom contained in Frame's four-volume Lordship series. It is a worthy climax to the life's work of one who has only ever sought to be a faithful servant of Christ, teaching in his church. It is a privilege to celebrate its appearing and to commend it for serious study. I guarantee that the dividends of such study will be uniformly high. Thank you, John Frame, for this superb gift.

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# PREFACE

SOME VERY GREAT systematic theologians never wrote systematic theologies, among them B. B. Warfield. Warfield never desired to write one. He thought the *Systematic Theology* of his predecessor Charles Hodge was quite adequate, and for himself he preferred to write scholarly and popular works on specific doctrinal subjects. His stature as a theologian is no less for this decision. Nevertheless, I would not be surprised to hear that most teachers in the field would dearly love to have the opportunity to summarize their thoughts in a full-scale systematics. I belong to the latter group, so I am immensely thankful to God for the opportunity to write this book, an elaborate exposition of the teaching of Scripture as I understand it.

When my friend and editor John J. Hughes suggested this project, I did not resist, but he sought to motivate me nonetheless. He pointed out that in my case the task might be easier than for others, because I have already written big systematic theology books in some areas,<sup>1</sup> and I have written an introductory summary of theology, including topics not covered in the larger books.<sup>2</sup> Certainly these earlier books have been a great help to me in writing this one, and readers of those books will see here a basic continuity of thought and approach. They might even suspect (rightly) that in many places some text has been cut and pasted from those past books. But I have tried to do more than to summarize the big books and to expand chapters of the smaller one. Rather, I have tried to rethink everything to make it more biblical, clear, and cogent.

For me, *biblical* is always the operative word. Systematic theologies, to be sure, are often full of historical lore about the theological battles of the past and present, and that is needed up to a point. Readers will misunderstand the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, if they don't see how the technical terms *substance* and *person* emerged from controversy over Sabellianism and Arianism. And I want also to include enough historical discussion to express proper gratefulness to those teachers whom God has raised up in past generations. Neither my theology nor anyone else's gets its content exclusively from an individual encounter with the Bible. And I don't want my readers to think I am claiming anything like that for my own work.

Yet the Bible is the most important thing. Only the Bible is the written Word of God made available to us. It must have the final word in all historical and contemporary

1. DKG; DG; DCL; DWG.

2. SBL.

controversies. So the most important aspect of theological work is to present to readers what the Bible says. And if some choice is to be made (as it must) of what to include and exclude, that choice must be on the basis of what is best suited to express the Bible's teaching to contemporary readers.

My use of this criterion has led to a systematic theology that is somewhat less historical in focus than other volumes. I have also written less than they about controversies among contemporary academic theologians, because frankly I do not think many of these controversies are helpful in bringing the Bible's teaching to Christian believers. I will have more to say on these subjects in chapter 1 of this book.

I am thankful to all who have helped to make this work possible. First among these is my dear wife, Mary, and our children, Debbie, Doreen, Skip, Justin, and Johnny. Thanks also go to the administration, faculty, and student body of Reformed Theological Seminary, who have given me constant and gracious support. P&R Publishing, which has given me many opportunities over the years to expound biblical doctrine, has now allowed me the privilege of publishing this volume. I am especially thankful to John J. Hughes, my longtime friend, who shepherded this volume through the publishing process and who has helped me much on my past writing projects. In this book he has worked together with Karen Magnuson, an outstanding copyeditor who has also done excellent work on my past projects. Thanks also to my RTS colleague John Muether, who has produced the Index of Scripture and the Index of Subjects and Names.

I have prayed that this book will also show that the hand of God, in the Spirit of Jesus, has been in it. Apart from him I can do nothing. For his work in and through me I am uniquely grateful.

# ABBREVIATIONS

AGG	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994)
ASV	American Standard Version
BRD	Herman Bavinck, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8)
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936–62)
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CVT	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995)
CWM	John M. Frame, <i>Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997)
DCL	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)
DG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002)
DKG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987)
DWG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
ER	John M. Frame, <i>Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); available at <a href="http://www.framepoythress.org">http://www.framepoythress.org</a> ; <a href="http://www.evangelicalreunion.org">http://www.evangelicalreunion.org</a>
ESV	English Standard Version
GST	Wayne Grudem, <i>Systematic Theology</i> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994)
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i>

IRF	John M. Frame, “Introduction to the Reformed Faith,” available at <a href="http://www.frame-poythress.org">http://www.frame-poythress.org</a>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	The Septuagint, early Greek translation of the OT, sometimes quoted in the NT
MCW	<i>Collected Writings of John Murray</i> , 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NOG	John M. Frame, <i>No Other God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PP	John M. Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” available at <a href="http://www.frame-poythress.org">http://www.frame-poythress.org</a>
PWG	John M. Frame, <i>Perspectives on the Word of God</i> (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000)
RD	Heinrich Heppe, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950, 1978)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	John M. Frame, <i>Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006)
SCG	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, Presbyterian Church in America, 1986); published together with the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC), and proof texts
WST	John M. Frame, <i>Worship in Spirit and Truth</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996)
WTJ	Westminster Theological Journal

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# PART 1

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## INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY



## WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

THEOLOGY IS FULL of definitions of things. One of the useful features of a systematic theology is that you can turn there and get quick definitions of terms such as *justification*, *glorification*, or *hypostatic union*. Definitions are useful, but we should be warned that they are rarely, if ever, found in Scripture itself.<sup>1</sup> Such definitions are themselves theology in that they are the work of human beings trying to understand Scripture. This work is fallible, and theological definitions are almost never adequate in themselves to describe the complex ways in which language is used in the Bible. For example, when John speaks of those who “believed” in Jesus in John 8:31, he is not using the term in any of the classical theological definitions of *belief* or *faith*. You can tell, because in verse 44 Jesus tells them, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.”

This reminder is especially appropriate when we are defining terms that are not explicitly found in Scripture itself. *Theology* itself is one of these. Theologians have developed a number of terms and concepts that are absent from Scripture itself, such as *Trinity*, *substance*, *person*, *nature*, *aseity*, *inerrancy*, *effectual calling*. There is nothing wrong with inventing new terms in order to better communicate biblical teaching. Indeed, this happens on a grand scale whenever the Bible is translated into a new language. When people first translated the Bible into French, German, English, and other languages, each time they had to come up with a whole set of new terms for everything in the Bible. From this fact, we can see that the line between translation and theology is not sharp.

Theologians came up with the term *effectual calling* to distinguish one biblical use of the term *calling* from others. Effectual calling is God’s sovereign summons that actually draws a person into union with Christ. But this is not the only kind of calling mentioned in Scripture. *Calling* can also refer to a name-giving, or an invitation, or a request for someone’s attention. So the term *effectual calling* isolates a particular

1. A few Bible passages come close to defining something, such as 1 John 3:4 (sin); 1 John 4:10 (God’s love). But are these definitions, or only contextually significant descriptions? Of course, the precise distinction between definition and description is not always clear.

biblical concept, distinguishing it from others. We see again, then, how making a definition is itself a theological task. It can help us to understand something of the teaching of Scripture.

Definitions, then, can be helpful teaching tools. But we should not look at them to find what something “really is,” as though a definition gave us unique insight into the nature of something beyond what we could find in the Bible itself. A theological definition of *omniscience* doesn’t tell you what omniscience really is, as if the biblical descriptions of God’s knowledge were somehow inadequate, even misleading or untrue. Even though there are none to few definitions in the Bible, Scripture, not any theological definition, is our ultimate authority. Theological definitions must measure up to Scripture, not the other way around.

Nor should we assume that there is only one possible definition of something. *Sin* can be defined as (1) transgression of God’s law or as (2) rebellion against God’s lordship. Other definitions, too, may be possible, but let’s just consider these. Of course, if you define sin as transgression of God’s law, you may well need to make it clear that such transgression constitutes rebellion. And if you define it as rebellion, eventually you will probably need to say that the rebellion in question is a rejection of a divine law. You may use either definition as long as you understand that each implies the other. You may choose either one as your definition, as long as you recognize the other as a description.

So of course, definitions are not something to live or die for. We should seek to understand the definitions of various writers, recognizing that someone who uses a different definition from ours might not differ with us at all on the substantive doctrine.

## Long and Short Definitions

Theologians often prefer very long definitions. One of Karl Barth’s definitions of *theology* is an example:

Theology is science seeking the knowledge of the Word of God spoken in God’s work—science learning in the school of the Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Word of God; science labouring in the quest for truth, which is inescapably required of the community that is called by the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

Here Barth tries to bring a large amount of theological content into his definition. This attempt is understandable, since every theologian wants his concept of theology to be governed by the content of theology. So he tries to show how the very definition of theology reflects the nature of the gospel, the content of Scripture, the preeminence of Christ, the nature of redemption, and so on.

2. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 49–50. He uses a somewhat shorter definition in *CD* for the related concept *dogmatics*: “As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.” *CD*, 1.1:4.



I think this is a mistake. In his *Semantics of Biblical Language*,<sup>3</sup> James Barr warned biblical scholars of the fallacy of supposing that the meanings of biblical terms were loaded with theological content. The meaning of Scripture comes not from its individual terms, but from its sentences, paragraphs, books, and larger units. For example, the word *created*, just by itself, out of all context, teaches us nothing. But “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1) teaches us a great deal. “By him all things were created” (Col. 1:16) teaches us even more.

The same warning is appropriate for theologians. Certainly our theological methods and conclusions must be derived from God’s revelation. But our definition of the word *theology* need not recapitulate those conclusions, though it must certainly be consistent with its conclusions. That is, the definition of *theology* cannot be a condensation of all the content of the Scriptures. Yet it must describe an activity that the Scriptures warrant.

### Theology as Application

Let us then attempt to develop a concept or definition of theology.<sup>4</sup> The basic idea of theology is evident in the etymology of the term: a study of God. But we should seek a more precise definition.

As I will argue in chapters 23–28, in Christianity the study of God is a study of God’s revelation of himself. Natural revelation and word revelation illumine one another. Scripture (our currently available form of word revelation) is crucial to the task of theology because as a source of divine words it is sufficient for human life (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and it has a kind of clarity not found in natural revelation. But natural revelation is a necessary means of interpreting Scripture. To properly understand Scripture, we need to know something about ancient languages and culture, and that information is not always available in Scripture alone. Nevertheless, once we have reached a settled interpretation as to what Scripture says, that knowledge takes precedence over any ideas supposedly derived from natural revelation.

So theology must be essentially a study of Scripture. It should not be defined as an analysis of human religious consciousness or feelings, as in the view of Friedrich Schleiermacher.<sup>5</sup> But we need to ask *how* theology is to study Scripture. Theology is not interested in finding the middle word in the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes, for example.

Charles Hodge saw theology as a science that dealt with the facts of Scripture, as an astronomer deals with facts about the heavenly bodies or a geologist deals with facts about rocks. He said that theology “is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.”<sup>6</sup> If Schleiermacher’s concept of theology is *subjectivist*, Hodge’s might be called *objectivist*. Schleiermacher

3. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 129–40, 246–96.

4. In all the discussion below, it should be evident that the term *theology* refers both to the activity of seeking knowledge and to the texts in which that knowledge is recorded.

5. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper, 1963).

6. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:19.

looked inward, Hodge outward. Schleiermacher looked primarily at subjective feelings, Hodge at objective facts. To Hodge, theology seeks the objective truth about God through Scripture. He wants the “facts” and the “truths.”

Certainly Hodge’s definition of theology is better than Schleiermacher’s, because Hodge’s is Bible-centered. But Hodge, like many orthodox evangelical theologians, leaves us confused about an important question: why do we need theology when we have Scripture?

Scripture itself, given Hodge’s own view of Scripture, tells us objective truth about God. We don’t need a theological science to give us that truth. So what is the role of theology?

In the statement quoted above, Hodge says that theology is an “exhibition of the facts of Scripture.” But aren’t the facts of Scripture already exhibited in the biblical text itself?

He further says that theology exhibits these facts “in their proper order and relation.” This sounds a bit as though the order and relation of the facts in Scripture itself are somehow improper, and that theology has to put them back where they belong. People sometimes talk about the theological “system” of biblical doctrine as if that system stated the truth in a better way than Scripture itself, or even as if that system were the real meaning of Scripture hidden beneath all the stories, psalms, wisdom sayings, and so on. I don’t think Hodge had anything like this in mind; such ideas are inconsistent with Hodge’s high view of Scripture. But his phrase “proper order and relation” doesn’t guard well against such notions. And in any case, it leaves unclear the relation between theology and Scripture.

He continues by saying that theology, together with its work of putting the facts of Scripture into proper order and relation, seeks to state “the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.” Certainly this is one of the things that theologians do, and ought to do. But again we ask: hasn’t Scripture done this already? And if it has, then what is left for theology to do?

In seeking a definition of theology, we need to emphasize not only its continuity with Scripture, but its discontinuity, too. The former is not difficult for orthodox Protestants: theology must be in accord with Scripture. But the latter is more difficult to formulate. Obviously, theology is something different from Scripture. It doesn’t just repeat the words of Scripture. So the main question about theology is this: what is the *difference* between theology and Scripture, and how can that difference be justified?

Evidently the theologian *restates* the facts and general truths of Scripture, for some purpose. But for what purpose? Hodge does not tell us.

In my view, the only possible answer is this: the theologian states the facts and truths of Scripture for the purpose of *edification*. Those truths are stated not for their own sake, but to build up people in Christian faith.

In this way, we align the concept of theology with the concepts of teaching and preaching in the NT. The terms for *teaching*—*didasko*, *didache*, and *didaskalia*<sup>7</sup>—refer not to the stating of objective truth for its own sake, but to the exposition of God’s truth in order to build up God’s people. Consider Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 14:6; 1 Tim. 1:10; 2:7; 4:6, 16; 6:3–4; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9; 2 John 9. These passages contain words of the *didasko* group, translated “teacher,” “teaching,” “doctrine.” Notice the frequent emphasis in these passages that teaching has the purpose of building people up in faith and obedience to God. Notice also the phrase *sound doctrine*, in which *sound* is *hygiainos*, “health-giving.” The purpose of teaching is not merely to state the objective truth, but to bring the people to a state of spiritual health.

In defining theology, it is not strictly necessary to align it with a single biblical term, but it is certainly an advantage when we can do this. I propose that we define theology as synonymous with the biblical concept of teaching, with all its emphasis on edification.

So theology is not subjective in Schleiermacher’s sense, but it has a subjective thrust. We need theology in addition to Scripture because God has authorized teaching in the church, and because we need that teaching to mature in the faith. Why did Hodge not state this as the reason we need theology? Perhaps he wanted to encourage respect for academic theological work, so he stressed its objective scientific character. Perhaps he was worried that reference to our subjective edification would encourage the disciples of Schleiermacher. But such considerations are inadequate to justify a definition of theology. Scripture must be decisive even here, and Scripture commends to us a kind of teaching that has people’s needs in mind.

Theology, on this basis, responds to the needs of people. It helps those who have questions about, doubts about, or problems with the Bible. Normally we associate theology with questions of a fairly abstract or academic sort: How can God be one in three? How can Christ be both divine and human? Does regeneration precede faith? But of course, there are other kinds of questions as well. One might be confronted with a Hebrew word, say *dabar*, and ask what it means. Or he might ask the meaning of a Bible verse, say Genesis 1:1. A child might ask whether God can see what we are doing when Mom isn’t watching. I see no reason to doubt that all these sorts of questions are proper subject matter for theology.

Nor would it be wrong to say that theology occurs in the *lives* of people, in their behavior, as well as in their speech. Behavior consists of a series of human decisions, and in those decisions believers seek to follow Scripture. Behavior, too, as well as speech, can be edifying or unedifying. Example is an important form of teaching. Imitating godly people is an important form of Christian learning, and the behavior of these people is often a revelation to us of God’s intentions for us (1 Cor. 11:1). Their application of the Word in their behavior may be called theology. So theology is not merely a means of teaching people how to live; it is life itself.<sup>8</sup>

7. *Didaskalia* is translated “doctrine” in 1 Timothy 1:10; 4:6; Titus 1:9; 2:1. Of course, we today often use *doctrine* as a synonym for *theology*.

8. Another way of bringing out the practicality of theology is to note that the term has often been used (by Abraham Kuyper, for example) to denote the *knowledge* of God that believers receive by saving grace, as in John

There really is no justification for restricting theology only to academic or technical questions. (*How academic? How technical?*) If theology is edifying teaching, theologians need to listen to everybody's questions. My point, however, is not to divert theology from theoretical to practical questions, or to disparage in any way the theoretical work of academic theologians. But I do think that academic and technical theology should not be valued over other kinds. The professor of theology at a university or seminary is no more or less a theologian than the youth minister who seeks to deal with the doubts of college students, or the Sunday school teacher who tells OT stories to children, or the father who leads family devotions, or the person who does not teach in any obvious way but simply tries to obey Scripture. Theoretical and practical questions are equally grist for the theologian's mill.

The only term I know that is broad enough to cover all forms of biblical teaching and all the decisions that people make in their lives is the term *application*. To apply Scripture is to use Scripture to meet a human need, to answer a human question, to make a human decision. Questions about the text of Scripture, translations, interpretation, ethics, Christian growth—all these are fair game for theology. To show (by word or deed) how Scripture resolves all these kinds of questions is to *apply* it. So I offer my definition of theology: theology is *the application of Scripture, by persons, to every area of life*.<sup>9</sup>

Why, then, do we need theology in addition to Scripture? The only answer, I believe, is “because we need to apply Scripture to life.”

## Kinds of Theology

Traditionally, theology has been divided into different types. *Exegetical*<sup>10</sup> theology is interpreting the Bible verse by verse. That is application, because it aims to help people understand particular passages in Scripture. *Biblical* theology expounds Scripture as a history of God's dealings with us. It therefore focuses on Scripture as historical narrative. But if it is theology, it cannot be pure narrative. It must be application, dealing with the meaning<sup>11</sup> that narrative has for its hearers and readers.

17:3. The early pages of John Calvin's *Institutes* discuss this saving knowledge of God in Christ. On the first page Calvin says that we cannot rightly know ourselves without knowing God, and vice versa. On this concept of theology, see *SBL*, 73–78.

9. Later, I will indicate three perspectives that we can bring to bear on many theological questions. In my definition of theology, those three perspectives are Scripture (normative), persons (existential), areas of life (situational). So my definition of theology contains these three elements.

10. *Exegetical*, *biblical*, and *systematic* theology are all misnomers. Exegetical theology is not more exegetical than the others, nor is biblical theology more biblical, nor is systematic theology necessarily more systematic.

11. *Meaning* is not something different from application. See my discussion in *DKG*, 83–84, 97–98. When someone asks, “What is the meaning of this passage?” he may be asking for a number of things, including (1) a translation into his language, (2) an explanation of its function in its immediate context or in the whole Bible, and (3) help in the personal appropriation of its teaching (what does it mean *to me*?). These forms of meaning are also forms of application, so the two terms cover the same ground. It is therefore misleading for someone to claim that items 1 and 2 represent meaning, but 3 is merely application. All of these are questions about meaning and also about application. All questions about meaning are questions about application, and vice versa.

*Systematic* theology seeks to apply Scripture by asking what the *whole* Bible teaches about any subject. For example, it examines what David said about the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus, and Paul, and John, and tries to understand what it all adds up to. Another way of putting it is to say that systematic theology seeks to determine what *we today* should believe about forgiveness (or any other scriptural teaching). Seen that way, systematic theology is a highly practical discipline, not abstract and arcane as it is often presented.

Sometimes systematic theologians have produced systems of theology—comprehensive attempts to summarize, analyze, and defend biblical teaching as a whole. When a writer calls his book a systematic theology, a dogmatics, a body of divinity, or a *summa*, we can expect to find in that book such a system. The present volume is that sort of book. But: (1) We should not imagine that any such system is the true meaning of Scripture, lurking, as it were, beneath the text. At best, the system is a summary of Scripture, but Scripture itself (in all its narratives, wisdom deliverances, songs, parables, letters, visions) is our true authority, the true Word of God. (2) This kind of comprehensive system-making is not the only legitimate form of systematic theology. Systematics is equally interested in studies of individual doctrines and answers to individual questions.

*Historical* theology is the analysis of past theological work. It is truly theology when it does this study in order to better apply biblical teaching to the church of the present day. Without this goal, it is something less than theology, a mere academic discipline among others. I define historical theology as a study of the church's past theology, for the sake of its present and future.

*Practical* theology is, in my understanding, a department of systematic theology. It asks a particular question of Scripture, among the other questions of systematics. That question is: how should we *communicate* the Word of God? Thus, it deals with preaching, teaching, evangelism, church-planting, missions, media communications, and so on.

## Theological Method

In *DKG* I discussed many aspects of theological method. Here I want to make only a single point, that theology should be Bible-centered. That is obvious, given the definition of theology that I have presented. If we are to apply the Bible, we must be in constant conversation with the Bible. If we are to argue adequately for a theological view, we must be able to show the biblical basis of that view.

There are, of course, many auxiliary disciplines that aid the work of theology. God's revelation in creation illumines Scripture, as well as the reverse. So to do theology well, we need to have some knowledge from extrabiblical sources: knowledge of ancient languages and culture, knowledge of how past theologians have dealt with issues. The creeds and confessions of the church are especially important theological sources because they reflect important official agreements on doctrinal issues. It is also useful for a theologian to know the various alternatives available in the theological literature of the present and for us to have some knowledge of secular disciplines, such as



psychology, sociology, politics, economics, philosophy, literary criticism, and the natural sciences. Some of these aid us directly in the interpretation of Scripture. Others help us to understand the contemporary situations to which we intend to apply Scripture.

I think, however, that theology today has become preoccupied with these auxiliary disciplines to the extent of neglecting its primary responsibility: to apply Scripture itself. Theological literature today is focused, especially, on history of doctrine and contemporary thought. Often this literature deals with theological questions by comparing various thinkers from the past and from the present, with a very minimal interaction with Scripture itself.

I cannot help but mention my conviction that this problem is partly the result of our present system for training theologians. To qualify for college or seminary positions, a theologian must earn a Ph.D., ideally from a prestigious liberal university.<sup>12</sup> But at such schools, there is no training in the kind of systematic theology that I describe here. Liberal university theologians do not view Scripture as God's Word, and so they cannot encourage theology as I have defined it, the application of God's infallible Word. For them, one cannot be a respectable scholar unless he thinks autonomously, that is, rejecting the supreme authority of Scripture.

When I studied at Yale in the mid-1960s, *systematic theology* was defined as a historical study of theology since Schleiermacher. (Theology before Schleiermacher was called *history of doctrine*.) In such a school, systematics was a descriptive, not a normative, discipline. It set forth what people have thought about God, not what we *ought* to think about God. Of course, some normative content seeped through: not the normative content of Scripture, but normative content that emerged from the modern mind, from an autonomous rejection of the supreme authority of Scripture.

Students are welcome at such schools to study historical and contemporary theology, and to relate these to auxiliary disciplines such as philosophy and literary criticism. But they are not taught to seek ways of applying Scripture for the edification of God's people. Rather, professors encourage each student to be "up to date" with the current academic discussion and to make "original contributions" to that discussion, out of his autonomous reasoning. So when the theologian finishes his graduate work and moves to a teaching position, even if he is personally evangelical in his convictions, he often writes and teaches as he was encouraged to do in graduate school: academic comparisons and contrasts between this thinker and that, minimal interaction with Scripture itself. In my judgment, this is entirely inadequate for the needs of the church. It is one source of the doctrinal declension of evangelical churches, colleges, and seminaries in our day. Evangelical denominations and schools need to seek new methods of training people to teach theology, educational models that will force theologian candidates to mine Scripture for edifying content. To do this, they may need to cut themselves off, in

12. Full disclosure: I do not have an earned doctorate. I completed all requirements for the Ph.D. at Yale University except for the dissertation. In 2003 I received an honorary D.D. degree from Belhaven College. So critics are welcome to dismiss my comments here as sour grapes if they prefer. I trust that other readers will respond in a less ad hominem fashion.

some degree, from the present-day academic establishment. And to do that, they may have to cut themselves off from the present-day accreditation system, which seeks to make theological seminaries conform more and more to the standards of the secular academic establishment.

It is good for readers of theology to know what Augustine thought about a particular issue, or Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, or someone else. And it is often interesting to see how a theologian “triangulates” among these, going beyond Barth here, avoiding the extreme of Pannenberg there.

But no theological proposal fully makes its case until it shows itself to be biblical. This means that any theologian worth his salt must interact in depth with the Bible. Such interaction is not only the work of biblical scholars or of exegetical theologians. It is the work of systematic theologians as well. In fact, the systematic theologian, since he aspires to synthesize the teaching of the *whole* Bible, must spend more time with Scripture than anybody else.<sup>13</sup>

The application of Scripture is a very distinctive discipline. Although it depends to some extent on the auxiliary disciplines that I have listed, none of them has the distinct purpose of applying Scripture to the edification of people. To carry out that purpose requires not only academic excellence, but a heart-knowledge of Jesus, a prayerful spirit, and an understanding of the needs of people.

This present volume of systematic theology will be focused on Scripture, not on history of doctrine or contemporary theology. Of course, nobody should suppose that the ideas in this book appeared out of nowhere, with no historical context. My own confession is Reformed, and this book will certainly reflect that orientation, though I hope herein to reach out to members of other doctrinal traditions. And from time to time I will refer to secular and liberal thinkers of the past and present. But my chief interest is to state what the Bible says, that is, what it says to us.

I have no objection to theologians who want to include in their work a larger component of historical and contemporary discussion. As I said before, that is historical theology, and that discipline is often a great help to systematics. I do object to theologies in which the historical emphasis detracts from an adequate biblical focus. I question whether it is possible to do an excellent job of combining a systematic theology with a history of doctrine, though many have tried to do it. Certainly I am not competent to do it. So although I will rely on past and contemporary thinkers at many points, I will not devote much time here to expounding their views.

To say that this book is exegetical is not to say that it focuses on new exegetical ideas. For the most part, I am sticking to interpretations of Scripture that are fairly obvious and commonplace. Reformed *doctrine* has traditionally been based on the main principles of Scripture, not individual verses alone. Although new interpretations of

13. John Murray’s lectures in systematic theology consist almost entirely of the exegesis of biblical passages that establish Reformed doctrines. He explains his method in his important article “Systematic Theology,” in *MCW*, 4:1–21.

verses appear from time to time, this process of change in exegetical theology generally does not lead to change in the church's doctrines. Further, I think the church's problems today are not usually problems that can be solved by novel interpretations of this or that passage. Our theological problems usually arise from our failure to note what is obvious.

## Key Terms

*Note: Key terms are listed in the approximate order in which they are treated in the text of each chapter.*

Definition  
 Theology (Barth)  
 Theology (Schleiermacher)  
 Theology (Hodge)  
 Theology (Frame)  
 Edification  
 Application  
 Exegetical theology  
 Biblical theology  
 Systematic theology  
 Historical theology  
 Practical theology  
 Meaning

## Study Questions

1. "Definitions are themselves theology." Explain; evaluate.
2. Is it wrong to develop theological terminology not found in Scripture itself? Why or why not?
3. "Nor should we assume that there is only one possible definition of something." Why shouldn't we assume this? Give an example of a term that may be defined in more than one way.
4. "The definition of *theology* cannot be a condensation of all the content of the Scriptures." Explain; evaluate.
5. "But Hodge, like many orthodox evangelical theologians, leaves us confused about an important question." What question? How does Frame answer it? How do you think we should answer that question?
6. What are the advantages in defining theology by reference to the *didasko* word-group of the NT? Do you see any disadvantages?
7. Frame believes that "theology today has become preoccupied by these auxiliary disciplines to the extent of neglecting its primary responsibility." What is that



primary responsibility? What have recent theologians substituted for that primary responsibility? How is this problem related to the current methods of training theologians? How is it related to the nature of seminary accreditation?

### Memory Verses

**Ps. 34:11:** Come, O children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

**1 Cor. 11:1:** Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

**1 Tim. 4:6:** If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

**2 Tim. 2:1–2:** You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

### Resources for Further Study

In addition to the specific suggestions that I make at the end of each chapter, it will be valuable for the student to compare the discussions here with those of other systematic theologies, such as those of Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, Robert Reymond, Douglas Kelly, and Richard Gamble.

Ames, William. *The Marrow of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997. Influential Puritan work on the basics of theology. He defines theology as “the science of living before God.”

Calvin, John. *Institutes*. This is the most influential theological text of the Reformed tradition, and an admirable example of *theology as application*. Calvin referred to this volume as his *Summa Pietatis*, “summary of piety.” Cf. Aquinas’s *ST* and *SCG*.

Frame, John M. *DKG*, 76–85, 206–14.

Murray, John. “Systematic Theology,” in *MCW*, 4:1–21.