
Why Systematic Theology?

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 25, NIV)

1. Introduction

Theology: theos = God + logos = a word or doctrine

Christian theology is, broadly speaking, the doctrine of God, His universe and His plan of salvation.

Not to be confused with ethics (conduct), psychology (behaviour), religion (worship of God or gods) or philosophy (lit. love of wisdom).

Theology can be approached from five perspectives:

- I. Exegetical - study of Biblical texts for meaning (in language, culture, timing, place, people)
- II. Historical - the history of God’s people (their origins, practices, beliefs, organisation, the lives of the Patriarchs, Israel and the church)
- III. Dogmatic - fundamentals of the faith, as set out in various creeds (not to be confused with “dogmatism”)
- IV. Practical - application of theology to life (eg ethics, Christian education, missions, worship and the raft of secular applications)
- V. *Systematic - arrangement of Biblical facts in logical order under major topics (to understand the doctrines of the Christian faith more fully)*

Some people oppose the study of doctrine (not to be confused with “doctrinaire”). They see it either as too academic, theoretical, dry, or too much of a distraction from evangelism.

Others don’t want to be emphatic - age of “relativism”, nor to use theology as a basis of disagreement. “Love is enough.” “Religious differences are too divisive.”

Others, still, are conscious of the (sometimes violent) history of theological differences in the Christian church and want to smooth over these by focussing on points of agreement.

Jesus criticised the Pharisees for not knowing the Word of God.

The existence of heresies (Chilean case study) makes it all the more important that we, as leaders, know what (and why) we believe. We do so because we believe the Bible to be infallible, trustworthy, the Word of God - everything hangs off that - but we are fallible.

We study mathematics, biology, physics and other disciplines “systematically” (imagine if we approach them randomly); the “systematic treatment of Biblical themes has a similar approach.

2. Why Study Theology?

- I. To enable us to have a clearer understanding of Biblical topics. The human mind organises things into logical systems. The Bible is full of theology, but it is often approached as an open field, where there are many types of grasses; it is easy to view the whole but (if we are to be more than spectators, or tourists) we also need to see the component parts. Surveys of the Bible look at the whole panorama. Within the panorama the Bible has a lot to say about God, Jesus Christ, sin, faith, salvation, the nature and purpose of the church.
 - Systematic theology is like a botanical garden compared with the pristine forest; it draws together Biblical teaching in reasonable chunks of related material (thematically), to help us understand.
 - Much of the Bible is groups thematically, eg the Ten Commandments, the Law, the Psalms, Proverbs, Prophetic writings, the records of Moses (the Pentateuch). Many Christians read the Bible but need assistance working through its teachings. As the work of the botanist is to draw samples together, classify, study/analyse, record and explain, our role is to draw together and explain what God has said.
- II. To help us apply the Bible to our modern lives. “What does the Bible say about x?” is not always answerable by a single verse, but makes sense thematically. Would you go to a medical practitioner who merely reads medical journals and relies on “common sense” instead of “dry” academic study? Systematic Theology draws truth from throughout the Bible, confirming the uniqueness of this book and the possibility of applying it in daily life. Intellectual commitment to a list of doctrines is not enough, but it clarifies what we believe. Add the reality of the Holy Spirit and it becomes “spirit and life”.
- III. To enable us to understand what others have said and written about the Bible. Much of the literature requires a prior working knowledge of theology and an understanding of language/concepts.
- IV. To equip others to refute false doctrine. In the NT the Galatian believers strayed because of erroneous teaching (Galatians 1:6-9). “The time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:3). This has tremendous implications for all believers, in part because it permits the growth of false doctrine and praxis. Many cults base key beliefs on verses from the Bible that are taken out of context, eg Mormon baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29). False doctrine usually involves a variation on a familiar theme (another Jesus, a different Spirit, a different Gospel, cf 2 Corinthians 11:4). We need to be able to compare one with the other. Biblical checks and balances are essential.
 - Theological courses are taught as academic disciplines in many universities, but they are often theologically “liberal”, sometimes agnostic. We need a Christian-faith alternative.
- V. To equip us for practical ministry. “My pastor isn’t a theologian; he is a preacher” is a misconception. Some Christian leaders have an aversion to doctrinal preaching; emphasis on edification, oratory instead. We are commanded to preach good doctrine (2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9).

3. Divisions of Theology

Overview of topic outline

- Bibliology - the Bible and God's Revelation
- Theology Proper - God
- Angelology - the origins, nature and power of angels, Satan and demons
- Biblical Anthropology - The origin and nature of man, in relation to God (as distinct from cultural/social/biological anthropology)
- Hamartiology - the origin, nature and consequences of sin; the "lostness" of mankind and our need of a Saviour
- Christology - the person and work of Jesus Christ
- Soteriology - Salvation
- Pneumatology - the person and work of the Holy Spirit
- Ecclesiology - the Biblical basis for the Church, its make-up and functions (organic, not just history or rituals)
- Eschatology - the last things; the final outcome of the present order

4. Revelation

Revelation = *apokalypsis* = uncovering what was previously hidden. (The opposite is "occult", which means "hidden".)

Reasons

- God is creator and sustainer of everything; He would want to reveal Himself to His creation
- God made man in His image, with the need/capacity to have fellowship with Him; He revealed Himself to fulfil and contextualise that relationship
- man separated himself from God, who now has to take the initiative
- sin brings spiritual darkness; compounded by the deceptions of sin and Satan

Paul reminds us that God is not far from any one of us.

The Extent of Revelation

In revelation:

- God discloses Himself to our minds and understanding
- He communicates divine truth
- by single act/s (eg prophecies) and over a period of time
- discloses facts and concepts that could not be grasped in any other way.

God *did* reveal Himself to man, but rebellion led to sin (Romans 3:23). It is impossible for man by himself to find God (Titus 1:15).

General Revelation

God has not left Himself without witnesses in the world:

- nature (creation, natural laws; Romans 1; Acts 14:17)
- history (Acts 17:26, 27). God dealt with nations: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Israel
- human conscience (Romans 2 - can be re-adapted to lower standards we accept; can be perverted by sin; nevertheless, confirms that there are a Lawgiver and Law.

Why general revelation?

- so that we would seek/find Him (Acts 17:27, 30)
- to provide a basis on which God could judge people; there is none without excuse.

Issues of insufficiency. General revelation:

- provides a motive for searching for God, but does not convict
- partial revelation is inconclusive; man turns into worship of the creature or substitutes with vague but unhelpful generalisations/concepts/principles
- does not lead to salvation

Special Revelation

God has progressively revealed Himself

- through prophets (eg 2,000 times in the Old Testament, cf 2 Peter 1:20-21)
- through miracles (eg Exodus 2-5; 1 Kings 18:22-39)
- through fulfilled prophecies (scores were fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ)
- through His Son (Hebrews 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15; John 1:18; 14:9)

The Bible as God's Revelation

Byblos = books (many religions have oral traditions; oral is limited, changes over time).

Not a book about:

history
geography
philosophy (cf Bill Hayden "a book like Shakespeare")
Israel

but about God. Supernaturally given in order to:

- reveal God, His person and ways
- reveal God's will
- bring worship to Him
- reveal the way of salvation through Jesus Christ

5. The writing of the Bible

“... you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed (theopneustos) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

The Holy Spirit led to God’s word being revealed and recorded.

Old Testament - Deuteronomy 4:2; Jeremiah 1:9

New Testament - Luke 1:23; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:1, 2; 1 John 5:10, 11; 1

Thessalonians 2:13

Theories of Inspiration

Natural - merely super-insight about God, moral and religious truth. Not supernatural. “Inspired” like masterpieces, with human endowments. This theory places low value on Scripture and its authority in human life. Susceptible to human weakness. Sometimes called the “intuition theory”.

Plenary - God inspired the writers; they wrote what they received. Did not by-pass human intellect (vocabulary, style, culture, language).

Partial - Inspired in some places. The principles are inspired, but there are errors, eg geography, history, making it untrustworthy and acceptance/interpretation untrustworthy, ie who judges? who is truly objective? We are left with little confidence in the book.

Mechanical Dictation - Writers were merely secretaries for God, who recorded His dictation, eg “This is what the Lord says” (Exodus 34:27). Infers that God by-passed their human intellect. One issue that arises is the inclusion of material that does not come from God, eg words by Satan, practices such as bigamy in the OT. Vocabulary and style vary widely. 40 authors over 1600 years; many different walks of life, 3 major languages, yet unified.

Implications of Plenary Inspiration

- affirms divine authorship
- language is as if God Himself were speaking (Hebrews 3:7)
- infallible - incapable of deceiving or making a mistake; perfect and trustworthy (Psalm 19:7); does not lie (Titus 1:2); the Bible’s words are truthful and worthy of confidence
- inerrant - free from error
- sufficient - enough light to save sinners and guide the church; no need for external revelation; all we need to know, to lead us to Christ (2 Timothy 3:15; Luke 24:25-27).
- complete - *the* Word of God; not “contains the word of God”
- authoritative - stamped with God’s supreme authority (Isaiah 1:2); not the word of men; claim to our obedience; need to understand it (context, culture, grammar, application).

Nothing profound in God’s eternal truth comes to us without revelation. Only the Holy Spirit can illuminate our hearts (1 Corinthians 2:11) and impart understanding (cf Matthew 16:17). This is necessary because of spiritual darkness that exists outside of Christ (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18; 5:8; Acts 26:18; Romans 2:19; John 1:5; Colossians 1:13). Without God’s help we cannot understand spiritual things. This, in turn, releases faith (Romans 10:17). The Holy Spirit is our teacher (2 Corinthians 2:9-13; John 16:13; 1 John 2:27).

Discussion: What if someone claims a new “revelation from the Holy Spirit? Consider Paul’s warning in Galatians 1:8.

Canonicity

Who decided which books should be in the Bible?

The term “canon” describes those writings that are divinely inspired, the 66 books in our Bibles. Determining the canon was undertaken over a long period of time by Jewish scholars and early Christians. We believe that ultimately, it was God who decided what books belonged in the Bible. Hebrew believers recognized God’s messengers and accepted their writings as inspired by God. For the New Testament, the process began in the first centuries of the Christian church. Canonicity took the following into account.

1. Was the author an apostle/did they have a close connection with an apostle (eg Luke, Paul)?
2. Was the work accepted by Jesus Christ (eg the Law and prophets he regularly cited)?
3. Was the book accepted by the body of Christ?
4. Was it read in churches and quoted in the writings of the early church fathers?
5. Did it contain consistency of doctrine?
6. Did it agree with overarching rules of faith?
7. Did it bear internal evidence of high moral and spiritual values that would reflect a work of the Holy Spirit?
8. Did it edify when read publicly and generate a positive heart response

Stephen Langton (1155/56 – 1228), a Paris theological professor, was the first to make chapter divisions to help his work with Bible commentaries. In 1240, Cardinal Hugo of St. Cher published the first Latin Bible with the chapter divisions that exist today.

Creeds

What does your church teach about the Bible?

Two examples:

(i) Assemblies of God

We believe that the Bible is God's Word. It is accurate, authoritative and applicable to our every day lives.

(ii) The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

I. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

II. Under the name of holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the Books of the Old and New Testament, which are these:

Of the Old Testament

Genesis	Ecclesiastes
Exodus	The Song of Songs
Leviticus	Isaiah
Numbers	Jeremiah
Deuteronomy	Lamentations
Joshua	Ezekiel
Judges	Daniel
Ruth	Hosea
I Samuel	Joel
II Samuel	Amos
I Kings	Obadiah
II Kings	Jonah
I Chronicles	Micah
II Chronicles	Nahum
Ezra	Habakkuk
Nehemiah	Zephaniah
Esther	Haggai
Job	Zechariah
Psalms	Malachi
Proverbs	

Of the New Testament

The Gospels according to	Thessalonians II
Matthew	Timothy I
Mark	Timothy II
Luke	Titus
John	Philemon
The Acts of the Apostles	The Epistle to the
Paul's Epistles to the Romans	Hebrews
Corinthians I	The Epistle of James
Corinthians II	The First and Second
Galatians	Epistles of Peter
Ephesians	The First, Second, and
Philippians	Third Epistles of John
Colossians	The Epistle of Jude
Thessalonians I	The Revelation

All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.

III. The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the Canon of Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

IV. The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or Church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

V. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

VI. The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

VII. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

VIII. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God who have right unto, and interest in, the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

IX. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

X. The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.