



SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY



FROM
CANON
TO
CONCEPT



VOLUME ONE

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

“Steve Wellum has already made a significant contribution in the area of biblical-theological methodology: a progressive covenantalism that emphasizes the covenants as the framework for the proper understanding of the whole of Scripture. With this new book, he makes another important contribution based upon progressive covenantalism: a systematic theology that arises out of that covenantal framework to express doctrinal truth about the triune God and his ways so that the church grows in faith and obedience and expands into the whole world through the gospel of Jesus Christ. *Systematic Theology* is a *tour de force!*”

—**Gregg R. Allison**, professor of Christian theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Systematic Theology* is solidly evangelical, thoroughly biblical, informed by major church history voices, written to serve the church, and shaped by an overarching progressive covenantalism. Wellum’s engagement with other thinkers combined with his articulation of matters related to theological method and Christian worldview development are superb. This comprehensive volume reflects decades of study, research, and teaching, and it will provide insightful, thoughtful, and edifying guidance for a generation of students, pastors, church leaders, and seasoned theologians as well.”

—**David S. Dockery**, distinguished professor of theology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and president, International Alliance for Christian Education

“Wellum proves himself to be extremely adept at summarizing and synthesizing biblical material, understanding the history of Christian theology, grasping various philosophical schools of thought, and is passionate about bringing his work to bear on contemporary life and practice. This theology is thoroughly Christian and trinitarian, steeped in ancient Christian theological reflection, committed to the best of the Reformation, and convictionally Baptist. It is satisfying to see a first-rate theological mind engage in the theological task. I am excited to see such a robust and forthright new systematic theology come to see the light of day. It is simply excellent, and I look forward to its reception and influence.”

—**Bradley G. Green**, professor of theological studies, Union University, and professor of philosophy and theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Stephen Wellum has given us the best systematic theology from the perspective of ‘progressive covenantalism.’ An alternative to both classic Reformed covenant theology and dispensationalism, Wellum casts a wide vision for this ‘third way’ of interpreting Scripture. Although I remain persuaded of the former perspective, I found Wellum’s arguments edifying, challenging and at many points an advance in serious evangelical engagement with Scripture’s own theological framework. Plus, he writes for the church and that aim is evident throughout all of the topics.”

—**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary, California

“Wellum’s *Systematic Theology* is biblically faithful, pastorally wise, culturally adept, and methodologically astute. Wellum addresses the basic philosophical challenges that loom behind theologizing today, yet most fundamentally he is a Baptist theologian who formulates doctrine exegetically, covenantally, and canonically. While other systematics do good work, this volume is the systematic theology I’ve been waiting for. It moves to the top of the heap.”

—**Jonathan Leeman**, editorial director, 9Marks

“We hold in our hands a volume that will become a standard textbook for evangelical seminaries. It will be referenced for decades to come because it truly is a theology driven by the biblical storyline, grounded in church history, and related to contemporary issues. It shows both the maturity of a seasoned professor and precision of a well-published scholar. Pastors, students, and professors alike will want to learn from it.”

—**Christopher W. Morgan**, dean and professor of theology, School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University

“Steve Wellum is one of the most astute and brilliant theologians of our day and now we are treated to his *magnum opus*. This volume is a profound systematic theology that draws on biblical theology, historical theology, and philosophy in formulating a coherent and articulate presentation of Christian doctrine. In my mind no one has done this better today than Steve Wellum. He emphasizes that systematic theology is practical—it is theology applied to all of life. We all live, whether we know it or not, based on our systematic theology. Thus, this is a life-changing book that is a must read both for the academy and for the church.”

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, and associate dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *Systematic Theology*, Stephen Wellum not only engages in the task of doing theology, he also does so as an expression of worship to God. In this exceptional volume, Wellum presents the storyline of the Bible and then masterfully moves from biblical to systematic theology in light of historical theology. And for Wellum, the goal of discerning doctrinal truth from Scripture is good but not ultimate. Theology and doctrine are for knowing and worshipping God rightly and to live obediently and joyfully under Christ’s lordship. This is theology of the church, in the church, and for the church. Take up and read. Learn of God. And ultimately, worship our Creator-Covenant Lord.”

—**Gregory C. Strand**, executive director of theology and credentialing, EFCA, and adjunct professor of pastoral theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“According to the law of supply and demand, the need for evangelical systematic theologies is not as great as it was twenty years ago—thanks be to God. Yet Wellum’s volume, the first of a promised pair, stands out from the pack, for two reasons. First, it is unashamedly Baptist. Second, and more importantly, Wellum’s systematic theology takes its marching orders from biblical theology. The whole of part three lays out his distinctive progressive covenantal theological framework. The ‘system’ that emerges is one that centers on and magnifies the being and works of the triune God in creating and caring for the world. Readers will find here clearly argued, biblically grounded theological thinking about God and all things in relation to God for the edification of the people of God.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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STEPHEN J. WELLUM

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ACADEMIC
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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To my theological colleagues, past and present, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who have sharpened my thinking, carried out robust theological discussion, and exhibited grace even in areas of disagreement. I am thankful for your partnership in the gospel as we have sought to take seriously our sober and joyous responsibility to teach the next generations of Christian ministers to remain faithful to Scripture alone and to know and proclaim the glory of our triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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PREFACE

When I first agreed to write a systematic theology many years ago, I underestimated how difficult and daunting such a project would be. The weight and responsibility of communicating faithfully the whole counsel of God to the church for our time is no small task. In fact, to think that one person can do such a thing is already a problem! Who is sufficient for such a task, apart from the constant encouragement of others, dependence on those who have gone before, and a constant reliance on the grace and help of our triune God?

Systematic theology is best understood as “faith seeking understanding,” and it requires an accurate understanding of God’s word, centered in the knowledge of God, and the application of Scripture to every area of life. Theology must stand on the shoulders of the theological giants who have gone before; it is never done in a vacuum. Moreover, theology must also address the needs of our current day, so that we can fulfill our calling as the church to “demolish arguments and every proud thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, and to take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:4b–5). Apart from faith and sound theology, the church is always in constant danger of being “tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit” (Eph 4:14), instead of being rooted and grounded in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3), and to know is life eternal (John 17:3). No wonder, the writing of a systematic theology for the church in our day is both a daunting task and an amazing joy and privilege. As such, I could not have finished this first volume of a projected two volume systematic theology apart from the help of many people too numerous to thank.

My understanding of the gospel and sound theology was first taught to me by my parents, family members, faithful pastors too numerous to mention, and by my teachers during my seminary years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School—all of whom faithfully sought to know, proclaim, and apply the truth of Scripture without compromise. In addition, I want to thank my wife, Karen, and our children, Joel, Justin, Joshua, Janae, and Jessica, who endured my teaching theology in the home and seeking to make it relevant to their lives as the baton was passed to them to remain faithful to the triune God of the gospel as they seek to honor him in their marriages and families.

Also, I want to thank my students over the years, starting over twenty-seven years ago, first at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools in western Canada, and since then in various theological institutions in North America, Ireland, and other international countries. However, special thanks go to my students at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where I have served since 1999. Over the years, my students have greatly encouraged me to persevere and to get this work done. Their strong support to finish this work has been much appreciated. Even more: their desire to know God and his Word and to think theologically in every area of life has been such an encouragement to me as a teacher, and I am so thankful to the Lord for the opportunity he has given me to teach and the train the next generation of gospel ministers to be faithful in their theology and lives. Today, what is needed are faithful pastors and strong local churches, and I am encouraged by many of my students who are such pastors in the churches they have been called to serve, teach, and minister.

I must also thank the administration and trustees of Southern Seminary, and especially Dr. Albert Mohler. Dr. Mohler has led the seminary well by modeling vigilance in holding to sound doctrine, and also demanding this of his faculty. Also, apart from the generous sabbatical policy of the seminary, it would have been difficult to finish this first volume. I am thankful for the investment of Southern in theological education for the church, along with the Southern Baptist Churches who faithfully and sacrificially support their seminaries. My prayer is that our Convention of churches and our seminaries will never cease to uphold the full authority of Scripture, sound orthodox theology, and to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

This book is dedicated to my colleagues, both past and present, who have served alongside me in the teaching of systematic theology. I have benefited from all of my colleagues at Southern Seminary who have sharpened and challenged me to faithful biblical and theological

teaching, but I especially want to acknowledge those in systematic theology who have served as colleagues in gospel ministry. Although we may disagree at some points, there is remarkable unity in the glorious truths of Christian theology, and a deep desire to pass sound theology on to the next generation. It has been a joy and privilege to serve alongside Bruce Ware, Gregg Allison, Kyle Claunch, and previously Oren Martin, Tyler Wittman, Chad Brand, and Craig Blaising. All of my colleagues have taught and sharpened me, and encouraged me in the doing of theology for the glory of our triune God and the good of the church. Thank you, gentlemen, for being fellow partners in the gospel, and may we remain faithful to the high calling that is ours to know God and his Word and to theologize correctly.

My prayer is that this work will encourage many in their understanding of God's Word and to think rightly about our great and glorious God. We live in challenging days for the church, and what is needed is faithfulness to the whole counsel of God so that gospel ministry may continue, God may be glorified, and Christ proclaimed. *Soli Deo gloria.*

INTRODUCTION

Systematic theology is *not* optional for the church. In fact, theology is the very lifeblood of the church and thus necessary for her life and health. At the center of theology's task is the knowledge of our triune God as our Creator, Redeemer, and covenant Lord, along with the application of his word to our lives. For us, who are created and redeemed by God, there is no higher calling than to know the only true God in and through our Lord Jesus Christ (John 17:3).

Theology, which is disciplined thought about God and all things in relation to him, is not reserved for academic theologians; it is the calling and responsibility of all Christians. As the “queen of the sciences,” theology is the culminating discipline that uses sanctified reason to understand the whole of Scripture and to apply its teaching to every area of our lives. Theology allows us to “to think God's thoughts after him” to the praise of his glory and for the good of the church. In fact, apart from sound theology, we do not think rightly about God, the self, or the world. Although everyone has some kind of theology, our task is to make sure that our theology is true to Scripture and faithful to “the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (Jude 3).

Theology is needed in every era but especially today. Since its beginning, the church has always been in danger of theological and spiritual drift, and theology's task is to keep her from being “tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching” (Eph 4:14). Theology is called to expound and defend the truth of God's word so that the church continues to love and proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ to the nations (Col 1:28–29) in every cultural context. But today, the need seems even greater. On every side, many evangelicals are experiencing a collective identity crisis. Why? I am sure there are many reasons, but certainly one

of them is due to the waning conviction that theology is an objective discipline grounded in the triune God who is truly there and who has authoritatively made himself known to us. For many years, as David Wells has repeatedly warned the evangelical church in the West, we have traded theological faithfulness for “pragmatic success.”¹ As a result, disciplined biblical and theological thinking has taken second place to other cultural concerns, so much so that even critics of evangelicalism are noticing some massive changes within contemporary evangelicalism.² For this reason, if the evangelical church is not careful, she is in danger of surrendering her conviction that an objective theology is possible (because Scripture *is* God’s authoritative and trustworthy word) and is desirable.

However, the conviction of this work is the opposite of some of these current trends. With the historic and “catholic” church, I am convinced that the triune God is actually there and that he has revealed himself in his authoritative word, and hence that theology is both possible and absolutely necessary for the life and health of the church. But what makes this work distinctive in contrast to other works of theology? Five comments are in order.

First, in many ways this work is saying nothing new, and I consider this its strength. This work is not seeking to be novel, but instead faithful to Scripture and classic, orthodox theology. As such, I gladly affirm the “catholic” confessions of the church as true (e.g., the Apostles’ Creed, Nicaea, Chalcedon), and I am convinced that the “old paths” are what the church needs today, especially in the doctrinal areas of theology proper and Christology.

Second, this book is committed to the truth of the Reformation *solas* (e.g., *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*, *solī Deo Gloria*) and what the Reformers recaptured in terms of these central gospel truths. Furthermore, I am convinced that at the heart of Reformation theology is the supremacy of the triune God of glory as the independent, self-sufficient, holy Creator, Lord, and Redeemer. On this point, this work is thoroughly committed to Reformed

¹ See David F. Wells, *The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2021); cf. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Reformation Faith in Today’s World*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

² For example, see David Gushee, “The Deconstruction of American Evangelicalism,” *Baptist News Global*, October 11, 2021, <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-deconstruction-of-american-evangelicalism/#.YWR-8trMKUk>. Gushee, a critic of evangelicalism, notes some recent trends within evangelicalism away from theology to more cultural concerns.

theology as the view that is most faithful to who God is as the sovereign Lord worthy of all of our worship, love, and obedience.

Third, this book is unashamedly Baptist, although specific Baptist distinctives as they pertain to the church will be developed in volume 2. However, it is evident even in this volume that I am convinced that a proper view of the covenants and God's new covenant work in Christ requires an uncompromising commitment to Baptist distinctives and convictions.

Fourth, as already stated, my Baptist convictions are due to my understanding of how God unfolds his eternal plan through the biblical covenants. In this regard, this book offers an alternative to classic Reformed covenant and dispensational theology, and in their place, I affirm "progressive covenantalism" as the best way of "putting together" the Bible's metanarrative from Genesis to Revelation.

Fifth, this work is convinced that systematic theology arises from the entire canon of Scripture, but not merely as isolated texts that may be organized in a variety of ways. Instead, theology arises out of the Bible's own presentation and covenantal framework, which is why theology must be *intratextual* and not *extratextual*. By the former, I mean that theology must be true to the Bible's own structures and categories and thus function as our authoritative "lens" by which we look at the world. This is in contrast to extratextual theologies that function as "authoritative" grids imposed on Scripture, thus reinterpreting the Bible according to an external framework outside of Scripture and not vice versa. This extratextual "method of correlation" is destructive of orthodox theology and must be rejected in order to be faithful to the Bible's own theological framework. Scripture, precisely because it is *God's* first-order authoritative word, presents its own God-given worldview, which must serve as the spectacles by which we draw theological conclusions *and* interpret the world. Otherwise, the Bible becomes merely a "wax nose" beholden to the latest conceptual scheme, which sadly we have repeatedly witnessed in theologies from the Enlightenment until today that have departed from historic Christianity.

This project is divided into two volumes. In part 1 of this volume, we discuss crucial prolegomena issues by setting the theological task in our present context and arguing for the necessity of a theology "from above." Since theology is never done in a vacuum, specific focus is on the exposition and defense of Christian theology as an objective, true discipline. We do so by unpacking the foundations (*principia*) for such a theology, namely, the triune God who exists and his authoritative speech given to us in Scripture. In part 2, the doctrine of

revelation as God's divine speech contained first in nature and then supremely in Scripture is developed in detail. Since our theology is dependent on God's self-revelation, it is crucial that our theological conclusions arise from the entirety of Scripture. For this reason, in part 3, we spend time unpacking the Bible's covenantal story from creation to the new creation and from Adam to Christ so that the Bible informs our theological conclusions as a coherent, unified story of God's eternal plan centered in Christ. Then in part 4, we begin to do theology by moving from biblical theology to theological formulation. We begin where Scripture begins, namely, the glory of our triune God. Theology proper is first discussed in terms of who God is in himself (*ad intra*) before we discuss God in his external works (*ad extra*) as our Creator and providential Lord.

In volume 2, by God's grace, we will continue to do theological formulation from the Bible's own covenantal story by completing the other loci of systematic theology: the doctrines of humanity and sin, the person and work of Christ, salvation, the church, and last things.

My earnest prayer is that in some small way this work will encourage the evangelical church to think theologically in every area of life for God's glory and the life and health of the church. We live in challenging times, which are witnessing much theological drift, and I am convinced that what is needed is not novel theologies indebted to the *Zeitgeist*, but theologies that retrieve the "old paths" and that, in doing so, remain faithful to God's holy word. What is needed is not less theology but more; not the lowest common denominator theology, but robust theology that takes God at his word and glories in Christ Jesus as Lord!

Soli Deo Gloria



Introduction to Systematic Theology

CHAPTER 1

Systematic Theology: Nature and Importance

Introduction

Theology means different things to people. For some it is an academic discipline that describes various theologians and their theologies and is thus only for professors or pastors, but not for the everyday Christian. For others, theology is a speculative, esoteric discipline that often leads us away from Scripture and that is detrimental for a vibrant relationship with the Lord. Others think of theology, especially “systematic” theology, as imposing “systems” on Scripture, thus removing it from Scripture and making it less than “biblical.”

Whatever people may think theology is, in the church, sadly, it has fallen on hard times. The evidence for this claim is not hard to find. On a biennial basis since 2014, Lifeway and Ligonier have conducted “The State of Theology” poll.¹ When basic theological questions are asked of self-identified evangelicals, it is evident that many are lacking even a rudimentary theological understanding. For example, in the 2020 poll, 96 percent of evangelicals agreed that “there is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” Yet 30 percent of these same people affirmed that “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God,” and 65 percent agreed that “Jesus was the first and greatest being created by

¹ “The State of Theology,” <https://thestateoftheology.com>.

God”—a contradiction of the first statement. However we try to make sense of these paradoxical answers, they minimally reveal that our churches are lacking basic doctrinal knowledge.

However, this should not surprise us. We have privileged religious experience and pragmatics over disciplined thinking about Scripture. For many, theology is a hard “sell,” especially in the age of social media, where careful thought is replaced by images and tweets. Theology has little “cash value”; what we want are instant answers to meet our felt needs. And we especially fear divisions within the church that often occur when careful theological thinking confronts false teaching.²

It is imperative that these “popular” misconceptions of theology are corrected by replacing them with a proper understanding of theology. As we begin our study, the purpose of this chapter is to define what systematic theology really is. We will do so by first reflecting on what systematic theology is in Scripture before identifying some of its basic elements and its relation to the other theological disciplines. Our aim is to demonstrate that systematic theology is *not* optional for the church; it is fundamental to our thinking rightly about God, the self, and the world. Theology is basic to Christian discipleship, and it is the culminating discipline, which leads to worldview formation. Theology is not a discretionary exercise; it is essential for the life and health of the church, and whether we realize it or not, everyone has some kind of theology. But the most significant question for us is whether our theology is true to Scripture or not. If it is not, this is serious since wrong ideas about God and Scripture result in disastrous consequences. Ultimately, what is at stake is the issue of truth and whether the church is faithful to Scripture’s command to “demolish arguments and every proud thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God” and to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:4b–5).

Theology *and* Scripture

Historically, systematic theology has been viewed as the “queen of the sciences.” As the “queen,” she is the beautiful capstone and culmination of all the disciplines, especially the theological disciplines. Properly understood, theology is the “study of the triune God,” who is our Creator

² See David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (see Introduction, n. 1); Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); and Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

and Lord and thus the source and standard of all knowledge and truth (Prov 1:7; Isa 46:8–10; Rom 11:33–36). In fact, the summum bonum of knowledge is the knowledge of God. In fact, all human knowledge, whether in creation or Scripture, is grounded in God’s speech and self-disclosure. For humans to know anything, we are dependent on God’s initiative to make himself known to us.³ For this reason, theology is not something reserved for the academic theologian, pastor, or spiritually-minded Christian. Rather, it is the calling and responsibility of all humans to know God as their Creator and Lord. And this is especially true for God’s redeemed people, who are re-created in Christ Jesus to know the only true God (John 17:3).

At its heart, systematic theology is the obedient task of the church to use renewed reason by reflecting faithfully on the whole of Scripture and to apply its teaching to every area of life. In other words, theology is the discipline that seeks “to think God’s thoughts after him”—for the praise of his glory and the good of the church.⁴ Viewed this way, theology obeys what God commands his people to do.

For example, think of our Lord’s command in the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). Under the authority of King Jesus, we are to “make disciples of all nations,” baptizing them in the name of the triune God and “teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.” To obey our Lord’s command requires careful biblical and theological thinking; knowing the Scripture; thinking rightly about who the Father, Son, and Spirit are; and faithfully applying all of Scripture to people’s lives. This is what theology *is*. Paul exhorts Timothy to “pay close attention to [his] life and [his] teaching,” which has life-and-death implications (1 Tim 4:16). He is commanded to “be diligent to present [himself] to God as one approved, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Titus is exhorted to hold “to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). All of these exhortations require that theology be done. One must first understand Scripture to have correct

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.1 (1:35), astutely notes the interrelated nature of the knowledge of God and of ourselves. In fact, we cannot know who we are apart from the knowledge of who God is.

⁴ Viewing theology as “thinking God’s thoughts after him” is a helpful summary of the entire theological task. On this point, see Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1998), 220–60.

teaching (or doctrine), and one must refute error by applying the teaching of Scripture properly. However, it is not only leaders in the church who must know sound theology; all believers must be “ready at any time to give a defense (*apologia*) to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). To obey this command, all believers must first know sound teaching in order to defend it against various objections. All of this requires rigorous and sound biblical and theological instruction.

So what, then, is systematic theology? In its most basic sense, systematic theology is the orderly, comprehensive “study of the triune God” and all things in relationship to him (Gk. *theos* [God] + *logos* [words, study of]). John Webster states it this way: Christian theology is the work of renewed, biblical reasoning to consider a twofold object:⁵ “first, God in himself in the unsurpassable perfection of his inner being and work as Father, Son and Spirit and his outer operations, and, second and by derivation, all other things relative to him.”⁶ B. B. Warfield defined theology in a similar way: “Theology . . . is that science which treats of God in himself and in his relations” to humans and the world.⁷ An older term to describe systematic theology is “dogmatic theology.” In this work, we will use these terms interchangeably, although technically dogmatic theology refers to “core biblical doctrines officially established in a church’s confessional statements,”⁸ and as such reflects the conclusions of a particular community or tradition’s biblical reasoning from Scripture.

If this is what systematic theology is, we can now see why there is no higher calling or study. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the famous question, “What is the chief end of man?” Its answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” In Scripture,

⁵ John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 115.

⁶ John Webster, *God without Measure*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 3. Elsewhere, Webster unpacks the nature of theology in terms of theology’s object and cognitive principles: “The Holy Trinity is the ontological principle of Christian systematic theology. Its external or objective cognitive principle is the divine Word, by which . . . God’s incommunicable self-knowledge is accommodated to saints. The internal or subjective cognitive principle is the redeemed intelligence of the saints. Systematic theology is thus ectypal knowledge. . . . Its matter is twofold: God, and all things in God.” Webster, “Principles of Systematic Theology,” *IJST* 11, no. 1 (2009): 56.

⁷ B. B. Warfield, “Theology a Science,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1973), 2:207.

⁸ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019–2021), 1:42.

central to our glorifying God is the knowledge of God. In fact, the purpose of our being created is to know and love God as his image-bearers and covenant people (Matt 22:37–40). Think of how the new covenant relationship is described between God and his people: “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD” (Jer 31:34a ESV). There is no higher calling and nothing more urgent than for humans, as God’s creatures, and especially for God’s redeemed people in Christ, to know our triune God in all of his majesty, beauty, and holy splendor (Ps 89:16; Isa 11:9; John 17:3). The life and health of the church is directly dependent on our knowledge of God and thus the doing of theology.

In fact, as Herman Bavinck rightly reminds us, theology is really nothing but the knowledge of God, which is then applied to every area of life. Bavinck writes:

So, then, the knowledge of God is the only dogma, the exclusive content, of the entire field of dogmatics [theology]. All the doctrines treated in dogmatics—whether they concern the universe, humanity, Christ, and so forth—are but the explication of the one central dogma of the knowledge of God. All things are considered in light of God, subsumed under him, traced back to him as the starting point. Dogmatics is always called upon to ponder and describe God and God alone. . . . It is the knowledge of him alone that dogmatics must put on display.⁹

The assumption undergirding such a view of theology is that it is an objective discipline or science, grounded in the triune God who is truly there and who has made himself known to us. This understanding of theology stands in contrast to “liberal” theology that broadly views theology as the study of “religion” or “faith”—a “subjectivist” idea. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s understanding of theology is a good example of this. For Schleiermacher, theology is the analysis of the religious consciousness, the feeling of absolute dependence.¹⁰ As we will note in chapters 2–3, the problem with such a view is that theology is made *independent* of Scripture, and its source is not directly grounded in God’s divine speech but in one’s personal experience

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 2:29.

¹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (1830; New York: T&T Clark, 1999), 3–128.

mediated through the communion of saints. But personal experience, even mediated through the church, is never the final authority for the theologian. In fact, this view of theology suspends the question of objective truth. “Religion” is more about our experience of and search for the divine. But for such a view, God becomes an aspect of human experience, a view contrary to historic Christian theology. Theology is not about us finding a way to talk about God from the fabric of human experience; instead, it is about the triune God choosing to make himself known to us.

In addition, John Frame defines systematic theology as “the application of God’s Word by persons to all areas of life.”¹¹ The focus on “application” is important because it reiterates what people often forget about theology, namely, that theology applies to every area of our lives. If we combine the definitions of Webster and Frame, we can say that systematic theology is the study of the triune God and all things in relationship to him and that it involves the application of God’s word to all areas of life.¹² Furthermore, Frame’s introduction of “application” into the definition of theology not only helps us think about what theology is but also how it is done. Although we will say more about theological method in chapter 4, at this point, working with our definition of theology, we can say that the doing of systematic theology minimally involves two steps.

First, theology requires that we *apply* God’s word. This not only assumes that Scripture, as God’s word written, is first order and thus foundational for our theology but also that a right reading of Scripture is central to the doing of theology. The Bible is more than a collection of isolated texts from ancient history. Instead, Scripture is God’s unfolding revelation of his eternal plan that moves from creation to the new creation, centered in the coming of Christ. Thus, a correct reading of Scripture requires that individual texts be located in relation to the Bible’s unfolding covenantal story and ultimately in light of the entire canon fulfilled in Christ. Careful attention must be given to the Bible’s own presentation of its content, categories, and teaching, which, as we will note below, involves the doing of *biblical theology*.

In this regard, Charles Hodge’s well-known definition of theology requires modification, as does Wayne Grudem’s definition that is dependent on Hodge. For example, Hodge defines theology as “the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation,

¹¹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 76.

¹² See Frame, 81–88.

with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.”¹³ Likewise, Wayne Grudem defines theology as the study that answers the question, “‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic,” which 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.”¹⁴

No doubt there is truth in what Hodge and Grudem say. Systematic theology does seek to know what the entirety of Scripture teaches on any given topic, hence the term “systematic.” Yet, the problem with such definitions is that they fail to do justice to what Scripture actually is. Scripture is not a theological dictionary or a storehouse of propositions and facts, although it is thoroughly propositional. Instead, Scripture is first-order God-given language that is composed of many literary forms that require careful interpretation, *and* it is an unfolding revelation given to us over time, a point we will develop in chapter 4. Theology, then, does not simply collect texts and arrange them properly as if we could remove texts out of their immediate and overall canonical context. Instead, Scripture, as God’s unfolding revelation over time, comes to us in a specific order and within its own interpretive framework. Texts have to be interpreted and made sense of in light of their redemptive-historical context and ultimately in terms of a closed canon. Our task is to understand individual texts in light of the entirety of Scripture and then to “put together” Scripture and all that it teaches “on its own terms.”¹⁵

Another way of stating this is that Scripture is a word-act revelation. It not only recounts God’s mighty actions in history; it is also God’s interpretation of his redemptive acts through human authors and thus true, objective, and authoritative. For this reason, Scripture’s own interpretations and descriptions are infallible, and they serve as our “interpretive framework” or “spectacles” for thinking about God, the world, and ourselves.¹⁶ Thus, *to apply* Scripture first entails that we interpret Scripture correctly as an entire canon.

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1852; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 1:19.

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 1 (emphasis removed).

¹⁵ For a similar critique of Charles Hodge’s use of Scripture and theological method, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:93–94.

¹⁶ See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1–4 (1:69–74).

Second, theology requires that we apply Scripture *to all areas of life*. This entails that theology is more than repeating Scripture; instead, theology has a “constructive” element to it. This “constructive” element not only “puts together” all that Scripture teaches; it also involves application to every area of life. For this reason, theology is foundational for worldview formation, as it seeks to integrate God’s revelation in nature and Scripture as an exercise of “faith seeking understanding.” As we take the Bible’s first-order description, we seek *to understand* Scripture in terms of application, logical implications, and metaphysical entailments. No doubt, we do so with help from the past, but we also seek to apply Scripture to the issues of our day in order to teach the church sound doctrine and refute the errors of both the past and present age. God has not given us his word for only one aspect of our lives; God’s word applies to every area of life, just as Christ’s Lordship is over everything. Abraham Kuyper captured this point well with his famous words: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”¹⁷

We will return to this point in subsequent chapters, but let me briefly illustrate what this second step looks like in the doing of Christology. To answer the question of who Jesus is, we first turn to the entire canon of Scripture. After we do so, we discover that the Jesus of the Bible is utterly unique; he is God the Son from eternity, who, in the incarnation, added a human nature to himself (John 1:1, 14). Yet, this biblical presentation raises some legitimate *theological* questions that require understanding and theological construction, even the use of extra-biblical language, concepts, and judgments. For example, how should we think of the relation between Jesus as the Son and the Father and Spirit? Or, how should we understand the relationship between the Son’s deity and humanity given the Creator-creature distinction (Phil 2:6–11)? Or, how do we make sense of Jesus’s statement that he does not know certain things if he is God the Son and thus omniscient (Mark 13:32)? To answer these questions, the “constructive” element of theology is done, which seeks to “understand” Scripture and “put together” the biblical teaching in such a way that accounts for all the biblical data. It is not enough to repeat Scripture, we must also “make sense” of it in order to disciple believers in the truth and to obey Scripture’s exhortation to always be ready to give a reasoned defense for what we believe.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

In the end, the purpose of theology is to help God's people understand Scripture better so that we can rightly know God's word, apply it to our lives, and fulfill our calling as the church to know God and to make him known.¹⁸ As Christians, we are called to bring all of our life, language, and thought into conformity with God's word. As we do so, we also formulate a well-thought-out biblical worldview so that we obey Scripture's command, "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of our mind" (Rom 12:2).

Theology *in* Scripture

With this basic idea of what systematic theology is in place, let us now turn to a biblical example of theology being done before our eyes. Sometimes it is easier to grasp what theology is by seeing it practiced, and this also has the added advantage of letting Scripture serve as the paradigm for our thinking about what theology is and how it is to be done. No doubt, in Scripture there are many examples of the doing of theology, yet Paul's Athenian address is most instructive for us today for a variety of reasons (Acts 17:16–32).¹⁹

First, Paul's reasoning illustrates that theology is *biblical* in that it is grounded in the Bible's unfolding story from creation to Christ. Even more: the Bible's content, categories, and theological framework serve as the interpretive matrix by which he explains the gospel, interprets the world, diagnoses the human problem, gives its solution in Christ, and applies the truth of Scripture to his hearers. Second, building on the first point, Paul's reasoning illustrates that theology presents a well-thought-out *worldview* or philosophy, that is, a total perspective on life, or a grand metanarrative, which allows him to interpret and critique all other theologies or worldviews. Scripture's own description of reality provides the "spectacles" by which Paul thinks and acts. Theology, then, is not only "constructive" in describing and explaining the Bible's message; it is also "apologetic" in that it calls non-Christians to repent of their thinking and suppression of the truth and to turn to the only source of truth, the triune God of Scripture and his word. Third, Paul's reasoning illustrates that theology is *contextual*; that is, it addresses a specific context and people, and it is applied to that context with precision and power. Theology is not

¹⁸ See Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 76–85.

¹⁹ My discussion of Acts 17 is indebted to D. A. Carson, "Athens Revisited," in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 384–98.

merely interested in giving us a list of timeless propositions; it is interested in applying God's authoritative word to specific people and bringing God's truth to bear on every area of life.

Each of these points is important to understand what theology is and how it is to be done. Yet, the third point links what Paul is doing in his day to ours and encourages us to do likewise. Why? For this reason: in many ways, our present cultural context is parallel to what Paul faced in Athens in the first century, and how he approaches the theological task is instructive for us. As we will discuss in chapter 2, our present context is pluralistic, postmodern, secular, and post-Christian. Central to the thinking of our age is a denial of objective truth largely due to the embrace of viewpoints that cannot account for a proper ground of said truth, in contrast to Christian theology. Specifically in the West, this has resulted in the acceptance of a multiplicity of worldviews other than Christianity and a corresponding biblical and theological illiteracy along with a rising syncretism. Our context is similar to what Paul faced at Athens except for the post-Christian aspect. This is why Paul's Athenian address and biblical reasoning is so instructive for us; he teaches us how to present the truth of the gospel in terms of an entire biblical-theological framework rooted in the Bible's story, which illustrates for us the theological task.

To underscore this point, think about *how* Paul in the book of Acts proclaims the truth of the gospel—including an entire theology—depending on his audience. Normally, when Paul went to a city, he first went to the synagogue, where he reasoned with the Jews and God-fearers, and his proclamation of the gospel followed a basic pattern: he reasoned from the OT that Jesus is the promised Messiah, who in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and in his sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost had ushered in the long-awaited kingdom of God and new covenant era (see Acts 13:5, 14–41, 44–45; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 17). Paul could begin this way because he and his Jewish audience had a common theology. They both believed the OT, and thus when Paul spoke about “God,” “Messiah,” “covenants,” “sin,” and so on, he spoke to people with a common worldview.

At Athens, however, Paul's audience and context were quite different. The Athenians did not accept the OT; they were steeped in idolatry, pluralistic in their outlook, and ignorant of the biblical teaching and worldview necessary to understand even the most rudimentary truths that Paul needed to communicate. Paul's preaching of Christ and the entire biblical worldview in the midst of the Areopagus, therefore, had a different starting place and structure than his preaching in the synagogues.

In Athens, Paul's gospel reasoning did not immediately begin with Jesus as the Messiah. Instead, he first built a biblical *and* theological frame of reference so that his proclamation of Christ would make sense *on the Bible's own terms* and *within its own categories*. This is not to deny that Paul and the Athenians had natural revelation in common (a point Paul makes clear in Rom 1). However, the point is that the Athenians, in suppressing the truth, could not fully understand Paul's message apart from placing it within the conceptual framework of Scripture.²⁰ Later on, we will identify this approach as *intratextual*, or "theology from above"; that is, theology's starting point is from the standpoint of God's revelation to us. Paul knows that his presentation of Christ only makes sense *within* the Bible's view of reality (metaphysics) grounded in a specific theory of knowledge (epistemology), which results in a specific view of moral obligation (ethics). The Athenians interpret and explain the world and themselves by an alien worldview framework due to a suppression of the truth of natural revelation, or what we will identify as an extratextual conceptual scheme. Paul does not start on some neutral ground where both he and the Athenians have a common epistemological agreement. No doubt, the Athenians are image-bearers of God like Paul and commonly share in the created order, but their interpretation of the world is dependent on their overall philosophy. This is why Paul first sets the entire Christian position as true over against the opposing non-Christian views; only *then*, and only from *within* the biblical worldview as governed by the "spectacles" of Scripture, does Paul proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior.

This is instructive for us, especially in thinking about what theology is. In fact, in Paul's gospel presentation, he develops the two interrelated steps mentioned above. First, Paul lays down six building blocks that are foundational to the biblical worldview and essential to the correct exposition and defense of Jesus's identity as the Christ. In laying down these building blocks, he erects the Bible's own interpretive framework, by which he interprets the world. And it is from *within this theological framework* that Paul proclaims the message of the gospel. Paul also makes the second step: he applies Scripture by setting the biblical view over against

²⁰ On this point, see the interaction between C. Kavin Rowe and Matthew Levering in Rowe, "God, Greek Philosophy, and the Bible: A Response to Matthew Levering," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5 (2011): 69–80; and Levering, "God and Greek Philosophy in Contemporary Scholarship," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4 (2010): 169–85; and the helpful discussion in Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 63–72.

its competitors, and in this case, he does so by calling his audience to repentance and faith in Christ as the only Lord and Savior. Before we apply what Paul is doing to our thinking on the nature of the theological task, let us look briefly at these six building blocks, which are essential to making sense of the Bible's view of the world and within which theology is done.

First, Paul begins with the triune God of creation, where all Christian theology must begin (v. 24). He frames his entire discussion of Christ and the gospel within a theistic universe, and he immediately establishes the most fundamental fact of reality, the Creator-creature distinction. As he explains to the Athenians, this world is not the result of blind chance (in contrast to Epicureans and naturalism) or the evolution of a world spirit (in contrast to Stoicism and pantheism), but it is the creation of one sovereign, personal God, who alone reigns as the Lord of heaven and earth.

Second, Paul establishes the nature of the God of creation as the one who is independent and self-sufficient (divine aseity). God is one (singularity and simplicity) and thus by definition in a different category than everything else. God alone is the source of all existence, the standard of truth, and the criterion of goodness. As such, God gives humans all things, but he receives nothing from us to help him rule as the Lord of all history and providence (vv. 25–26). For this reason, God cannot be bribed or cajoled; he judges justly and righteously, with his own will and character as the standard of justice, morality, and goodness. If we receive anything from him, it is not because we deserve it; instead, it is solely due to his sovereign choice to act in grace.

Third, Paul explains that God is a talking God who takes the initiative to make himself known to us, creating us in his image (“offspring”), and sovereignly locating us in our exact places so that we may know him as Lord of heaven and earth (vv. 26–29). The Athenians had constructed an idol to the “unknown god,” but Paul is clear that God is known and ought to be worshipped as God. Our *not* knowing God is our fault, not his, which raises the issue of the human problem as sin *before* the known Creator and Lord. God is not removed from this world and unknown; instead, he is active in it to reveal himself in truth (vv. 25, 28). In fact, due to creation, which all people have in common, God is universally known. As such, there is no real ignorance of him. In addition, God is known to his covenant people by his specific revelation of himself in word and deed, which Paul is now proclaiming.

Fourth, Paul establishes the basis for human responsibility in not knowing God in truth. By starting with the doctrine of God and then placing humans in their proper frame of reference,

Paul demonstrates that by nature and by choice we are alienated from God and justly condemned because we have turned from the truth about our Creator and Lord and his universe. This is why humans stand guilty under divine judgment and are in need of redemption (vv. 30–31). As image-bearers of God, descended from one man (v. 26), we not only have a common creation but also a common problem: we have *all* willfully rebelled against the one God, who alone gives us our very life and breath. We are without excuse. But apart from this framework, it is difficult to account for such truths. Whether in the first or the twenty-first century, one of the great challenges we face in presenting the truth of Scripture, who Jesus is, and why we need him is communicating a biblical sense of human depravity before *this* God.

Fifth, given the theocentric nature of the universe and humanity's rebellion, Paul declares that all people are commanded to repent before the coming day of God's final judgment (vv. 29–31). Note how discussion of final judgment is placed in an overall context that makes sense of it on the Bible's own terms. On that day, all humans, given their common creation and common problem, will stand before the one true and living God in either repentance or rebellion. If there is hope at all, it will not be found in us, either individually or corporately; it is only found in God the righteous, who must act in sovereign grace to provide salvation for us. Since God is one, the only Creator and Lord, he alone can redeem, and he alone must initiate. In the end, and in keeping with his character, God will act in both judgment on the rebels and grace toward the repentant.

Sixth, after constructing the Bible's basic theological framework as tied to its overall storyline, Paul finally arrives at a point where he is able to proclaim Jesus as a man (yet more than a mere man) whom God raised from the dead to judge the world in righteousness (v. 31).

For our purposes, as we reflect on how Paul's address instructs us regarding the nature of the theological task, it is crucial to note how much time Paul spends in first constructing the Bible's own *theological categories* before he preaches Christ. Why? Because the Jesus of the Bible can only be understood as the unique and incomparable Lord and Savior by first placing him *within* the theology and worldview of Scripture, not the extratextual framework of the Athenians. For example, just think of Paul's emphasis on Christ's bodily resurrection. For the Greeks, bodily resurrections were impossible and undesirable.²¹ But within the

²¹ See David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 486–505.

biblical conceptual scheme and worldview in which Paul has placed Jesus, a bodily resurrection is not only possible but also entirely plausible and desirable. After all, given who God is, it is entirely reasonable to think that the Creator and Lord is actively involved in history and able to bring about the bodily resurrection of Christ. In fact, given who God is and God's choice to save a fallen humanity, it makes total sense that the only one who can redeem us is utterly unique. By first erecting the biblical worldview of God, self, and the world, Paul is able to communicate Christ's true identity *within* the theology and plausibility structures of Scripture. Conversely, apart from the Bible's worldview, Jesus's identity will inevitably be misunderstood, distorted, and rejected as implausible. D. A. Carson captures this crucial point:

The good news of Jesus Christ—who he is and what he accomplished by his death, resurrection, and exaltation—is simply incoherent unless certain structures are already in place. You cannot make heads or tails of the real Jesus unless you have categories for the personal/transcendent God of the Bible; the nature of human beings made in the image of God; the sheer odium of rebellion against him; the curse that our rebellion has attracted; the spiritual, personal, familial, and social effects of our transgression; the nature of salvation; the holiness and wrath and love of God. One cannot make sense of the Bible's plot line without such basic ingredients; one cannot make sense of the Bible's portrayal of Jesus without such blocks in place.²²

Carson's point is important. However, it is not only noteworthy for grasping Jesus's identity or for doing Christology; it is also critical in the construction of *all* Christian doctrines. Biblical truth does not come to us in a vacuum; it comes to us embedded within the specific theology of Scripture. Or, as J. I. Packer reminded us, "theology is a seamless web, a circle within which everything links up with everything else through its common grounding in God."²³ As a web, biblical truths are interrelated, and to understand Christian doctrine, one must locate doctrines *within* the content, categories, and framework of Scripture. This is why Paul's Athenian address is an important illustration of systematic theology in practice.

²² Carson, "Athens Revisited," 386.

²³ J. I. Packer, "Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture," in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, ed. James Montgomery Boice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 61.

Specifically, it demonstrates that the doing of theology consists of the two interrelated steps discussed previously.

First, theology begins by constructing the biblical worldview, or what we have labelled the “biblical-theological framework” rooted in the Bible’s unfolding covenantal storyline. In so doing, it begins where Scripture begins: first, the triune God within himself (*ad intra*) and then the triune God in action outside of himself (*ad extra*) in creation, providence, redemption, and consummation. In tracing out the Bible’s covenantal story from creation to the new creation, centered in Christ, theology presents the Bible’s view of reality, knowledge, and ethics. And it is from *within* the entire canon that doctrines are formulated according to Scripture’s presentation of them. In this first step, the role of biblical theology is vital since it allows us “to interpret the biblical texts ‘on their own terms’” and guarantee that our doctrine is from all of Scripture.²⁴

Second, theology applies Scripture to every area of life. As an exercise in “faith seeking understanding,” theology seeks to “make sense” of the biblical teaching on specific points on the Bible’s own terms. In so doing, theology also gives us a well-thought-out worldview grounded in the Bible’s overarching metanarrative, by which we interpret and critique all other views. Theology, then, gives us *truth* as it applies Scripture to all areas of life—salvation, science, psychology, marriage, children, ethics, and so on. In the end, systematic theology is the high calling of every Christian and the sacred responsibility of the church to learn anew “to think God’s thoughts after him” and to be both “hearers” and “doers” of the word (Jas 1:22–25).

The Discipline of Systematic Theology

We have described systematic theology as the discipline that the church undertakes to apply renewed reason to the study of the triune God and all things in relation to him. In this section, we want to develop further the nature of systematic theology by describing first four elements that constitute the discipline and, second, its relationship to the other theological disciplines and why systematic theology is the capstone and culmination of those disciplines.

²⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (hereafter, *NDBT*), ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 52.

The Elements of Systematic Theology

As a discipline, systematic theology submits to the magisterial authority of Scripture, attends to the ministerial authority of the historical witness of the church, and then engages perennial and contemporary issues. As such, at least four elements constitute the discipline.

First, systematic theology is *grounded and warranted* by Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*). Given that Scripture is God's word written, it alone is first order, the epistemological warrant and foundation for our theology. All of our theological conclusions, what we say about God, ourselves, and the world, must be true to Scripture. To be "biblical" is not to "proof text" Scripture, that is, to interpret texts out of context. Instead, it is to interpret texts first in their immediate context, then in terms of the Bible's unfolding covenantal story, and finally in light of the entire canon fulfilled in Christ. Furthermore, *sola Scriptura* means that Scripture is our final, sufficient authority, not our only ("*solo*") authority.²⁵ There are other "ministerial" authorities, such as historical and philosophical theology, which serve a vital role. Yet as important as these authorities are, they are never sufficient: Scripture alone is the final, "magisterial" authority, the "ruling rule" (*norma normans*) for all of our theological formulations.

Second, systematic theology is historically *informed*. As Winston Churchill wisely reminded us, "Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." This is not only true in the political realm but also in the study of theology. Our present context is pluralistic, postmodern, and secular. With the loss of an agreed-on metanarrative and the rejection of cultural traditions, we are committed to what C. S. Lewis dubbed "chronological snobbery." We are bent on self-destruction; anything from the past is rejected as biased and oppressive, including the wisdom of the past.²⁶ This mentality has sadly crept into the church, contrary to how the church has viewed the importance of tradition. The Reformers, for example, were not committed to theological iconoclasm, but theological retrieval; they did not reject tradition but sought to reform it in light of Scripture. As Carl Trueman notes,

²⁵ On this point, see Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

²⁶ See Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 73–102.

“Sacred text and ecclesiastical history were agreed-on authorities for both [Catholics and Protestants]. The question was not whether they were to be rejected but how they were to be understood.”²⁷

Historical theology and the confessional tradition of the church serve a critical “ministerial” role in our theologizing; we ignore them at our peril. We do not approach Christian theology *de novo*; rather, we stand on the shoulders of giants and learn from the past’s mistakes and from its constructive dogmatic formulations. Theology must listen to its forefathers and not simply think that its only creed is the Bible. We stand within the tradition of the church and of the “faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (Jude 3).

In this regard, we need to distinguish between different kinds of tradition. On the one end, there is the Roman Catholic Church that argues for two sources of divine revelation: Scripture and tradition (Tradition II).²⁸ According to this view, Scripture is not sufficient to determine correct interpretation or to establish doctrine; Christ has established the magisterium of the church for that purpose.²⁹ On the other end is “biblicism,” or “*solo*” *Scriptura*. This view argues that we can interpret the Bible and establish doctrine without the benefit of tradition: “No creed but the Bible” (Tradition 0).³⁰ However, the more consistent view, held by the church fathers and the Reformers, is Tradition I. There is only one source of revelation, namely Scripture, but tradition as given in the “rules of faith” provides a “single exegetical tradition of interpreted Scripture.”³¹ In other words, Scripture is the final authority, yet tradition often rightly interprets Scripture and makes theological judgments true to Scripture. In the laboratory of history, theological ideas are tested for their faithfulness to Scripture, and doctrinal formulations that have received “catholic” (universal) consent are rightly viewed as “rules of faith” for the church.

²⁷ Trueman, 91.

²⁸ See Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus (London: Lutterworth, 1967), 58.

²⁹ See Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 71–116.

³⁰ See Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 144–45.

³¹ See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 280.

This is why the Reformers did not reject the early church councils, given their “catholicity.”³² Nicaea, Chalcedon, and the Christological conclusions of Constantinople II and III were viewed as faithful to the entirety of Scripture, albeit in *theological* language, as the church sought to conceptualize (“faith seeking understanding”) and defend (apologetics) what Scripture teaches. These early councils established the parameters for trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy as “ruled rules” (*norma normata*) for the church.

Within evangelical theology today, there is a healthy emphasis on “retrieval theology.”³³ Retrieval theology is “theological discernment that looks back in order to move forward.”³⁴ It does more than repeat; it reforms—by Scripture and the tradition. This renewed emphasis in evangelical theology on the role of tradition is strongly encouraged. Yet it is also true that “retrieval” works best in the doctrinal areas of “catholic” agreement (e.g., Trinity, Christology) associated with Nicaea and Chalcedon given that they accurately reflect the teaching of Scripture. However, in other doctrinal areas where disagreement still resides (e.g., the nature of sin, the atonement, soteriology, ecclesiology, and some aspects of eschatology), tradition is instructive but not sufficient. In these latter areas, where our confessions materially differ, we are reminded that tradition is “ministerial,” but Scripture is “magisterial.” In fact, even in areas of “catholic” agreement (Trinity and Christology), there are still areas of disagreement that can only be resolved by testing our exegesis and theological formulations with Scripture. For this reason, systematic theology is *informed* by tradition, but Scripture alone is our *final* authority.

Third, systematic theology is *contextual*, as it engages *perennial and contemporary issues*. Given that theology involves the application of Scripture to every area of life, it must bring God’s truth to bear on the battles of our present day while learning from the past. It is true that “there is nothing new under the sun,” yet old battles take on new forms, and theology seeks to apply God’s unchanging truth to a changing world. For example, think of debates today over what a human

³² The early church councils include Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), and Constantinople III (680–81).

³³ See Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019); Scott R. Swain and Michael Allen, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 23.

is, given our culture's embrace of postmodern and secular thought, and our ability to "manufacture" humans, or consider how our culture has embraced changing ideas of human sexuality. Although the Reformation certainly knew of homosexuality and condemned it, transgenderism, along with our culture's attempt to redefine maleness, femaleness, and marriage were not crucial debates in their day. However, given our cultural context, theology cannot avoid these issues.

This is why knowing the "culture" is important for theology, but contrary to the thinking of some, "culture" does not serve as a source for our theology.³⁵ Instead, as Paul taught us in Acts 17, theology addresses our current context by setting Scripture's own description of reality over against non-Christian views, and we interpret and critique the culture from *within* the biblical worldview. This is not to deny that due to natural revelation and common grace, non-Christians know various truths, but it does deny that non-Christians *consistent with their worldview* rightly understand and interpret the world, especially when it comes to diagnosing the human problem and offering any solutions to it.

Fourth, systematic theology is *practical*; it must to be lived out by the church. We must "walk our talk." Since theology is a whole-person response to God's word, it is not enough merely to confess what we believe; we must also apply God's word to every area of our thinking and lives. When our Lord Jesus diagnosed the condition of the Ephesian church, he was pleased with their orthodoxy and consistent application of the truth, but he rebuked them for their loss of their "first love" (Rev 2:2–5). God calls his people both to know the truth and to live out the truth before a watching world, to exhibit simultaneously the holiness and love of God as they stand against the "spirit of our age," and to make all of their thought captive to Christ for his glory, the good of the church, and their witness in the world.³⁶

Systematic Theology in Relation to the Other Theological Disciplines

Systematic theology is the "queen of the sciences," the capstone and culmination of all the disciplines, especially the theological disciplines. As such, biblical, historical, and philosophical

³⁵ In contrast to many in the post-conservative camp, such as Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

³⁶ See Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*, in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, 5 vols. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1982), 4:183–204.

studies contribute to the overall theological task of applying renewed reason to the study of the triune God and all things in relationship to him. Let us briefly discuss the various theological disciplines to discover why they are necessary for doing systematic theology.

Exegetical Theology

This discipline is identified with biblical studies, which seeks to interpret specific books of Scripture. The goal of exegesis is to discover God's intent through the human authors by grasping the intent of the authors in their text by grammatical/literary-historical exegesis. This involves understanding the rules of the original language used by the author, analyzing the book's literary structure, including its genre, and placing the book in its historical setting. A commentary is the fruit of such exegetical work. Since theology involves the application of God's word, exegetical theology is foundational to knowing what Scripture says.

Biblical Theology

In recent days, the term *biblical theology* has become somewhat of a buzzword; however, there is little agreement on exactly what it is and how to do it. Yet, it is vitally important to the doing of theology since it is the theological discipline that seeks to understand the entire canon as "the whole plan of God" (Acts 20:27). One cannot draw legitimate theological conclusions from Scripture apart from the doing of biblical theology; it provides the *biblical* warrant for theology. Given its importance for theology, and given the fact that people mean different things by it, let me explain what biblical theology is and how it functions in this work.³⁷

Biblical theology is the theological discipline that seeks to understand the canon of Scripture "on its own terms." Or, as Brian Rosner states, biblical theology is "theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks

³⁷ For a helpful overview of the history of biblical theology, see C. H. H. Scobie, "History of Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 11–20. For helpful discussions regarding diverse conceptions of biblical theology, see Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012).

to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus."³⁸

As a discipline, biblical theology is *not* presuppositionless. It approaches Scripture according to its own claim; namely, Scripture is *God's* word written. Moreover, biblical theology presupposes the central truths of historic Christianity; hence it is a *theological* discipline. Since Scripture is *God's* word, it assumes that despite its diversity, Scripture is a unified revelation. And given that Scripture has come to us over time, Scripture is a *progressive* unfolding of God's plan across a specific redemptive-historical storyline demarcated by the biblical covenants. As an exegetical method, it is sensitive to literary, historical, and theological dimensions of various corpora, as well as to the interrelationships between the *earlier* and *later* texts in Scripture, thus relating the "parts" of Scripture to the "whole." By doing so, it allows us to discern *God's intention*, which is most *fully* given in terms of the canon. Furthermore, biblical theology is interested in reading Scripture *on its own terms* (intratextual), that is, in light of its own content, categories, and structure, not by superimposing "outside" (extratextual) categories on it. For this reason, biblical theology provides the *biblical* warrant from the whole Bible for our theological conclusions.

In thinking about biblical theology, it is vital to distinguish an "evangelical biblical theology" from an Enlightenment or "classic liberal biblical theology," often identified with Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826).³⁹ As we will discuss more in chapter 2, during the Enlightenment there was a growing tendency to approach Scripture *critically*, uncoupled from historic Christian theology. The result: Scripture was viewed "as any other book," open to

³⁸ Brian Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 10 (italics removed from original). Similar to Rosner, Jeremy Treat offers the following definition: "*Biblical theology is faith seeking understanding of the redemptive-historical and literary unity of the Bible in its own terms, concepts, and contexts*" (emphasis original). Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 35; Cf. D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 89–104.

³⁹ Gabler is viewed as the "father of biblical theology" from his inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf on March 30, 1787, "An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each." Yet, Gabler is better identified as the "father of classic liberal biblical theology." On this point, see J. V. Fesko, "On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology," in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church*, ed. L. G. Tipton and J. C. Waddington (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 443–77.

criticism, and *not* God's unified, true revelation. Thus, when Gabler defined biblical theology as an inductive, historical, and descriptive discipline, he used the term "historical" in a historical-*critical* sense. For him, "historical" did not mean that we read Scripture as *God's* word, accurately describing God's unfolding plan in redemptive history. Instead, Scripture is to be read by virtue of Enlightenment presuppositions, which, from the outset, denied Scripture's authority and trustworthiness.

As this view of biblical theology developed into the next century, practitioners increasingly made use of the historical-critical method, which assumed *methodological* naturalism.⁴⁰ Over time, the end result of this approach was Scripture's fragmentation and a biblical theology governed by *critical* methodologies and theological views foreign to historic Christian theology. Consequently, this view of biblical theology emphasized more "diversity" than "unity" in Scripture, and ultimately, it came to an end.⁴¹ In the twentieth century, there were attempts to overcome the Enlightenment restrictions on Scripture. In theology, the work of Karl Barth is notable. Barth is often viewed as the forerunner of the post-liberal school, a school that attempts to read Scripture as a unified canon, but which does not fully embrace Scripture's reliability and thus renders the theological task problematic. In biblical studies there was also the "Biblical Theology Movement."⁴² Although its goal was to overcome the negative results of historical criticism, it too failed because it did not return to the theology of historic Christianity.⁴³

Today in non-evangelical theology, there are a variety of options that attempt to read Scripture as a unified whole, but most of them are weak on Scripture and reject consistent

⁴⁰ "Methodological naturalism" is the view that approaches our study of history (including our study of the Bible) and science without considering God's involvement in the world and divine action as represented by divine revelation and miracles. Methodological naturalism does *not* necessarily require a commitment to atheism, even though it is consistent with it. Deism and pantheism also assume methodological naturalism given their denial of divine action in an effectual, supernatural sense.

⁴¹ See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). In the nineteenth century, "biblical theology" was eventually identified with "classic liberalism" as represented by various schools of thought associated with such people as F. C. Baur, J. Wellhausen, the history of religions school, and so on.

⁴² For a survey of this movement, see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Nature of Biblical Theology: Recent Trends and Issues," *AUSS* 32, no. 3 (1994): 211–14; and James Barr, "Biblical Theology," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. K. Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 104–6.

⁴³ On this point, see Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JR* 41 (1961): 194–205.

Christian presuppositions.⁴⁴ This is why an “evangelical biblical theology” is often viewed as impossible given evangelicals’ denial of Scripture’s unity and embrace of historical criticism. In fact, Geerhardus Vos, the pioneer of an “evangelical biblical theology,” warned us that such a biblical theology is impossible apart from historic Christian theology, on which it stands.⁴⁵

However, in this work, we are not only convinced that an “evangelical biblical theology” is possible, but that it also provides the *biblical* warrant for our theologizing. Working from historic Christian theological convictions, especially in regard to the doctrines of God and Scripture, we believe that biblical *and* systematic theology are possible because the triune God is there, has spoken, and, in his speech, has given us an authoritative, unified word that is the foundation for our reasoning rightly about God and all things in relation to him (Heb 1:1–2).

Historical Theology, Philosophy, and Apologetics

We have already discussed the “ministerial” role that *historical theology* and the confessional standards serve in the doing of theology. We do not approach Christian theology as blank

⁴⁴ One thinks of the movement known as “Theological Interpretation of Scripture” (TIS). This movement is fairly diverse and encompasses evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike. For the non-evangelicals, generally speaking, commitment to the Bible’s unity is not due to Scripture’s self-attestation but to the church’s decision to choose these texts as Scripture. For example, think of the canonical approach of Brevard Childs, who chooses to read texts in their final form and canonical shape. However, as Paul Noble astutely argues, unless Childs grounds his preference for final form and canonical shape in the doctrine of inspiration and divine authorship, it is a view hanging in midair. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 1995). For a critique of post-liberalism and its view and use of Scripture, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). As helpful as TIS is in its attempt to recapture the voice of Scripture for the church, given that it is composed of such a diverse number of people with such divergent views of Scripture, one wonders how long it can be sustained without a return to orthodox theological convictions. On this point, see D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . .,” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207.

⁴⁵ See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); Geerhardus Vos, *Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1979); Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001). On Vos’s contribution to biblical theology, see Fesko, “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” 449–53.

slates; rather, we stand in a received tradition that is crucial to our dogmatic formulations. However, historical theology is not the only discipline that serves as a handmaid to theology. This is also true of philosophy, apologetics and, by extension, the discipline of science, which focuses on God's revelation in nature.⁴⁶

Philosophy is the discipline that attempts to answer the most fundamental questions we face. Historically, philosophers have sought the “basic principles” by which to explain and interpret a total account of reality (metaphysics), a final criterion of truth (epistemology), and a normative moral standard (ethics).⁴⁷ These *basic* principles are such that no further explanation or proof is needed for them; they are logically fundamental, and they function as *presuppositions* by which we interpret the world and our place in it. In fact, anyone who thinks about this world, ultimate reality, meaning, truth, human nature, moral values, and so on is doing philosophy and, as such, has a worldview. The important question is whether we are doing philosophy well and on what epistemological grounds.⁴⁸

From a Christian view, philosophy is *not* a neutral discipline. In thinking about our most basic and ultimate commitments, the philosopher reasons about the world either upon the foundation of God and his word or views human reason as self-sufficient, having the ability to interpret experience apart from divine revelation (Rom 1:18–21; Col 2:6–8). To do philosophy as a Christian, one does it under the authority of God's revelation in Scripture and creation, although the emphasis is more on natural revelation. It is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between a Christian theology and philosophy; ultimately, it is a matter of emphasis and terminology.⁴⁹

The study of philosophy is important for theology. Although every philosophy assumes a specific worldview and must be evaluated as such, due to natural revelation and common grace, philosophers have developed, for example, systems of logic, critical distinctions in the analysis of causality, language, and so on that are useful for theology *if* they are placed within an overall Christian theology. Philosophy helps theology critically analyze arguments, avoid conceptual confusions, and constructively understand Scripture by offering definitions of terms and

⁴⁶ God's revelation in creation will be discussed in chapter 6.

⁴⁷ See Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 85.

⁴⁸ See Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 51.

⁴⁹ See Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1969), xiv–xv.

concepts (e.g., what a nature and person is, analysis of various definitions of freedom, etc.).⁵⁰ Philosophers have argued well for the need for universals in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics—all important for theology. But the history of philosophy has also revealed the basic antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought, that “ideas have consequences,” and that the attempt to ground human knowledge apart from God and his revelation is futile.⁵¹

This is why apologetics is necessary. As Frame defines it, apologetics is the discipline that applies “Scripture to unbelief,”⁵² and as such it functions as an important subset of theology. Theology supplies to apologetics its presuppositions and the truth that it defends. It is part of the theological task to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), to defend the truth of the gospel, and to call all people to submit their thinking and lives to Christ.

The Goal of Systematic Theology

What is the goal of theology? Ultimately, it is to enable the church to know and worship our triune Creator-covenant Lord rightly, to live obediently and faithfully under Christ’s lordship, and unashamedly to witness to and defend the life-changing truth of the gospel.

First, theology’s task is to know and love God according to his word (Matt 22:37–38). As Bavinck succinctly states: “God, and God alone, is man’s highest good.”⁵³ Yet, one cannot fully know God apart from the doing of theology, which requires careful, renewed biblical reasoning. As we grow in our understanding of Scripture and theology, we grow in our knowledge of

⁵⁰ On this point, the role of “analytic theology” is important. See Oliver D. Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine: Toward a Systematic Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019).

⁵¹ Bavinck has some helpful comments on the role of philosophy in theology:

The question here is not whether theology should make use of a specific philosophical system. Christian theology has never taken over any philosophical system without criticism and given it the stamp of approval. . . . [Theology] is not per se hostile to any philosophical system and does not, a priori and without criticism, give priority to the philosophy of Plato or of Kant, or vice versa. But it brings along its own criteria, tests all philosophy in general. In other words, it arrives at scientific knowledge only by thinking. The only internal principle of knowledge, therefore, is not faith as such, but believing thought, Christian rationality. (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:608–9)

⁵² Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 87.

⁵³ Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 1.

God. In the end, there is no greater knowledge. Charles Spurgeon captured this truth well in contrast to non-Christian thought:

It has been said by someone that “the proper study of mankind is man.” I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of the child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.⁵⁴

First, theology’s goal and purpose are to know God; indeed, to reason with Paul on “the depth of the riches / and the wisdom and the knowledge of God!” and how all things are “from him and through him / and to him. . . . To him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:33, 36).

Second, theology’s task is to enable the church to understand and apply Scripture rightly in order to live faithful and obedient lives under Christ’s lordship. But again, one cannot fulfill this goal apart from the doing of theology. In the church’s preaching and teaching, we apply the truth of the gospel to people’s lives, equipping “the saints . . . [building] up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son” (Eph 4:12–13). But even to know what the gospel is, who Jesus is, and what he has done for us requires sound theology. In fact, faithful preaching and teaching *is* theology in practice.

For one to rightly build up the church so that she is no longer “tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching” (Eph 4:14) requires careful biblical exposition and constructive canonical application (2 Tim 4:1–5). Apart from theology, we have no message to preach and no gospel to apply. Even in thinking about the Scripture’s application to our lives, we are keenly aware that we cannot randomly apply texts without carefully thinking how those texts apply to us given where we live in redemptive history. Given that God has revealed his plan over time, theology must wrestle with how the parts fit with the whole and how the whole applies to us today in light of Christ’s work. Thus, for example, to counsel people from Scripture regarding God’s providence in their lives and why there is suffering and evil in the world, or to help people in their questions regarding their marriages, the assurance of salvation, or how to live as God’s new covenant people in relation to the state all requires theology.

⁵⁴ Cited in J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 17.

And unless we do theology, the goal of enabling those in the church to live godly lives will be thwarted, with potentially disastrous consequences, as evidenced by some of the false teaching the apostles had to confront in the NT era and to which the church had to respond throughout church history.

Third, theology's task is to enable the church to witness to and defend the truth of the gospel. The Lord of the church has called his people to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ to the nations (Matt 28:18–20; Col 1:28–29). But to proclaim who Jesus is as God the Son incarnate, the meaning of his death “for our sins” (1 Cor 15:1–3), and so on, requires systematic theology. In church history, people have differed on these central gospel points, so to know what Scripture rightly teaches, we have to engage in faithful theological formulation and careful refutation of false views that threaten the truth (Gal 1:6–10; 1 John 4:2–3; 5:5–10). Just because someone claims to be “biblical” does not mean they are. All heresies appeal to Scripture, but not rightly. It is incumbent on the church to know the truth *and* defend it (Titus 1:9; 1 Pet 3:15–16).

The apostle Paul viewed gospel ministry as the positive proclamation of Christ *and* the “demolishing of arguments” that stand contrary to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Theology's task is to enable the church in every generation to do likewise and to embolden the church to say with Paul: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). What is needed, then, is not a minimalist theology, but a comprehensive and thoroughly biblical one. For unless we have such a theology, church history has taught us that we will easily be swept away by the “wisdom” of our age. Given our tendency to embrace error faster than the truth, the church must remain vigilant. Theology's goal is to enable the church to expound the truth and to reject error. Without careful theology being done, taught, and embraced, the church will drift aimlessly from the truth of God.

In the end, the goal of theology is for God's redeemed people to know, contemplate, and delight in the sheer glory of God. As John Owen wrote many years ago: “Evangelical theology has been instituted by God in order that sinners may once again enjoy communion with God himself, the All-Holy One. . . . The ultimate end of true theology is the celebration of the praise of God, and his glory and grace in the eternal salvation of sinners.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ John Owen, *Biblical Theology: The History of Theology from Adam to Christ*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 6.4 (618–19).

Concluding Reflection

Systematic theology is not an option for the church; it is necessary for her spiritual health and well-being. In this chapter, we have described what theology is and why it is essential to our thinking rightly about God, ourselves, and the world. In the end, we are called to faithfulness under the lordship of Christ. Our triune God calls us to love him with our minds and hearts, which is true life for us. Theology matters to achieve these ends.

Yet one of the challenges we face today is that the historic view of theology as an objective science that yields true knowledge of God is considered impossible. In the next chapter, we will look at some of the reasons why this is the case so we can understand our context. Theology is never done in a vacuum, and it is important to recognize that there is no greater challenge to theology than the battle over truth.

“SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY is a tour de force!”

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*professor of Christian theology,
The Southern Baptist
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