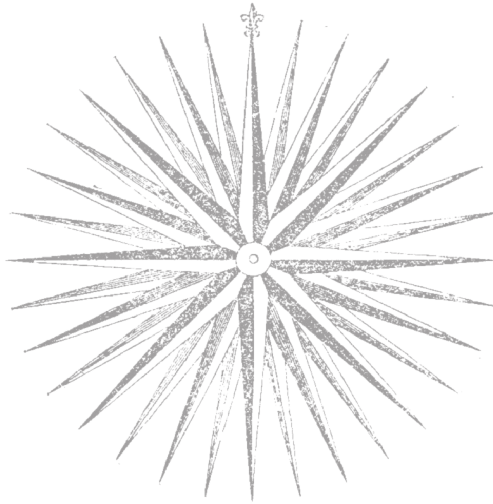


A HANDBOOK ON
BIBLICAL TRUTH

E S S E N T I A L

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D O C T R I N E



GENERAL EDITOR

JOHN MACARTHUR

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“For decades John MacArthur has exemplified expository preaching, putting on full display the Word of God for the people of God. This systematic theology demonstrates how his verse-by-verse exposition naturally blossoms into a robust, colorful theological mosaic. This book is the theological dessert at the end of an expository meal. Regardless of your theological heritage, I encourage every Christian to sit under the doctrinal teaching of MacArthur. Certainly, you will walk away saturated in Scripture, left in total awe after relishing the majesty and glory of our gracious God.”

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“As a professor of theology, I am able to recommend this single volume on systematic theology to my students and tell them with confidence that this is a book I can endorse from cover to cover. I especially appreciate the dispensational aspects of this work and the way it consistently and firmly grounds the doctrines in the biblical text.”

Kevin D. Zuber, Professor of Theology, The Master’s Seminary; contributor, *Evidence for the Rapture* and *The Moody Bible Commentary*

ESSENTIAL CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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*A Handbook on
Biblical Truth*

JOHN MACARTHUR

GENERAL EDITOR

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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P R E F A C E

THE OBJECTIVE OF STUDYING Scripture is not merely to equip the believer to repeat its words; it is to equip him to understand the accurate *sense* of its words—the *truth* that the Scripture yields. Rising out of the Bible in all its forms—whether it is history, prophecy, poetry, narrative, or instruction—is propositional truth, definitive doctrine authored by the Holy Spirit that becomes the framework of both Christian theology and Christian living.

While some would consider doctrine divisive, doctrine is the one reality that unites the people of God around the truth. Any other kind of unity is superficial and sentimental.

In 2017, Crossway published *Biblical Doctrine*, which was a systematic summary of doctrine that is the foundation of The Master’s Seminary. I was thrilled to oversee its publication and grateful for the investment made into that volume by Dr. Richard Mayhue and the faculty of The Master’s Seminary. In particular, I have special appreciation for Nathan Busenitz and Michael Riccardi for all their work in bringing that project to fruition. We are gratified that the book has had a far-reaching response. It is now available not only in English but also in French, Spanish, and German, with eleven more languages in the process of translation. We are grateful for this global interest and are assured it will serve to bring honor and glory to our Lord in his church.

Realizing, however, the length and detail of the book, it became apparent that we needed to create a condensed version—a work that would retain the doctrinal clarity of the original but would be more accessible to those reluctant to embark upon a 1,000-page volume. The result is the book you hold in your hands. It is condensed only in length, not in substance. It retains the core biblical definitions of all the doctrines discussed in *Biblical Doctrine*, so that the dedicated and discerning reader will be able to grasp the full breadth of Christian theology. While the original is intended as a reference book, this one is designed to be read from cover to cover. Anyone who does that will find an accurate, consistent, biblical presentation of essential Christian doctrine.

It is a profound joy to be able to provide in these 300-plus pages a theological education to every reader. These are not speculations; this is God's truth systematized from Genesis to Revelation, revealing one author—the Spirit of God—and demonstrating that the Bible is so consistent as to be its own interpreter. As a result of reading, the student of this book will also learn hermeneutics—the science of biblical interpretation—by seeing how all the passages are faithfully interpreted leading to the accuracy and consistency of doctrine.

I am grateful to Professor Michael Riccardi and Dr. Kevin Zuber for their oversight and dedication in condensing the original work. I also want to thank Dr. Peter Sammons, Dr. Brad Klassen, Professor Chris Burnett, and TMS graduates Herald Gandi and Kevin VanTongeren for their work on the first drafts of the project.

It is my prayer that a generation of faithful Christians will enjoy unity in the truth. May God be pleased to use this volume to that end, to the praise of the glory of his grace.

JOHN MACARTHUR
Pastor, Grace Community Church
Chancellor, The Master's University and Seminary

ABBREVIATIONS

Standard Abbreviations

ca.	about, approximately
cf.	confer, compare
chap.	chapter
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (Lat., “for example”)
esp.	especially
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (Lat., “that is”)
Lat.	Latin
lit.	literally
mg.	marginal reading (in Scripture citations)

Resource Abbreviations

MNTC	MacArthur New Testament Commentary
<i>MSJ</i>	<i>The Master’s Seminary Journal</i>

INTRODUCTION

Prolegomena

THE TERM *PROLEGOMENA* ORIGINATED from the combination of two Greek words, *pro*, meaning “before,” and *legō*, meaning “to say,” which together convey the general sense of “to say beforehand” or “to say in advance.” A prolegomena chapter serves as a prologue or a preliminary discussion that introduces and defines the central content of the work that follows. These prefatory comments include assumptions, definitions, methodology, and purposes, thereby providing a context for understanding the subsequent content. Here the prolegomena discussion is organized by giving answers to a series of significant questions that will prepare the reader for the rest of this study.

What Is Theology?

Christian theology is the study of the divine revelation in the Bible. It has God as its perpetual centerpiece, God’s Word as its source, and godliness as its aim. As Alva McClain puts it, summarizing Romans 11:36,

Out of God all things come—He is the origin. Through God all things exist—He is the sustainer of all things. Unto God—back to God—He is the goal. There is the circle of eternity: *out, through, back*.¹

David Wells has crafted a notable working definition of Christian theology:

Theology is the sustained effort to know the character, will, and acts of the triune God as he has disclosed and interpreted these for his people in Scripture . . . in order that we might know him, learn to think our thoughts

1 Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God’s Grace* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), 204.

after him, live our lives in his world on his terms, and by thought and action project his truth into our own time and culture.²

The apostle John died in about AD 98. With his writing of Revelation, the canon of Scripture was completed and closed. It did not take long for succeeding generations to begin writing about scriptural truth. Some of the more significant authors and their volumes include the following:

- Unknown author, *The Didache* (ca. 110)
- Irenaeus (ca. 120–202), *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*
- Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215), *Stromata*
- Origen (ca. 184–ca. 254), *On First Principles*
- Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 330–ca. 389), *Five Theological Orations*
- Augustine (354–430), *Enchiridion*
- John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 749), *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*
- Peter Lombard (ca. 1095–ca. 1169), *Four Books of Sentences*
- Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), *Summa Theologica*
- John Calvin (1509–1564), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- Thomas Watson (ca. 1620–1686), *A Body of Divinity*
- Francis Turretin (1623–1687), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*
- John Gill (1697–1771), *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*
- John Dick (1764–1833), *Lectures on Theology*

Why Study Theology?

Scottish pastor and theologian John Dick answered this penetrating query with seven profound responses. A better and more succinct answer would be difficult to come by:³

1. “To ascertain the character of God in its aspect towards us”
2. “To contemplate the display of his attributes in his works and dispensations”
3. “To discover his designs toward man in his original and his present state”
4. “To know this mighty Being, as far as he may be known, [which] is the noblest aim of the human understanding”
5. “To learn our duty to him, the means of enjoying his favor, the hopes which we are authorized to entertain, and the wonderful expedient by which our fallen race is restored to purity and happiness”

2 David Wells, “The Theologian’s Craft,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComisky (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 172.

3 John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (Cincinnati, OH: Applegate, 1856), 6.

6. "To love him, the most worthy exercise of our affections"
7. "To serve him, the most honourable and delightful purpose to which we can devote our time and talents"

What Are the Various Major Kinds of Theology?

1. *Biblical theology*: The organization of Scripture thematically by biblical chronology or by biblical author with respect to the progressive revelation of the Bible (properly a component of systematic theology)
2. *Dogmatic theology*: The organization of Scripture with an emphasis on favored or selected church creeds
3. *Exegetical theology*: The methodical organization of Scripture by dealing exegetically with individual texts of the Bible (properly a component of both biblical and systematic theology)
4. *Historical theology*: The historical study of doctrinal developments after the apostolic era to the present time
5. *Natural theology*: The study of what can be known about God by human reason alone through the empirical study of the natural world
6. *Pastoral/practical theology*: The organization of Scripture with an emphasis on the personal application of doctrinal truth in the lives of the church and individual Christians
7. *Systematic theology*: The organization of Scripture by a synthesis of scriptural teaching, summarized using major categories that encompass the entirety of God's written revelation (developed from exegetical and biblical theology)

What Is Systematic Theology?

The term *systematic* comes from the compound Greek word made up of *syn*, "together," and *histanai*, "to set up," meaning "to set up together" or "to systematize." As noted above, *theology* comes from the Greek word *theologia*, "a word about God." Etymologically, *systematic theology* involves the orderly bringing together of words about God or a bringing together of biblical truth in an organized fashion. Consider Charles Spurgeon's response to those who object to a systematic approach to theology:

Systematic theology is to the Bible what science is to nature. To suppose that all the other works of God are orderly and systematic, and the greater the work the more perfect the system: and that the greatest of all His works,

in which all His perfections are transcendentally displayed, should have no plan or system, is altogether absurd.⁴

Systematic theology answers the question, what does the completed canon of Scripture teach about any one theme or topic? For example, what does the Bible teach from Genesis to Revelation about the deity of Jesus Christ? A basic definition of systematic theology, then, would be “the ordered exposition of Christian doctrines.”⁵

A systematic theology must display (1) hermeneutical integrity, (2) doctrinal coherence, (3) ethical relevance, (4) worldview explicability, and (5) traditional continuity. Where these are present and operative, one will find a good systematizing that will be of value to the student of Scripture. As he carefully examines every detail of the text in preparation to expound it, systematic theology allows him to also view the whole theological picture—one that has taken into account not only the studied conclusions from church history but also the progress of revelation culminating in the complete revelation of God.

One’s understanding of systematic theology could be framed by the following observations from John Murray:

When we properly weigh the proposition that the Scriptures are the deposit of special revelation, that they are the oracles of God, that in them God encounters and addresses us, discloses to us his incomprehensible majesty, summons us to the knowledge and fulfillment of his will, unveils to us the mystery of his counsel, and unfolds the purposes of his grace, then systematic theology, of all sciences and disciplines, is seen to be the most noble, not one of cold, impass[ive] reflection but one that stirs adoring wonder and claims the most consecrated exercise of all our powers. It is the most noble of all studies because its province is the whole counsel of God and seeks, as no other discipline, to set forth the riches of God’s revelation in the orderly and embracive manner which is its peculiar method and function. All other departments of theological discipline contribute their findings to systematic theology and it brings all the wealth of knowledge derived from these disciplines to bear upon the more inclusive systemization which it undertakes.⁶

Systematic theology aims to expound in a comprehensive and thematically organized fashion the biblical doctrines focused on the persons of the triune God, their purposes, and their plans in relationship to the world and humanity. It begins

4 Charles Spurgeon, as quoted in Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (London: Banner of Truth, 1973), 9.

5 James L. Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:8.

6 John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:4.

with informing the intellect (knowing and understanding). The intellect shapes what we believe and love in our heart. Our will desires what we love and repudiates what we hate. Our actions then accord with what we want most. The mind shapes the affections, which shape the will, which directs the actions. Theology is not fully finished until it has warmed the heart (affections) and prompted the volition (will) to act in obedience to its content.⁷

What Are the Categories of Systematic Theology?

1. *Bibliology*: The doctrine of the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, and canonicity of the Bible (Gk. *biblion*, “book”)
2. *Theology proper*: The doctrine of the existence and being of God, including the triunity of God (Gk. *theos*, “God”)
3. *Christology*: The doctrine of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Gk. *christos*, “Christ”)
4. *Pneumatology*: The doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit (Gk. *pneuma*, “Spirit”)
5. *Anthropology*: The doctrine of humanity (Gk. *anthrōpos*, “man”)
6. *Hamartiology*: The doctrine of sin (Gk. *hamartia*, “sin”)
7. *Soteriology*: The doctrine of salvation (Gk. *sōtēria*, “salvation”)
8. *Angelology*: The doctrine of holy angels, Satan, and fallen angels (Gk. *angelos*, “angel”)
9. *Ecclesiology*: The doctrine of the church, universal and local (Gk. *ekklēsia*, “assembly” or “church”)
10. *Eschatology*: The doctrine concerning the entire scope of biblical predictive prophecy, especially end-time events, including the destination for both saved and unsaved people, heaven and hell (Gk. *eschatos*, “last things”)

What Is the Relationship between Exegetical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology?⁸

All biblical theology is systematic in nature; all systematic theology is biblical in content; and both biblical and systematic theology are exegetical in the interpretive

7 William Ames observed that theology should have as its end *eupraxia*, lit., “good practice” (*The Marrow of Theology*, trans. and ed. John Dykstra Eusden [1629; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997], 78).

8 The following resources represent some of the clearest definitions, distinctions, and dependencies of the three theological emphases under discussion: Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38.3 (1976): 281–99; Eugene Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), 1–27; Murray, “Systematic Theology,” 4:1–21; Roger Nicole, “The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,” in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer

process. Therefore, the key question is not which one is the best approach to theology but rather, how do the three interrelate with each other?

To use a construction metaphor,

- exegetical theology supplies the building material for the foundation and structure;
- biblical theology provides the foundational support for the structure; and
- systematic theology serves as the structure built on the foundation.

Exegetical theology involves the methodical organization of Scripture by dealing exegetically with the individual texts of the Bible. This is properly an initial component of both biblical and systematic theology. As a result, every word, sentence, and paragraph of Scripture is examined in detail.

Biblical theology is characterized by the organization of Scripture thematically by biblical chronology or biblical author with respect to the progressive revelation of the Bible. This is properly a component of systematic theology. It serves as a bridge from exegetical theology to systematic theology.

Systematic theology is the organization of Scripture by a synthesis of scriptural teaching, summarized by major categories that encompass the entirety of God's written revelation. Systematic theology develops out of exegetical and biblical theology and pulls all the teaching of Scripture together as a whole. Again, Murray is helpful in making sense of these connections:

Hence exposition of the Scripture is basic to systematic theology. Its task is not simply the exposition of particular passages. That is the task of exegesis. Systematics must coordinate the teaching of particular passages and systematize this teaching under the appropriate topics. There is thus a synthesis that belongs to systematics that does not belong to exegesis as such. But to the extent to which systematic theology synthesizes the teaching of Scripture, and this is its main purpose, it is apparent how dependent it is upon the science of exegesis. It cannot coordinate and relate the teaching of particular passages without knowing what the teaching is. So exegesis is basic to its objective. This needs to be emphasized. Systematic theology has gravely suffered, indeed has deserted its vocation, when it has been divorced from meticulous attention to biblical exegesis. This is one reason why the charge mentioned above has so much to yield support to the indictment. Systematics becomes lifeless and fails in its mandate just to the extent to which it has become detached from exegesis. And the guarantee against a stereotyped dogmatics is that systematic theology be constantly enriched,

(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 185–93; and Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 11–24.

deepened, and expanded by the treasures increasingly drawn from the Word of God. Exegesis keeps systematics not only in direct contact with the Word but it ever imparts to systematics the power which is derived from that Word. The Word is living and powerful.⁹

One other approach to theology should be mentioned. Historical theology examines how exegetical and theological convictions developed over time. It takes into consideration the conclusions reached by prior generations of godly interpreters of Scripture.

What Are the Benefits and Limitations of Systematic Theology?

All Scripture, whether examined exegetically in particular texts or categorically within the full scope of the Bible, is spiritually profitable to accomplish at least four divine purposes (2 Tim. 3:16):

1. For establishing “teaching” or doctrine, that is, God’s inspired self-disclosure about himself, his created world, and his redemptive plan to save and sanctify sinners
2. For confrontation or “reproof” of sin, whether in the form of false teaching or disobedient living
3. For “correction” of error in thinking and behaving so that the repentant one can be restored to the place of pleasing God
4. For “training,” so that believers can be habitually trained to practice the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ—sinning less and obeying more

Scripture provides the only complete, wholly accurate, and trustworthy teaching about God, and it will sufficiently accomplish these four things for equipping “the man of God” (2 Tim. 3:17).

BENEFITS

Systematic theology can provide several benefits:

1. An unabridged collection of biblical truth
2. An orderly synthesis and summation of biblical doctrine
3. An imperative to take the gospel to the ends of the earth
4. A repository of truth for expositional preaching and teaching
5. A scriptural basis for Christian behavior in the church, the home, and the world
6. A defense of biblical doctrine against false teaching
7. A biblical response to ethical and social malpractice in the world

⁹ Murray, “Systematic Theology,” 4:17.

As James Leo Garrett Jr. puts it,

Systematic theology is beneficial as an extension of the teaching function of the churches, for the orderly and integrated formulation of biblical truths, for the undergirding of the preaching of preachers and lay Christians, for the defense of gospel truth against error that has invaded the church, for the legitimation of the gospel before philosophy and culture, as the foundation for Christian personal and social ethics, and for more effective universal propagation of the gospel and interaction with adherents of non-Christian religions.¹⁰

LIMITATIONS¹¹

Systematic theology can be limited by the following factors:

1. The silence of the Bible on a particular topic (Deut. 29:29; John 20:30; 21:25)
2. A theologian's partial knowledge/understanding of the entire Bible (Luke 24:25–27, 32; 2 Pet. 3:16)
3. The inadequacy of human language (1 Cor. 2:13–14; 2 Cor. 12:4)
4. The finiteness of the human mind (Job 11:7–12; 38:1–39:30; Rom. 11:33–35)
5. The lack of spiritual discernment/growth (1 Cor. 3:1–3; Heb. 5:11–13)

What Is the Relationship of Systematic Theology to Doctrine?

Doctrine represents teaching that is considered authoritative. When Christ taught, the crowds were amazed at his authority (Matt. 7:28–29; Mark 1:22, 27; Luke 4:32). A church's "doctrinal" statement contains a body of teaching used as the standard of authoritative orthodoxy.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *laqakh* means "what is received" or "accepted teaching" (Deut. 32:2; Job 11:4; Prov. 4:2; Isa. 29:24). It can be variously translated as "instruction," "learning," or "teaching."

In the New Testament, two Greek words are translated as "doctrine," "instruction," or "teaching": *didachē* (referring to the content of teaching) and *didaskalia* (referring to the activity of teaching). Paul used both words together in 2 Timothy 4:2–3 and Titus 1:9.

In Latin, *docere*, "to teach," *doctrina*, "what is being taught," and *doctor*, "the one who is teaching," all contribute to the meaning of the English word *doctrine*.

¹⁰ James Leo Garrett Jr., "Why Systematic Theology?," *Criswell Theological Review* 3.2 (1989): 281.

¹¹ This material is adapted from Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace-Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1907), 34–36.

The content may be informational (to be believed) or practical (to be lived out). It does not necessarily refer to categorized truth.

Biblically speaking, the word *doctrine* is a rather amorphous term that takes shape only in context. It refers to general teaching (systematized or not, true or false), such as the “teaching of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14) or “human teachings” (Col. 2:22), in contrast to biblical teaching such as Christ’s teaching (Matt. 7:28) or Paul’s teaching (2 Tim. 3:10).

Biblical doctrine, therefore, refers to the teaching of Scripture, whether it be proclamational, expository, or categorical. That makes all Scripture “doctrinal,” whether it be read, taught, preached, or systematized into theological categories. Systematic biblical doctrine (systematic theology) refers to a categorical summation of biblical teaching that follows normally employed themes or categories.

A survey of Scripture shows that all doctrine or teaching can generally be classified into one of two categories, depending on its source:

- with regard to origin—from God the Creator (John 7:16; Acts 13:12) or from God’s creation (Col. 2:22; 1 Tim. 4:1)
- with regard to truth content (2 Thess. 2:11–12)—true or false
- with regard to human source (1 Thess. 2:13)—biblical or unbiblical
- with regard to quality (1 Tim. 1:10; 6:3)—sound or unsound
- with regard to acceptability (1 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 13:9)—familiar or strange
- with regard to retention (Rev. 2:24)—to hold or not to hold
- with regard to benefit (1 Tim. 4:6)—good or bad
- with regard to value (2 Tim. 3:16)—profitable or unprofitable

The modern theological use of the term *doctrine* is too narrow, distorts the primary biblical use of the term, and can be misleading. It is far better in discussing *doctrine* to use the term in its broader sense of “teaching” (which certainly includes systematized truth but is not limited to this use) rather than to use *doctrine* in its secondary sense as though this were the only sense. The teaching of Scripture serves as the yardstick, gauge, standard, paradigm, pattern, measure, and plumb line by which all other teaching on any given subject is determined to be true or false, received or rejected, sound or unsound, orthodox or heretical.

Sound biblical doctrine has many implications for the life of Christ’s church:

1. Sound doctrine exposes and confronts sin and false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:8–11, esp. 1:10; 4:1–6).
2. Sound doctrine marks a good servant of Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 4:6; see also 1 Tim. 4:13, 16; Titus 2:1).
3. Sound doctrine is rewarded with double honor for elders (1 Tim. 5:17).
4. Sound doctrine conforms to godliness (1 Tim. 6:3; Titus 2:10).

5. Sound doctrine is included in the apostolic example to follow (2 Tim. 3:10).
6. Sound doctrine is essential to equipping pastors (2 Tim. 3:16–17).
7. Sound doctrine is the continual mandate for preachers (2 Tim. 4:2–4).
8. Sound doctrine is a basic qualification for eldership (Titus 1:9).

Scripture teaches that there will always be opposition to sound doctrine, both by humans (Matt. 15:2–6; Mark 11:18; 1 Tim. 1:3, 10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9) and by Satan and demons (1 Tim. 4:1). The Bible outlines several antidotes/corrections to false doctrine:

1. Speaking the truth of sound doctrine in love (Eph. 4:15)
2. Teaching sound doctrine (1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 4:2)
3. Holding fast to sound doctrine (Titus 1:9; Rev. 2:24–25)
4. Refuting false doctrine (Titus 1:9)
5. Rejecting and turning away from teachers of false doctrine (Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9–10)

There is a direct, inseparable relationship between sound doctrine and sanctified living, something Scripture teaches clearly and consistently (Rom. 15:4; 1 Tim. 4:16; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim. 3:10; Titus 2:1–4, 7–10). The reverse is also true—where there is false belief, there will be sinful behavior (Titus 1:16). In spite of Scripture’s clear emphasis on both purity of doctrine and purity of life, a number of mistaken notions have arisen concerning the relationship between what a person believes and how a person should live. These wrong ideas include the following:

1. Right doctrine automatically leads to godliness.
2. It doesn’t matter how a person lives so long as he or she has right doctrine.
3. Doctrine deadens, spiritually speaking.
4. There is no connection between what one believes and how one lives.
5. Christianity is life, not doctrine.
6. Doctrine is irrelevant.
7. Doctrine divides.
8. Doctrine drives people away.

In contrast to the negativity aimed at doctrine, the absence of sound doctrine and the presence of false doctrine will always lead to sinful behavior. Without sound doctrine, there is no scriptural basis to delineate right from wrong, no doctrinal authority to correct sin, and no biblical encouragement to motivate godly living.

On the other hand, the spiritual value of sound doctrine is incalculable:

1. Sound doctrine is spiritually profitable (2 Tim. 3:16–17).
2. Spiritual blessings are promised for obedience (Rev. 1:3; 22:7).

3. Sound doctrine guards against sin (e.g., Job, Joseph, Daniel, Christ).
4. Sound doctrine delineates between truth and error (2 Cor. 11:1–15; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).
5. Sound doctrine was central to Christ’s ministry (Matt. 7:28–29; Mark 4:2; Luke 4:32).
6. Sound doctrine was central in the early church (Acts 2:42; 5:28; 13:12).
7. Sound doctrine was central to apostolic ministry (Paul: Acts 13:12; 17:19; Gal. 2:11–21; John: 2 John 9–10).
8. Martyrs gave their lives for sound doctrine (Christ: Mark 11:18; Stephen: Acts 7:54–60; James: Acts 12:2; Paul: 2 Tim. 4:1–8).
9. Christ and the apostles left a mandate to pass sound doctrine on to the next generation (Christ: Matt. 28:20; Paul: 2 Tim. 2:2).
10. Churches were commended for sound doctrine or condemned for lack of sound doctrine (Ephesus, commended: Rev. 2:2, 6; Pergamum and Thyatira, condemned: Rev. 2:14–15, 20).
11. Established sound doctrine anticipates and prepares for eras when sound doctrine is out of season (2 Tim. 4:3).
12. Sound doctrine protects the church from false teachers (Titus 1:9).
13. Sound doctrine provides true spiritual adornment for believers (Titus 2:10).
14. Sound biblical teaching and sound systematic doctrine are inseparably connected to “theology.” Whether it be viewed expositionally in a text of Scripture or categorized comprehensively from all Scripture, biblical teaching cannot be disconnected from its identification with theology. Put another way, all biblical teaching is theological in nature, and all Christian theology is biblical in content.

What Is the Overarching and Unifying Theme of Scripture?¹²

The broad theme of *king/kingdom* (human and divine) appears throughout the Bible. With the exceptions of Leviticus, Ruth, and Joel, the Old Testament explicitly mentions this theme in thirty-six of its thirty-nine books. Except for Philippians, Titus, Philemon, and 1, 2, and 3 John, the New Testament directly mentions the subject in twenty-one of its twenty-seven books. All in all, fifty-seven of the sixty-six canonical books include the kingdom theme (86 percent).

The Hebrew words for “king,” “kingdom,” “reign,” and “throne” appear over three thousand times in the Old Testament, while the Greek words for these terms appear 160 times in the New Testament. The first Old Testament mention occurs

12 Adapted from Richard L. Mayhue, “The Kingdom of God: An Introduction,” *MSJ* 23.2 (2012): 167–72. Used by permission of *MSJ*.

in Genesis 10:10 and the last in Malachi 1:14. The initial appearance in the New Testament comes in Matthew 1:6 and the last in Revelation 22:5.

The exact expression “kingdom of God” does not appear in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Matthew alone uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven,” but he uses it interchangeably with “kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:23–24). And where he uses “kingdom of heaven” in passages that parallel other Gospels, those Gospel writers use “kingdom of God” (cf. Matt. 13:11 with Luke 8:10), thus establishing the correspondence between these two phrases.

Jesus never precisely defined “kingdom of heaven/God” in the Gospels, although he often illustrated it (e.g., Matt. 13:19, 24, 44, 45, 47, 52). Surprisingly, no one ever asked Christ for a definition. It can be assumed that they at least thought they understood the basic idea from the Old Testament, even if their ideas were mistaken.

Most telling, perhaps, is the plethora of *King* titles given to Christ in the New Testament:

- “King of Israel” (John 1:49; 12:13)
- “King of the Jews” (John 18:39; 19:3, 19, 21)
- “King of kings” (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16)
- “King of the ages, immortal, invisible” (1 Tim. 1:17)
- “King of the nations” (Rev. 15:3)

Christ’s reign is said to be forever and ever (Rev. 11:15; cf. 22:5).

A biblical study of God’s kingdom leads one to conclude that it is multifaceted, multidimensional, multifocal, multifactorial, and multifarious. It certainly could not be considered monolithic in character.

The idea of God’s kingdom encompasses every stage of biblical revelation. For instance,

- God is King of eternity (pre-Genesis 1, Revelation 21–22, post-Revelation 22)
- God is King of creation (Genesis 1–2)
- God is King of history (Genesis 1–Revelation 20)
- God is King of redemption (Genesis 3–Revelation 20)
- God is King of the earth (Genesis 1–Revelation 20)
- God is King of heaven (pre-Genesis 1, Genesis 1–Revelation 22, post-Revelation 22)

All *kingdom of God* passages can be summarized by recognizing several broad aspects. First is the *universal kingdom*, which includes the rule of God that has been, is, and forever will be over all that exists in time and space. Second is God’s *mediatorial kingdom*, in which he rules on earth through divinely chosen human

representatives. Third is the *spiritual or redemptive aspect of God's kingdom*, which uniquely deals with a person's salvation and personal relationship with God through Christ. When Scripture uses the word "kingdom" to refer to God's kingdom, it could point to any one aspect of the kingdom or several of its parts together. Careful interpretation in context will determine the particulars for a given biblical text.

With these ideas in mind, it is proposed that *God as King* and *the kingdom of God* should together be seriously considered as the grand, overarching theme of Scripture. A number of other candidates for the main theme of Scripture have been considered in the past, such as the glory of God, redemption, grace, Christ, covenant, and promise. Each possibility explains a part of God's kingdom, but only *God's kingdom* explains the whole.

From before the beginning until after the end, from the beginning to the end, both in and beyond time and space, God appears as the ultimate King. God is central to and the core of all things eternal and temporal. The kingdom of God convincingly qualifies as the unifying theme of Scripture.

John Bright succinctly and eloquently captured this thinking as follows:

Old Testament and New Testament thus stand together as the two acts of a single drama. Act I points to its conclusion in Act II, and without it the play is an incomplete, unsatisfying thing. But Act II must be read in the light of Act I, else its meaning will be missed. For the play is organically one. The Bible is one book. Had we to give that book a title, we might with justice call it "The Book of the Coming Kingdom of God." That is, indeed, its central theme everywhere.¹³

The authors of this volume would edit Dr. Bright's brilliant summary only by deleting one word, "Coming." For God's kingdom has been, is, and forevermore shall be.

The kingdom of God can be explained in this manner: The eternal triune God created a kingdom and two kingdom citizens (Adam and Eve) who were to exercise dominion over it. But an enemy deceived them, seduced them into breaking allegiance to the King, and caused them to rebel against their sovereign Creator. God intervened with consequential curses that exist to this day. Ever since, he

¹³ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), 197; see also 7, 244. See Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 4–53; George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ, as Covenanted in the Old Testament and Presented in the New Testament*, 3 vols. (1884; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1978), 1:29–33; Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity: An Outline of the Divine Purposes* (1954; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 89.

has been redeeming sinful, rebellious people to be restored as qualified kingdom citizens, both now in a spiritual sense and later in a kingdom-on-earth sense. Finally, the Enemy will be vanquished forever, as will sin. Thus, Revelation 21–22 describes the final and eternal expression of the kingdom of God, where the triune God will restore the kingdom to its original purity with the curse having been removed and the new heaven and the new earth becoming the everlasting abode of God and his people.

What Are the Major Motifs of Scripture?¹⁴

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books inspired by God. These documents are gathered into two Testaments, the Old (thirty-nine) and the New (twenty-seven). Prophets, priests, kings, and leaders from the nation of Israel wrote the Old Testament books in Hebrew (with some passages in Aramaic). The apostles and their associates wrote the New Testament books in Greek.

The Old Testament record starts with the creation of the universe and closes about four hundred years before the first coming of Jesus Christ. The flow of history through the Old Testament moves along the following lines:

1. Creation of the universe
2. Fall of man
3. Judgment flood over the earth
4. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel)—fathers of the chosen nation
5. The history of Israel
 - a. Exile in Egypt (430 years)
 - b. Exodus and wilderness wanderings (40 years)
 - c. Conquest of Canaan (7 years)
 - d. Era of the judges (350 years)
 - e. United kingdom—Saul, David, Solomon (110 years)
 - f. Divided kingdom—Judah and Israel (350 years)
 - g. Exile in Babylon (70 years)
 - h. Return and rebuilding of the land (140 years)

The details of this history are explained in the thirty-nine books, which can be divided into five categories:

1. The Law—5 (Genesis–Deuteronomy)
2. History—12 (Joshua–Esther)
3. Wisdom—5 (Job–Song of Solomon)

¹⁴ This section is adapted from John MacArthur, ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), xi–xv. Charts and notes from *The MacArthur Study Bible: English Standard Version* originate with *The MacArthur Study Bible*, copyright © 1997 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson/HarperCollins Christian Publishing.

4. Major Prophets—5 (Isaiah–Daniel)
5. Minor Prophets—12 (Hosea–Malachi)

The completion of the Old Testament was followed by four hundred years of silence, during which time God did not speak through prophets or inspire any Scripture. That silence was broken by the arrival of John the Baptist announcing that the promised Savior had come. The New Testament records the rest of the story, from the birth of Christ to the culmination of all history and the final eternal state. So the two Testaments go from creation to consummation, eternity past to eternity future.

While the thirty-nine Old Testament books major on the history of Israel and the promise of the coming Savior, the twenty-seven New Testament books major on the person of Christ and the establishment of the church. The four Gospels give the record of his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Each of the four writers views the greatest and most important event of history, the coming of the God-man, Jesus Christ, from a different perspective. Matthew looks at him through the perspective of his kingdom, Mark through the perspective of his servanthood, Luke through the perspective of his humanness, and John through the perspective of his deity.

The book of Acts tells the story of the impact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord Savior—from his ascension, the consequent coming of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church through the early years of gospel preaching by the apostles and their associates. Acts records the establishment of the church in Judea, in Samaria, and into the Roman Empire.

The twenty-one Epistles were written to churches and individuals to explain the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ, with its implications for life and witness until he returns.

The New Testament closes with Revelation, which starts by picturing the current church age and culminates with Christ's return to establish his earthly kingdom, bringing judgment on the ungodly and glory and blessing for believers. Following the millennial reign of the Lord Savior will be the last judgment, leading to the eternal state. All believers of all history enter the ultimate eternal glory prepared for them, and all the ungodly are consigned to hell to be punished forever.

To understand the Bible, it is essential to grasp the sweep of that history from creation to consummation. It is also crucial to keep in focus the unifying theme of Scripture. The one constant theme unfolding throughout the whole Bible is this: God, for his own glory, has chosen to create and gather to himself a group of people to be the subjects of his eternal kingdom, who will praise, honor, and serve him forever and through whom he will display his wisdom, power, mercy, grace, and glory. To gather his chosen ones, God must redeem them from sin.

The Bible reveals God's plan for this redemption from its inception in eternity past to its completion in eternity future. Covenants, promises, and epochs are all secondary to the one continuous plan of redemption.

There is one God. The Bible has one divine Source. Scripture is one book. It has one plan of grace, recorded from initiation through execution to consummation. From predestination to glorification, the Bible is the story of God redeeming his chosen people for the praise of his glory.

As God's redemptive purposes and plan unfold in Scripture, five recurring motifs are constantly emphasized. Everything revealed on the pages of both the Old Testament and the New is associated with these five categories. Scripture is always teaching or illustrating (1) the character and attributes of God; (2) the tragedy of sin and disobedience to God's holy standard; (3) the blessedness of faith and obedience to God's standard; (4) the need for a Savior by whose righteousness and substitution sinners can be forgiven, declared just, and transformed to obey God's standard; and (5) the coming glorious end of redemptive history in the Lord Savior's earthly kingdom and the subsequent eternal reign and glory of God and Christ. While reading through the Bible, one should be able to relate each portion of Scripture to these dominant topics, recognizing that what is introduced in the Old Testament is also made clearer in the New Testament. Looking at these five categories separately gives an overview of the Bible.

THE REVELATION OF THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Above all else, Scripture is God's self-revelation. He reveals himself as the sovereign God of the universe who has chosen to make man and to make himself known to man. In that self-revelation he has established his standard of absolute holiness. From Adam and Eve through Cain and Abel and to everyone before and after the law of Moses, the standard of righteousness has been established and is sustained in Scripture to the last page of the New Testament. Violation of it produces judgment, both temporal and eternal.

In the Old Testament, God revealed himself by the following means:

1. Creation (the heavens and the earth)
2. Creation of mankind, who was made in his image
3. Angels
4. Signs, wonders, and miracles
5. Visions
6. Spoken words by prophets and others
7. Written Scripture (Old Testament)

In the New Testament, God revealed himself again by the same means but more clearly and fully:

1. Creation (the heavens and the earth)
2. Incarnation of the God-man, Jesus Christ, who is the very image of God
3. Angels
4. Signs, wonders, and miracles
5. Visions
6. Spoken words by Christ, apostles, and prophets
7. Written Scripture (New Testament)

THE REVELATION OF DIVINE JUDGMENT FOR SIN AND DISOBEDIENCE

Scripture repeatedly deals with the matter of man's sin, which leads to divine judgment. Account after account in Scripture demonstrates the deadly effects in time and eternity of violating God's standard. There are 1,189 chapters in the Bible. Only four of them do not involve a fallen world: the first two and the last two—before the fall and after the creation of the new heaven and new earth. The rest chronicle sin's tragedy and God's redemptive grace in Christ Jesus.

In the Old Testament, God showed the disaster of sin—starting with Adam and Eve and carrying on to Cain and Abel, the patriarchs, Moses and Israel, the kings, the priests, some prophets, and the Gentile nations. Throughout the Old Testament is the relentless record of continual devastation produced by sin and disobedience to God's law.

In the New Testament, the tragedy of sin becomes clearer. The teaching of Jesus and the apostles begins and ends with a call to repentance. King Herod, the Jewish leaders, and the nation of Israel—along with Pilate, Rome, and the rest of the world—all reject the Lord Savior, spurn the truth of God, and thus condemn themselves. The chronicle of sin continues unabated to the end of the age and the return of Christ in judgment. New Testament disobedience is even more flagrant than Old Testament disobedience because it involves the rejection of the Lord Savior Jesus Christ in the brighter light of New Testament revelation.

THE REVELATION OF DIVINE BLESSING FOR FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

Scripture repeatedly promises wonderful rewards in time and eternity that come to people who trust God and seek to obey him. In the Old Testament, God showed the blessedness of repentance from sin, faith in himself, and obedience to his Word—from Abel, through the patriarchs, to the remnant in Israel, and even on to the Gentiles who believed (such as the people of Nineveh).

God's will, his moral law, and his standard for man were always made known. To those who faced their inability to keep God's standard, who recognized their sin, who confessed their impotence to please God by their own works, and who asked him for forgiveness and grace—to those came merciful redemption and blessing for time and eternity.

In the New Testament, God again showed the full blessedness of redemption from sin for repentant people. There were those who responded to the preaching of repentance by John the Baptist. Others repented at the preaching of Jesus. Still others from Israel obeyed the gospel through the apostles' preaching. And finally, many Gentiles all over the Roman Empire believed the gospel. To all those and to all who will believe throughout all history, God promises blessing, both in this world and in the world to come.

THE REVELATION OF THE LORD SAVIOR AND HIS SACRIFICE FOR SIN

This is the heart of both the Old Testament, which Jesus said spoke of him in type and prophecy, and the New Testament, which gives the biblical record of his coming. The promise of blessing is dependent on grace and mercy given to the sinner. Mercy means that sin is not held against the sinner. Such forgiveness depends on a payment of sin's penalty to satisfy holy justice, which demands a substitute—one to die in the sinner's place. God's chosen substitute—the only one who qualified—was Jesus. Salvation is always by the same gracious means, whether during Old Testament or New Testament times. When any sinner comes to God in repentant faith, acknowledging that he has no power to save himself from the deserved judgment of divine wrath, believing in Christ, and pleading for mercy, God's promise of forgiveness is granted. God then declares him righteous because the sacrifice and obedience of Christ is credited to his account. In the Old Testament, God justified sinners that same way, in anticipation of Christ's atoning work. There is, therefore, a continuity of grace and salvation through all redemptive history. Various covenants, promises, and epochs do not alter that fundamental continuity, nor does the discontinuity between the Old Testament witness-nation, Israel, and the New Testament witness-people, the church. A fundamental continuity is centered on the cross, which was no interruption in the plan of God but is the very thing to which all else points.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Savior-sacrifice is promised. In Genesis, he is the seed of the woman who will destroy Satan. In Zechariah, he is the "pierced" one to whom Israel turns and by whom God opens the fountain of forgiveness to all who mourn over their sin (Zech. 12:10). He is the very one symbolized in the sacrificial system of the Mosaic law. He is the suffering substitute of whom the prophets speak. Throughout the Old Testament, he is the Messiah who would die for the transgressions of his people; from beginning to end, the Old Testament presents the theme of the Lord Savior as a sacrifice for sin. It is solely because of his perfect sacrifice for sin that God graciously forgives repentant believers.

In the New Testament, the Lord Savior came and actually accomplished the promised sacrifice for sin on the cross. Having fulfilled all righteousness by his perfect life, he satisfied justice by his death. Thus God himself atoned for sin,

at a cost too great for the human mind to fathom. Now he graciously supplies all the merit necessary for his people to be the objects of his favor. That is what Scripture means when it speaks of salvation by grace.

THE REVELATION OF THE KINGDOM AND GLORY OF THE LORD SAVIOR

This crucial component of Scripture brings the whole story to its God-ordained consummation. Redemptive history is controlled by God so as to culminate in his eternal glory. Redemptive history will end with the same precision and exactness with which it began. The truths of eschatology are neither vague nor unclear—nor are they unimportant. As in any book, how the story ends is both compelling and critically important—and so it is with the Bible. Scripture notes several very specific features of the end planned by God.

In the Old Testament, there is repeated mention of an earthly kingdom ruled by the Messiah, the Lord Savior, who will come to reign. Associated with that kingdom will be the salvation of Israel, the salvation of Gentiles, the renewal of the earth from the effects of the curse, and the bodily resurrection of God's people who have died. Finally, the Old Testament predicts that God will create a new heaven and new earth—which will be the eternal state of the godly—and a final hell for the ungodly.

The New Testament clarifies and expands these features. The King is rejected and executed, but he promises to come back in glory, bringing judgment, resurrection, and his kingdom for all who believe. Innumerable Gentiles from every nation will be included among the redeemed. Israel will be saved and grafted back into the root of blessing, from which she has been temporarily excised. Israel's promised kingdom will be enjoyed with the Lord reigning on the throne in the renewed earth, exercising power over the whole world and receiving due honor and worship. Following that kingdom will come the dissolution of the renewed but still sin-stained creation and the subsequent creation of a new heaven and new earth—which will be the eternal state, separate forever from the ungodly in hell.

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One's Worldview?¹⁵

A worldview comprises one's collection of presuppositions, convictions, and values from which a person tries to understand and make sense out of the world and life. As Ronald Nash puts it, "A world-view is a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and

¹⁵ This section is adapted from Richard L. Mayhue, "Introduction," in *Think Biblically: Recovering a Christian Worldview*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 13–16. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL.

by which we interpret and judge reality.”¹⁶ Similarly, Gary Phillips and William Brown explain, “A worldview is, first of all, *an explanation and interpretation of the world* and second, *an application of this view to life*.”¹⁷

Every worldview begins with *presuppositions*—beliefs that one presumes to be true without supporting evidence from other sources or systems. Making sense of reality, in part or in whole, requires that one adopt an interpretive stance, since there is no “neutral” thought in the universe. This becomes the foundation on which one builds.

What are the presuppositions of a Christian worldview that is solidly rooted and grounded in Scripture? Carl F. H. Henry, an important Christian thinker in the last half of the twentieth century, answers the question very simply by saying that “evangelical theology dares harbor one and only one presupposition: the living and personal God intelligibly known in his revelation.”¹⁸ This one major presupposition, which underlies a proper Christian worldview, breaks down into two parts. First, God exists eternally as the personal, transcendent, triune Creator. Second, God has revealed his character, purposes, and will in the infallible and inerrant pages of his special revelation, the Bible.

What is the Christian worldview? The following definition is offered as a working model:

The Christian worldview sees and understands God the Creator and his creation—that is, man and the world—primarily through the lens of God’s special revelation, the holy Scriptures, and secondarily through God’s natural revelation in creation as interpreted by human reason and reconciled by and with Scripture, for the purpose of believing and behaving in accord with God’s will and, thereby, glorifying God with one’s mind and life, both now and in eternity.

What are some of the benefits of embracing the Christian worldview? A biblical worldview provides compelling answers to the most crucial of life’s questions:

1. How did the world and all that is in it come into being?
2. By what standard can I determine whether a knowledge claim is true or false?
3. How does/should the world function?
4. What is the nature of a human being?

¹⁶ Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 24.

¹⁷ W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World from a Biblical Viewpoint* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 29, italics original.

¹⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Preliminary Considerations* (1976; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 212.

5. What is one's personal purpose of existence?
6. How should one live?
7. Is there any personal hope for the future?
8. What happens to a person at and after death?
9. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
10. How does one determine what is right and wrong?
11. What is the meaning of human history?
12. What does the future hold?

Christians in the twenty-first century face the same basic questions about this world and life that confronted the earliest humans in Genesis. They also had to sift through various worldviews to answer the above questions. This has been true throughout history. Consider what faced Joseph (Genesis 37–50) and Moses (Exodus 2–14) in Egypt, or Elijah when he encountered Jezebel and her pagan prophets (1 Kings 17–19), or Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 1–6), or Nehemiah in Persia (Nehemiah 1–2), or Paul in Athens (Acts 17). They discerned the difference between truth and error, right and wrong, because they placed their faith in the living God and his revealed Word.

What distinguishes the Christian worldview from other worldviews? At the heart of the matter, a Christian worldview contrasts with competing worldviews in that it (1) recognizes the triune God of the Bible as the unique source of all truth, and (2) relates all truth back to an understanding of God and his purposes for this life and the next.

There are at least two mistaken notions about the Christian worldview, especially among Christians. The first is that a Christian view of the world and life will differ on *all* points from other worldviews. While this is not always true (e.g., all worldviews accept the law of gravity), the Christian worldview will differ and be unique on the most important points, especially as they relate to the character of God, the nature and value of Scripture, and the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The second misperception is that the Bible contains all that we need to know in every sense. Common sense should put an end to this misdirected thought; for example, Scripture does not give instructions for how to change the oil in one's car. However, it is true that the Bible alone contains all that Christians need to know about their spiritual life and godliness through a knowledge of the one true God, which is the highest and most important level of knowledge (2 Pet. 1:2–4).

How and in what life contexts does a Christian worldview prove to be necessary? First, in the world of *scholarship* the Christian worldview is offered not as one of many equals or possibilities but as the one true view of life whose single source of truth and reality is the Creator God. Thus, it serves as a bright light reflecting the glory of God amid intellectual darkness.

Second, a Christian worldview must be used as an essential tool in *evangelism*, to answer the questions and objections of the unbeliever. However, it must be clearly understood that, in the final analysis, it is the gospel that has the power to bring an individual to salvation (Rom. 1:16–17).

Finally, a Christian worldview is foundational in the realm of *discipleship*, to inform and mature a true believer in Christ with regard to the implications and ramifications of one's Christian faith. It provides a framework by which one (1) can understand the world and all of its reality from God's perspective and (2) can order one's life according to God's will.

What should be the ultimate goal of embracing the Christian worldview? Why is the Christian worldview worth recovering? Jeremiah passes along God's direct answer:

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." (Jer. 9:23–24)

Man's chief end is to know and glorify God. Yet the knowledge of God is impossible apart from a Christian worldview.

Where do systematic theology and one's worldview intersect? First, both are erected on the same shared presupposition with its two parts: (1) the personal existence of the eternal God and (2) his self-revelation in Scripture. Second, a Christian worldview is dependent on systematic theology to know and understand God's truth, for systematic theology is nothing other than organizing all that God has revealed for the purpose of rightly knowing and living unto him. Third, a Christian worldview is dependent on systematic theology to know and embrace God's worldview as revealed in Scripture, for it is only as we think Christianly that we learn to think God's own thoughts after him. Finally, systematic theology is dependent on a Christian worldview in order to consistently and properly apply the truth of Scripture for living according to the will of God, for God's glory.

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One's Mind?¹⁹

Systematic theology is entirely about God's mind as found in Scripture. It is not about what humans think independently apart from the Bible. The necessary characteristics of the Christian's mind are discussed next because they qualify

¹⁹ This section is adapted from Mayhue, "Cultivating a Biblical Mind-Set," in MacArthur, *Think Biblically*, 42–53. Used by permission of Crossway.

one to learn and teach Christian theology, whose source is Scripture and whose centerpiece is the triune God.

THE REDEEMED MIND

As a result of salvation, the mind of a newly redeemed person knows and comprehends the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:6). Whereas this person was previously blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4), he or she now possesses “the helmet of salvation” (Eph. 6:17) to protect the mind against the “schemes” (a mind-related term in the Greek, Eph. 6:11) of Satan. No longer is this one left vulnerable against the Devil, as he or she was before salvation. This new person (2 Cor. 5:17) now has a knowledge of God and his will that he or she previously lacked (1 John 5:18–20).

THE RENEWED MIND

When a person enters into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he or she becomes a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) who sings “a new song” (Ps. 98:1). The mind acquires a new way to think and a capacity to put off old, sinful ways of thinking. Unquestionably, God is in the business of mind renewal for Christians (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23; Col. 3:10).

The Bible says to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). Paul put this concept in military terms: “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). How do we do this? Scripture reveals the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:16)—not all of his mind, to be sure, but all that God wisely determined to reveal to us. To think like God, one must think like Scripture. That’s why Paul encouraged the Colossians to let the Word of Christ dwell within them richly (Col. 3:16).

Harry Blamires, an Englishman with extraordinary understanding about the Christian mind, puts this quite well:

To think christianly is to think in terms of Revelation. For the secularist, God and theology are the playthings of the mind. For the Christian, God is real, and Christian theology describes His truth revealed to us. For the secular mind, religion is essentially a matter of theory: for the Christian mind, Christianity is a matter of acts and facts. The acts and facts which are the basis of our faith are recorded in the Bible.²⁰

At salvation, Christians are given a regenerated mental ability to comprehend spiritual truth. After salvation, Christians need to readjust their thinking chiefly by

20 Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (1963; repr., Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1978), 110–11.

mind renewal, using the Bible as the means to do so. The ultimate goal is to have a full knowledge of God and his will (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 1:17–18; Col. 1:9–10).

THE ILLUMINATED MIND

The Bible says that believers need God’s help to understand God’s Word (1 Cor. 2:12–13). Consequently, the Spirit of God enlightens the minds of believers, so that they might comprehend, embrace, and obey the truths revealed in Scripture. Theologians call this *illumination*.

A great prayer to offer as one studies Scripture is, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law” (Ps. 119:18). It acknowledges an indispensable need for God’s light in Scripture. So do texts like Psalm 119:33–34, “Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart” (see also Ps. 119:102).

God wants Christians to know and understand and obey. So he gives them the help that they need through his Holy Spirit. Believers, like the men to whom Jesus spoke on the road to Emmaus, require God’s assistance: “Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). God’s ministry of illumination, by which he gives light on the meaning of the Bible, is affirmed in texts such as Psalm 119:130; Ephesians 1:18–19; and 1 John 2:27.

The truth about God illuminating Scripture for Christians should greatly encourage the believer. While it does not eliminate the need for gifted men to teach (Eph. 4:11–12; 2 Tim. 4:2) or the hard labor of serious Bible study (2 Tim. 2:15), it does promise that there is no need to be enslaved to church dogma or to be led astray by false teachers. Primary dependence for learning Scripture needs to be on the author of Scripture—God himself.

THE CHRISTLIKE MIND

When one thinks like God wants him to think and acts like God wants him to act, then one will receive God’s blessing for obedience (Rev. 1:3). Spiritually, the Christian will be that obedient child, that pure bride, and that healthy sheep in Christ’s flock who experiences the greatest intimacy with God.

It is brazen idolatry to reject the mind of God in Scripture and worship at the altar of one’s own independent thinking. A believer’s greatest intimacy with the Lord occurs when the Lord’s thoughts prevail and one’s behavior then models that of Christ.

Christians should be altogether glad to embrace the certain and true mind of God the Father (Rom. 11:34), God the Son (1 Cor. 2:16), and God the Spirit (Rom. 8:27). In contrast to Peter, who was tempted by Satan to set his mind on the things of man, believers are to set their minds on the things of God (Matt. 16:23; Col.

3:2). This has to do not so much with different categories or disciplines of thought but rather with the way things are viewed from a divine perspective. Christians should stand in awe of God's mind, as did the apostle Paul (Rom. 11:33–36).

God's view is the only true view that accurately corresponds to all reality. God's mind sets the standard for which believers are to strive but which they will never fully achieve. Put another way, man's thoughts will never exceed, equal, or even come close to God's. Over 2,500 years ago, the prophet Isaiah said this very thing (Isa. 55:8–9).

The ultimate pattern of Christian-mindedness is the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul declares, "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). How can this be? We have it with the Bible, which is God's sufficient, special revelation (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:3). In Philippians 2:5, Paul instructs, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." The apostle is specifically pointing to Christ's mindset of sacrifice for God's glory (Phil. 2:7) and submission to God's will (Phil. 2:8). By following Christ's model, Christians can train their minds to become more like his.

THE TESTED MIND

The Christian mind should be a repository of God's revealed truth. It should not waver, compromise, or bend in the face of opposing ideas or seemingly superior arguments (2 Tim. 1:7). Truth originates not with humans but with God. Therefore, Christians should be the champions of truth in a world filled with lies that are deceptively disguised as and falsely declared to be the truth.

It was God who invited the nation of Israel, saying, "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18). The subject matter to be considered was repentance from sin and salvation (Isa. 1:16–20). By application, the same invitation is extended to every person alive.

However, while a commitment to think Christianly honors Christ, it is not without opposition. Satan would have believers think contrary to God's Word and then act disobediently to God's will.

Remember that before one becomes a Christian, his or her mind is blinded by the Devil: "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). Even after salvation, Satan continues his intellectual rampage. Thus Paul had great concern for the Corinthian church: "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Eve had allowed Satan to do some thinking for her. Then she did some of her own thinking independent of God. When her conclusions differed from God's, she chose to act on her conclusions rather than on God's commands, which is sin (Gen. 3:1–7).

Satan aims his fiery darts (Eph. 6:16) at the minds of believers (2 Cor. 11:3), making their thought life the battlefield for spiritual conquest. Scriptural accounts abound of those who succumbed, like Eve (Genesis 3) and Peter (Matt. 16:13–23). Others walked away from the fray as victors, like Job (Job 1:1–2:10) and Christ (Matt. 4:1–11). When Christians fall, it is most likely that they have forgotten to wear the helmet of salvation or to wield the sword of truth (Eph. 6:17).

In warning believers about life's ongoing, never-ending battle with Satan, Paul on two occasions tells about the schemes or designs of the Devil. He uses two different Greek words, but both relate to the mind (2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11). Since no one is immune from these attacks, the Christian must heed Peter's strong exhortation: "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:13; see 3:15).

So far, this discussion has focused on a preventive or defensive military posture regarding the mind. The majority of Scripture deals with personal protection. However, Paul also addresses how to go on the intellectual offensive (2 Cor. 10:4–5). These offensive "weapons" (10:4) certainly feature the Word of God wielded by a Christian's mind in the context of worldview warfare. In this context of mind battle, the "strongholds" (10:4) are "arguments" (10:5) and "every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God" (10:5). In other words, any philosophy, worldview, apologetic, or other kind of teaching that undermines, minimizes, contradicts, or tries to eliminate the Christian worldview or any part of it is to be met head-on with an aggressive, offensive battle plan. God's intended end is the destruction ("destroy" is used twice in 10:4–5) of that which does not correspond to Scripture's clear teaching about God and his created world.

In the historical context of 2 Corinthians, Paul opposed any teaching on any subject that had come into the church and did not correspond to his apostolic instruction. Whether an unbeliever or a believer was responsible, whether the idea came from scholars or the uneducated, whether the teaching found wide acceptance or not, all thoughts or opinions that were not *for* the knowledge of God were to be considered *against* the knowledge of God. Therefore, they were to be targeted for intellectual battle and ultimate elimination. Thus, in today's context, all intellectual activities (e.g., reading, listening to the radio, viewing television and movies, studying in formal academia, engaging in casual conversations) must always be pursued using the filtering lens of a Christian theological worldview to determine whether they are allied with the truth of Scripture or are enemies of which to be wary.

THE PROFITABLE MIND

Psalm 119 provides detailed insight into a Christian's new relation to the Bible, which reveals the mind of Christ. First, a believer will develop a great love for and tremendous delight in the Scriptures (119:47–48). Second, a believer in Christ will have a strong desire to know God's Word as the best way to know God (119:16, 93, 176). Third, knowing God will then lead to a Christian obeying him (119:44–45).

Meditation

To hear something once is not enough for most people. To briefly ponder something profound does not allow sufficient time to grasp and fully understand its significance. This proves to be most true with God's mind in Scripture. Psalm 119 testifies to the importance and blessing of lingering long over God's Word.

The idea of meditating sometimes lends itself to misunderstanding. Meditation involves prolonged thought or pondering. An American figure of speech for meditating is "chewing" on a thought. Some have also likened it to the rumination process of the cow's four-stomach digestive system. A vivid picture comes from a coffee percolator. The water goes up a small tube and drains down through the coffee grounds. After enough cycles, the flavor of the coffee beans has been transferred to the water, which is then called coffee. So it is that Christians need to cycle their thoughts through the grounds of God's Word until they start to think like God and then act in a godly manner.

Scripture commands believers to meditate on three areas:

1. God (Pss. 27:4; 63:6)
2. God's Word (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2)
3. God's works (Pss. 143:5; 145:5)

All 176 verses of Psalm 119 extol the virtue of living according to the mind of God. Meditation is mentioned at least seven times as the habit of one who loves God and desires a closer intimacy with him: "O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. . . . My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promise" (119:97, 148; see also vv. 15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 99). In contrast, an aspect of Eve's sin can be attributed to her failure to adequately meditate on God's clear and sufficient word (Gen. 2:16–17; cf. 3:3).

Meditating on God's Word will purify the mind of old thoughts that are not of God and reinforce new thoughts from Scripture. It also puts a protective shield around the mind to block and reject incoming thoughts that contradict God. That is the scriptural process of renewing the mind.

Think on These Things

Someone has suggested that the mind is the taproot of the soul. That being so, one needs to carefully and effectively feed his or her soul by sinking one's taproot deep into God's mind in Scripture. One may ask, "What food will feed my soul?" Paul's menu for the mind includes thought entrées that are (1) "true," (2) "honorable," (3) "just," (4) "pure," (5) "lovely," (6) "commendable," (7) "excellen[t]," and (8) "worthy of praise" (Phil. 4:8). In meditating on God's Word and thinking on these things, Christians will avoid setting their minds on earthly things (Phil. 3:19) and being double-minded (James 1:6–8).

THE BALANCED MIND

Are divine revelation and human reason like oil and water—do they never mix? Christians have sometimes reached two erroneous extremes in dealing with divine revelation versus human reason. On one end of the spectrum is *anti-intellectualism*, which basically concludes that if a subject matter is not discussed in the Bible, then it is not worthy of serious study or thought. This unbiblical approach to learning and thinking leads to cultural and intellectual withdrawal. At the opposite extreme is *hyper-intellectualism*, which embraces natural revelation at a higher level of value and credibility than God's special revelation in Scripture; when the two are in conflict, natural revelation is the preferred source of truth. This unbiblical approach results in withdrawal from Scripture.

Both errors must be rejected. The believer must appropriate knowledge from both special and general revelation. However, the creation and our faculties of reason and deduction by which we study the creation (i.e., general revelation) are fallen, fallible, and corrupted by sin. Scripture, on the other hand, is infallible and inerrant and therefore must take precedence over general revelation. Where the Bible speaks to an intellectual discipline, its truth is superior. Where the Bible does not so speak, God has given us the whole world of creation to explore for knowledge—but with the caveat that man's ability to draw conclusions from nature is not infallible like God's Word. This is especially true of thinkers who continually reject their need for Christ's salvation. This does not necessarily mean that their facts are wrong or even that their basic ideas are in error. However, it does guarantee that their worldview is not in accord with God's perspective, and therefore their conclusions ought to be subjected to critical evaluation according to Scripture.

Unmistakably, from the perspective of a Christian worldview, believers are to engage their own minds and the minds of others to the best of their ability and as opportunity allows. However, several wise cautions are in order:

1. Becoming a scholar and trying to change the way one's generation thinks is secondary to becoming a Christian and changing the way one personally thinks about Christ.

2. Formal education in a range of disciplines is secondary to gospel education—namely, obeying the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) and taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, to every creature.
3. General revelation *points* to a higher power, while special revelation *personally introduces* this higher power as the triune God of Scripture, who created the world and all that is in it (see Isaiah 40–48, where Yahweh reminds Israel of this critical truth) and who provided the only Redeemer in the Lord Jesus Christ.
4. To know about the truth is not nearly as important as personally and redemptively being in fellowship with the Truth, Jesus Christ (John 14:6), who is the only source of eternal life.
5. The New Testament church was not mandated to intellectualize their world, nor was this their practice. Rather, they “gospelized” it by proclaiming the saving grace of Jesus Christ to all without distinction, from key political leaders like King Agrippa (Acts 25:23–26:32) to lowly imprisoned slaves like Onesimus (Philem. 10).
6. To moralize, politicize, or intellectualize society without first seeing spiritual conversion is to guarantee only a brief and generally inconsistent change that is shallow, not deep; temporary, not lasting; and ultimately damning, not saving.

It bears repeating that both special and general revelation are necessary for cultivating a biblical mindset. However, the study of special revelation is the priority, followed in the second place by learning from natural revelation. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived (1 Kings 3:12; 4:29–34), wrote the same advice almost three thousand years ago. His are the most authoritative statements on the subject of the mind and knowledge, since they are Scripture (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; see also 1 Cor. 1:20–21).

The beginning and end of Christian theology is a *knowledge of God* (2 Cor. 2:14; 4:6; Eph. 1:17; Col. 1:10; 2 Pet. 1:2–3, 8; 3:18) and a *knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:25; Titus 1:1). Above all, at the very center of a Christian worldview is the Lord Jesus Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). Nothing can be fully understood if God is not known first.

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One’s Personal Life?²¹

Godliness, Christlikeness, and Christian spirituality all describe a Christian becoming more like God. The most powerful way to effect this change is by letting

21 For more on this topic, see Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Religious Life of Theological Students,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), 1:411–25.

the Word of God dwell in one richly (Col. 3:16). When one embraces Scripture without reservation, it will energetically work God's will in the believer's life (1 Thess. 2:13). The process could be basically defined as follows:

Christian spirituality involves growing to be like God in character and conduct by personally submitting to the transforming work of God's Word and God's Spirit.

INTIMACY AND MATURITY

There is no better way to saturate one's mind with Scripture than by sitting under expository preaching and studying systematic theology. Both will enhance one's spiritual maturity. The author of Hebrews rejoiced that Jewish Christians had exhibited the intimacy of childlike faith (Heb. 5:12–13) but deplored their lack of advancement to the maturity of meat. So he exhorted, "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1). Paul wrote to the Corinthians with similar disappointment (1 Cor. 3:1–3).

Intimacy deals fundamentally with one's personal relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in godwardness. Maturity is the result of intimacy reflecting God's abiding, growing presence in Christians in regard to godliness (John 15:1–11). Just as a baby or young child, although not yet mature, can enjoy intimacy with a parent, so should a new Christian with the freshly found Savior. This intimacy fuels the maturing process, whereby a child grows into parental likeness.

Intimacy without maturity results in spiritually infantile behavior instead of spiritually adult responses. In contrast, maturity without intimacy results in a stale, joyless Christianity that can easily deteriorate into legalism and sometimes even a major fall into sin. However, Scripture teaches that when intimacy and maturity complement and feed off each other, the result is a strong, vibrant Christian life. Genuine spirituality, then, must be marked by both intimacy and maturity.

Scripture is essential for growing in spiritual maturity. Jesus, Paul, and James each directly communicated God's clear and frequent pressing demand for spiritual development in the true believer, providing key words for understanding spiritual maturity. We are to be perfect (Matt. 5:48), to be built up to mature manhood (Eph. 4:11–13), to be presented mature in Christ (Col. 1:28), complete and equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4).

The quickest way to grasp the essence of maturity is to read about the obedience of such people as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph in Genesis. But one should not quit there. Sixty-five more books of the Bible contain additional stirring accounts of spiritual maturity. This canonical "hall of faith" serves as the ultimate example of God's affirmation of intimate faith and mature faithfulness.

Hebrews 11 chronicles spiritual maturity at its best. But notice that an exhortation immediately follows Hebrews 11, calling for the same kind of maturity in those who received the letter (Heb. 12:1–3). That exhortation is accompanied by a warning about the Father’s discipline of those who persist in immaturity (12:4–11). Imperfect earthly parenthood is but a faint reflection of God’s flawlessly consistent response to those who by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have been born again into God’s family (John 1:12–13).

A saint of old, Epaphras, prayed that the Christians at Colossae would stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God (Col. 4:12). May God, in similar fashion, commend these compelling biblical truths about spiritual maturity to our stewardship of worship and obedience for his great glory.

HOLINESS

Christians have been saved to be holy and to live holy lives (1 Pet. 1:14–16). What does it mean to be holy? Both the Hebrew and Greek words for “to be holy” (which appear about two thousand times in Scripture) basically mean “to be set aside for something special.” Thus, God is holy in that he sets himself apart from creation, humanity, and all pagan gods by the fact of his deity and sinlessness. That’s why the angels sing of God, “Holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8), and why Scripture declares him to be holy (e.g., Ps. 99:9; Isa. 43:15).

Thus, the idea of holiness takes on a spiritual meaning among the people of God based on the holy character of God. For instance, the high priest of God had inscribed across his headpiece “Holy to the LORD” (Ex. 39:30). The high priest was especially set apart by God to intercede on behalf of a sinful nation to a holy God for the forgiveness of their transgressions.

Holiness embodies the very essence of Christianity. The holy Savior has saved sinners to be a holy people (1 Pet. 2:4–10). That’s why one of the most common biblical names for a believer is *saint*, which simply and wonderfully means “saved and set apart” (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2).

When one considers that a holy God saves, it is no surprise to learn that he gives his Holy Spirit to every believer at salvation. A primary purpose of this gift is to equip believers with the power to live a holy life (1 Thess. 4:7–8; 1 John 3:24; 4:13).

So God wants Christians to share his holiness (Heb. 12:10) and to present themselves as slaves of righteousness, which will result in holiness (Rom. 6:19): “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). Thus the author of Hebrews writes, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Holiness is the core of a Christian’s experience.

Spiritual maturity springs out of holiness. Scottish theologian John Brown boils holiness down to a definition that we can all understand and pursue:

Holiness does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervours, or uncommanded austerities; it consists in thinking as God thinks, and willing as God wills. God's mind and will are to be known from his word; and, so far as I really understand and believe God's word, God's mind becomes my mind, God's will becomes my will, and according to the measure of my faith, I become holy.²²

SANCTIFICATION²³

Closely connected with holiness is *sanctification*. In many New Testament uses, the word means "salvation" (Acts 20:32; 1 Cor. 1:2). Sanctification, or being set apart in salvation, should result in believers being set apart for Christian living.

Sanctification not only includes the immediate act and fact of salvation but also involves a progressive or growing experience of greater holiness and less sinfulness. It expresses God's will and fulfills the purpose of God's salvation call (1 Thess. 4:3–7). Sanctification includes one's responsibility to participate in continuing what God's Spirit began in salvation (2 Tim. 2:21; Rev. 22:11).

Christians are constantly exhorted to pursue in their Christian experience what God has declared to be true of them in salvation. Believers are also promised that what is not now complete, God will ultimately finish in glory (Phil. 2:12–13; 1 Thess. 5:23). These passages express one of the great paradoxes of Scripture: Christians are to become what they already are and one day will be. Such certainty of the Christian's future is captured in texts like these:

For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Rom. 10:13)

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:18)

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. (Rom. 13:11)

Sanctification involves the spiritual process that is pictured by a body growing into adulthood (Heb. 5:11–14) or a tree bearing fruit (Ps. 1:3). Growth is not always easy or uniform; however, it should be the direction of a true Christian's life.

²² John Brown, *Expository Discourses on the First Epistle of Peter*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Oliphant, 1866), 1:117.

²³ For a more detailed discussion of sanctification, see "Sanctification," in chap. 7, "Salvation" (p. 342).

Several obstacles face the believer in this lifelong pursuit. Christians need to know about these obstacles and stay on guard to avoid them or to correct them if they become a part of one's thinking:

1. One may think more highly of self than one ought and not pursue holiness as one should (Rom. 12:3).
2. One may presume upon salvation and assume that since one is saved, holy living is optional (Rom. 6:1–2).
3. One may have been erroneously taught about the nature of Christian living and so neglect the lordship of Christ (1 Pet. 3:15).
4. One may lack the zeal or energy to make holiness a priority (2 Cor. 7:1).
5. One may think that he or she is saved but not truly *be* saved and then try to live a holy life in the power of the flesh (Matt. 13:5–7, 20–22).

Nature teaches that growth is normal and to be expected; conversely, a lack of growth should sound an alarm that something is seriously wrong. Scripture teaches this same principle in a spiritual sense. Frequently, Acts reports that the early church grew and expanded (see Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31, 35, 42; 11:21; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:12). God also has expectations for individual growth in the Christian's life. These exhortations of Scripture need to be taken seriously (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18).

The chief agents for this growth are God's Word (John 17:17; 1 Pet. 2:2) and God's Spirit (Eph. 5:15–21). When growth occurs, one can quickly acknowledge God as the cause (1 Cor. 3:6–7; Col. 2:19). The Holy Spirit plays a prominent role in providing a true believer with the assurance of salvation. His assurance connects directly with growth (Rom. 8:16–17; 1 John 3:24).

Having formerly been spiritually dead but now made alive to God, the believer can check his vital signs to substantiate the fact that he is indeed alive, because he walks in the works that God has prepared (Eph. 2:1–10). In order to check one's spiritual health, here are some of the most important vital signs of a true Christian:

1. Christian fruit (John 15:8)
2. Love for God's people (John 13:35)
3. Concern for personal holiness (1 Pet. 1:13–21)
4. Love for God's Word (1 Pet. 2:2–3)
5. A desire to obey (John 14:15, 21, 23)
6. A sense of intimacy with God (Rom. 8:14–17)
7. Perseverance (Phil. 1:27–28)
8. Fellowship with God's people (Heb. 10:24–25)
9. A desire to glorify God (Matt. 5:13–16)
10. Witness to Christ's personal reality (1 Pet. 3:15)

As a result of testing their spiritual vital signs, Christians are not to linger or remain at the childhood level but are to grow up in all things. As this individual maturity or growth occurs, it extends to the building up and growth of the corporate body of Christ (Eph. 4:14–16).

Spirituality involves God's Spirit taking God's Word and maturing God's people through the ministry of God's servants for the spiritual growth of individual believers, which results in the growth of Christ's body. This is the ultimate goal of systematic theology—to increasingly think and then act in accord with God's will as one matures in the Christian faith.

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One's Ministry?

The noted theologian Benjamin Warfield gave the following answer to this vital question:

If such be the value and use of doctrine, the systematic theologian is pre-eminently a preacher of the gospel; and the end of his work is obviously not merely the logical arrangement of the truths which come under his hand, but the moving of men, through their power, to love God with all their hearts and their neighbors as themselves; to choose their portion with the Saviour of their souls; to find and hold Him precious; and to recognize and yield to the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit whom He has sent. With such truth as this he will not dare to deal in a cold and merely scientific spirit, but will justly and necessarily permit its preciousness and its practical destination to determine the spirit in which he handles it, and to awaken the reverential love with which alone he should investigate its reciprocal relations. For this he needs to be suffused at all times with a sense of the unspeakable worth of the revelation which lies before him as the source of his material, and with the personal bearings of its separate truths on his own heart and life; he needs to have had and to be having a full, rich, and deep religious experience of the great doctrines with which he deals; he needs to be living close to his God, to be resting always on the bosom of his Redeemer, to be filled at all times with the manifest influences of the Holy Spirit. The student of systematic theology needs a very sensitive religious nature, a most thoroughly consecrated heart, and an outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon him, such as will fill him with that spiritual discernment, without which all native intellect is in vain. He needs to be not merely a student, not merely a thinker, not merely a systematizer, not merely a teacher—he needs to be like the beloved disciple himself in the highest, truest, and holiest sense, a divine.²⁴

²⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 9, *Studies in Theology* (1933; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 86–87.

Questions:

1. What are the terms used to define, and what is the definition of, theology?
2. What are the “various major kinds” of theology?
3. What is the definition of systematic theology?
4. What are the “categories” of systematic theology?
5. What are the “benefits and limitations” of systematic theology?
6. What are the implications of sound doctrine for the life of the church?
7. What is “the overarching and unifying theme of Scripture”?
8. In what ways is Scripture a revelation of God?
9. What is a “worldview,” and how does systematic theology relate to one’s worldview?
10. How does systematic theology relate to one’s mind and life?

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY