



JON NIELSON

KNOWING GOD'S TRUTH

AN INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Knowing God's Truth Workbook

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An Introduction to
Systematic Theology

JON NIELSON

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Knowing God's Truth Workbook: An Introduction to Systematic Theology

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this introductory study of systematic theology—*Knowing God's Truth!*

This workbook is designed to be used as a supplementary resource in conjunction with your reading of the full book. There are summaries of the chapters in *Knowing God's Truth*, but also questions for you to answer that will help you dive deeper into the material—and make sure you're grasping all of it. Ideally, you should read the chapters in the book first, then move through the workbook chapters to reinforce and capture all you're learning.

You can use this on your own or in the context of a small group, Sunday school class, or Bible class in a school setting. You'll benefit greatly from discussion with other Christians as you learn this material.

So dive in and see what God has to teach you about himself in his wonderful word!

Chapter 1

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

The word *theology* literally means “God talk.” The root *theo* means “God,” and the suffix, *-logy*, comes from the Greek word *logos*, which means “word.” So when we do theology, we are talking together about God and things that relate to God. Theology, broadly, is the study of God. When you think about it this way, hopefully the term seems less intimidating or alienating. After all, we already do this when we study God’s word; we study God.

In “systematic theology,” we are simply bringing organization to our theological thinking by using some categories for the way we think and talk about God, sin, human beings, salvation, and so on. It’s a bit like organizing the different parts of the wardrobe in your closet: pants, shirts, socks, underwear—you get the picture. In *Knowing God’s Truth* and this workbook, we’re going to organize the “closet” of our theology into distinct sections, trying to pull together the Bible’s teaching on specific subjects and topics.

Respond to the following questions as you begin to dive into the study of theology through this book and workbook:

1. What about systematic theology sounds intimidating to you? Does it sound exciting, boring, overly academic, or something else? Explain.

2. Why is it helpful to be reminded that everyone is a theologian of some sort (even the atheist who says, “There is no god!”)? If we’re all theologians already, why should we put time and effort into working through our theological beliefs?

3. Jot down a few of your biggest and most confusing theological questions. What have you wrestled with—about God, salvation, sin, and so on—recently in your walk with God?

WHY DOES THEOLOGY MATTER?

Review pages 3–5 in *Knowing God’s Truth*

One of the common objections from Christians today, when it comes to studying theology, is that it’s too academic or “heady.” “Just love Jesus and others,” some say. “Why spend time getting into the weeds of theology? Let’s keep things simple!” The simple response to this idea is that God gave us the Bible—his inspired word—which tells us marvelous things about him. To care about theology is actually to care about God himself. As we learn theology, we also find that it is deeply practical; what we believe about God, our world, and ourselves has very real implications for the decisions we make every day.

1. What objections have you heard in your social circles to studying theology? What misunderstandings about the Christian life do some of those objections reveal?

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2. How might we see the study of theology as a demonstration of our love for God himself?

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3. Why does what we believe have practical implications for how we live?

BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Review pages 5–7 in *Knowing God's Truth*

It's important to understand the different *kinds* of theology that a person can study. “Biblical theology” involves tracing themes and ideas throughout the Bible as they are progressively revealed. “Historical theology” is more tied to developments in theological thinking through the centuries; it explores how theological beliefs and formulations came about in and through the church over time. “Systematic theology”—what we’re doing—certainly takes biblical and historical theology into account, but it is more focused on organizing theological thought into specific categories or topics, summarizing the Bible’s teaching on each particular idea.

1. What might be some benefits of learning to do biblical theology well? Why is it important to understand how a theme or idea develops throughout the Bible?

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2. How can historical theology be a valuable field of study? What can be helpful about getting perspectives from Christians in different centuries, countries, or cultures?

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3. In what ways have you already done some systematic theology—even in small and simple ways? What biblical themes or ideas have you tried to summarize for yourself?

DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE AND DOCTRINE OF GOD

Review pages 8–9 in *Knowing God's Truth*

The first two big categories of systematic theology in this study are the doctrine of *Scripture* and the doctrine of *God* (sometimes called theology proper). When we study the doctrine of Scripture, we're trying to answer questions about the Bible: What *is* the Bible? What do we mean when we talk about the Bible being “inspired” or “infallible”? How is the Bible different from other religious books? When we study the doctrine of God, we're focusing on God himself: What is he like (or what are his attributes)? What does it mean that God is “sovereign”? It's important to start with these categories because the rest of the study of theology flows from them.

1. What questions have you asked about the Bible? Have you ever been tempted to doubt the trustworthiness of the Bible? Why or why not?

2. Why might it be good to begin our study of theology with the doctrine of Scripture? How is this a foundational doctrine for all the rest of our study?

3. Does it intimidate you to study God specifically? Why is it important for us to understand that there will always be limits to our understanding of God?

DOCTRINE OF MAN AND DOCTRINE OF SIN

Review pages 9–10 in *Knowing God's Truth*

The doctrine of *man* (also called biblical anthropology) deals with questions about humanity, and particularly what it means that men and women were created by God in his image. This doctrine naturally leads to the next category: the doctrine of *sin* (also called hamartiology). When we dive into this category of theology, we're asking questions about the fall of humanity—and in what sense we can rightly describe men and women as “fallen.” We'll discuss the meaning of “total depravity” and how humanity's sinful nature affects life on earth (and creates the need for God's work of salvation through Jesus Christ).

1. Why is it so important to have a biblical perspective on men and women, and particularly on *why* and *how* God created them?

2. Would you say that people today see human beings as basically good or basically evil? Explain your answer.

3. What evidence do you see in the world around you of the fall of mankind into sin? Why is humanity's sinful nature somewhat easy to prove and demonstrate?

DOCTRINE OF CHRIST AND DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Review pages 11–12 in *Knowing God's Truth*

The doctrine of *Christ* (also called Christology) focuses specifically on Jesus—the second person of the Trinity. Key discussions about this doctrine include Jesus's full divinity (he is completely God and always has been) and his full humanity (he truly became human in order to offer himself in the place of sinful human beings to bring them salvation). This doctrine leads naturally to the doctrine of *salvation* (also called soteriology), which includes discussions of Jesus's work on the cross and his resurrection for the sake of saving God's people. These doctrines are incredibly important, rich, and complex; they are also beautiful, for in them we consider the work of Jesus Christ to redeem lost sinners and make them children of God forever.

1. What are some misunderstandings that people today have about Jesus? Why is it important to be clear on who he is—both in his divinity and in his humanity?

2. How might the doctrine of salvation (understanding how a sinner can be saved eternally) impact our lives practically?

3. What questions have you wrestled with about salvation? How are you tempted to doubt that God can save you or to trust things other than Jesus for your salvation?

DOCTRINE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

Review pages 13–14 in *Knowing God's Truth*

In our study of theology, we need to wrestle with what the Bible teaches about *heaven and hell*—the final judgment and future that lies ahead of every human being who has ever lived. We'll consider questions about resurrection life and the new heaven and new earth, as well as the reality of hell as a place of God's perfectly just wrath against sin.

CHAPTER 1

1. What are some commonly held cultural beliefs about heaven? Why might many people today question the existence of a literal hell?

2. Why might the idea of eternal existence in heaven be a difficult concept for some to embrace?

3. What might the existence of hell as a place of eternal punishment teach us about sin and the character of God?

DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Review pages 15–16 in *Knowing God's Truth*

After making our way through the doctrines of God, sin, and salvation (and a few others), we will come to the doctrine of the *church* (also called ecclesiology). We'll again ground our discussion in Scripture as we see the biblical foundations for the church, what purpose it serves, and how it is meant to be governed and led. Within

the context of the church, we'll then turn to the *sacraments*, which, in the Protestant tradition, include only the Lord's Supper and baptism. We'll consider what these sacraments symbolize—and how they are meant to glorify Jesus and strengthen his people (and we'll also explain some different perspectives within the Protestant tradition).

1. Why might some people today think that they can have a personal relationship with Jesus without being involved in a church? What could be problematic about that mindset?

2. What questions do you have about the role of the church in the life of a Christian? What different church traditions have you been a part of?

3. How do different church traditions practice baptism? Why might these differences exist? What is your understanding of the reason why we practice the Lord's Supper (or "Communion")?

DOCTRINE OF ANGELS AND DEMONS

Review pages 16–17 in *Knowing God's Truth*

The Bible is clear about the reality of the spiritual realm—that both angels and demons (and a personal devil—Satan) exist as spiritual beings that were created by God for his glorious and eternal purposes. Part of the discipline of theology is coming to understand what the Bible teaches about these spiritual beings and their God-ordained purposes. We also can learn much about the character of our God by considering these beings. Christians need to make sure they are not embracing cultural myths or false ideas about angels and demons, but rather rooting their understanding of these creatures in the clear teachings of Scripture.

1. In what contexts today do people talk about angels—if at all?

2. Why is it important to understand the spiritual realm (angels, demons, Satan) within the context of God as the Creator and all-powerful one?

3. How are people's perceptions and ideas about angels and demons often shaped more by culture (books, movies, stories) than by God's word?

DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

Review pages 17–19 in *Knowing God's Truth*

As we approach the end of our study of systematic theology, we'll turn to the doctrine of *last things* (often called eschatology). The “apocalyptic” passages in Scripture (passages in which mysteries are *revealed*, particularly about future things) will be our main focus as we discuss this topic. We'll consider what we can know for sure—according to Scripture—about Jesus's return, the final judgment, and the end of the world. But we'll also acknowledge some different perspectives that faithful Christians have about these things. There are firm convictions and beliefs that every Bible-believing Christian should have about the last days, even though there is some room for disagreement.

1. What do people in your circles generally say and believe about the end of the world (if they talk about it at all)?

2. Why is it important to form at least some belief and understanding about the return of Jesus Christ and the eternal future ahead of us?

3. How can Christians focus on the return of Jesus and the final judgment while also staying focused on obeying God and living a faithful life right now?

DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Review pages 19–20 in *Knowing God's Truth*

For many Christians, the most mysterious and least understood of the three persons of the Trinity is the third person—God the Holy Spirit. We tend to have a better understanding of the Father and the Son than we do of the Spirit (who is fully God and a distinct person from the Father and the Son). We need to search the Scriptures to understand the Holy Spirit well—his identity, purpose, and distinct function among the actions and roles of the persons of the Trinity.

1. What questions do you have about the identity and role of the Holy Spirit? Why might this person of the Trinity be the most mysterious to many Christians?

2. Why is it so important to understand the Trinity (God in three persons), as much as we are able, through the study of God's word? How can understanding more about God help us love and worship him more?

3. What ideas about the Holy Spirit have you heard (or been taught) that you have questioned? How might the Holy Spirit be misunderstood in some circles today?

 **SO WHAT?**

As you get ready to dive into your study of basic theology, jot down some answers to the following application questions:

1. How have you grown already in your understanding of the *relevance* of studying theology for the way you think, speak, and live? Why does what you believe and understand about God make a practical difference in your life?

2. What category or topic of theology is of most interest to you? Why?

CHAPTER 1

3. What are some ways you can be asking God to teach you through this study and help you grow in your love for Jesus?
