

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY. The attempt to reduce religious truth to a coherent and relevant whole for the church.

Definition and Relations. The word “theology” does not occur in Scripture, although the idea is very much present there. In the Greek world *theologia* signified the discussions of the philosophers about divine matters. Plato referred to the poets’ stories about the gods as

“theologies,” and Aristotle taught a threefold division of the sciences into physics, the study of nature; mathematics, the study of number and quantity; and theology, the study of God. Aristotle regarded theology as the greatest of the sciences since its subject, God, is the highest reality.

Etymologically, theology derives from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (reason or speech) and strictly means rational reflection on God. B. B. Warfield advanced the classic short definition: “Theology is the science of God and his relationship to man and the world.” Theology might be more fully defined as the discipline that (1) presents a unified formulation of truth concerning God and his relationship to humanity as set forth primarily in divine revelation and secondarily in classical church teaching and the field of human knowledge and that (2) applies such truths to the entire range of human life and thought. Systematic theology thus begins with the totality of biblical revelation and extra-biblical truth, provisionally respects the development of doctrine in the church’s history, draws out the teachings of Scripture via sound grammatical, historical, and cultural exegesis, orders the result into a coherent whole where the interrelatedness of its parts is evidenced, and

relates the results to the life and witness of the Christian community. Traditionally the church employed systematic theology for purposes of catechesis, polemic against heresy, and the spiritual formation of its members. In that systematic theology formulates a world-and-life view for Christ-centered living, it is an intellectual and spiritual task appropriate for every mature Christian.

The discipline has sometimes been designated dogmatic theology (Shedd, Bavinck, Barth)—the leading idea being beliefs established by competent authority, which has been variously identified as Scripture, creedal standards, or the church’s *magisterium*. Other common designations are Christian theology (Headlam, Wiley, Erickson), Christian faith (Rahner, H. Berkhof), and constructive theology (Hodgson, Meland).

Some mistakenly view systematic theology as a deposit of divine truths that is timeless and unalterable. Although Scripture is inviolable, fresh theological understanding and reformulation are required in every generation and for every culture, first, because the corpus of Christian truth must be clad in every distinctive cultural form and context, and

second, because new issues and problems arise to challenge the church. Theology, in other words, needs to be continually recontextualized.

What is the relation of systematic theology to other disciplines? Since theology and *philosophy* both engage in critical analysis of the meaning of terms, follow a strict process of observation and reasoning to reach conclusions, and traditionally sought to formulate a consistent worldview, philosophy and theology are overlapping disciplines. *Religion*, on the other hand, is a set of beliefs, attitudes, and practices that receives a particular institutionalized expression. Every religion, whether simple or sophisticated, *has* a theology. Hence religion is larger in scope than theology. *Ethics* assumes the results of systematic theology to define the character of personal and community conduct. *Apologetics* develops a reasoned defense of basic Christian presuppositions concerning God, Christ, and the Bible against assumptions held by conflicting worldviews (metaphysics) and ways of knowing (epistemology).

The Possibility and Necessity of Systematic Theology. Contrary to claims that human knowledge of metaphysical realities is not possible,

Christians assert that knowledge of God is eminently feasible for several reasons: (1) the God who exists has revealed himself in meaningful disclosures to his creatures (1 Cor. 2:10); (2) humans as created in the divine image are rational beings endowed with the ability to comprehend God's communication (James 3:9); (3) believers enjoy the restoration of epistemic and spiritual powers by the grace of regeneration (Col. 3:10), and (4) Christians are enabled to perceive divine truth through the gift of Spirit illumination (Ps. 119:18; 1 Cor. 2:14–15). It follows that only Spirit-guided believers can do theology in a way pleasing to God.

Working with the full range of revelation, systematic theology concerns itself with God's saving history with his people, the utterances of divinely ordained prophets and apostles, and supremely the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Systematic theology also utilizes data mediated by secondary modes of revelation, such as the created order (Ps. 19:1–6), the flow of providential history (Acts 17:26), the moral dictates of the conscience (Rom. 2:14–15), and truth wherever found.

Although persons, especially believers, acquire valid knowledge

about God, such knowledge is not identical to God's knowledge of himself and the universe. Rather, the partial knowledge that finite persons gain of the infinite God is a knowledge mediated by images and symbols (analogical knowledge), as well as by propositional assertions (cognitive, univocal truth). Even "picture language" about God (e.g., God as "father," "shepherd," or "rock") is valid since each analogy includes a core of univocal truth. Systematic theology thus claims that God can be known personally and in true assertions made in meaningful language, even though such knowledge is partial and incomplete (1 Cor. 13:12). Mystery and a modicum of ambiguity are an inescapable part of a humanly formulated theology.

The church undertakes the task of systematic theology for the following reasons: (1) That the believing community might be edified. The people of God are spiritually enriched by foundational truths (2 Tim. 3:16) and the faith experience of the believing community (Heb. 11). (2) That the gospel in its fulness might be proclaimed. Without the foundation of sound theology effective gospel proclamation, evangelism, and missionary outreach are impossible. (3) That the truth content and

lived experience of the faith might be preserved. Where systematic theology is devalued, cults and false sects abound.

The Method of Systematic Theology. One way of doing systematic theology is the so-called *confessional* method. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and neoorthodox confessional theologies reproduce the doctrinal system of the host system. The problem with confessionalism is that few reasons are given *why* one confessional position should be accepted as normative vis-à-vis the others. Preferable is the *verificational* method that respects confessional views as hypotheses to be tested by the criteria of logical consistency, coherence with revelation, and existential viability. Theologians must show that the body of truth as formulated from revelation data fits the facts with fewest problems and satisfies human needs to a greater degree than the alternatives. The virtues of this method are that (1) a higher degree of openness and communication are maintained with others inside and outside the church and (2) a rationale is given why one should accept the Christian faith in the face of competing claims. By this verificational or scientific method both the content of revelation is expounded in orderly

fashion for the church and a convincing case is made for the validity of the gospel.

The church traditionally regarded systematic theology as the queen of the sciences. Kant, however, argued that the science of God is impossible since objective knowledge of noumenal realities is unattainable. Modern logical positivism and theological liberalism deny that systematic theology properly is a science. The fact is that systematic theology follows a reliable *method*, namely, the method of research that, beginning with certain presuppositions, observes, records data, formulates hypotheses, tests the hypotheses, and relates the resultant field of knowledge to life. Systematic theology also deals with a *product*, namely, an integrated field of reliable knowledge. Thus theology is no less a science than any of the social sciences. Systematic theology is not a spurious discipline that deals with fables and private opinions, but one that operates with accurate information secured by reliable means.

In pursuing its task, systematic theology utilizes the results of other branches of theology. *Exegetical* theology unfolds the meaning of specific biblical texts and so provides systematic theology with its most

important building block. *Biblical* theology sets forth the message of biblical books by author or other scheme of grouping. *Historical* theology traces the church's faith topically through the various eras of its history. *Systematic* theology incorporates the data of exegetical, biblical, and historical theology to construct a coherent representation of the Christian faith. As Origen put it, "God gives the truth in single threads which we must weave into a finished texture." Finally, *practical* theology applies the results of systematic theology to preaching, teaching, counseling, and formation of the spiritual life.

Theologians have undertaken the task of theology in two major ways. Some (Schleiermacher, Tillich, Macquarrie) have begun with the human existential situation and constructed a "theology from below." Others (most orthodox and Reformed) posit God as the primary datum and construct a "theology from above." The latter approach is preferred, if only for the reason that "man only knows who he is in the light of God" (Bonhoeffer). Theologians such as Aquinas and Calvin have ordered the material of theology according to the trinitarian pattern. Others, such as Barth, follow a christological model and relate the data to God's

self-disclosure through the incarnate Word. Traditionally, Christian theologians have ordered the topics of theology as the sources of revelation (prolegomena), the triune nature of God (theology proper), human existence and the fall (anthropology), Christ's person and work (Christology), salvation applied (soteriology), the society of the redeemed (ecclesiology), and the consummation and eternal state (eschatology).

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See also [DOGMA](#); [DOGMATICS](#).

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