

# REFORMED SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

**Volume 1:  
Revelation and God**

**Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley**

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*Reformed Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Revelation and God*

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In memory of  
**R. C. Sproul (1939–2017)**  
friend and mentor,  
dedicated worker and prolific author for God’s kingdom,  
gifted teacher and theologian:  
he, like Abel, being dead, yet speaks (Heb. 11:4),  
and for  
**Steven J. Lawson**  
powerful preacher and encourager,  
dedicated worker and prolific author for God’s kingdom,  
whose friendship I treasure:  
he, like Caleb, follows God fully (Num. 14:24).  
—Joel R. Beeke

And for  
**the pastors of Grace Immanuel Reformed Baptist Church**  
“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is  
born for adversity” (Prov. 17:17 ESV).  
“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17 ESV).  
You are true brothers and friends, and I am sharper for it.  
—Paul M. Smalley



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# What Is Theology? Part 1

## *An Academic Discipline*

At the command of the angel of the Lord, Philip the evangelist traveled south to a desert road. There he encountered an Ethiopian court official returning from Jerusalem, where he had worshiped the God of Israel. The man sat in his chariot, reading the words of Isaiah about One who quietly submitted to death like a meek lamb. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian replied, “How can I, except some man should guide me?” (Acts 8:26–33).

Anyone who has spent more than a little time reading the Bible has experienced this need: How can I understand unless someone guides me? Though the basic message of the Bible is startlingly clear, parts of the Scriptures present deep and perplexing truths. The search for understanding leads us to the hard work of close reading, careful thinking, fervent praying, and conferring with Christians wiser than we are. Then we are enabled to crystallize our thoughts about God in clear and penetrating insights, and are better equipped to serve him. This is the process of “doing theology,” that is, using our minds to engage with the truths of God’s Word.

*Theology* is a word that mystifies some and intimidates others. Some even say that doing theology is a waste of time. This response often arises from an outlook controlled by materialistic naturalism—the belief that only those things we can see and handle are real. Theology introduces us

to an unseen world, one far greater and more enduring than the world we see and touch. This means that doing theology is the most important task that any human being can undertake. In fact, as R. C. Sproul (1939–2017) said, “Everyone’s a theologian.”<sup>1</sup> We cannot escape theology. Even the atheist’s stout rejection of God is a theological statement. The question is whether our theology is true or false.

Theology, as we shall see, deals with several major topics that are addressed in the Bible. However, before we consider those topics (who God is, for example), there are questions that we should ask. This is the focus of *prolegomena*, a Greek word that means “things said beforehand.” Prolegomena is sometimes called “introduction.” To lay a good foundation for other doctrines, we need to consider how we know what we know. We need to ask ourselves what the Bible is and why we should build our theology and our lives on what it teaches. Even before that, we must ask questions about the nature of theology. To begin with, therefore, we will consider this question: What is theology?

## A Preliminary Definition of Theology

The word *theology* does not appear in the Bible. The closest we may come is the Greek terminology behind the biblical phrase “oracles of God” (*logia theou*, 1 Pet. 4:11; cf. Rom. 3:2; Heb. 5:12), a description of the Bible as the prophetic Word of God. The term *theology* (from Greek *theologia*) means “words” or “speech” about God. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) understood *theologia* to mean “an account or explanation of the divine nature.”<sup>2</sup> It came into use early in the history of the church, as is evident from the ancient title given to the book of Revelation (“The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” or “the Theologian”) and the writings of Basil the Great (c. 330–379).<sup>3</sup> Thus, one dictionary defines theology as “the study of God and of God’s relation to the world.”<sup>4</sup>

1. From the title of R. C. Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2014).

2. Augustine, *The City of God*, 8.1, in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup>, 2:144.

3. Johannes Polyander, Antonius Walaeus, Antonius Thysius, and Andreas Rivetus, *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae, Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Latin Text and English Translation, Volume 1, Disputations 1–23*, trans. Riemer A. Faber, ed. Dolf te Velde, Rein Ferwerda, Willem J. van Asselt, William den Boer, and Riemer A. Faber (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1.2 (31). Polyander here cites “the Second Letter of Basil to Gregory of Nazianzus, where he calls the doctrine of the Holy Scripture ‘Theology.’”

4. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2003); cf. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium and Commonplace-Book Designed for the Use of Theological Students* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1907), 1:1.

In order to clarify the meaning of theology, we may distinguish it from religion, doctrine, and dogma. The word *religion* (Latin *religio*), which some believe is derived from a Latin word meaning “to bind, obligate” (*religō*), refers broadly to belief in a divine being together with the attempt to honor him (or it) through moral and ritual practices.<sup>5</sup> John Calvin (1509–1564) said that “pure religion” consists not in “cold speculation” about God but “honoring him,” for “he is to be duly honored according to his own will.”<sup>6</sup> The biblical term which most closely approximates this idea is “godliness” (Greek *eusebeia*). Paul writes that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6) and warns against those who have “a form of godliness, but [deny] the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5).

Theology is narrower than religion or godliness, for theology is not the whole life of devotion, but specifically the engagement of the mind with truth as the foundation for the religious life. Yet theology is quite broad, including an exposition of all the truths about God and his relationship to man as recorded in the Bible. A notable example of doing theology would be Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Benjamin Warfield (1851–1921) said, “Theology and religion are parallel products of the same body of facts in diverse spheres; the one in the sphere of thought and the other in the sphere of life.”<sup>7</sup>

The term *doctrine* (from Latin *doctrina*) means “teaching” or “instruction,” referring to both the act of teaching and that which is taught. Paul commends “sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1) and says that the Bible is “profitable for doctrine [Greek *didaskalia*]” (2 Tim. 3:16). As Christians often use the word, doctrine consists of focused teaching on particular points of theology where there is general agreement within an ecclesiastical circle, such as that teaching summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism. The teacher or preacher builds the church by informing people’s minds and shaping their lives with the established truths of Christianity applied by the grace of God’s Spirit, somewhat as engineering uses the established principles of physics to build complex machines. Doctrine, then, is narrower than theology. As David Wells observes, “Doctrine is the straightforward summary of what the Bible

5. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879).

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.12.1.

7. Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 9, Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 57.

teaches on any subject,” whereas theology elaborates on doctrine in order to organize it, explore its relationships, defend its veracity, and link its implications to other fields of study.<sup>8</sup>

Most narrow of all is *dogma*, a transliterated Greek word that means “an authoritative decree.” Sometimes this word was used of God’s laws (Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14), sometimes of the decrees or decisions of church councils. We read in Acts 16:4 that after the Jerusalem council, as Paul and Timothy “went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees [*dogmata*] for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem.” Although some writers speak of systematic theology as “dogmatics”—especially among the Dutch Reformed—the term *dogma* is generally reserved for core biblical doctrines officially established in a church’s confessional statements as part of the church’s functional identity, such as the Apostles’ Creed. Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) wrote, “Religious or theological dogmas owe their authority solely to a divine testimony.”<sup>9</sup> He added, “Among Reformed theologians, therefore, the following proposition returns again and again: ‘the principle into which all theological dogmas are distilled is: God has said it.’”<sup>10</sup>

We may visualize the relationship between theology, religion, doctrine, and dogma as a set of concentric circles, with dogma at the core, doctrine next, then theology, and outermost, religion, or faith and life. Theology then is a broad, intellectual discipline that forms a crucial link between the doctrines cherished by the church and the whole exercise of godliness in this world. Robert Reymond (1932–2013) said, “The systematic theologian, viewing the Scriptures as a completed revelation, seeks to understand holistically the plan, purpose, and didactic intention of the divine mind revealed in Holy Scripture, and to arrange that plan, purpose, and didactic intention in orderly and coherent fashion as articles of the Christian faith.”<sup>11</sup>

## The Branches of Theology

When we speak of theology, we often refer specifically to systematic theology. However, theology engages several academic disciplines that depend

8. David F. Wells, *The Search for Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 39–40.

9. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:29.

10. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:30.

11. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xxv–xxvi.

upon one another. Since the early nineteenth century, most European and American seminaries have defined their curricula according to four branches: biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology (i.e., primarily pastoral ministry).<sup>12</sup> This is sometimes referred to as the theological “encyclopedia,” meaning all the various disciplines of theology taken together; the word derives from a Greek expression for a “well-rounded” education (*enkuklios paedeia*), or as Americans might say, one that “covers all the bases.” Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) organized the four branches of this “encyclopedia,” beginning with “the Holy Scripture as such; then as a second group . . . the working of the Word of God in the life of the Church; then in a third group . . . the content of the Scripture in our consciousness; and finally . . . how the working of the Word of God, subject to His ordinances, must be maintained.”<sup>13</sup> These four parts of the theological encyclopedia may be further divided into specific disciplines as follows.

### *Exegetical Theology*

This branch answers the question, What does a particular part of the Bible teach? The Greek word *exēgēsis* refers to the explanation or drawing out of the inherent meaning of a text in God’s Word. The word comes from a verb meaning “to lead out” or “to explain” (*exēgeomai*), which appears in John 1:18: “No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared [or exegeted] him.” Exegetical theology includes the study of the canon (which books are part of the Bible); textual criticism (what the original texts of the Bible may have said); the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages in which the Bible was written; the Bible’s literary genres, idioms, and rhetorical forms; the history, geography, and culture of the ancient Near East; introductions to each book of the Bible in terms of its author, theme, outline, and occasion; and principles of hermeneutics (from Greek *hermeneuō*, “interpret”; cf. John 1:42) or interpretation. Exegesis establishes what the text says; hermeneutics determines what it means.

Exegetical theology is foundational for systematic theology. John Murray (1898–1975) said, “The main source of revelation is the Bible. Hence

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12. David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 166.

13. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898), 630.

exposition of the Scripture is basic to systematic theology. . . . Systematics must coordinate the teaching of particular passages and systematize this teaching under the appropriate topics.”<sup>14</sup> Murray warned, “Systematic theology has gravely suffered, indeed has deserted its vocation, when it has been divorced from meticulous attention to biblical exegesis.”<sup>15</sup> Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) said that theology “is eminently a process in which God speaks and man listens.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, both exegesis and hermeneutics depend upon systematic theology. The better an interpreter understands the great teachings of the Bible as a coherent system, the better he will understand and interpret its individual parts.

### *Biblical Theology*

Though all theology should be biblical in the sense of conforming to the Bible, “biblical theology” refers to a particular theological discipline. Biblical theology answers the question, How is a particular doctrine of the Bible developed in relation to redemptive history? Whereas systematic theology considers eternal truths in their logical relationships, biblical theology considers how God revealed truth progressively over time, as an acorn grows into an oak tree. Vos wrote that the “main features” of biblical theology are its attention to “the historical progressiveness of the revelation-process,” the inseparable link between God’s revelation and his acts of redemption, and “the organic nature” of the development of revelation.<sup>17</sup> For example, one may develop a biblical theology of God’s dwelling place, starting with God walking with man in the garden of Eden, then studying his dwelling with Israel in the tabernacle and temple, his dwelling among men in the person of his incarnate Son, and his dwelling in the person of the Holy Spirit descending upon and abiding with the church, all looking ahead to the glorious city of God, where God shall dwell in the midst of his redeemed people forever.

Biblical theology serves exegetical theology by locating each text in its proper redemptive and covenantal context rather than flattening the Bible as if it were all revealed in one day. Thus, it prevents systematic theology from taking texts out of their several contexts. It also serves systematic

14. John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:17.

15. Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings*, 4:17.

16. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 4.

17. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5–7.

theology by linking together parts of the Bible with great themes that span redemptive history and culminate in the person, work, and church of Jesus Christ. In doing so, biblical theology can be a powerful tool to demonstrate the unity of the Bible and the immutability of God's eternal purpose in Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> However, biblical theology needs systematic theology, with its reminders that the Bible's many human authors were directed by one divine Author, and that the Bible, as the living Word, is given as much to us today as it was to people long ago and far away. Systematic theology helps biblical theology to link revelation at any one point in history to the fullness of revelation we now possess in Christ.

### *Historical Theology*

The historical branch of theology answers the questions, How have the doctrines of Christianity been identified, formulated, elaborated, defended, and applied during the long history of the church? and What have particular theologians or churches taught about particular doctrines in the context of the history of Christianity? Whereas the primary source of exegetical theology and biblical theology is the Bible, the primary sources of historical theology are the writings of past theologians and the creeds, confessions, and other official documents of the historic church, together with other historical information that sheds light on them. Historical theology also attempts to locate individual thinkers and their thought in the context of historical events, prior influences, and generally held ideas of their time. For example, one might study the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone according to the polemics of an early English Puritan, with attention to how his views were shaped by prior Reformers and English attitudes in general toward the Roman Catholic Church.

Historical theology serves systematic theology in a number of ways.<sup>19</sup> It offers the opportunity to study theology with some of the greatest minds of the historical church. It opens our eyes to alternative interpretations of the Scriptures that we might not have considered before. It illuminates the thinking behind the creeds and confessions of the church. It makes us more aware of the stream of orthodox Christianity that has flowed through the ages, as well as alerting us to heresies that the church has rejected. It

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18. A recent attempt at this may be found in James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

19. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 12–13.

encourages us by showing the continuity of our faith with that of previous generations. It punctures our insulated individualism and broadens our awareness that we are not the first theologians ever to open the Bible, but participate in a grand project that has engaged the church of all times and places. Bavinck said, “Processing the content of Scripture dogmatically . . . is not just the work of one individual theologian, or of a particular church, but of the entire church throughout the ages, of the whole new humanity regenerated by Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the most helpful contributions of historical theology to systematic theology is that the historical discipline enables us to recognize how our beliefs, both personally and as churches, have been influenced by the theology of the past. Everything a Christian knows about the Bible has been shaped by centuries of previous Christian thought in the translation, interpretation, and application of the Bible. Richard Muller writes, “Church history and the history of doctrine provide the connecting link between us and the text” of Scripture.<sup>21</sup> Philip Schaff (1819–1893) said, “If exegesis is the root, church history is the main trunk. We are connected with the Bible through the intervening links of the past and all its educational influences, and cannot safely disregard the wisdom and experience of the ages.”<sup>22</sup>

Historical theology also challenges some of the presuppositions and traditions we have inherited from our churches and cultures by exposing us to theologians from other times and places. It reminds us of the fallibility of the best of Christians, and therefore of our own fallibility. It shows us the tendencies of theological positions as worked out over time. It also inspires us with accounts of the faith, love, and perseverance of the saints as they contended for the truth of God’s Word. Historical theology helps us fulfill the mandate of Hebrews 13:7–8 to remember church leaders of the past, imitate their faith, and consider the fruit of their conduct and labors, as Jesus Christ, forever the same, works in us as he did in them.

### *Philosophical Theology*

The philosophical branch of theology answers the question, How do logic and reasoning help us develop the doctrines taught in passages of Scripture

20. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:116.

21. Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 97.

22. Philip Schaff, *Theological Propaedeutic: A General Introduction to the Study of Theology*, 7th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 235.



into a coherent perspective? Some Christians have declared a categorical opposition between philosophy and theology. Tertullian (fl. 200) famously said, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?”<sup>23</sup> Certainly we must not base our faith upon, or bend it to conform to, pagan philosophy. In Colossians 2:8, Paul says, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.” However, the Bible uses logic, and it is impossible to do theology without using logical arguments, especially the law of noncontradiction. Bavinck noted, “For if the knowledge of God has been revealed by himself in his Word, it cannot contain contradictory elements or be in conflict with what is known of God from nature and history. God’s thoughts cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily [form] an organic unity.”<sup>24</sup> We also find some philosophical categories useful to describe the nature, necessity, and causes of things, and must reflect upon these categories critically if we are to use them biblically.

Philosophical theology plays an important role in systematic theology, as long as philosophy remains a servant of God’s Word, not its master. Millard Erickson writes, “Basically, there are three contributions different theologians believe philosophy or philosophy of religion may make to theology: philosophy may (1) supply content for theology, (2) defend theology or establish its truth, and (3) scrutinize its concepts and arguments.”<sup>25</sup> As to the first idea, we must reject the claim that philosophical theology may add to the teachings of the Bible or deduce new doctrines from those revealed by God, for theology must stand upon the Word of God alone for its authority. Bavinck said, “There is no room in dogmatics for a system in which an attempt is made to deduce the truths of faith from an a priori principle. . . . For dogmatics [or systematic theology] is a positive science, gets all its material from revelation, and does not have the right to modify or expand that content by speculation apart from that revelation.”<sup>26</sup> However, philosophy may supply arguments and insights that help to establish the conclusions of systematics and scrutinize its

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23. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, chap. 7, in ANF, 3:246.

24. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:44. “Form” is “from” in the original text, evidently a typographical error.

25. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 13–14.

26. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:44.

formulations. Philosophy may not judge the Word of God, but it may critique our fallible systems of theology by sharpening our definitions of terms, purging our arguments from logical fallacies, and testing our teachings for inherent contradictions.

### *Systematic Theology*

This branch of theology answers the question, What does the whole Bible teach about a given topic and its relation to other topics? One may write a systematic treatment of a particular doctrine, but the term *systematic theology* often refers to an organized and comprehensive presentation of “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27 ESV). Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) said that systematic theology “seeks to give a systematic presentation of all the doctrinal truths of the Christian religion.”<sup>27</sup> He explained that this is a “constructive task,” for it builds a structure of thought that brings each doctrine into clear formulation and organic relation to other doctrines; it is a “demonstrative” task, for it shows how every part of the system is deeply rooted in the Holy Scriptures; and it is a “critical” task, for it neither casts off the theological systems of the past nor accepts any one of them blindly, but compares all things to the Word of God in order to defend orthodox Christianity while deepening our understanding of God’s revelation.<sup>28</sup>

Systematic theology is closely related to the other branches of theology and yet is distinct from them. Exegetical theology derives doctrine from particular passages of the Bible; systematic theology collects these teachings into a coherent body of truth. Biblical theology traces the revelation of a doctrine through redemptive history as recorded in the Bible; systematic theology considers the full revelation given in all Scripture. Historical theology describes and analyzes the biblical findings and doctrinal teachings of past theologians as an ongoing discussion; systematic theology is a modern contribution to this discussion in the light of that history.

Systematic theology is not just descriptive but an attempt to declare God’s authoritative Word to the present generation. One central purpose of systematic theology is pastoral: to build up and unify the church. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:13, Christ gave the church pastors and teachers to build up his body “till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the

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27. Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 58.  
28. Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 58–59.

knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

### *Apologetic and Polemical Theology*

Systematic theology must engage with erroneous systems of belief, whether false religions, Christian heresies, or less virulent errors in faith or practice in Christian churches. This requires patient instruction of those who oppose the truth (2 Tim. 2:24). Jude 3 says, “Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

When the engagement primarily intends to defend Christian doctrine against outside attacks, it is called *apologetics*, from a Greek word (*apologia*) meaning “defense” (Acts 22:1). Peter writes, “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer [*apologia*] to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15). As Christianity spread in the ancient Greco-Roman world, it was attacked as an irrational, seditious, and dangerous religion, thus justifying persecution against Christians. Early apologists such as Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) defended the faith against accusations and arguments in order to assert Christianity’s veracity and nobility.<sup>29</sup>

When the engagement aims to attack false doctrine, it is known as *polemics*, from a Greek word (*polemos*) meaning “war” or “battle” (Luke 21:9; cf. Rev. 17:14). An aspect of spiritual warfare is exposing and refuting falsehoods that oppose the truth of God. Systematic theology furnishes important weapons for this warfare, as Paul says, “Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:3–5).

Apologetics and polemics often coalesce, for engagement with hostile systems of belief requires both a strong defense and a strong offense. Ultimately, both depend upon the Bible for authority. As Calvin observed, while rational arguments may confirm the truth of Christianity, they can

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29. Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, AD 30–312*, The Baker History of the Church, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 212.

never be the basis of faith, which receives the Word of God on its own divine authority by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup> We disagree, therefore, with Warfield, who said that apologetics is “the science which establishes the truth of Christianity,” even with his clarification, “That is not to argue that it is by apologetics that men are made Christians, but that apologetics supplies to Christian men the systematically organized basis on which the faith of Christian men must rest.”<sup>31</sup> Rather, we agree with Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), who rightly pointed out that we cannot start with a neutral position and, by apologetics, build a foundational belief in God, for there is no neutrality; apologetics must instead stand upon the biblical revelation of God and defend that truth.<sup>32</sup> The Bible does not attempt to prove the existence of God, but declares that he is, and calls men to submit to his Word. Apologetics and polemics should never attempt to lay a foundation for the Christian faith, but instead must start with the written Word of God and its revelation of Jesus Christ, for this is our only foundation.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, apologetics and polemics are exercises in systematic theology performed in coordination with other disciplines, such as philosophy and history.

### *Ethical Theology*

Christian ethics answers the question, What has God revealed in the whole Bible about the duties he requires of us? It may immediately be observed that biblical ethics is closely connected to systematic theology, for it aims to make a systematic statement about what the Bible teaches on certain subjects.

In fact, early Reformed systematic theologies included treatments of God’s commandments and Christian spirituality with other doctrinal subjects, as we can see in Calvin’s *Institutes*, *The Marrow of Theology* by William Ames (1576–1633), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* by Francis Turretin (1623–1687), *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* by Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), and the *Systematic Theology* of John Brown of Haddington (1722–1787).<sup>34</sup>

30. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.5; 1.8.1.

31. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *Works*, 9:8, 16.

32. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrine of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 18–19.

33. Isa. 28:16; Matt. 7:24; 1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20.

34. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8, 3.7–10, 3.20; William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), book 2, 219–331; Francis Turretin, *Institutes*

However, beginning in the late nineteenth century, most systematic theologies omitted any significant discussion of ethics and spirituality.<sup>35</sup> Instead, ethics began to be treated separately. Berkhof commented, “While this was in itself quite harmless, it did have disastrous results, since Ethics gradually drifted from its religious moorings.” He rightly observed, “It is undoubtedly true that the two [systematic theology and ethics] should always be regarded and studied in the closest relation to each other. The truth revealed in the Word of God calls for a life that is in harmony with it.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Practical Theology or Poimenics*

All theology should be practical in the sense that it calls for obedient action on the part of those who believe it. However, the discipline of practical theology studies what God has revealed concerning the office and work of pastors. Therefore, it is sometimes called *poimenics*, from the Greek word (*poimēn*) meaning “a pastor” or “a shepherd” (Eph. 4:11; cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). It includes pastoral qualifications, calling, preaching (homiletics), teaching, leading public worship, catechizing, counseling, evangelism, and missions.

Practical theology is often treated separately from the systematic theology of the church because of the many practical concerns that pertain to it. However, practical or pastoral theology must never be detached from systematic theology, lest the practice of the church and her ministers be loosed from its moorings in the truth of God’s Word. The modern

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*of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997), 2:1–167; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992–1995); and John Brown of Haddington, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books; Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 450–500.

35. This phenomenon is not limited to a single tradition, as is evident from the systematic theologies or dogmatics of Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, Michael Bird, James M. Boice, James P. Boyce, Robert Culver, Millard Erickson, John Frame, James Garrett, Norman Geisler, Wayne Grudem, A. A. Hodge, Michael Horton, Thomas Oden, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Reymond, William G. T. Shedd, Charles Swindoll, and J. Rodman Williams—none of which gives much attention to God’s commands or instructions for Christian spirituality. This is not a criticism of these authors, many if not all of whom seek to wed theology and practice in the Christian life, but simply an observation about how the categories of modernity shape our methodology. Examples of modern theologies attending to God’s law, all from the Presbyterian tradition, are John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (Edinburgh: William Oliphant & Son, 1834), 4:404–79; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871–1873; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 3:259–465; Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1878; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 110–19, 351–429; and Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), 617–53.

36. Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 51.

church offers many examples of what happens when her leaders cast off God's Word as their rule of duty and turn to the wisdom of this world as their guide.

### **A Multidisciplinary Endeavor in the Body of Christ**

This brief survey of the branches of theology shows that good systematic theology must draw from all these fields of study: exegesis, biblical theology, history, and philosophy. Systematic theology also serves multiple purposes: building up the church in its worldview, defending the faith, promoting the truth, opposing error, establishing a system of morality and ethics, and guiding pastors in their work.

Therefore, we should appreciate the work of systematic theology. It plays an important role in the life of the church. Furthermore, it is not an easy task, but one that places great demands upon those who engage in it.

The multidisciplinary nature of theology should teach us humility. No one person can master all these fields. Every Christian, including every professional theologian, depends upon the gifts and labors of others. We would be fools to undertake this work alone. Christians do theology as members of the body of Christ. Some Christian scholars excel as exegetes, some as philosophers, some as historians, and some as systematicians, but "all these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:11 ESV). To honor the one Spirit who energizes and unites us (Eph. 4:5), we must not divorce these disciplines from each other. David Clark says, "They are facets of the diamond of a unified and holistic understanding of truth."<sup>37</sup>

### **Sing to the Lord**

#### *Students of God*

Teach me, O Lord, Thy way of truth,  
And from it I will not depart;  
That I may steadfastly obey,  
Give me an understanding heart.

In Thy commandments make me walk,  
For in Thy law my joy shall be;

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37. Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 178.

Give me a heart that loves Thy will,  
From discontent and envy free.

Turn Thou my eyes from vanity,  
And cause me in Thy ways to tread;  
O let Thy servant prove Thy word  
And thus to godly fear be led.

Turn Thou away reproach and fear;  
Thy righteous judgments I confess;  
To know Thy precepts I desire,  
Revive me in Thy righteousness.

Psalm 119:33–40

Tune: Bishop

*The Psalter*, No. 325

*The Trinity Hymnal—Baptist Edition*, No. 451

### Questions for Meditation or Discussion

1. Why do some people think that theology is a waste of time? How would you respond to them?
2. What is the basic meaning of the word *theology*?
3. How does theology differ from:
  - religion?
  - doctrine?
  - church dogma?
4. Please define the following terms:
  - exegetical theology
  - biblical theology
  - historical theology
  - philosophical theology
  - systematic theology
  - apologetic and polemical theology
  - ethical theology
  - practical theology
5. How does exegetical theology provide the basis of systematic theology?
6. What does biblical theology contribute to systematic theology?

7. Why should we study historical theology instead of just doing theology without reference to the past?
8. Why is it dangerous to completely separate systematic theology and ethics?
9. How does the multidisciplinary nature of theology call for humility? How can you know if you are humble in your approach to theology?

### **Questions for Deeper Reflection**

10. Imagine that a friend in your church tells you that he does not need systematic theology because he can simply read the Bible and see what it says. How would you respond?
11. You have been asked to review a book on a particular doctrine to see if it would be edifying for people to read. You notice that the book rarely interacts with the Bible, but often quotes theologians of the past. What problems might that approach cause?
12. Tertullian said, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” At face value, this statement completely rejects philosophy, at least Greek philosophy. What do you think a Christian’s general approach to philosophy should be?