

After a quarter century of remarkable usefulness globally, Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, in its second edition, remains remarkable for its extraordinary juxtapositions. It is penetrating but not confusing; forthright and unequivocal but not reckless or overstated; readable and clear but not superficial; biblically grounded, even biblically saturated, but not textually careless or glib; devout and reverent but not uncritical or naive; practical but not trendy or sentimental; comprehensive but not majoring on minors; a book for the church but not parochial or sectarian. I thank God for this precious gift to Christ's people worldwide.

—**John Piper**, founder and teacher, Desiring God, chancellor, Bethlehem College and Seminary

Wayne Grudem's second edition of *Systematic Theology* displays all the virtues of the first. He shows and explains how the doctrines discussed stem from the biblical text. Even if readers disagree here or there, they understand why Grudem argues as he does since he makes his case from the Scriptures. The book stands out for its clarity and accessibility. Academics, immersed in technical study for years, are prone to forget that most people have never read a systematic theology before. The lucidity and simplicity of Grudem makes his work an ideal textbook. This is not to say that scholars cannot profit from his work as well since he lays out arguments cogently. The pastoral tone of the work shines through as well. The hymns and songs concluding the chapters remind us that theology isn't a matter of abstract teaching but should lead us to praise and worship of the Lord.

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Professor Of Biblical Theology, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Wayne Grudem studied with me in the early 1970s, and both of us have endorsed one another's systematic theologies. That is perhaps unusual. Our two books look at theology from somewhat different "perspectives," as I like to say, and so they appeal to somewhat different readers. But Grudem's book has sold a lot more copies, and deservedly so. I couldn't be happier. I wish that all Christian writers could be as thankful for God's ministry through friendly "rivals," authors who bless the church through biblical, clear, and winsome teaching. Scripture is so rich that we need to look at it from many angles. We need more systematic theologies, not fewer. But for now, Wayne's work is the best.

—**John Frame**, professor of systematic theology and philosophy emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary

It is impossible to estimate the benefit that Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* has had for countless individuals, churches, Bible colleges, and seminaries over the past twenty-five-plus years. I've gladly used it as my main text in teaching theology to thousands of students whom I've had the privilege to teach at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Southern Seminary. And oh how my students have loved the clarity, comprehensiveness, worshipfulness, and biblical fidelity of this textbook. But now we have, due to Dr. Grudem's painstaking work, an even better, more complete, updated version of this excellent theology book. Praise be to God, and deep thanks to Wayne Grudem, for extending the life of this work and making it even better for another generation of theological students of God's Word.

—**Bruce A. Ware**, T. Rupert and Lucille Coleman Professor of Christian Theology, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem stands squarely in the stream of broadly Reformed tradition on the main issues of theology, including the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of God, and the doctrine of salvation. Perhaps the strongest feature of the book is its accessibility. Grudem does not water down the meat of theology. But by minimizing technical terminology and by including hymns, questions, and indications of application, he makes systematic theology much more accessible and life-invigorating for a large range of Christian readers. In this second edition he has made further improvements by including new material and by modifying his views on a few difficult issues.

—**Vern Poythress**, distinguished professor of New Testament,
biblical interpretation, and systematic theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary

I can neither quantify nor qualify all the ways in which Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* has assisted me over the past twenty-five years. I've turned to it innumerable times and for innumerable reasons, and it has invariably proven a trusted and steady guide. It was there when I was first exploring Christian doctrine and there when I was ready to dive deeper. I can say truly that few books have been more meaningful or had more influence. With the arrival of this long-awaited second edition, it is fitting that the book that has so guided me and my generation can be refreshed in such a way that it can equally impact my children and theirs. I have every confidence that it will.

—**Tim Challies**, author of *Epic: An Around-the-World
Journey through Christian History*

I used to tell people that Grudem's *Systematic Theology* was the best single volume theology available. After using it for a quarter of a century, I now believe it is the best of all the systematic theologies in print, single or multivolume. It is one of those rare works that can challenge the scholar and instruct the beginner. This new edition addresses the most important changes in the theological landscape since 1994, and it has completely updated bibliographies. It is simply indispensable.

—**Dr. Jack Deere**, author and Old Testament scholar

Our current generation is seeing a resurgence in Reformed theology and practice, fueled by the likes of John Piper, R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, the Gospel Coalition, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. At the heart of this renaissance is a textbook read by over 750,000 students, pastors, Christian leaders, and lay people in churches. Defining and explaining scores of doctrines, connecting them to the Bible, providing interpretations of key supporting passages, defending a Reformed theological understanding of the doctrines, and offering concrete applications of them, Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* has provided an essential foundation for this Reformed resurgence. This second edition, updated and expanded, will undoubtedly continue to energize this reawakening!

—**Gregg R. Allison**, professor of Christian theology,
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, author,
Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine

How does one improve on a classic? You can't, say some. But I beg to differ. In this second and expanded edition of *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem has made his classic work even better, more insightful, significantly more detailed, and an even greater resource for the Christian and the local church. When I'm asked to recommend a good and comprehensive volume on Christian doctrine and practice, I never hesitate. My encouragement is precise and to the point: "Get Grudem!"

—**Sam Storms, PhD**, lead pastor for preaching and vision,
Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City

If you were hoping to find a student's textbook of theology that seeks your spiritual no less than your intellectual formation, rejoice. Wayne Grudem has written exactly what you wanted, and he has done so very competently indeed. [endorsement for the first edition]

—**J. I. Packer†**, Regent College

As a theology professor at Biola University, where I have taught for over twenty years, I feel like I coteach all my classes with Wayne Grudem. Our students are taught the basic doctrine of the Christian faith in three semesters of required courses. Grudem's *Systematic Theology* provides the core content for my classes and many of the other undergraduate theology courses at the university. Grudem wrote this book to strengthen the church, and it excels in its clarity, readability, and biblically based approach that seeks to get theology into real life. *Systematic Theology* consistently accomplishes Grudem's goal—to lead the reader to greater knowledge and worship of the God of the Bible.

—**Erik Thoennes, PhD**, professor of and chair of theology, Talbot School of Theology
and Biola University, pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church of La Mirada

Grudem's *Systematic Theology* is well organized, easy to understand, usually persuasive, and devotional. Grudem does not merely inform you; he stirs your affections to love and worship the triune God. Grudem is not attempting to write a cutting-edge contemporary theology that plays theological ping-pong with trendy nonevangelical theologians. Nor is he attempting to write a historical theology that exhaustively explains what significant Bible interpreters and theologians have believed. Rather, he is serving the church by helping Christians who are not experts in theology better understand what the whole Bible says about God, God's Word, man, Christ, the Holy Spirit, angels and demons, salvation, the church, and the end times.

—**Andy Naselli**, associate professor of systematic theology and New Testament,
Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minneapolis, pastor, Bethlehem Baptist Church

The whole church is indebted to Wayne Grudem for a fresh presentation of evangelical Christianity. . . . Even those who do not share his . . . positions on certain issues will be enriched by Grudem's clear statement of basic evangelical theology and his helpful cross-references to other major theological positions. Of particular value is his constant eye to the application of doctrine to personal life, ministry, and the church. For Grudem, intellectual understanding cannot be separated from heart experience.

—**Allan Coppedge**, former Beeson Professor of Christian
Theology, Asbury Theological Seminary

I warmly welcome the second edition of *Systematic Theology*. There is nothing like it. Here is an introduction to biblical doctrine that every believer can read and understand. As we read we are not only informed but edified and led to worship. And when we disagree or simply want to dig deeper, we are pointed to other resources in the Christian tradition. Just as the first edition was widely used, so I trust this new edition will do much good.

—**Bill James**, principal, London Seminary, UK

Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* can help any Christian who is thinking through the great questions of our faith—the questions we all inevitably ask. The answers offered here are biblical, insightful, and clearly written. I have turned here many times through the years, and I have *always* been helped and enriched.

—**Ray Ortlund**, Immanuel Church, Nashville

My favorite systematic theology by my favorite systematic theologian just got even better. *Systematic Theology* is simple but not simplistic, thorough but not tedious, decided in its positions but not dogmatic on debatable matters, and it provides ready explanations for even the thorniest theological questions. Best of all, Wayne's writing is warm, devotional, and Christ-exalting. There are good reasons to own other systematic theologies, but there is not a good reason to not own this one!

—**C. J. Mahaney**, senior pastor,
Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

"I think the best place to start is the chapter in Grudem's *Systematic Theology*." I must have said that dozens of times over the last quarter century or so to Cambridge University undergraduate and graduate students (as well as many others) when they have asked me for a good resource on a particular question about theology. And I have frequently reached for it myself. In 1995 it was the best new systematic theology in decades. Since then it has done more for theological literacy in the UK than almost any other book. This new edition will extend its preeminence and usefulness. The commitment to Scripture and to the gospel of Christ remain as strong as ever. The learning is, if anything, deeper and more considered. When I do find something I disagree with, I am always helped by reading Wayne's arguments. The tone is fair-minded, loving, and doxological. Its very special quality is its atmosphere of worship: the book breathes Christ. With Wayne in person, you are never far from a smile and a prayer; this new edition (in addition to all its other qualities) retains that fragrance.

—**Julian Hardyman**, senior pastor,
Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge, UK

I know of no other systematic theology that has had such an impact on so many believers. I have personally benefited from it and widely recommended it. Both its accessibility and its thoroughness have served to draw many thousands of believers into serious Bible study. I am delighted to recommend this new edition with its additional material.

—**Terry Virgo**, founder, Newfrontiers family of churches

For more years than I can remember, “Grudem” (as I and most of my friends refer to it now) has been the go-to reference book in my songwriting, as it invariably brings clarity, balance, and profound insight in exploring the central themes of the Christian faith. And I’m delighted that this updated edition includes much-needed discussion on some hot topics of the moment, including penal substitution and the creation debate. This is a must-have addition to the libraries not only of pastors and teachers but also of worship songwriters who take their lyric writing seriously. I highly recommend it.

—**Stuart Townend**, hymn writer of “In Christ Alone”
and “How Deep the Father’s Love”

Since the first edition was published in 1994, Wayne Grudem’s introduction to biblical doctrine has equipped a generation of students, church members, church leaders, and pastors around the world with a robustly biblical systematic theology. This updated second edition will ensure that a new generation is helped in the same way. The great strength of Grudem’s work is that it is unashamedly biblical in approach, reflecting in its methodology his deep convictions about the inerrancy, sufficiency, and clarity of Scripture. It is accessible and well structured and is written with an irenic spirit that evaluates different opinions amongst evangelicals without being afraid to draw firm conclusions. In this new edition Grudem clarifies and affirms his commitment to divine impassibility, the eternal generation of the Son, and the ontological equality of the Father and the Son within the Trinity. He adds helpful and succinct critiques of the “new perspective” on Paul, Roman Catholicism, and Mormonism. The inclusion of questions for personal application, traditional hymns, and contemporary worship songs ensures that the truths explained never remain abstract or purely intellectual, and he helpfully highlights the implications of theology for contemporary church life and ministry. These revisions and updates will ensure that this work remains unsurpassed as a one-volume introduction to biblical doctrine, and my prayer is that it will help foster a love of contemporary Reformed evangelical theology in the coming generation, just as the first edition did in mine.

—**John Stevens**, national director, Fellowship of Independent
Evangelical Churches, United Kingdom

I have been thankful to God for Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* for many reasons, but here are the top three. First, it is a means of making theology accessible and clear for every Christian. I have commended this work to many and ensured that our children had it as part of their “essential Christian library” before leaving home. Second, Wayne Grudem is rightly convinced that theology should be lived and prayed and sung. The study of God and his Word compels holy awe, joyful worship, and willing obedience. Third, this book has an absolute commitment to the authority and infallibility of Scripture, alongside the recognition that believers who submit to the authority of the Word differ on the interpretation of numerous issues. Each section provides a comprehensive listing of alternative works. I am delighted that this updated edition is now available for a new generation.

—**Dr. Sharon James**, social policy analyst,
the Christian Institute, UK, author and speaker

Systematic Theology

An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine

SECOND EDITION

**WAYNE
GRUDEM**

 **ZONDERVAN
ACADEMIC**

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Preface to the Second Edition

I am grateful to God that he has allowed the first edition of this book to have such widespread use. People have often told me that reading this book strengthened their spiritual life and walk with God, deepened their faith, and significantly increased their understanding of the teachings of the Bible.

The changes in this edition mainly consist of additional material:

1. completely updated bibliographies
2. all Scripture quotations changed from RSV to ESV
3. new sections on the differences between evangelical Protestant theology and Protestant theological liberalism (additional note to chapter 4), Mormonism (additional note to chapter 14), and Roman Catholicism (additional note to chapter 45, with extensive quotations from the 1997 edition of *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)
4. additional discussion of specific “problem verses” for biblical inerrancy (chapter 5)
5. a completely revised, stronger chapter on the clarity of Scripture (chapter 6)
6. updated sections on God’s atemporal eternity (chapter 11), the relationship of the Son to the Father in the Trinity (chapter 14), seeker-sensitive churches (chapter 44), the role of women in the church (chapter 47), contemporary worship music (chapter 51), and miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit (chapters 52 and 53)
7. a more extensive critique of open theism (chapter 12)
8. a completely revised, stronger chapter on creation and evolution, including recent evidence for intelligent design, a longer critique of theistic evolution, and a summary of recent evidence regarding the age of the earth (chapter 15)
9. a new discussion and critique of middle knowledge (or Molinism) (chapter 16)
10. a reply to recent criticisms of the penal substitutionary view of the atonement (chapter 27)
11. an extensive discussion of “Free Grace” theology (chapter 35)
12. a critique of the “new perspective on Paul” and its view of justification (chapter 36)

13. a critique of the preterist view that Christ has already returned in AD 70 (chapter 54)
14. a contemporary worship song added at the end of each chapter (while retaining the traditional hymns as well)
15. indexing of topics covered in twenty-one new systematic theology texts (including new translations of older texts by Turretin and Vos) that have been published since 1993
16. numerous smaller modifications that have been prompted by letters and emails from people around the world and by interaction with the many wonderful, insightful students as I have taught through this material over the last twenty-six years both at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and at Phoenix Seminary

As a result of this added material, this second edition is about 16 percent longer than the first edition.

“Did you change your mind about anything?” is the question people often ask me about this second edition.

The short answer is, “Very little,” but there are a few changes: (1) I now affirm the doctrine of God’s impassibility in the sense of “incapable of suffering harm,” a meaning that I had mistakenly failed to consider in the first edition (chapter 11). (2) Because of substantial new evidence about the meaning of the Greek word *monogenēs*, I now think that this word should be translated as “only begotten” rather than simply “only” in John 3:16 (and elsewhere), and I now endorse the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father (chapter 14). (3) I now think that the scientific evidence in favor of an old earth (4.5 billion years) and an old universe (13.8 billion years) has become overwhelming, with the result that I now advocate an old earth position, though I still believe that both old earth and young earth viewpoints are valid for Christian leaders to hold today (chapter 15).

There has been an explosion of systematic theology texts (along with some shorter surveys of theological topics) in the evangelical Protestant world since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1994. These new books have come from various traditions, including Anglican (Packer, Bird, Bray), Baptist (Akin, Erickson’s 3rd edition), dispensational (Geisler, MacArthur and Mayhue), charismatic/Pentecostal (Stanley Horton, Menzies and Horton, Duffield and Van Cleave), and especially Reformed (Reymond, Van Genderen and Velema, Michael Horton, Culver, Frame, Allen and Swain, Barrett, and Letham, as well as new translations of Vos, Turretin, and Bavinck). I view these books as a wonderful indication that the study of systematic theology is alive and well in the evangelical world. I have added cross-references to these twenty-one additional books at the end of each chapter, indicating the pages on which each book treats the topic discussed in that chapter. I hope this will be a useful resource for students seeking to compare different authors and different viewpoints on a particular theological topic.

Many people have helped me in preparing this revised edition, including first of all the students in my seminary classes, and also many members of my Christian Essentials class for adults at Scottsdale Bible Church. In addition, faculty colleagues at Phoenix Seminary, including Brian Arnold, Darryl DelHousaye, John DelHousaye, Peter Gurry, Malcolm Hartnell, Bing Hunter, Jonathan Logan, John Meade, Justin Smith, and Steve Tracy have helped me at various times with advice about areas in which they had specialized knowledge. Mitch Miller, the remarkably knowledgeable reference and acquisitions librarian at Phoenix Seminary, compiled substantial additions to the bibliographies at the end of the chapters. Yvonne Gonzales printed the entire manuscript showing in color every change from the first edition.

Chris Herrington, the worship leader at Illuminate Church in Scottsdale, compiled an entire list of fifty-seven contemporary worship songs that fit the themes of the fifty-seven chapters (I have added these to the ends of the chapters, but in a few cases I substituted some of my favorite contemporary worship songs). Casey Sandberg sent me many additional bibliography suggestions. Trent Poling once again saved me from some difficult computer problems at a crucial time when the book manuscript was nearing completion.

Hugh Ross, Ken Wolgemuth, Günter Bechly, and John Wiester helped me with research on the age of the earth. Ann Gauger helped me understand evolutionary views about human origins. Titus Vogt, who translated this book into German, sent me a long list of small editing corrections (such as exact Bible verse references in the Septuagint and vowel transliterations in Hebrew words) that no one else had noticed (or at least mentioned to me) in twenty-six years. And my long-time friends Gregg Allison, Ray Ortlund, John Piper, Vern Poythress, Tom Schreiner, Sam Storms, Erik Thoennes, and Bruce Ware have provided helpful interaction about theological topics at various times over the past twenty-six years.

Stan Gundry at Zondervan, Sam Richardson at SPCK, and Brian Wilson at IVP-UK had valuable conversations with me regarding the scope and contents of this revised edition. Editors Madison Trammel (Zondervan), Philip Duce (IVP-UK), and especially the primary editor Matt Estel (Zondervan) gave me excellent editorial input at many points. Also at Zondervan, Jesse Hillman has been very helpful regarding cover design and marketing plans.

I am grateful to several excellent student assistants at Phoenix Seminary who have helped me over the last five years: Josh McCoy and Jason Miller completed the massive task of converting every Scripture quotation from the RSV to the ESV. Jason Miller also helped me with computer problems on a number of occasions. Phil Hoshiwara, Eric Wildgen, Ryan Carpenter, Jesse Bustamante, and Brett Gray provided significant help in proofreading, verifying footnotes, adding to the bibliographies for each chapter, and completing other detailed tasks in manuscript preparation. Brett Gray also updated the glossary and patiently coaxed numerous music publishers to accept a very reasonable fee

in exchange for permission to quote the lyrics of the fifty-seven contemporary worship songs that have been added to the ends of the chapters. I am also grateful to the music publishers who granted permission to reprint the lyrics to the fifty-seven contemporary worship songs found at the ends of the chapters, and especially to Capitol Music Group (CMG) who granted permission for thirty-nine of those songs.

Many people have prayed for me as I worked on this second edition, including some friends whom I call my “prayer partners,” and the special friends who are members of the small group that Margaret and I have met with for Bible study and prayer for the past nine years. I am thankful to all of you for your prayers.

Finally, I am grateful to my remarkable, wonderful wife Margaret, who celebrated with me in June our fiftieth anniversary, and who regularly prays for me, encourages me, brings meals to my study when I am writing, and simply brings joy and laughter into my life again and again.

When I was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in December 2015, I wrote in an online article,

Parkinson’s usually does not shorten a person’s life expectancy very much, but in any case, I’m happy to live as long as the Lord wills that I live, and to keep on being productive for as long as he enables me to do so. “In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Ps. 139:16).

But I would like, if God allows, to finish my current major writing projects:

1. a textbook on Christian ethics, which I hope will take me about one more year to finish after the first draft is done—or until January 2017
2. a revised edition of my book *Systematic Theology*, which should take from 2017 to 2019.¹

God has been exceptionally kind to me in the nearly four years since I wrote that. My Parkinson’s symptoms are still very mild, and my doctor says that the disease is progressing “very slowly.” The first book that I mentioned, *Christian Ethics*, was published in 2018, and now this second project is finally coming to an end. I plan to continue to teach (half-time) at Phoenix Seminary, and I have committed to preparing a revised edition of a commentary on 1 Peter that I published in 1988, but beyond that I do not know what else the Lord has in mind for me to do. I feel well, and I am thankful for good health at seventy-one years of age.

1. Wayne Grudem, “I Have Parkinson’s and I Am at Peace,” *Desiring God*, December 22, 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/i-have-parkinsons-and-i-am-at-peace>.

I am grateful to God for the widespread ministry of the first edition of this book (1994). The book so far has been translated into nineteen languages, with more translations in process.² In addition, Jeff Purswell prepared a 528-page condensation of this book, *Bible Doctrine*,³ and my son Elliot further condensed that into a 159-page book, *Christian Beliefs*.⁴ Finally, Erik Thoennes prepared a further condensation for a 6-page laminated study guide.⁵ With God's blessing, these shorter publications have also proved helpful to many people and churches.

Two other volumes have directly supplemented the material in this book. I have found immensely helpful the chapter-by-chapter historical surveys for these same doctrines that are found in Gregg Allison's *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine; A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology*.⁶ And Erik Thoennes and Brianna Smith have compiled a new companion volume, *Systematic Theology Workbook*,⁷ which contains study questions and practical exercises to help in learning the material in each chapter.

I commit this second edition into the Lord's hands, asking that he may use it to inform and strengthen the faith of those who read it and to deepen their personal relationship with him.

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory” (Ps. 115:1).

WAYNE GRUDEM
Phoenix Seminary

2. Albanian, Amharic, Arabic, Burmese, Chinese (traditional script), Chinese (simplified script), French, German, Italian, Jinghpaw-Kachin, Korean, Nepali, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Singalese, Spanish, Tajik, and Tamil. In cases where publication information is available to me, I have posted on my website waynegrudem.com.

3. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, ed. Jeff Purswell (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999).

4. Wayne Grudem, *Christian Beliefs*, ed. Elliot Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005).

5. Wayne Grudem and Erik Thoennes, *Systematic Theology Laminated Sheet* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008).

6. Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine; A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

7. Wayne Grudem, Erik Thoennes, and Brianna Smith, *Systematic Theology Workbook: Study Questions and Practical Exercises for Learning Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

Preface to the First Edition

I have not written this book for other teachers of theology (though I hope many of them will read it). I have written it for students—and not only for students, but also for every Christian who has a hunger to know the central doctrines of the Bible in greater depth.

This is why I have called the book *An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. I have tried to make it understandable even for Christians who have never studied theology before. I have avoided using technical terms without first explaining them. And most of the chapters can be read on their own, so that someone can begin at any chapter and grasp it without having read the earlier material.

Introductory studies do not have to be shallow or simplistic. I am convinced that most Christians are able to understand the doctrinal teachings of the Bible in considerable depth, provided that they are presented clearly and without the use of highly technical language. Therefore I have not hesitated to treat theological disputes in some detail where it seemed necessary.

Yet this book, despite its size, is still an *introduction* to systematic theology. Entire books have been written about the topics covered in each chapter of this book, and entire articles have been written about many of the verses quoted in this book. Therefore each chapter is capable of opening out into additional study in more breadth or more depth for those who are interested. The bibliographies at the end of each chapter give some help in that direction.

The following six distinctive features of this book grow out of my convictions about what systematic theology is and how it should be taught.

1. A Clear Biblical Basis for Doctrines. Because I believe that theology should be explicitly based on the teachings of Scripture, in each chapter I have attempted to show where the Bible gives support for the doctrines under consideration. In fact, because I believe that the words of Scripture themselves have power and authority greater than any human words, I have not just given Bible references; I have frequently quoted Bible passages at length so that readers can easily examine for themselves the scriptural evidence and in that way be like the noble Bereans, who were “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). This conviction about the unique nature of the Bible as God’s words has also led to the inclusion of a Scripture memory passage at the end of each chapter.

2. Clarity in the Explanation of Doctrines. I do not believe that God intended the study of theology to result in confusion and frustration. A student who comes out of a course in theology filled only with doctrinal uncertainty and a thousand unanswered questions is hardly “able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). Therefore I have tried to state the doctrinal positions of this book clearly and to show where in Scripture I find convincing evidence for those positions. I do not expect that everyone reading this book will agree with me at every point of doctrine; I do think that every reader will understand the positions I am arguing for and where Scripture can be found to support those positions.

I think it is only fair to readers of this book to say at the beginning what my own convictions are regarding certain points that are disputed within evangelical Christianity. I hold to a conservative view of biblical inerrancy, very much in agreement with the “Chicago Statement” of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (chapter 5 and appendix 1), and a traditional Reformed position with regard to questions of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility (chapter 16), the extent of the atonement (chapter 27), and the question of predestination (chapter 32). Consistent with the Reformed view, I hold that those who are truly born again will never lose their salvation (chapter 40). With regard to male-female relationships, I argue for a view that is neither traditional nor feminist, but “complementarian”—namely, that God created man and woman equal in value and personhood, and equal in bearing his image, but that both creation and redemption indicate some distinct roles for men and women in marriage (chapter 22) and in the church (chapter 47). On church government, I advocate a modified congregational form of government, with plural elders in governing positions (chapter 47). I argue for a baptistic view of baptism, namely, that those who give a believable profession of personal faith should be baptized (chapter 49). I hold that “baptism in the Holy Spirit” is a phrase best applied to conversion, and subsequent experiences are better called “being filled with the Holy Spirit” (chapter 39); moreover, that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are still valid for today, but that “apostle” is an office, not a gift, and that office does not continue today (chapters 52, 53). I believe that Christ’s second coming could occur any day, that it will be premillennial—that is, that it will mark the beginning of his thousand-year reign of perfect peace on the earth—but that it will be posttribulational—that is, that many Christians will go through the great tribulation (chapters 54, 55).

This does not mean that I ignore other views. Where there are doctrinal differences within evangelical Christianity I have tried to represent other positions fairly, to explain why I disagree with them, and to give references to the best available defenses of the opposing positions. In fact, I have made it easy for students to find a conservative evangelical statement on each topic from within their own theological traditions, because each chapter contains an index to treatments of that chapter’s subject in thirty-four other theology texts classified by denominational background. (If I have failed to represent an

opposing view accurately I would appreciate a letter from anyone who holds that view, and I will attempt to make corrections if a subsequent edition of this book is published.)

3. Application to Life. I do not believe that God intended the study of theology to be dry and boring. Theology is the study of God and all his works! Theology is meant to be lived and prayed and sung! All of the great doctrinal writings of the Bible (such as Paul's epistle to the Romans) are full of praise to God and personal application to life. For this reason I have incorporated notes on application from time to time in the text, and have added "Questions for Personal Application" at the end of each chapter, as well as a hymn related to the topic of the chapter. True theology is "teaching that accords with godliness" (1 Tim. 6:3), and theology when studied rightly will lead to growth in our Christian lives, and to worship.

4. Focus on the Evangelical World. I do not think that a true system of theology can be constructed from within what we may call the "liberal" theological tradition—that is, by people who deny the absolute truthfulness of the Bible, or who do not think the words of the Bible to be God's very words (see chapter 4, on the authority of Scripture). For this reason, the other writers I interact with in this book are mostly within what is today called the larger "conservative evangelical" tradition—from the great Reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther, down to the writings of evangelical scholars today. I write as an evangelical and for evangelicals. This does not mean that those in the liberal tradition have nothing valuable to say; it simply means that differences with them almost always boil down to differences over the nature of the Bible and its authority. The amount of doctrinal agreement that can be reached by people with widely divergent bases of authority is quite limited. I am thankful for my evangelical friends who write extensive critiques of liberal theology, but I do not think that everyone is called to do that, or that an extensive analysis of liberal views is the most helpful way to build a positive system of theology based on the total truthfulness of the whole Bible. In fact, somewhat like the boy in Hans Christian Andersen's tale who shouted, "The Emperor has no clothes!" I think someone needs to say that it is doubtful that liberal theologians have given us any significant insights into the doctrinal teachings of Scripture that are not already to be found in evangelical writers.

It is not always appreciated that the world of conservative evangelical scholarship is so rich and diverse that it affords ample opportunity for exploration of different viewpoints and insights into Scripture. I think that ultimately we will attain much more depth of understanding of Scripture when we are able to study it in the company of a great number of scholars who all begin with the conviction that the Bible is completely true and absolutely authoritative. The cross-references to thirty-four other evangelical systematic theologies that I have put at the end of each chapter reflect this conviction: though they are broken down into seven broad theological traditions (Anglican/Episcopalian, Arminian/Wesleyan/Methodist, Baptist, Dispensational, Lutheran, Reformed/Presbyterian, and Renewal/Charismatic/ Pentecostal), they all would hold

to the inerrancy of the Bible and would belong to what would be called a conservative evangelical position today. (In addition to these thirty-four conservative evangelical works, I have also added to each chapter a section of cross-references to two representative Roman Catholic theologies, because Roman Catholicism continues to exercise such a significant influence worldwide.)

5. Hope for Progress in Doctrinal Unity in the Church. I believe that there is still much hope for the church to attain deeper and purer doctrinal understanding, and to overcome old barriers, even those that have persisted for centuries. Jesus is at work perfecting his church “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27), and he has given gifts to equip the church “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). Though the past history of the church may discourage us, these Scriptures remain true, and we should not abandon hope of greater agreement. In fact, in this century we have already seen much greater understanding and some greater doctrinal agreement between Covenant and Dispensational theologians, and between charismatics and noncharismatics; moreover, I think the church’s understanding of biblical inerrancy and of spiritual gifts has also increased significantly in the last few decades. I believe that the current debate over appropriate roles for men and women in marriage and the church will eventually result in much greater understanding of the teaching of Scripture as well, painful though the controversy may be at the present time. Therefore, in this book I have not hesitated to raise again some of the old differences (over baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church government, the millennium and the tribulation, and predestination, for example) in the hope that, in some cases at least, a fresh look at Scripture may provoke a new examination of these doctrines and may perhaps prompt some movement not just toward greater understanding and tolerance of other viewpoints, but even toward greater doctrinal consensus in the church.

6. A Sense of the Urgent Need for Greater Doctrinal Understanding in the Whole Church. I am convinced that there is an urgent need in the church today for much greater understanding of Christian doctrine, or systematic theology. Not only pastors and teachers need to understand theology in greater depth—the whole church does as well. One day by God’s grace we may have churches full of Christians who can discuss, apply, and live the doctrinal teachings of the Bible as readily as they can discuss the details of their own jobs or hobbies—or the fortunes of their favorite sports team or television program. It is not that Christians lack the ability to understand doctrine; it is just that they must have access to it in an understandable form. Once that happens, I think that many Christians will find that understanding (and living) the doctrines of Scripture is one of their greatest joys.

Many people have helped me in the writing of this book. First I should mention my students, past and present, both at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota (1977–81), and

then at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1981–present). Their thoughtful, insightful contributions during classroom discussions have influenced every chapter of this book.

God has blessed me with help from some excellent typists. The typing of the manuscript was started by Sherry Kull several years ago. Later, Mary Morris, Ron Tilley, Kathryn Sheehan, Shelly Mills, Rebecca Heidenreich, Jenny Hart, and Carol Pederson typed several portions. Then the largest part of the manuscript was typed with great skill and care by Tammy Thomas, who also helped with some editing. Andi Ledesma and Joyce Leong cheerfully helped with photocopying many times. Finally, Kim Pennington faithfully and accurately typed in the many corrections and changes that came during the editorial process. I am grateful to all of them for their help.

John O. Stevenson did excellent work in compiling the bibliographies, and Don Rothwell completed a significant portion of the cross-references to other theology texts. H. Scott Baldwin, Tom Provenzola, and Mark Rapinchuk were a great help in proofreading and in library research. Mark Rapinchuk also compiled the indexes of authors and Scripture references. Beth Manley provided excellent help in proofreading. George Knight III, Robert Reymond, Harold Hoehner, Robert Saucy, Doug Moo, Tom Nettles, Tom McComiskey, Doug Halsne, Steve Nicholson, Doug Brandt, Steve Figard, Gregg Allison, Ellyn Clark, and Terry Mortenson provided detailed comments on different portions. Raymond Dillard kindly provided me with a computerized text of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Bruce Shauger solved my computer problems several times, and Tim McLaughlin repaired my computer at a crucial time. My long-time friend John Hughes gave me needed advice on computers and manuscript publication several times. My sons also helped me when deadlines approached: Elliot with library research, and Oliver and Alexander (and Alexander's friend Matt Tooley) with compiling and correcting the indexes.

One person has had greater influence on the final form of this book than any other: David Kingdon, theological books editor at Inter-Varsity Press, England, has been helpful far beyond my expectations in his work as an astute, conscientious, and wise editor. He has worked through every chapter with great care, suggesting corrections, additions, and deletions, and interacting with my arguments in extensive memos. His wide-ranging knowledge of theology, biblical studies, and the history of doctrine has been of immense value to me, and the book is much better as a result of his work. Moreover, Frank Entwistle of Inter-Varsity Press and Stan Gundry, Jim Ruark, and Laura Weller of Zondervan have been gracious and patient with me about many details regarding publication of the book.

I could not have completed this work without the generous provision of sabbaticals from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the fall of 1983, the fall of 1985, the winter of 1989, and the fall of 1991, and I am grateful to Trinity's board of directors for allowing me this time to write. I am also very thankful for the support of my parents, Arden and Jean Grudem, who generously provided financial help that enabled me to

write during these and other times, and who have also been a constant encouragement to me along the way, both in their prayers and in their unwavering belief that a book like this—written in nontechnical language so that they and thousands of Christians like them could understand it—would be valuable for the church.

I think that almost everyone who knew me was praying for this project at some time or other—especially my student advisees over several years at Trinity, and many friends in my church. I have frequently been aware of the Lord’s help in response to those prayers, giving me health and strength, freedom from interruptions, and an unwavering desire to complete the book.

Most of all, I am thankful for the support of my wife, Margaret, and my sons, Elliot, Oliver, and Alexander. They have been patient and encouraging, have prayed for me and loved me, and continue to be a great source of joy in my life, for which I thank God.

I am sure that this book, like all merely human books, has mistakes and oversights, and probably some faulty arguments as well. If I knew where they were, I would try to correct them! Therefore I would be grateful if any interested readers would send me suggestions for changes and corrections. I do not guarantee that I can acknowledge every letter, but I will give consideration to the material in every letter and make corrections where I can.

“O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!”
(Ps. 118:29).

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory” (Ps. 115:1).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Systematic Theology

What is systematic theology?

Why should Christians study it?

How should we study it?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

A. DEFINITION OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

What is systematic theology? Many different definitions have been given, but for the purposes of this book the following definition will be used: *systematic theology is any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?” about any given topic.*¹

This definition indicates that systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic. However, it is important to state at once that the study of *church history* (including the great creeds of the church and the writings of major theologians in church history) and the study of *philosophy* can often be of great benefit in helping us understand what the whole Bible in fact does teach about various topics. But they do not contain any authority greater than or equal to the authority of Scripture.

1. Relationship to Other Disciplines

As my definition indicates, the emphasis of this book will not be on *historical theology*² (a historical study of how Christians in different periods have understood various

1. This definition of systematic theology is taken from Professor John Frame, now emeritus professor at Reformed Theological Seminary of Orlando, Florida, under whom I was privileged to study in 1971–73 (at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia). Though it is impossible to acknowledge my indebtedness to him at every point, it is appropriate to express gratitude to him at this point, and to say that he has probably influenced my theological thinking more than anyone else, especially in the crucial areas of the nature of systematic theology and the doctrine of the Word of God. Many of his

former students will recognize echoes of his teaching in the following pages, especially in those two areas.

2. Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine; A Companion to Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), provides an excellent survey of church history from the end of the New Testament to the present day for each of the topics discussed in this book. I am grateful to Gregg, a former student and now a life-long friend, for the remarkable amount of work that was required in writing this excellent book.

theological topics) or *philosophical theology* (studying theological topics largely without use of the Bible, but using the tools and methods of philosophical reasoning and what can be known about God from observing the universe) or *apologetics* (providing a defense of the truthfulness of the Christian faith for the purpose of convincing unbelievers). These three subjects, which are worthwhile subjects for Christians to pursue, are sometimes also included in a broader definition of the term *systematic theology*. In fact, some consideration of historical, philosophical, and apologetic matters will be found at points throughout this book. This is because historical study informs us of the insights gained and the mistakes made by others previously in understanding Scripture; philosophical study helps us understand right and wrong thought forms common in our culture and others; and apologetic study helps us bring the teachings of Scripture to bear on the objections raised by unbelievers. But these areas of study are not the focus of this volume, which rather interacts directly with the biblical text in order to understand what the Bible itself says to us about various theological subjects.

If someone prefers to use the term *systematic theology* in the broader sense (including especially historical theology and philosophy, as well as apologetics) instead of the narrower sense that has been defined above, it will not make much difference. Those who use the narrower definition will agree that these other areas of study definitely contribute in a positive way to our understanding of systematic theology, and those who use the broader definition will certainly agree that historical theology, philosophical theology, and apologetics can be distinguished from the process of collecting and synthesizing all the relevant Scripture passages for various topics. Moreover, even though historical and philosophical studies do contribute to our understanding of theological questions, only Scripture has the final authority to define what we are to believe,³ and it is therefore appropriate to spend some time focusing on the process of analyzing the teaching of Scripture itself.

Systematic theology, as we have defined it, also differs from *Old Testament theology*, *New Testament theology*, and *biblical theology*. These three disciplines organize their topics historically and in the order the topics are presented in the Bible. Therefore, in Old Testament theology, one might ask, “What does Deuteronomy teach about prayer?” or “What do the Psalms teach about prayer?” or “What does Isaiah teach about prayer?” or even, “What does the whole Old Testament teach about prayer, and how is that teaching developed over the history of the Old Testament?” In New Testament theology one might ask, “What does John’s gospel teach about prayer?” or “What does

3. Charles Hodge says, “The Scriptures Contain All the Facts of Theology” (section heading in *Systematic Theology*, 1:15). He argues that ideas gained from intuition or observation or experience are valid in theology only if they are supported by the teaching of Scripture. Similarly, Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper (1852–1931) says, “We can obtain the whole body of

the Christian doctrine only by taking each doctrine from those passages—considered of course in their context—which treat of that specific doctrine. . . . The Church has no doctrine of its own, no doctrine alongside and without Christ’s Word.” Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vol. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 1:202.

Paul teach about prayer?” or even “What does the New Testament teach about prayer and what is the historical development of that teaching as it progresses through the New Testament?”

Biblical theology has a technical meaning in theological studies. It is the larger category that contains both Old Testament theology and New Testament theology as we have defined them above. Biblical theology gives special attention to the teachings of *individual authors and sections* of Scripture and to the place of each teaching in the *historical development* of Scripture.⁴ So one might ask, “What is the historical development of the teaching about prayer as it is seen throughout the history of the Old Testament and then of the New Testament?” Of course, this question comes very close to the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today about prayer?” (which would be *systematic theology* by our definition). It then becomes evident that the boundary lines between these various disciplines often overlap at the edges, and parts of one study blend into the next. Yet there is still a difference, for biblical theology traces the *historical development* of a doctrine and the way one’s place in that historical development affects one’s understanding and application of that particular doctrine. Biblical theology also focuses on the understanding of each doctrine that the individual biblical authors and their original hearers or readers possessed.

Systematic theology, on the other hand, makes use of the material of biblical theology and often builds on the results of biblical theology. At some points, especially where great detail and care is needed in the development of a doctrine, systematic theology will even use a biblical-theological method, analyzing the development of each doctrine through the historical development of Scripture. But the focus of systematic theology remains different: its focus is on the collection and then the summary of the teaching of all the biblical passages on a particular subject. Thus systematic theology asks, for example, “What does the whole Bible teach us today about prayer?” It attempts to summarize the teaching of Scripture in a brief, understandable, and very carefully formulated statement.

2. Application to Life

Furthermore, systematic theology focuses on summarizing each doctrine as it should be understood by present-day Christians. This will sometimes involve the use of terms and even concepts that were not used by any individual biblical author but that are the proper result of combining the teachings of two or more biblical authors on a particular subject. The terms *Trinity*, *incarnation*, and *deity of Christ*, for example, are not found in the Bible, but they usefully summarize biblical concepts.

4. The term *biblical theology* might seem to be a natural and appropriate one for the process I have called systematic theology. However, its usage in theological studies to refer to tracing the historical development of doctrines throughout the

Bible is too well established, so that starting now to use the term biblical theology to refer to what I have called systematic theology would only result in confusion.

Defining systematic theology to include “what the whole Bible *teaches us* today” implies that application to life is a necessary part of the proper pursuit of systematic theology. Thus a doctrine under consideration is seen in terms of its practical value for living the Christian life. Nowhere in Scripture do we find doctrine studied for its own sake or isolated from life. The biblical writers consistently apply their teaching to life. Even those books of the Bible that have the most doctrinal content (such as Romans, Ephesians, and Hebrews) contain much material that is also directly applicable to the Christian life. Therefore, any Christian reading this book should find his or her Christian life enriched and deepened during this study; indeed, if personal spiritual growth does not occur, then the book has not been written properly by the author or the material has not been rightly studied by the reader.

3. Systematic Theology and Disorganized Theology: The Key Differences

If we use this definition of systematic theology, it will be seen that most Christians actually do systematic theology (or at least make systematic-theological statements) many times a week. For example: “The Bible says that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved.” “The Bible says that Jesus Christ is the only way to God.” “The Bible says that Jesus is coming again.” These are all summaries of what Scripture says, and as such, they are systematic-theological statements. In fact, every time a Christian says something about what the whole Bible says, he or she is in a sense doing systematic theology—according to our definition—by thinking about various topics and answering the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?”⁵

How then does this book differ from the “systematic theology” that most Christians do? First, it treats biblical topics in a *carefully organized way* to guarantee that all important topics will receive thorough consideration. This organization also provides one sort of check against inaccurate analysis of individual topics, for it means that all other doctrines that are treated can be compared with each topic for consistency in methodology and absence of contradictions in the relationships between the doctrines. This also helps to ensure balanced consideration of complementary doctrines: Christ’s deity and humanity are studied together, for example, as are God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, so that wrong conclusions will not be drawn from an imbalanced emphasis on only one aspect of the full biblical presentation.

In fact, the adjective *systematic* in systematic theology should be understood to mean something like “carefully organized by topics,” with the understanding that the topics

5. Robert L. Reymond, “The Justification of Theology with a Special Application to Contemporary Christology,” in *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology: Essays in Approach and Method*, ed. Nigel M. Cameron (Edinburgh: Rutherford, 1987), 82–104, cites several examples from the New Testament of this kind of searching through all of Scripture to demonstrate

doctrinal conclusions: Jesus in Luke 24:25–27 (and elsewhere), Apollos in Acts 18:28, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and Paul in Acts 17:2–3; 20:27, and all of Romans. To this list could be added Heb. 1 (on Christ’s divine Sonship), Heb. 11 (on the nature of true faith), and many other passages from the Epistles.

studied will be seen to fit together in a consistent way, and will include all the major doctrinal topics of the Bible. Thus *systematic* should be thought of as the opposite of “randomly arranged” or “disorganized.” In systematic theology topics are treated in an orderly or “systematic” way.

A second difference between this book and the way most Christians do systematic theology is that it treats topics in *much more detail* than most Christians do. For example, as a result of regular reading of the Bible an ordinary Christian may make the theological statement, “The Bible says that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved.” That is a perfectly true summary of a major biblical teaching. However, in this book we devote several pages to elaborating more precisely what it means to “believe in Jesus Christ,”⁶ and twelve chapters (chapters 32–43) are devoted to explaining what it means to “be saved” in all of the many implications of that term.

Third, a formal study of systematic theology will make it possible to formulate summaries of biblical teachings with *much more accuracy* than Christians would normally arrive at without such a study. In systematic theology, summaries of biblical teachings must be worded precisely to guard against misunderstandings and to exclude false teachings.

Fourth, a good theological analysis must find and treat fairly *all the relevant Bible passages* for each particular topic, not just some or a few of the relevant passages. This often means that it must depend on the results of careful exegesis (or interpretation) of Scripture as generally agreed upon by evangelical interpreters, or when there are significant differences of interpretation, systematic theology will include detailed exegesis.

4. Beliefs Must Be Based on Scripture, Not Human Authorities or Traditions

Because of the large number of topics covered in a study of systematic theology and because of the great detail with which these topics are analyzed, it is inevitable that someone studying a systematic theology text or taking a course in systematic theology for the first time will have many of his or her personal beliefs challenged or modified, refined or enriched. It is of utmost importance therefore that each person beginning such a course firmly resolve to abandon as false any idea found to be clearly contradicted by the teaching of Scripture. But it is also very important for each person to resolve not to believe any individual doctrine simply because this textbook or any other textbook or teacher says that it is true, unless this book or the instructor in a course can convince the student from the text of Scripture itself. It is Scripture alone and not “conservative evangelical tradition” or any other human authority that must function as the normative authority for what we should believe.

6. See chapter 35, pp. 861–79, on saving faith.

5. What Are Doctrines?

In this book, the word *doctrine* will be understood in the following way: *a doctrine is what the whole Bible teaches us today about some particular topic*. This definition is directly related to our earlier definition of systematic theology, since it shows that a “doctrine” is simply the result of the process of doing systematic theology with regard to one particular topic. Understood in this way, doctrines can be very broad or very narrow. We can speak of “the doctrine of God” as a major doctrinal category, including a summary of all that the Bible teaches us today about God. Such a doctrine would be exceptionally large. On the other hand, we may also speak more narrowly of the doctrine of God’s eternity or the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of God’s justice.⁷

The book is divided into seven major sections according to seven major doctrines:

- Part 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God
- Part 2: The Doctrine of God
- Part 3: The Doctrine of Man in the Image of God
- Part 4: The Doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit
- Part 5: The Doctrine of the Application of Redemption
- Part 6: The Doctrine of the Church
- Part 7: The Doctrine of the Future

Within each of these major doctrinal categories many more specific teachings have been selected as appropriate for inclusion. Generally these meet at least one of the following three criteria: (1) they are doctrines that are most emphasized in Scripture; (2) they are doctrines that have been most significant throughout the history of the church and have been important for all Christians at all times; (3) they are doctrines that have become important for Christians in the present situation in the history of the church (even though some of these doctrines may not have been of such great interest earlier in church history). Some examples of doctrines in the third category would be the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, the doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of Satan and demons with particular reference to spiritual warfare, the doctrine of spiritual gifts in the New Testament age, and the doctrine of the creation of man as male and female in relation to the understanding of roles appropriate to men and women today. Because of their relevance to the contemporary situation, doctrines such as these have received greater emphasis in the present volume than in other systematic theology textbooks.

7. The word *dogma* is an approximate synonym for *doctrine*, but I have not used it in this book. *Dogma* is a term more often used by Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians, and

the term frequently refers to doctrines that have official church endorsement. *Dogmatic theology* is another term for *systematic theology*.

6. The Difference between Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics

Although there is inevitably some overlap between the study of theology and the study of ethics, I have tried to maintain a distinction in emphasis. The emphasis of systematic theology is on what God wants us to *believe* and to *know*, while the emphasis in Christian ethics is on what God wants us to *do* and what *attitudes* he wants us to have. Such a distinction is reflected in the following definition: *Christian ethics is any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us about which acts, attitudes, and personal character traits receive God’s approval, and which do not?”*⁸ Thus theology tells us what we should *believe* while ethics tells us how we should *live*. There is some overlap in topics between theology and ethics (for example, marriage could be treated in both), but in general terms, theology focuses on beliefs while ethics focuses on situations in life.

A textbook on ethics, for example, would discuss topics such as marriage and divorce, lying and telling the truth, stealing and ownership of property, abortion, birth control, homosexuality, the role of civil government, discipline of children, capital punishment, war, care for the poor, racial discrimination, and so forth. Of course there is some overlap: theology must be applied to life (therefore it is often ethical to some degree). And ethics must be based on proper ideas of God and his world (therefore it is theological to some degree).

This book will emphasize systematic theology, though it will not hesitate to apply theology to life where such application comes readily. Still, for a thorough treatment of Christian ethics, see my companion book, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning*.

B. INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THIS BOOK

We begin with two assumptions or presuppositions: (1) the Bible is true and is, in fact, our only absolute standard of truth, and (2) the God who is spoken of in the Bible exists, and he is who the Bible says he is—the Creator of heaven and earth and all things in them. These two presuppositions, of course, are always open to adjustment or modification or deeper confirmation, but at this point, these two assumptions form the point at which we begin.

C. WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS STUDY THEOLOGY?

Why should Christians study systematic theology? That is, why should we engage in the process of collecting and summarizing the teachings of many individual Bible passages on particular topics? Why is it not sufficient simply to continue reading the Bible regularly every day of our lives?

8. This definition of Christian ethics is found in my book *Christian Ethics: an Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 37. I have adapted the

definition from John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 10.

1. The Basic Reason

Many answers have been given to this question, but too often they leave the impression that systematic theology somehow can “improve” on the Bible by doing a better job of organizing its teachings or explaining them more clearly than the Bible itself has done. Thus we may begin implicitly to deny the clarity of Scripture (see chapter 6) or the sufficiency of Scripture (see chapter 8).

However, in the Great Commission, Jesus commanded his disciples and now commands us also to *teach* believers to observe all that he commanded: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them* to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).⁹ Now to teach all that Jesus commanded, in a narrow sense, is simply to teach the content of the oral teaching of Jesus as it is recorded in the gospel narratives. However, in a broader sense, “all that Jesus commanded” includes the interpretation and application of his life and teachings, because in the book of Acts it is implied that it contains a narrative of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through the apostles after his resurrection (note that Acts 1:1 speaks of “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach”). “All that Jesus commanded” can also include the Epistles, since they were written under the supervision of the Holy Spirit and were also considered to be a “command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37; see also John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Peter 3:2; and Rev. 1:1–3). Thus in a larger sense, “all that Jesus commanded” includes all of the New Testament.

Furthermore, when we consider that the New Testament writings endorse the absolute confidence Jesus had in the authority and reliability of the Old Testament Scriptures as God’s words (see chapter 4), and when we realize that the New Testament Epistles also endorse this view of the Old Testament as absolutely authoritative words of God, then it becomes evident that we cannot teach “all that Jesus commanded” without including all of the Old Testament (rightly understood in the various ways in which it applies to the new covenant age in the history of redemption) as well.

The task of fulfilling the Great Commission includes therefore not only evangelism but also *teaching*. And the task of teaching all that Jesus commanded us is, in a broad sense, the task of teaching what the whole Bible says to us today. To effectively teach ourselves and to teach others what the whole Bible says, it is necessary to *collect* and *summarize* all the Scripture passages on a particular subject.

For example, if someone asks me, “What does the Bible teach about Christ’s return?” I could say, “Just keep reading your Bible and you’ll find out.” But if the questioner begins reading at Genesis 1:1, it will be a long time before he or she finds the answer to that question. By that time many other questions will have needed answers, and the list of

9. Every instance of italics in biblical passages has been added by the author.

unanswered questions will begin to grow very long indeed. What does the Bible teach about the work of the Holy Spirit? What does the Bible teach about prayer? What does the Bible teach about sin? There simply is not time in our lifetimes to read through the entire Bible looking for an answer for ourselves every time a doctrinal question arises. Therefore, for us to learn what the Bible says, it is very helpful to have the benefit of the work of others who have searched through Scripture and found answers to these various topics.

We can teach others most effectively if we can direct them to the most relevant passages and suggest an appropriate summary of the teachings of those passages. Then the person who questions us can inspect those passages quickly for himself or herself and learn much more rapidly what the teaching of the Bible is on a particular subject. Thus the necessity of systematic theology for teaching what the Bible says comes about primarily because we are finite in our memory and in the amount of time at our disposal.

The basic reason for studying systematic theology, then, is that it enables us to teach ourselves and others what the whole Bible says, thus fulfilling the “teaching” part of the Great Commission.

2. The Benefits to Our Lives

Although the basic reason for studying systematic theology is that it is a means of obedience to our Lord’s command, there are some additional specific benefits that come from such study.

First, studying theology helps us *overcome our wrong ideas*. If there were no sin in our hearts, we could read the Bible from cover to cover, and although we would not immediately learn everything in the Bible, we would most likely learn only true things about God and his creation. Every time we read it we would learn more true things, and we would not rebel or refuse to accept anything we found written there. But with sin in our hearts and with false beliefs rampant in our cultures, we retain some rebelliousness against God. At various points there are—for all of us—biblical teachings that for one reason or another we do not want to accept. The study of systematic theology is of help in overcoming those rebellious ideas.

For example, suppose there is someone who does not want to believe that Jesus is personally coming back to earth again. Perhaps we could show this person one or two verses that speak of Jesus’ return to earth, but the person might still find a way to evade the force of those verses or read a different meaning into them. But if we collect twenty-five or thirty verses that say that Jesus is coming back to earth personally and write them all out on paper, our friend who hesitated to believe in Christ’s return is much more likely to be persuaded by the breadth and diversity of biblical evidence for this doctrine. Of course, we all have areas like that, areas where our understanding of the Bible’s teaching is inadequate. In these areas, it is helpful for us to be confronted with the *total weight of the teaching of Scripture* on that subject, so that we will more readily be persuaded even against our initial wrongful inclinations.

Second, studying systematic theology helps us to be *able to make better decisions later* on new questions of doctrine that may arise. We cannot know what new doctrinal controversies will arise in the churches in which we will live and minister ten, twenty, or thirty years from now, if the Lord does not return before then. These new doctrinal controversies will sometimes include questions that no one has faced very carefully before. Christians will be asking, “What does the whole Bible say about this subject?” (The precise nature of biblical inerrancy and the appropriate understanding of biblical teaching on gifts of the Holy Spirit are two examples of questions that have arisen in the past fifty years with much more forcefulness than ever before in the history of the church.)

Whatever the new doctrinal controversies are in future years, those who have learned systematic theology well will be much better able to answer the new questions that arise. The reason for this is that everything the Bible says is somehow related to everything else the Bible says (for it all fits together in a consistent way, at least within God’s own understanding of reality, and in the nature of God and creation as they really are). Thus the new question will be related to much that has already been learned from Scripture. The more thoroughly that earlier material has been learned, the better able we will be to deal with those new questions.

This benefit extends even more broadly. We face problems of applying Scripture to life in many more contexts than formal doctrinal discussions. What does the Bible teach about husband-wife relationships? About raising children? About witnessing to a friend at work? What principles does Scripture give us for studying psychology or economics or the natural sciences? How does it guide us in spending money or in saving or in tithing? In every area of inquiry certain theological principles will come to bear, and those who have learned well the theological teachings of the Bible will be much better able to make decisions that are pleasing to God.

A helpful analogy at this point is that of a jigsaw puzzle. If the puzzle represents “what the whole Bible teaches us today about everything,” then a course in systematic theology would be like filling in the border and some of the major items pictured in the puzzle. But we will never know everything that the Bible teaches about everything, so our jigsaw puzzle will have many gaps, many pieces that remain to be put in. Solving a new real-life problem is analogous to filling in another section of the jigsaw puzzle: the more pieces one has in place correctly, the easier it is to fit new pieces in, and the less apt one is to make mistakes. In this book the goal is to enable Christians to put into their “theological jigsaw puzzle” as many pieces with as much accuracy as possible, and to encourage Christians to go on putting in more and more correct pieces for the rest of their lives. The Christian doctrines studied here will act as guidelines to help in the filling in of all other areas, areas that pertain to all aspects of truth in all aspects of life.

Third, studying systematic theology will *help us grow as Christians*. The more we know about God, about his Word, about his relationships to the world and human-kind, the better we will trust him, the more fully we will praise him, and the more

readily we will obey him. Studying systematic theology rightly will make us more mature Christians. If it does not do this, we are not studying it in the way God intends.

In fact, the Bible often connects sound doctrine with maturity in Christian living: Paul speaks of “*the teaching that accords with godliness*” (1 Tim. 6:3) and says that his work as an apostle is “for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of *the truth which accords with godliness*” (Titus 1:1). By contrast, he indicates that all kinds of disobedience and immorality are “contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10).

3. What Is the Difference between “Major” and “Minor” Doctrines?

It is appropriate to ask what the difference is between a “major doctrine” and a “minor doctrine.” Christians often say they want to seek agreement in the church on major doctrines but also to allow for differences on minor doctrines. I have found the following guideline useful:

A major doctrine is one that has a significant impact on our thinking about other doctrines, or that has a significant impact on how we live the Christian life. A minor doctrine is one that has very little impact on how we think about other doctrines, and very little impact on how we live the Christian life.

By this standard doctrines such as the authority of the Bible (chapter 4), the Trinity (chapter 14), the deity of Christ (chapter 26), justification by faith (chapter 36), and many others would rightly be considered major doctrines. People who disagree with the historic evangelical understanding of any of these doctrines will have wide areas of difference with evangelical Christians who affirm these doctrines. By contrast, it seems to me that differences over forms of church government (chapter 47) or some details about the Lord’s Supper (chapter 50) or the timing of the great tribulation (chapter 55) concern minor doctrines. Christians who differ over these things can agree on perhaps every other area of doctrine, can live Christian lives that differ in no important way, and can have genuine fellowship with one another.

Of course, we may find doctrines that fall somewhere between “major” and “minor” according to this standard. For example, Christians may differ over the degree of significance that should attach to the doctrine of baptism (chapter 49) or the millennium (chapter 55) or the extent of the atonement (chapter 27). That is only natural, because many doctrines have *some* influence on other doctrines or on life, but we may differ over whether we think it to be a “significant” influence. We could even recognize that there will be a range of significance here and just say that the more influence a doctrine has on other doctrines and on life, the more “major” it becomes. This amount of influence may even vary according to the historical circumstances and needs of the church at any given time. In such cases, Christians will need to ask God to give them mature wisdom and sound judgment as they try to determine to what extent a doctrine should be considered “major” in their particular circumstances.

D. A NOTE ON THREE OBJECTIONS TO THE STUDY OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

1. "The Conclusions Are 'Too Neat' to Be True"

Some scholars look with suspicion at systematic theology when—or even because—its teachings fit together in a noncontradictory way. They object that the results are “too neat” and that systematic theologians must therefore be squeezing the Bible’s teachings into an artificial mold, distorting the true meaning of Scripture to get an orderly set of beliefs.

To this objection two responses can be made. (1) We must first ask the people making the objection to tell us at what specific points Scripture has been misinterpreted, and then we must deal with the understanding of those passages. Perhaps mistakes have been made, and in that case there should be corrections.

Yet it is also possible that the objector will have no specific passages in mind, or no clearly erroneous interpretations to point to in the works of the most responsible evangelical theologians. Of course, incompetent exegesis can be found in the writings of the less competent scholars in *any* field of biblical studies, not just in systematic theology, but those “bad examples” constitute an objection not against the scholar’s field but against the incompetent scholar himself.

It is very important that the objector be specific at this point because this objection is sometimes made by those who—perhaps unconsciously—have adopted from our culture a skeptical view of the possibility of finding universally true conclusions about anything, even about God from his Word. This kind of skepticism regarding theological truth is especially common in the modern university world where systematic theology—if it is studied at all—is studied only from the perspectives of philosophical theology and historical theology (including perhaps a historical study of the various ideas that were believed by the early Christians who wrote the New Testament and by other Christians at that time and throughout church history). In this kind of intellectual climate the study of “systematic theology” as defined in this chapter would be considered impossible because the Bible would be assumed to be merely the work of many human authors who wrote out of diverse cultures and experiences over the course of more than one thousand years; trying to find “what the whole Bible teaches” about any subject would be nearly as hopeless as trying to find “what all philosophers teach” about some question, for the answer in both cases would include not one view but many diverse and often conflicting views. This skeptical viewpoint must be rejected by evangelicals who see Scripture as the product of human *and* divine authorship and therefore as a collection of writings that teach noncontradictory truths about God and about the universe he created.

(2) Second, it must be answered that in God’s own mind, and in the nature of reality itself, *true* facts and ideas are all consistent with one another. Therefore if we have accurately understood the teachings of God in Scripture we should expect our conclusions to “fit together” and be mutually consistent. Internal consistency, then, is an argument for, not against, any individual results of systematic theology.

2. “The Choice of Topics Dictates the Conclusions”

Another general objection to systematic theology concerns the choice and arrangement of topics, and even the fact that such topically arranged study of Scripture, using categories sometimes different from those found in Scripture itself, is done at all. Why are *these* theological topics treated rather than just the topics emphasized by the biblical authors, and why are the topics *arranged in this way* rather than in some other way? Perhaps—this objection would say—our traditions and our cultures have determined the topics we treat and the arrangement of topics so that the results of this systematic-theological study of Scripture, though acceptable in our own theological tradition, will in fact be untrue to Scripture itself.

A variant of this objection is the statement that our starting point often determines our conclusions on controversial topics: if we decide to start with an emphasis on the divine authorship of Scripture, for example, we will end up believing in biblical inerrancy, but if we start with an emphasis on the human authorship of Scripture, we will end up believing there are some errors in the Bible. Similarly, if we start with an emphasis on God’s sovereignty, we will end up as Calvinists, but if we start with an emphasis on man’s ability to make free choices, we will end up as Arminians,¹⁰ and so forth. This objection makes it sound as if the most important theological questions could probably be decided by flipping a coin to decide where to start, since *different* and *equally valid* conclusions will inevitably be reached from the different starting points.

Those who make such an objection often suggest that the best way to avoid this problem is not to study or teach systematic theology at all, but to limit our topical studies to the field of biblical theology, treating only the topics and themes the biblical authors themselves emphasize and describing the historical development of these biblical themes through the Bible.

In response to this objection, much of the discussion in this chapter about the necessity to teach Scripture will be relevant. Our choice of topics need not be restricted to the main concerns of the biblical authors, for our goal is to find out what God requires of us in all areas of concern to us today.

For example, it was not the *main* concern of any New Testament author to explain such topics as “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” women’s roles in the church, or the doctrine of the Trinity, but these are valid areas of concern for us today, and we must look at all the places in Scripture that have relevance for those topics (whether those specific terms are mentioned or not, and whether those themes are of primary concern to each passage we examine or not) if we are going to be able to understand and explain to others “what the whole Bible teaches” about them.

The only alternative—for we *will* think *something* about those subjects—is to form

10. See chapter 16, pp. 420, 445–64, for a discussion of the terms *Calvinist* and *Arminian*.

our opinions haphazardly from a general impression of what we feel to be a “biblical” position on each subject or perhaps to buttress our positions with careful analysis of one or two relevant texts with no guarantee that those texts present a balanced view of “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) on the subject being considered. In fact this approach—one all too common in evangelical circles today—could, I suppose, be called “unsystematic theology” or even “disorderly and random theology”! Such an alternative is too subjective and too subject to cultural pressures. It tends toward doctrinal fragmentation and widespread doctrinal uncertainty, leaving the church theologically immature, like “children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14).

Concerning the objection about the choice and sequence of topics, there is nothing to prevent us from going to Scripture to look for answers to *any* doctrinal questions, considered in *any* sequence. The sequence of topics in this book is a very common one and has been adopted because it is orderly and lends itself well to learning and teaching. But the chapters could be read in any sequence one wanted and the conclusions should not be different, nor should the persuasiveness of the arguments—if they are rightly derived from Scripture—be significantly diminished. In fact, I suspect that most readers of this book will not read it through from chapter 1 to chapter 57 but will begin with the chapters of most interest to them and read others later. That does not really matter because I have tried to write the chapters so that they can be read as independent units, and I have added cross-references to sections in other chapters where relevant. Whether one reads the chapter on the new heavens and new earth (chapter 57) first or last or somewhere in between, the arguments will be the same, the Scripture passages quoted for support will be the same, and the conclusions should be the same.

3. “You Can’t Just Get Doctrine Directly from the Pages of Scripture”

This third objection is not about systematic theology in general but about my particular approach in this book. Although many of the reviews of the first edition of this book were very positive, one criticism concerned the method I used in constructing the book. Why did I think I could go directly to Scripture, quote a number of verses, and then conclude that we should believe *x* or *y* or *z*, on the basis of those verses? Did I not realize that doctrines needed to be developed through interaction with the writings of the great theologians in the history of the church and also with the writings of contemporary theologians who were famous in the academic world?

Coming from evangelical faculty members who teach and write in university contexts where they often seek to influence other scholars who hold a more liberal theological position, such an objection is understandable. I have studied in such contexts myself (at Harvard and Cambridge), and I would not write a book like this one—in which I assume the understandability and the complete truthfulness, authority, and internal consistency of Scripture—for the purpose of persuading other faculty members in

such contexts. That is because most or all of the nonevangelicals in that context would not share my belief that the words of the Bible are the very words of God and come with his authority. The basis of shared assumptions would be much narrower for such an audience.

For most theologians who are outside the evangelical world, the words of the Bible are *merely human words* expressing human ideas about God.¹¹ And the writings of the great theologians in the history of the church are, similarly, human ideas expressed in merely human words. Therefore, from their perspective, as we attempt to construct the doctrines that we should believe, all we have to work with are the human ideas about God that have been expressed both in the Bible and in Christian theological writings since the Bible was completed.

That is why, today, evangelical students are still able to study the writings of theologians such as Augustine, Calvin, or Luther on an equal footing with liberal students and faculty members who also study those writings. They all agree that these are merely human writings, and so there is no fundamental disagreement on the question of authority, or whether these writers might at times have been wrong.

But in such university contexts, evangelical students would not find shared assumptions if they were to base their research and writing on the assumption that the entire Bible is the word of God and therefore absolutely truthful and absolutely authoritative. In fact, upon receiving a copy of the first edition of this book in 1994, my always-gracious doctoral supervisor at Cambridge, Professor C. F. D. Moule (1908–2007), wrote to thank me as follows (note what he appreciates and what he does not appreciate):

I am writing . . . to thank you for your extremely generous gift of your *maximum opus*. . . I am filled with admiration—as I always have been—for your exceptional capacity for hard and accurate work. . . And Zondervan have done a very nice job, haven't they? . . . I know you wouldn't expect me to agree with you doctrinally! We are poles apart in our understanding of authority, which is the basis of so much; but we can rejoice to have the same Lord and to be fellow-members in the body."¹²

But I did not write this book to gain his approval. I wrote it for evangelical Christians who believe the Bible to be the very words of God, written by ordinary human beings under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (see chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5).

In addition, I could never have written a book like this if I had tried to do it as a brand-new believer, apart from the previous work of many theologians in the history of the church. My understanding of the doctrine of Scripture was the result of reading

11. I should add the qualification that many Roman Catholic scholars would not consider themselves to be “evangelicals,” but they would also agree that the words of the Bible are words of God.

12. Personal letter to Wayne Grudem from C. F. D. Moule, December 19, 1994. I had received my PhD from Cambridge in 1979, but Professor Moule regularly kept in touch with his former students.

the works of B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, and E. J. Young, and learning from Westminster Seminary professors John Frame, Edmund Clowney, Richard Gaffin, and others including my life-long friend Vern Poythress. My understanding of other areas of theology had been heavily influenced by the writings of John Calvin, John Murray, Louis Berkhof, Herman Bavinck, Charles Hodge, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. And all of those theologians had learned from the work of many who had gone before them, and they in turn had learned from others before them, going all the way back to the beginning of the church in the first century. At times in this book I cite one or another of these authors, but even where I do not (for this is an introductory textbook), those who are familiar with their writings will recognize their influence. (However, in the chapters where I deal with current differences of viewpoint among evangelical authors, I do cite and interact with the arguments of numerous other writers.)

In the end, however, I accepted or rejected various parts of all of their writings depending on whether, in my judgment, their viewpoints represented faithfully the teachings of the Bible itself, which I had been reading every day of my life for thirty-nine years when the first edition of this book was published in 1994. So yes, while taking into account those valuable influences, I do think it is possible to build a system of doctrine directly from the pages of Scripture. But I would also say that this cannot be done well without an awareness of the theological convictions of other Christian writers throughout the history of the church.

E. HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS STUDY SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

How then should we study systematic theology? The Bible provides some guidelines for answering this question.

1. We Should Study Systematic Theology with Prayer

If studying systematic theology is simply a certain way of studying the Bible, then the passages in Scripture that talk about the way in which we should study God's Word give guidance to us in this task. Just as the psalmist prays in Psalm 119:18, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law," so we should pray and seek God's help in understanding his Word. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." Studying theology is therefore a spiritual activity in which we need the help of the Holy Spirit.

No matter how intelligent a student might be, if the student does not continue to pray for God to give him or her an understanding mind and a believing and humble heart, and the student does not maintain a personal walk with the Lord, then the teachings of Scripture will be misunderstood and disbelieved, doctrinal error will result, and the mind and heart of the student will not be changed for the better but for the worse. "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23). Students of

systematic theology should resolve at the beginning to keep their lives free from any disobedience to God or any known sin that would disrupt their relationship with him. They should resolve to maintain with great regularity their own personal devotional lives. They should continually pray for wisdom and understanding of Scripture.

Charles Hodge, recognized as one of America's greatest theologians, taught at Princeton Seminary from 1820 to 1878 (Princeton was at that time conservative in its view of the authority of Scripture). But for two years (1826–28) he studied in Germany. When he returned to Princeton in 1828, he asked, in an address to students, how it was that, in the former great centers of Protestantism—especially Germany—Christianity had ceased to be even a nominal religion. Hodge answered that the reason was the decline of what he called “vital religion”:

Holiness is essential to the correct knowledge of divine things and the great security from error. . . . Wherever you find vital piety, there you find the doctrines of the fall, of depravity, of regeneration, of atonement, and of the deity of Jesus Christ. . . . Keep your hearts with all diligence, for out of them are the issues of life. . . . Holiness is essential to correct knowledge of divine things, and the great security from error. . . . When men lose the life of religion, they can believe the most monstrous doctrines, and glory in them.¹³

Since it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability rightly to understand Scripture, we need to realize that the proper thing to do, particularly when we are unable to understand some passage or some doctrine of Scripture, is to pray for God's help. Often what we need is not more data but more insight into the data we already have available. This insight is given only by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 1:17–19).

2. We Should Study Systematic Theology with Humility

Peter tells us, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Peter 5:5). Those who study systematic theology will learn many things about the teachings of Scripture that are perhaps not known or not known well by other Christians in their churches or by relatives who are older in the Lord than they are. They may also find that they understand things about Scripture that some of their church officers do not understand and that even their pastor has perhaps forgotten or never learned well.

In all of these situations it would be very easy to adopt an attitude of pride or superiority toward others who have not made such a study. But how ugly it would be if anyone were to use this knowledge of God's Word simply to win arguments or to put down a

13. David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, vol.1, *Faith and Learning, 1812–1868* (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), 123.

fellow Christian in conversation or to make another believer feel insignificant in the Lord's work. James's counsel is good for us at this point: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:19–20). He tells us that one's understanding of Scripture is to be imparted in humility and love:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. . . . But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13, 17–18)

Systematic theology rightly studied will not lead to the knowledge that "puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1) but to humility and love for others.

3. We Should Study Systematic Theology with Reason

First, it is right for us to reason from Scripture. We find in the New Testament that Jesus and the New Testament authors often quote a verse of Scripture and then draw logical conclusions from it. They reason from Scripture. It is therefore not wrong to use human understanding, human logic, and human reason to draw conclusions from the statements of Scripture. Nevertheless, when we reason and draw what we think to be correct logical deductions from Scripture, we sometimes make mistakes. The deductions we draw from the statements of Scripture are not equal to the statements of Scripture in certainty or authority, for our ability to reason and draw conclusions is not the ultimate standard of truth—only Scripture is.

What then are the limits on our use of our reasoning abilities to draw deductions from the statements of Scripture? The fact that reasoning to conclusions that go beyond the mere statements of Scripture is appropriate and even necessary for studying Scripture, and the fact that Scripture itself is the ultimate standard of truth, combine to indicate to us that *we are free to use our reasoning abilities to draw deductions from any passage of Scripture so long as these deductions do not contradict the clear teaching of some other passage of Scripture*.¹⁴

This principle safeguards against our misguided or incorrect logical deductions from Scripture. Our supposedly logical deductions may be erroneous, but Scripture is not erroneous. Thus, for example, we may read Scripture and find that God the Father is called God (1 Cor. 1:3), that God the Son is called God (John 20:28; Titus 2:13), and that God the Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3–4). We might deduce from this that there are

14. This guideline is also adopted from Professor John Frame of Reformed Theological Seminary (see p. 1).

three Gods! But then we find the Bible explicitly teaching us that God is one (Deut. 6:4; James 2:19). Thus we conclude that what we *thought* to be a valid logical deduction about three Gods was wrong and that Scripture teaches both (a) that there are three separate persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), each of whom is fully God, and (b) that there is one God. But how can this be? In our human experience, we understand what it means to know three separate persons—three friends, for example. But these three friends are three separate beings. How can God be three persons and yet one being?

Second, Christian theology can tolerate a paradox, but God never asks us to believe a contradiction. We cannot understand exactly how these two statements about God can both be true, so together they constitute a *paradox* (“a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true”).¹⁵ We can tolerate a paradox (such as “God is three persons and one God”) because we have confidence that ultimately God knows fully the truth about himself and about the nature of reality and that in his understanding the different elements of a paradox are fully reconciled,¹⁶ even though at this point God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isa. 55:8–9). But a true contradiction (such as, “God is three persons and God is not three persons”) would imply ultimate contradiction in God’s understanding of himself or of reality, and this cannot be.

When the psalmist says, “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (Ps. 119:160), he implies that God’s words are not only true individually but also viewed together as a whole. Viewed collectively, their “sum” is also “truth.” Ultimately, there is no internal contradiction either in Scripture or in God’s own thoughts.

15. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Morris (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1980), s.v. paradox, p. 950 (first definition). Essentially the same meaning is adopted by *Oxford English Dictionary* (1913 ed.), 7:450; *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1981 ed.), 742; *Random House College Dictionary* (1979 ed.), 964; and *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 780, though all note that *paradox* can also mean “contradiction” (though less commonly); cf. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan; Free, 1967), 5:45, and the entire article “Logical Paradoxes” by John van Heijenoort on pp. 45–51 of the same volume, which proposes solutions to many of the classical paradoxes in the history of philosophy. (If *paradox* meant “contradiction,” such solutions would be impossible.)

When I use the word *paradox* in the primary sense defined by these dictionaries today, I realize that I am differing somewhat with the article “Paradox” by K. S. Kantzer in the *EDT*, ed. Walter Elwell, 826–27 (which takes *paradox* to mean essentially “contradiction”). However, I am using *paradox* in an ordinary English sense and one also familiar in philosophy. There seems to me to be available no better word than *paradox* to refer to an apparent but not real contradiction.

There is, however, some lack of uniformity in the use of the term *paradox* and a related term, *antinomy*, in contemporary evangelical discussion. The word *antinomy* has sometimes been used to apply to what I here call *paradox*, that is, “seemingly

contradictory statements that may nonetheless both be true” (see, e.g., John Jefferson Davis, *Theology Primer* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 18). Such a sense for *antinomy* gained support in a widely read book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, by J. I. Packer (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961). On pp. 18–22 Packer defines *antinomy* as “an appearance of contradiction” (but admits on p. 18 that his definition differs with the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*). My problem with using *antinomy* in this sense is that the word is so unfamiliar in ordinary English that it just increases the stock of technical terms Christians have to learn in order to understand theologians, and moreover such a sense is unsupported by any of the dictionaries cited above, all of which define *antinomy* to mean “contradiction” (e.g., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1:371). The problem is not serious, but it would help communication if evangelicals could agree on uniform senses for these terms.

A paradox is certainly acceptable in systematic theology, and paradoxes are in fact inevitable so long as we have finite understanding of any theological topic. However, it is important to recognize that Christian theology should never affirm a *contradiction* (a set of two statements, one of which denies the other). A contradiction would be “God is three persons and God is not three persons” (where the term *persons* has the same sense in both halves of the sentence).

16. Another way of saying that we can tolerate a paradox is to say that we can tolerate a mystery in Christian theology.

4. We Should Study Systematic Theology with Help from Others

We need to be thankful that God has put teachers in the church (“God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third *teachers* . . .” [1 Cor. 12:28]). We should allow those with gifts of teaching to help us understand Scripture. This means that we should make use of systematic theologies and other books written by some of the teachers God has given to the church over the course of its history. It also means that our study of theology should include *talking with other Christians* about the things we study. Among those with whom we talk will often be some with gifts of teaching who can explain biblical teachings clearly and help us to understand more easily. In fact, some of the most effective learning in systematic theology courses in colleges and seminaries often occurs outside the classroom in informal conversations among students who are attempting to understand Bible doctrines for themselves.

5. We Should Study Systematic Theology by Collecting and Understanding All the Relevant Passages of Scripture on Any Topic

This point was mentioned in our definition of systematic theology at the beginning of the chapter, but the actual process needs to be described here. How does one go about making a doctrinal summary of what all the passages of Scripture teach on a certain topic?

For topics covered in this book, many people will find that studying the relevant chapters in this book (and other systematic theology books) and reading the Bible verses noted in those chapters is enough. But some people will want to do further study of Scripture on a particular topic or study some new topic not covered here. How could a student go about using the Bible to research its teachings on some new subject, perhaps one not discussed explicitly in any of his or her systematic theology textbooks?

The process would look like this: (1) Find all the relevant verses. The best help in this step is a good concordance or Bible search program, which enables one to look up key words and find the verses in which the subject is treated. For example, in studying what it means that man is created in the image and likeness of God, one needs to find all the verses in which *image* and *likeness* and *create* occur. (The words *man* and *God* occur too often to be useful for a concordance search.) In studying the doctrine of prayer, many words could be looked up (*pray, prayer, intercede, petition, supplication, confess, confession, praise, thanks, thanksgiving*, etc.)—and perhaps the list of verses would grow too long to be manageable, so that the student would have to skim the concordance entries or search results without looking up the verses, or the search would probably have to be divided into sections or limited in some other way. Verses can also be found by thinking through the overall history of the Bible and then turning to sections where there would be information on the topic at hand. For example, a student studying prayer would want to read passages like the one about Hannah’s prayer for a son (1 Sam. 1), Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8), Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane

(Matt. 26 and parallels), and so forth. Then in addition to using a concordance or a search program and reading other passages that one can find on the subject, checking the relevant sections in some systematic theology books will often bring to light other verses that had been missed, sometimes because none of the key words used for the concordance were in those verses.¹⁷

(2) The second step is to read, take notes, and summarize the points made in the relevant verses. Sometimes a theme will be repeated often and the summary of the various verses will be relatively easy. At other times, there will be verses difficult to understand, and the student will need to take some time to study a verse in depth (just by reading the verse in context over and over or by using specialized tools such as commentaries and dictionaries) until a satisfactory understanding is reached.

(3) Finally, the teachings of the various verses should be summarized into one or more points that the Bible affirms about that subject. The summary does not have to take the exact form of anyone else's conclusions on the subject, because we each may see things in Scripture that others have missed, or we may organize the subject differently or emphasize different things.

On the other hand, at this point it is also helpful to read related sections, if any can be found, in several systematic theology books. This provides a useful check against error and oversight, and often makes one aware of alternative perspectives and arguments that may cause us to modify or strengthen our position. If a student finds that others have argued for strongly differing conclusions, then these other views need to be stated fairly and then answered. Sometimes other theology books will alert us to historical or philosophical considerations that have been raised before in the history of the church, and these will provide additional insight or warnings against error.

The process outlined above is possible for any Christian who can read his or her Bible and can look up words in a concordance or use a Bible search program. Of course people will become faster and more accurate in this process with time and experience and Christian maturity, but it would be a tremendous help to the church if Christians generally would give much more time to searching out topics in Scripture for themselves and drawing conclusions in the way outlined above. The joy of discovery of biblical themes would be richly rewarding. Especially pastors and those who lead Bible studies would find added freshness in their understanding of Scripture and in their teaching.

6. We Should Study Systematic Theology with Rejoicing and Praise

The study of theology is not merely a theoretical exercise of the intellect. It is a study of the living God and of the wonders of all his works in creation and redemption.

17. I have read a number of student papers telling me that John's gospel says nothing about how Christians should pray, for example, because they looked at a concordance and found that the word *prayer* was not in John, and the word *pray* only

occurs four times in reference to Jesus praying in John 14, 16, and 17. They overlooked the fact that John contains several important verses where the word *ask* rather than the word *pray* is used (John 14:13–14; 15:7, 16, et al.).

We cannot study this subject dispassionately! We must love all that God is, all that he says and all that he does. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart” (Deut. 6:5). Our response to the study of the theology of Scripture should be that of the psalmist who said, “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!” (Ps. 139:17). In the study of the teachings of God’s Word, it should not surprise us if we often find our hearts spontaneously breaking forth in expressions of praise and delight like those of the psalmist:

The precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart. (Ps. 19:8)

In the way of your testimonies I delight
as much as in all riches. (Ps. 119:14)

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:103)

Your testimonies are my heritage forever,
for they are the joy of my heart. (Ps. 119:111)

I rejoice at your word
like one who finds great spoil. (Ps. 119:162)

Often in the study of theology the response of the Christian should be similar to that of Paul in reflecting on the long theological argument that he has just completed at the end of Romans 11:32. He breaks forth into joyful praise at the richness of the doctrine which God has enabled him to express:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.
Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

These questions at the end of each chapter focus on application to life. Because I think doctrine is to be felt at the emotional level as well as understood at the intellectual level, in many chapters I have included some questions about how a reader *feels* regarding a point of doctrine. I think these questions will prove quite valuable for those who take the time to reflect on them.

1. In what ways (if any) has this chapter changed your understanding of what systematic theology is? What was your attitude toward the study of systematic theology before reading this chapter? What is your attitude now?
2. What is likely to happen to a church or denomination that gives up learning systematic theology for a generation or longer? Has that been true of your church?
3. Are there any doctrines listed on the table of contents for which a fuller understanding would help to solve a personal difficulty in your life at the present time? What are the spiritual and emotional dangers that you personally need to be aware of in studying systematic theology?
4. Pray for God to make this study of basic Christian doctrines a time of spiritual growth and deeper fellowship with him, and a time in which you understand and apply the teachings of Scripture rightly.

Special Terms

apologetics
biblical theology
Christian ethics
contradiction
doctrine
dogmatic theology
historical theology
major doctrine
minor doctrine
New Testament theology
Old Testament theology
paradox
philosophical theology
presupposition
systematic theology

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In these bibliographies I have usually listed only works written from what would today be called a conservative evangelical position. This is because the purpose of this section is to give the student ready access to other treatments of each topic by theologians who share with this book the same general convictions about the nature of Scripture—that all of it is totally truthful and that it is God's unique and absolutely authoritative Word to

us. Once we step outside of that conviction, the variety of theological positions becomes amazingly large, and sufficient bibliographies are easily found in the more recent works cited below. (However, I have also included two representative Roman Catholic works because of the great influence of the Roman Catholic Church in almost every society in the world.)

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- 2008..... Van Genderen and Velema,
1–19
- 2011..... Horton, 13–34
- 2013..... Culver, 1–18
- 2013..... Frame, 3–52
- 2016..... Allen and Swain, 1–6
- 2017..... Barrett, 43–66
- 2019..... Letham, 33–38

7. *Renewal (or charismatic/Pentecostal)*

- 1988–92..... Williams, 1:11–28
- 1993..... Menzies and Horton, 9–13
- 1995..... Horton, 7–60
- 2008..... Duffield and Van Cleave, 5–6

SECTIONS IN REPRESENTATIVE ROMAN CATHOLIC SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGIES

1. *Roman Catholic: Traditional*

- 1955..... Ott, 1–10

2. *Roman Catholic: Post–Vatican II*

- 1980..... McBrien, 1:3–78, 183–200
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- overview of major biblical doctrines and shows the vital differences with Protestant liberal theology at every point, differences that still confront us today. It is required reading in all my introductory theology classes.)
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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Students have repeatedly mentioned that one of the most valuable parts of any of their courses in college or seminary has been the Scripture passages they were required to memorize. "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11). In each chapter, therefore, I have included an appropriate memory passage so that instructors may incorporate Scripture memory into the course requirements wherever possible.

Matthew 28:18–20: And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

HYMN

Systematic theology at its best will result in praise. It is appropriate therefore at the end of each chapter to include a hymn related to the subject of that chapter. In a classroom setting, the hymn can be sung together at the beginning or end of class. Alternatively, an individual reader can sing it privately or simply meditate quietly on the words.

For almost every chapter the words of the hymns were found in *Trinity Hymnal*,¹⁸ the hymnal of the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, but most of them are found in many other common hymnals. Unless otherwise noted,¹⁹ the words of these hymns are now in public domain and no longer subject to copyright restrictions: therefore they may be freely copied for PowerPoint use or photocopied.

Why have I used so many old hymns? The great hymns of the church have a doctrinal richness and breadth that is still unequaled. But many contemporary worship songs also have beauty and rich content, so for this second edition of *Systematic Theology*, I have added (with much help from Chris Herrington) a contemporary worship song at the end of each chapter as well.

For this chapter, however, I found no hymn ancient or modern that thanked God for the privilege of studying systematic theology from the pages of Scripture. Therefore I have selected a hymn of general praise, which is always appropriate.

“O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

This hymn by Charles Wesley (1707–88) begins by wishing for “a thousand tongues” to sing God’s praise. Verse 2 is a prayer that God would “assist me” in singing his praise throughout the earth. The remaining verses give praise to Jesus (vv. 3–6) and to God the Father (v. 7).

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer’s praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace.*

*Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;
’Tis music in the sinner’s ears,
’Tis life and health and peace.*

*My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad,
The honors of Thy name.*

*He breaks the pow’r of reigning sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.*

18. *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission, 1990). This hymn book is completely revised from a similar hymnal of the same title published by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1961.

19. Copyright restrictions still apply to the hymns in chapters 21, 37, and 5, and these may not be reproduced without permission from the owner of the copyright.

*He speaks and, list'ning to His voice,
New life the dead receive;
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice;
The humble poor believe.*

*Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ,
Ye blind, behold your Savior come;
And leap, ye lame, for joy.*

*Glory to God and praise and love
Be ever, ever giv'n
By saints below and saints above—
The church in earth and heav'n.*

Author: Charles Wesley, 1739, alt.

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP SONG

“O Praise The Name” (Anástasis)

*I cast my mind to Calvary,
Where Jesus bled and died for me.
I see His wounds His hands His feet,
My Savior on that cursed tree.
His body bound and drenched in tears.
They laid Him down in Joseph's tomb.
The entrance sealed by heavy stone,
Messiah still and all alone.*

Chorus

*O praise the Name of the Lord our God,
O praise His Name forevermore!
For endless days we will sing Your praise,
Oh Lord, oh Lord our God!*

*Then on the third, at break of dawn,
The Son of heaven rose again.
O trampled death, where is your sting?
The angels roar for Christ the King!
He shall return in robes of white.
The blazing sun shall pierce the night,
And I will rise among the saints,
My gaze transfixed on Jesus' face.*

Words by Benjamin Hastings, Dean
Ussher, and Marty Sampson²⁰

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PART 1

The Doctrine of the Word of God



CHAPTER 2

The Word of God

What are the different forms of the Word of God?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

What is meant by the phrase “the Word of God”? Actually, there are several different meanings taken by this phrase in the Bible. It is helpful to distinguish these different senses clearly at the beginning of this study.

A. “THE WORD OF GOD” AS A PERSON: JESUS CHRIST

Sometimes the Bible refers to the Son of God as “the Word of God.” In Revelation 19:13, John sees the risen Lord Jesus in heaven and says, “The name by which he is called is The Word of God.” Similarly, in the beginning of John’s gospel we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). It is clear that John is speaking of the Son of God here because in verse 14 he says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” These verses (and perhaps 1 John 1:1) are the only instances where the Bible refers to God the Son as “the Word” or “the Word of God,” so this usage is not common. But it does indicate that among the members of the Trinity it is especially God the Son who, in his person as well as in his words, has the role of communicating the character of God to us and of expressing the will of God for us.

B. “THE WORD OF GOD” AS SPEECH BY GOD

1. God’s Decrees

Sometimes God’s words take the form of powerful decrees that cause events to happen or even cause things to come into being. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). God even created the animal world by speaking his powerful word: “And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.’ And it was so” (Gen. 1:24). Thus, the psalmist can say, “*By the word of the LORD* the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6).

These powerful, creative words from God are often called God’s decrees.¹ *A decree of*

1. I am grateful to Professor John Frame for first making me aware of the four categories in this section and how the full authority of God applies to all four of them.

God is a word of God that causes something to happen. These decrees of God include not only the events of the original creation but also the continuing existence of all things, for Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Christ continually “upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

2. God’s Words of Personal Address

God sometimes communicates with people on earth by speaking directly to them. These can be called instances of God’s Word of *personal address*. Examples are found throughout Scripture. At the very beginning of creation God speaks to Adam: “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Gen. 2:16–17). After the sin of Adam and Eve, God still comes and speaks directly and personally to them in the words of the curse (Gen. 3:16–19). Another prominent example of God’s direct personal address to people on earth is found in the giving of the Ten Commandments: “*God spoke all these words*, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me’” (Ex. 20:1–3). In the New Testament, at Jesus’ baptism, God the Father spoke with a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

In these and several other instances where God spoke words of personal address to individual people it was clear to the hearers that these were the actual words of God: they were hearing God’s very voice, and they were therefore hearing words that had absolute divine authority and that were absolutely trustworthy. To disbelieve or disobey any of these words would have been to disbelieve or disobey God and therefore would have been sin.

Though the words of God’s personal address are always seen in Scripture to be the actual words of God, they are *also* “*human*” words in that they are spoken in ordinary human language that is immediately understandable. The fact that these words are spoken in human language does not limit their divine character or authority in any way: they are still entirely the words of God, spoken by the voice of God himself.

Some theologians have argued that since human language is always in some sense “imperfect,” any message that God addresses to us in human language must also be limited in its authority or truthfulness. But these passages and many others that record instances of God’s words of personal address to individuals give no indication of any limitation of the authority or truthfulness of God’s words when they are spoken in human language. Quite the contrary is true, for the words always place an absolute obligation on the hearers to believe them and to obey them fully. To disbelieve or disobey any part of them is to disbelieve or disobey God himself.

3. God’s Words as Speech Through Human Lips

Frequently in Scripture God raises up prophets through whom he speaks. Once again, it is evident that although these are human words, spoken in ordinary human

language by ordinary human beings, the authority and truthfulness of these words is in no way diminished: they are still completely God's words as well.

In Deuteronomy 18, God says to Moses:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. *And I will put my words in his mouth*, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. (Deut. 18:18–20)

God made a similar statement to Jeremiah: “Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, ‘Behold, I have put my words in your mouth’” (Jer. 1:9). God tells Jeremiah, “Whatever I command you, you shall speak” (Jer. 1:7; see also Ex. 4:12; Num. 22:38; 1 Sam. 15:3, 18, 23; 1 Kings 20:36; 2 Chron. 20:20; 25:15–16; Isa. 30:12–14; Jer. 6:10–12; 36:29–31, et al.). Anyone who claimed to be speaking for the Lord but who had not received a message from him was severely punished (Ezek. 13:1–7; Deut. 18:20–22).

Thus God's words spoken through human lips were considered to be just as authoritative and just as true as God's words of personal address. *There was no diminishing of the authority of these words* when they were spoken through human lips. To disbelieve or disobey any of them was to disbelieve or disobey God himself.

4. God's Words in Written Form (the Bible)

In addition to God's words of decree, God's words of personal address, and God's words spoken through the lips of human beings, we also find in Scripture several instances where God's words were put in *written form*. The first of these is found in the narrative of the giving of the two tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Commandments: “He gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (Ex. 31:18). “The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets” (Ex. 32:16; 34:1, 28).

Further writing was done by Moses:

Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years . . . you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing . . . that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God.” (Deut. 31:9–13)

This book, which Moses wrote, was then deposited by the side of the ark of the covenant: “When Moses had finished *writing the words of this law in a book* to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, “Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you” (Deut. 31:24–26).

Further additions were made to this book of God’s words. “*Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God*” (Josh. 24:26). God commanded Isaiah, “Now, go, *write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book*, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever” (Isa. 30:8). Once again, God said to Jeremiah, “*Write in a book* all the words that I have spoken to you” (Jer. 30:2; cf. Jer. 36:2–4, 27–31; 51:60). In the New Testament, Jesus promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance the words which he, Jesus, had spoken (John 14:26; cf. 16:12–13). Paul can say that the very words he writes to the Corinthians are “a command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37; cf. 2 Peter 3:2).

Once again it must be noted that these words are still considered to be God’s own words, even though they are written down mostly by human beings and always in human language. Still, they are absolutely authoritative and absolutely true: to disobey them or disbelieve them is a serious sin and brings judgment from God (1 Cor. 14:37; Jer. 36:29–31).

Several benefits come from the writing down of God’s words. First, there is a much *more accurate preservation* of God’s words for subsequent generations. To depend on memory and the repeating of oral tradition is a less reliable method of preserving these words throughout history than is their recording in writing (cf. Deut. 31:12–13). Second, the *opportunity for repeated inspection* of words that are written down permits careful study and discussion, which leads to better understanding and more complete obedience. Third, God’s words in writing are *accessible to many more people* than they are when preserved merely through memory and oral repetition. They can be inspected at any time by any person and are not limited in accessibility to those who have memorized them or those who are able to be present when they are recited orally. Thus the reliability, permanence, and accessibility of the form in which God’s words are preserved are all greatly enhanced when they are written down. Yet there is no indication that their authority or truthfulness is diminished.

C. THE FOCUS OF OUR STUDY

Of all the forms of the Word of God,² the focus of our study in systematic theology is God’s Word in written form, that is, the Bible. This is the form of God’s Word that

2. In addition to the forms of God’s Word mentioned above, God communicates to people through different types of “general revelation”—that is, revelation that is given not just to certain people but to all people generally. General revelation includes both the revelation of God that comes through nature (see Ps. 19:1–6; Acts 14:17) and the revelation of God

that comes through the inner awareness of God’s existence and inner sense of right and wrong in every person’s heart (Rom. 2:15). These kinds of revelation are nonverbal in form, and I have not included them in the list of various forms of the Word of God discussed in this chapter. (See chapter 7, pp. 143–47, for further discussion of general revelation.)

is available for study, for public inspection, for repeated examination, and as a basis for mutual discussion. It tells us about and points us to the Word of God as a person, namely Jesus Christ, whom we do not now have present in bodily form on earth. Thus we are no longer able to observe and imitate his life and teachings firsthand.

The other forms of the Word of God are not suitable as the primary basis for the study of theology. We do not hear God's words of decree and thus cannot study them directly but only through observation of their effects. God's words of personal address are uncommon, even in Scripture. Furthermore, even if we did hear some words of personal address from God to ourselves today, we would not have certainty that our understanding of it, our memory of it, and our subsequent report of it was wholly accurate. Nor would we be readily able to convey to others the certainty that the communication was from God, even if it was. God's words as spoken through human lips ceased to be given when the New Testament canon was completed.³ Thus, these other forms of God's words are inadequate as a primary basis for study in theology.

It is most profitable for us to study God's words as written in the Bible. It is God's written Word that he commands us to study. The man is "blessed" who "meditates" on God's law "day and night" (Ps. 1:1–2). God's words to Joshua are also applicable to us: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but *you shall meditate on it day and night*, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Josh. 1:8). It is the Word of God in the form of written Scripture that is "breathed out by God" and is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Do you think you would pay more attention if God spoke to you from heaven or through the voice of a living prophet than if he spoke to you from the written words of Scripture? Would you believe or obey such words more readily than you do Scripture? Do you think your present level of response to the written words of Scripture is an appropriate one? What positive steps can you take to make your attitude toward Scripture more like the kind of attitude God wants you to have?
2. When you think about the many ways in which God speaks and the frequency with which God communicates with his creatures through these means, what conclusions might you draw concerning the nature of God and the things that bring delight to him?

3. See chapter 3, pp. 47–57, on the canon of Scripture. For a discussion of the nature of contemporary Christian prophecy, see chapter 53, pp. 1303–13.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, pp. 23–24. Complete bibliographical data may be found on pp. 1489–96.) The subject of this chapter has not been treated explicitly in many systematic theologies, but similar material is often covered in the section on the authority of the Word of God; see the bibliography at the end of chapter 4 for that subject.

SECTIONS IN EVANGELICAL SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGIES

1. *Anglican (Episcopalian)*

- 1882–92 Litton, 9–10
 2001 Packer, 3–6
 2013 Bird, 62–70
 2017 Bray, 137–48

2. *Arminian (Wesleyan or Methodist)*

- 1940 Wiley, 1:124–65
 1992 Oden, 1:330–35, 345–51,
 379–82
 2002 Cottrell, 23–28

3. *Baptist*

- 1990–95 Garrett, 1:105–212
 2007 Akin, 118–175
 2013 Erickson, 121–42, 143–67,
 168–87, 210–29

4. *Dispensational*

- 2002–2005 Geisler, 1:229–43
 2017 MacArthur and Mayhue,
 69–142

5. *Lutheran*

(no explicit treatment)

6. *Reformed (or Presbyterian)*

- 1679–85 Turretin, *IET*, 1:55–61
 1894 Shedd, 85–124
 1906–11 Bavinck, *RD*, 1:283–300,
 301–22, 323–51, 401–2
 1998 Reymond, 3–24
 2008 Van Genderen and Velema,
 58–116
 2011 Horton, 151–219
 2013 Culver, xvi–xvii
 2013 Frame, 519–693
 2016 Allen and Swain, 30–56
 2017 Barrett, 145–88
 2019 Letham, 41–65

7. *Renewal (or charismatic/Pentecostal)*

- 1993 Menzies and Horton, 15–40
 1995 Horton, 61–116
 2008 Duffield and Van Cleave, 5–8

SECTIONS IN REPRESENTATIVE ROMAN CATHOLIC SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGIES

1. *Roman Catholic: Traditional*

- 1955 Ott (no explicit treatment)

2. *Roman Catholic: Post-Vatican II*

- 2012 *CCC*, paragraphs 101–41

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SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Psalm 1:1–2:

*Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in the way of sinners,*

*nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.*

HYMN

“Break Thou the Bread of Life”

This hymn is a prayer asking the Lord to give us not physical bread but spiritual nourishment from the “bread of life,” a metaphor referring both to the written Word of God (“the sacred page,” v. 1) and to Christ himself, the “Living Word” (see vv. 1, 3).

*Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
 As thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;
 Throughout the sacred page I seek thee, Lord,
 My spirit pants for thee, O Living Word.*

*Bless thou the truth, dear Lord, to me, to me,
 As thou didst bless the bread by Galilee;
 Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters fall;
 And I shall find my peace, my all in all.*

*Thou art the bread of life, O Lord, to me,
Thy holy Word the truth that saveth me;
Give me to eat and live with thee above;
Teach me to love thy truth, for thou art love.*

*O send thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,
That he may touch mine eyes, and make me see:
Show me the truth concealed within thy Word,
And in thy Book revealed I see the Lord.*

Author: Mary A. Lathbury, 1877

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP SONG

“Thy Word”

Chorus

*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,
And a light unto my path.
Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,
And a light unto my path.*

*When I feel afraid,
And I think I've lost my way,
Still You're there right beside me.
Nothing will I fear*

*As long as You are near.
Please be near me to the end.*

*I will not forget,
Your love for me, and yet,
My heart forever is wandering.
Jesus be my guide
And hold me to Your side.
I will love You to the end.*

Words by Amy Grant, Music
by Michael W. Smith⁴

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