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A SYSTEMATIC SUMMARY OF
✦ BIBLE TRUTH ✦

BIBLICAL
—
DOCTRINE



GENERAL EDITORS

JOHN MACARTHUR
RICHARD MAYHUE

Biblical Doctrine

Biblical Doctrine

A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth

John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue

GENERAL EDITORS

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Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth
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To all the faithful Master's Seminary graduates
serving Christ around the globe.

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”¹

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear,
Now to His temple draw near;
Join me in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord, who o’er all things so wondrously reigneth,
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!
Hast thou not seen
How thy desires all have been
Granted in what He ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;
Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.
Ponder anew
What the Almighty can do
If with His love He befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore Him!
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before Him!
Let the “amen”
Sound from His people again;
Gladly forever adore Him! Amen.
~Joachim Neander (1650–1680)

1. All hymns quoted in this volume are in the public domain.

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Preface

Professor Eugene Merrill has admonished his students that a biblically derived theology is “an old man’s game.” He explains,

By this I mean it presupposes so many other disciplines and so much accumulation of knowledge that few scholars are prepared to undertake the task unless they have invested long, hard years in preparation of its accomplishment.¹

We concur with his sage advice and have waited until the “evening hours” of our own lives to undertake this theology volume.

The following qualities shape the overall design and formation of *Biblical Doctrine*:

1. *Biblical* in content with a view to the progress of scriptural revelation
2. *Exegetical* in methodology because the meaning of Scripture is extracted from texts in the Bible
3. *Systematic* in presentation by focusing on an orderly synthesis of all that Scripture teaches on each area of doctrine
4. *Comprehensive* in breadth by evenly covering the major elements of systematic theology
5. *Pastoral* in application with expository preaching and holy living in view
6. *Practical* in its affordability, portability, and utility

Five interpretive principles guided our explanation of biblical revelation and doctrine:²

1. *The literal principle.* Scripture should be understood in its literal, natural, and normal sense. While the Bible does contain figures of speech and symbols, they are intended to convey literal truth. In general, however, the Bible speaks in literal terms and must be allowed to speak for itself.
2. *The historical principle.* A passage should be interpreted in its historical context. What the author intended and what the text meant to its first audience must

1. Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), xv.
2. The first four principles are drawn from John MacArthur, ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), xxx. Charts and notes from *The MacArthur Study Bible: English Standard Version* originate with *The MacArthur Study Bible*, copyright © 1997 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson. www.thomasnelson.com.

be taken into account. In this way, a proper, contextual understanding of the original meaning of Scripture can be grasped and articulated.

3. *The grammatical principle.* This task requires an understanding of the basic grammatical structure of each sentence in the original languages. To whom do the pronouns refer? What is the tense of the main verb? By asking simple questions like these, the meaning of the texts becomes clearer.
4. *The synthetic principle.* This principle, the *analogia scriptura*, means that Scripture is to be its own interpreter.³ It assumes that the Bible does not contradict itself. Thus, if an understanding of a passage conflicts with a truth taught elsewhere in the Scriptures, that interpretation cannot be correct. Scripture must be compared with Scripture to discover its accurate and full meaning.
5. *The clarity principle.* God intended Scripture to be understood. However, not every portion of the Bible is equally clear. Therefore, clearer portions should be employed to interpret the less clear.

While many would label us *fundamentalists*, this term can be historically and pejoratively misleading. For almost four decades, we have periodically considered what one word would best describe us. *Futurists*, *normalists*, and *sovereignists* have been considered but set aside because none of these adequately capture the one, most essential element of our theology. While not a perfect term, we have chosen *biblicists*, because at the core of our convictions lies unshakable trust in God's inerrant and infallible Bible, rightly interpreted.

This volume is marked by the following noteworthy distinctives:⁴

1. A presuppositional approach to Scripture that affirms (1) the eternal existence of almighty God and (2) his progressive, written revelation collected in the sixty-six-book canon of Scripture, which is inerrant and infallible in the autographs
2. An affirmation of recent creationism, that is, a young earth and a global flood
3. An emphasis on covenants that are biblically derived, not theologically constructed
4. A soteriology that reflects God's sovereignty in the redemption of sinners
5. A belief in the cessation of all miraculous sign gifts at the completion of the biblical canon, which is concurrent with the end of the apostolic era
6. A biblically based understanding of the New Testament church
7. A complementarian approach to the roles of men and women in the home and in the church
8. A futuristic premillennial understanding of eschatology according to God's sovereign plan for the whole world, including Israel

Additionally, a substantial reservoir of bibliographic references will enable readers to expand their studies beyond this volume.

Biblical Doctrine's design has multiple audiences in mind:

3. R. C. Sproul, "Biblical Interpretation and the Analogy of Faith," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 119–35.

4. *Biblical Doctrine* contains a distinct combination of features. These hallmarks generally follow in the footsteps of notable men like Allan A. MacRae (1902–1997), James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000), and S. Lewis Johnson (1915–2004).

1. seminary, college, and Bible institute instructors
2. seminary, college, and Bible institute students
3. national and international preachers⁵
4. local church teachers
5. lay people who want to understand Scripture in its entirety

All theologies should begin with biblical content arranged systematically that then leads to Christians being motivated to live holy lives of obedience to God's Word for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 4:17; 1 Pet. 4:11). To this end, *Biblical Doctrine* goes forth with our hope that it will

extend one's biblical knowledge, which will . . .
 enable one's sound understanding of doctrine, which will . . .
 enrich one's divine wisdom, which will . . .
 expand one's Christlike obedience, which will . . .
 elevate one's holy worship.⁶

The value of this volume will be enhanced by the complementary use of (1) the *MacArthur Study Bible* (ESV, NASB, NIV, and NKJV versions), (2) the *MacArthur Topical Bible*, and (3) the *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* series. A mini-library consisting of these four study tools will basically equip one to be a student of Scripture for a lifetime (2 Tim. 2:15).

A work of this magnitude comes about only as a result of significant involvement by many people. We greatly appreciate the vision and encouragement for *Biblical Doctrine* from Crossway, especially Dr. Lane Dennis (president), Dr. Justin Taylor (executive vice president of book publishing), Dave DeWit (vice president of book publishing), Dr. David Barshinger (editor, book division), and Jill Carter (editorial administrator). Our thanks go to the Master's University and Seminary board members who generously encouraged and prayed for this project. Our Master's Seminary colleagues Dr. Bill Barrick, Dr. Nathan Busenitz, Dr. Jim Mook, Dr. Bryan Murphy, Dr. Michael Vlach, and Professor Michael Riccardi supported us by producing drafts of several sections. Special thanks go to Jeremy Smith for his consultation. We express deep gratitude to Michael Riccardi and Nathan Busenitz for their comprehensive final edit of the entire volume. Janice Osborne cheerfully prepared innumerable drafts up to and including the final one presented to the publisher.

We offer this material with the prayer that

the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called

5. R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Pastor as Theologian," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 927–34; John Murray, "Calvin as Theologian and Expositor," in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:305–11.

6. "The goal of theology is the worship of God. The posture of theology is on one's knees. The model of theology is repentance." Sinclair B. Ferguson, quoted in James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 179.

you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might. (Eph. 1:17–19)

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“Amazing Grace”

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

The Lord has promised good to me;
His Word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come.
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

~John Newton (1725–1807)
stanza 5, John P. Rees (1828–1900)

Introduction

Prolegomena

Major Subjects Covered in Chapter 1

What Is Theology?

Why Study Theology?

What Are the Various Major Kinds of Theology?

What Is Systematic Theology?

What Are the Categories of Systematic Theology?

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

What Are the Benefits and Limitations of Systematic Theology?

What Is the Relationship of Systematic Theology to Doctrine?

What Is the Overarching and Unifying Theme of Scripture?

What Are the Major Motifs of Scripture?

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One's Worldview?

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One's Mind?

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One's Personal Life?

How Does Systematic Theology Relate to One's Ministry?

The term *prolegomena* originated from the combination of two Greek words, *pro*, meaning “before,” and *legō*, meaning “to say,” which together convey the general sense of “to say beforehand or “to say in advance.” A prolegomena chapter serves as a prologue or a preliminary discussion that introduces and defines the central content of the work that follows. These prefatory comments include assumptions,

definitions, methodology, and purposes, thereby providing a context for understanding the subsequent content. Here the prolegomena discussion is organized by giving answers to a series of significant questions that will prepare the reader for the ensuing material, which constitutes the main body of *Biblical Doctrine*.

What Is Theology?

Theology—from the Greek *theos*, “god,” and *logia*, “word”—is not a uniquely Christian word. The Greek verb *theologeō* refers to the act of speaking about a god, while the noun *theologos* refers to a person who engages in *theologeō*, that is, a *theologian*. The adjective *theologikos* describes something *theological*, while the noun *theologia* means “a word about god”—literally, *theology*. These words were used in pagan religious contexts centuries before the New Testament. None of these four words are found in the New Testament or the Septuagint. The earliest known Christian use of one of these terms is a reference to the apostle John as a *theologos* early in the second century AD.

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

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

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

Theology is the sustained effort to know the character, will, and acts of the triune God as he has disclosed and interpreted these for his people in Scripture . . . in order that we might know him, learn to think our thoughts after him, live our lives in his world on his terms, and by thought and action project his truth into our own time and culture.²

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

- Unknown author, *The Didache* (ca. 110)
- Irenaeus (ca. 120–202), *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*
- Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215), *Stromata*
- Origen (ca. 184–ca. 254), *On First Principles*
- Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 330–ca. 389), *Five Theological Orations*
- Augustine (354–430), *Enchiridion*
- John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 749), *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*

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

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

- Peter Lombard (ca. 1095–ca. 1169), *Four Books of Sentences*
- Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), *Summa Theologica*
- John Calvin (1509–1564), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- Thomas Watson (ca. 1620–1686), *A Body of Divinity*
- Francis Turretin (1623–1687), *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*
- John Gill (1697–1771), *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*
- John Dick (1764–1833), *Lectures on Theology*

Prominent theologies from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries are listed in the bibliography at the end of this chapter.

Why Study Theology?

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

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

What Are the Various Major Kinds of Theology?

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

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

7. *Systematic theology*: The organization of Scripture by a synthesis of scriptural teaching summarized using major categories that encompass the entirety of God’s written revelation (developed from exegetical and biblical theology)

What Is Systematic Theology?

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

Systematic theology is to the Bible what science is to nature. To suppose that all the other works of God are orderly and systematic, and the greater the work the more perfect the system: and that the greatest of all His works, in which all His perfections are transcendently displayed, should have no plan or system, is altogether absurd.⁴

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

A systematic theology must display (1) hermeneutical integrity, (2) doctrinal coherence, (3) ethical relevance, (4) worldview explicability, and (5) traditional continuity. Where these are present and operative one will find a good systematizing that will be of value to the expositor. As he carefully examines every detail of the text in preparation to expound it, systematic theology allows him to also view the whole theological picture—one that has taken into account not only the studied conclusions from church history but also the progress of revelation culminating in the complete revelation of God.⁶ (For a chronological overview of the progress of revelation, see the appendix).

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

When we properly weigh the proposition that the Scriptures are the deposit of special revelation, that they are the oracles of God, that in them God encounters and addresses us, discloses to us his incomprehensible majesty, summons us to the knowledge and fulfillment of his will, unveils to us the mystery of his counsel, and unfolds the purposes of his grace, then systematic theology, of all sciences and disciplines, is seen to be the most noble, not one of cold, impassioned reflection but one that stirs adoring wonder and claims the most consecrated exercise of all our powers. It is the most noble of all studies because its province is the whole

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

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

6. This insight came from our colleague Trevor Craigen, retired Master’s Seminary professor of theology.

counsel of God and seeks, as no other discipline, to set forth the riches of God's revelation in the orderly and embracive manner which is its peculiar method and function. All other departments of theological discipline contribute their findings to systematic theology and it brings all the wealth of knowledge derived from these disciplines to bear upon the more inclusive systemization which it undertakes.⁷

Systematic theology aims to expound in a comprehensive and thematically organized fashion the biblical doctrines focused on the persons of the triune God, their purposes, and their plans in relationship to the world and humanity. It begins with informing the intellect (knowing and understanding). The intellect shapes what we believe and love in our heart. Our will desires what we love and repudiates what we hate. Our actions then accord with what we want most. The mind shapes the affections, which shape the will, which directs the actions. Theology is not fully finished until it has warmed the heart (affections) and prompted the volition (will) to act in obedience to its content.⁸

What Are the Categories of Systematic Theology?

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

What Is the Relationship between Exegetical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology?⁹

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

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

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

9. The following resources represent some of the clearest definitions, distinctions, and dependencies of the three theological emphases under discussion: Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *WTJ* 38, no. 3 (1976): 281–99; Eugene Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), 1–27; Murray, “Systematic Theology,” 4:1–21; Roger Nicole, “The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,” in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 185–93; and Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 11–24.

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

To use a construction metaphor,

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

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

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

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

Hence exposition of the Scripture is basic to systematic theology. Its task is not simply the exposition of particular passages. That is the task of exegesis. Systematics must coordinate the teaching of particular passages and systematize this teaching under the appropriate topics. There is thus a synthesis that belongs to systematics that does not belong to exegesis as such. But to the extent to which systematic theology synthesizes the teaching of Scripture, and this is its main purpose, it is apparent how dependent it is upon the science of exegesis. It cannot coordinate and relate the teaching of particular passages without knowing what the teaching is. So exegesis is basic to its objective. This needs to be emphasized. Systematic theology has gravely suffered, indeed has deserted its vocation, when it has been divorced from meticulous attention to biblical exegesis. This is one reason why the charge mentioned above has so much to yield support to the indictment. Systematics becomes lifeless and fails in its mandate just to the extent to which it has become detached from exegesis. And the guarantee against a stereotyped dogmatics is that systematic theology be constantly enriched, deepened, and expanded by the treasures increasingly drawn from the Word of God. Exegesis keeps systematics not only in direct contact with the Word but it ever imparts to systematics the power which is derived from that Word. The Word is living and powerful.¹⁰

One other approach to theology should be added. Historical theology examines how exegetical and theological convictions developed over time. It takes into

10. Murray, "Systematic Theology," 4:17.

consideration the conclusions reached by prior generations of godly interpreters of Scripture.

What Are the Benefits and Limitations of Systematic Theology?

Benefits

Limitations

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

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

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

Benefits

Systematic theology can provide several benefits:

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

As James Leo Garrett Jr. puts it,

Systematic theology is beneficial as an extension of the teaching function of the churches, for the orderly and integrated formulation of biblical truths, for the undergirding of the preaching of preachers and lay Christians, for the defense of gospel truth against error that has invaded the church, for the legitimation of the gospel before philosophy and culture, as the foundation for Christian personal and social ethics, and for more effective universal propagation of the gospel and interaction with adherents of non-Christian religions.¹¹

11. James Leo Garrett Jr., “Why Systematic Theology?” *CTR* 3, no. 2 (1989): 281.

Limitations¹²

Systematic theology can be limited by the following factors:

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

What Is the Relationship of Systematic Theology to Doctrine?

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

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

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

In Latin, *doceo*, "to teach," *doctrina*, "what is being taught," and *doctor*, "the one who is teaching," all contribute to the meaning of the English word *doctrine*. The content may be informational (to be believed) or practical (to be lived out). It does not necessarily refer to categorized truth.

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

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

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

- with regard to origin— from God the Creator (John 7:16; Acts 13:12) or from God's creation (Col. 2:22; 1 Tim. 4:1)
- with regard to truth content (2 Thess. 2:11–12)—true or false
- with regard to human source (1 Thess. 2:13)—biblical or unbiblical
- with regard to quality (1 Tim. 1:10; 6:3)—sound or unsound

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

- with regard to acceptability (1 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 13:9)—familiar or strange
- with regard to retention (Rev. 2:24)—to hold or not to hold
- with regard to benefit (1 Tim. 4:6)—good or bad
- with regard to value (2 Tim. 3:16)—profitable or unprofitable

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

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

1. Sound doctrine exposes and confronts sin and false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:8–11, esp. 1:10; 4:1–6).
2. Sound doctrine marks a good servant of Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 4:6; see also 1 Tim. 4:13, 16; Titus 2:1).
3. Sound doctrine is rewarded with double honor for elders (1 Tim. 5:17).
4. Sound doctrine conforms to godliness (1 Tim. 6:3; Titus 2:10).
5. Sound doctrine is included in the apostolic example to follow (2 Tim. 3:10).
6. Sound doctrine is essential to equipping pastors (2 Tim. 3:16–17).
7. Sound doctrine is the continual mandate for preachers (2 Tim. 4:2–4).
8. Sound doctrine is a basic qualification for eldership (Titus 1:9).

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

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

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

1. Right doctrine automatically leads to godliness.
2. It doesn’t matter how a person lives so long as he or she has right doctrine.

3. Doctrine deadens, spiritually speaking.
4. There is no connection between what a person believes and how one lives.
5. Christianity is life, not doctrine.
6. Doctrine is irrelevant.
7. Doctrine divides.
8. Doctrine drives people away.

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

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

1. Sound doctrine is spiritually profitable (2 Tim. 3:16–17).
2. Spiritual blessings are promised for obedience (Rev. 1:3; 22:7).
3. Sound doctrine guards against sin (see Job, Joseph, Daniel, Christ).
4. Sound doctrine delineates between truth and error (2 Cor. 11:1–15; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).
5. Sound doctrine was central to Christ’s ministry (Matt. 7:28–29; Mark 4:2; Luke 4:32).
6. Sound doctrine was central in the early church (Acts 2:42; 5:28; 13:12).
7. Sound doctrine was central to apostolic ministry (Paul: Acts 13:12; 17:19; Gal. 2:11–21; John: 2 John 9–10).
8. Martyrs gave their lives for sound doctrine (Christ: Mark 11:18; Stephen: Acts 7:54–60; James: Acts 12:2; Paul: 2 Tim. 4:1–8).
9. Christ and the apostles left a mandate to pass sound doctrine on to the next generation (Christ: Matt. 28:20; Paul: 2 Tim. 2:2).
10. Churches were commended for sound doctrine or condemned for lack of sound doctrine (Ephesus, commended: Rev. 2:2, 6; Pergamum and Thyatira, condemned: Rev. 2:14–15, 20).
11. Established sound doctrine anticipates and prepares for eras when sound doctrine is out of season (2 Tim. 4:3).
12. Sound doctrine protects the church from false teachers (Titus 1:9).
13. Sound doctrine provides true spiritual adornment for believers (Titus 2:10).
14. Sound biblical teaching and sound systematic doctrine are inseparably connected to “theology.” Whether it be positionally viewed in a text of Scripture or comprehensively categorized from all Scripture, biblical teaching cannot be disconnected from its identification with theology. Put another way, all biblical teaching is theological in nature, and all Christian theology is biblical in content.

What Is the Overarching and Unifying Theme of Scripture?¹³

The broad theme of *king/kingdom* (human and divine) appears throughout the Bible. With the exceptions of Leviticus, Ruth, and Joel, the Old Testament explicitly mentions this theme in thirty-six of its thirty-nine books. Except for Philipians, Titus,

13. Adapted from Richard L. Mayhue, “The Kingdom of God: An Introduction,” *MSJ* 23, no. 2 (2012): 167–72. Used by permission of *MSJ*.

Philemon, and 1, 2, and 3 John, the New Testament directly mentions the subject in twenty-one of its twenty-seven books. All in all, fifty-seven of the sixty-six canonical books include the kingdom theme (86 percent).

The Hebrew words for “king,” “kingdom,” “reign,” and “throne” appear over three thousand times in the Old Testament, while the Greek words for these terms appear 160 times in the New Testament. The first Old Testament mention occurs in Genesis 10:10 and the last in Malachi 1:14. The initial appearance in the New Testament comes in Matthew 1:6 and the last in Revelation 22:5.

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

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

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

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

His reign is said to be forever and ever (Rev. 11:15; 22:5).

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

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

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

All *kingdom of God* passages can be summarized by recognizing several broad aspects. First is the *universal kingdom*, which includes the rule of God that has been, is,

and forever will be over all that exists in time and space. Second is God's *mediatorial kingdom*, in which he rules on earth through divinely chosen human representatives. Third is the *spiritual or redemptive aspect of God's kingdom*, which uniquely deals with a person's salvation and personal relationship with God through Christ. When Scripture uses the word "kingdom" to refer to God's kingdom, it could point to any one aspect of the kingdom or several of its parts together. Careful interpretation in context will determine the particulars for a given biblical text.

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

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

John Bright succinctly and eloquently captured this thinking as follows:

Old Testament and New Testament thus stand together as the two acts of a single drama. Act I points to its conclusion in Act II, and without it the play is an incomplete, unsatisfying thing. But Act II must be read in the light of Act I, else its meaning will be missed. For the play is organically one. The Bible is one book. Had we to give that book a title, we might with justice call it "The Book of the Coming Kingdom of God." That is, indeed, its central theme everywhere.¹⁴

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

The kingdom of God can be explained in this manner: The eternal triune God created a kingdom and two kingdom citizens (Adam and Eve) who were to have dominion over it. But an enemy deceived them, seduced them into breaking allegiance to the King, and caused them to rebel against their sovereign Creator. God intervened with consequential curses that exist to this day. Ever since, he has been redeeming sinful, rebellious people to be restored as qualified kingdom citizens, both now in a spiritual sense and later in a kingdom-on-earth sense. Finally, the enemy will be vanquished forever, as will sin. Thus, Revelation 21–22 describes the final and eternal expression of the kingdom of God, where the triune God will restore the kingdom to its original purity with the curse having been removed and the new heaven and the new earth becoming the everlasting abode of God and his people.

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