

Introduction to Systematic Theology



What is Systematic Theology?

Systematic theology is any study that answers the question, "*What does the whole Bible teach us today?*" about any given topic.

It 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.

Relationship to other disciplines

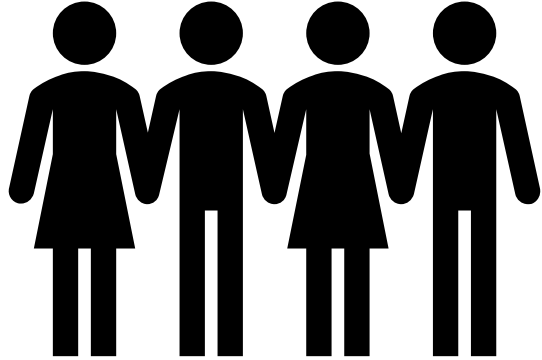
The *emphasis* of **systematic theology** is different from...

- *Historical theology* - a historical study of how Christians in different periods have understood various theological topics
- *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
- *Apologetics* - providing a defense of the truthfulness of the Christian faith for the purpose of convincing unbelievers

Relationship to other disciplines

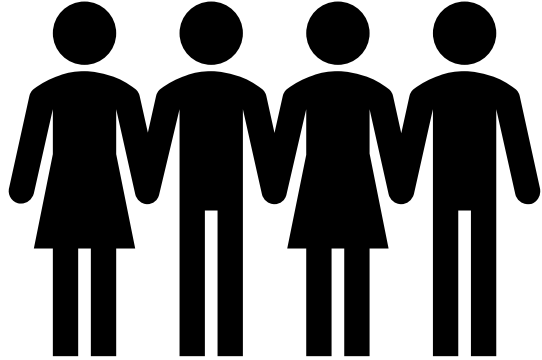
Instead, through **systematic theology** we will interact directly with Scriptures to understand what the Bible says to us about various theological subjects.

Application to Life



1. Systematic theology summarizes each doctrine as Christians **today** should understand them.
 - Sometimes, this involves using terms or concepts that are not used by any individual biblical author. Instead, such terms arise as the result of properly combining the teachings of 2 or more biblical authors on a particular subject.
 - For example, "Trinity", "incarnation" and "deity of Christ" are not found in the Bible, but they usefully summarize biblical concepts.

Application to Life



2. Since the focus is on “what the whole Bible teaches us today” we are interested in how doctrines are ***applied to life***.

- We look at each doctrine in terms of its practical value for living the Christian life. Nowhere in Scripture is doctrine studied isolated from life.
- The people who wrote the Bible consistently applied their teaching to life.
- Our aim, therefore, is to enrich and deepen our Christian lives during this study & to grow spiritually.

Why study theology?



1. The basic reason:

Jesus commanded his disciples (including us) 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 lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Matt. 28:19-20)

Why study theology?



2. Benefits to our lives

- a) Overcoming our wrong ideas
- b) Helping us grow as Christians

The Bible often connects sound doctrine with maturity in Christian living, e.g.:

- “the teaching which accords with godliness” - 1 Tim. 6:3
- Paul referred to his work as an apostle as “to further the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of *the truth which accords with godliness*” - Titus 1:1
- Paul indicated that all kinds of disobedience and immorality are “contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10)

How should we study systematic theology?



1. With prayer
2. With humility
3. With reason
4. With help from others
5. By collecting and understanding all the relevant passages of Scripture on any topic
6. With rejoicing and praise

How should we study systematic theology?

With **prayer**

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 unspiritual man does not receive the gifts 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.

It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability rightly to understand Scripture, so when we are unable to understand some passage or some doctrine of Scripture, we need 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 (1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 1:17–19)



How should we 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).*

Studying systematic theology may teach us many things that are perhaps not well known by other Christians (even relatives who are older in the Lord than we are). In these situations, we must avoid adopting an attitude of pride or superiority toward anyone else.

Consider James' good counsel: *"Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work 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 life 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, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13, 17-18)

Studying systematic theology rightly will not lead to the knowledge that "puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1).



How should we study systematic theology?

With **reason**



In the New Testament Jesus and the New Testament authors often quoted a verse of Scripture and then drew logical conclusions from it. They *reasoned* from Scripture. It is therefore not wrong to use human understanding, human logic, and human reason to draw conclusions from the statements of Scripture. However, the conclusions we draw from the statements of Scripture are not equal to the statements of Scripture themselves 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 conclusions 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 conclusions from any passage of Scripture so long as these conclusions do not contradict the clear teaching of some other passage of Scripture.***

How should we study systematic theology?

With **help from others**



We should be thankful that God has put teachers in the church (*"And 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 that have been written by some of the teachers that 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.

How should we study systematic theology?

By **collecting and understanding all the relevant passages of Scripture on any topic**



(1) Find all the relevant verses. A good concordance is a useful tool as it enables you to look up key words and find the verses in which the subject is treated.

(2) Read, make notes on, and try to 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 you 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.

How should we 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. We cannot study this subject dispassionately! ***We must love all that God is, all that he says and all that he does.***



Reference

- Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 32–37.

