

THE DEFINITION, VALIDATION, AND METHODOLOGY  
OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AAR American Academy of Religion

*BibSac* *Bibliotheca Sacra*

*CBQ* *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

*CJ* *Concordia Journal*

*CSSRB* *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin*

*CTR* *Criswell Theological Review*

*CV* *Communio Viatorum*

*EDT* *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by W. Elwell

*FT* *First Things*

*GTJ* *Grace Theological Journal*

*HR* *Homiletic Review*

*JAAR* *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

*JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*

*JMAT* *Journal of Ministry and Theology*

*JPC* *Journal of Pastoral Care*

*JR* *Journal of Religion*

*JTSA* *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*

*LQ* *Lutheran Quarterly*

*MT* *Modern Theology*

*NDBT* *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Alexander and Rosner

*NDT* *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Ferguson, Wright, and Packer

*NovT*    *Novum Testamentum*  
*PE*      *Pro Ecclesia*  
*PRR*    *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*  
*PRS*    *Perspectives in Religious Studies*  
*RE*      *Review & Expositor*  
*TE*      *Theological Education*  
*Them*   *Themelios*  
*TynBul* *Tyndale Bulletin*  
*WTJ*    *Westminster Theological Journal*

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

“The widening anti-intellectual trend of our day should spur evangelical Christians to a precise scholarly delineation of theological methodology.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote C. F. H. Henry in advocating the need for Christians to be concise and clear regarding theological affirmations. The sheer volume of theological material extant today provides the theologian no lack of sources to consult. However, a need exists in taking one step back even further to prolegomena matters in order to know *how* and *why* one must engage in the discipline of systematic theology. For many theologians, the methodology of theology has become a sort of secondary issue or, quite frankly, a relatively unimportant issue to discuss.<sup>2</sup>

The truism remains correct that every Christian is a theologian. Not only the ordained, but laypersons in general, are called to be theologians, since Scripture and Christian teaching are rightly studied by all believers, learned as well as learned.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, all “theologians” should know what the discipline both is and requires that they are engaged in.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 1:214. In fact, Henry further suggests that “if the question of method and verifiability is left unanswered, even the Christian himself can have no rational certainty in his commitment to God . . . A theological methodology is not merely to be presupposed, but is consciously set in juxtaposition to rival theories of life and reality, or else those who affirm God’s reality will otherwise frequently buttress their belief with unpersuasive arguments” (ibid.).

<sup>2</sup> See David Tracy, “Method as Foundation for Theology: Bernard Lonergan’s Option,” *JR* 50, no. 3 (July 1970): 293.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 1:364.

### *The Need for This Paper*

The need for this paper is manifold. First, this paper will define both biblical theology and systematic theology in ways that are understandable, agreeable, and workable. Second, this paper will formulate a theological method through which the framework, hypotheses, and systematizing of theology may be achieved.

Third, few theologies recognize—at least as clearly and explicitly spelled out in their respective tomes—the existence of presuppositions and a methodology for framing systematic theology.<sup>4</sup> In other words, many theologians implement a theological methodology in constructing a theology without ever explicitly defining that methodology being implemented. In essence, then, “to conceive theology in terms of method, therefore, is not to ask a second-level question but a foundational one.”<sup>5</sup> Fourth, the need for this paper stems from the recognition that a central interpretive motif threads its way into every theologian’s system. The central interpretive motif may vary from theologian to theologian. It consists of that theme which affects the way a certain theologian interprets various doctrines. Here, a few candidates must be discussed with a suggestion for the best central interpretive motif in the methodology of the dispensational theologian.

### *The Purpose for This Paper*

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, this paper will explain, define, work out, and construct a methodology for the systematic theology of the current author. Second, this paper will serve others in revealing the need for a study of such prolegomena issues and an

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<sup>4</sup> See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (reprint, 1958; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005). Berkhof omits a preliminary section on presuppositions and methodology. Nevertheless, to Berkhof’s credit, elsewhere he does explicate his presuppositions in theology (Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (reprint, 1932; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Tracy, “Method as Foundation for Theology,” 296.

honest recognition of the role of presuppositions in doing theology and ascertaining what those presuppositions are. That many theologies, essays, and journal articles neglect to specify this all-too-important step regardless of what doctrine or category being discussed is noticeable; hence the need for this paper.

This paper will not veer into explaining various theological categories per se; the intent, rather, is to formulate a methodology from square one so that the theologian *can* engage in an accurate theological process from the Word of God. In essence, Lonergan's words on methodology may adequately summarize the purpose of this project: "Method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dot. It is a framework for collaborative creativity. It would outline the various clusters of operations to be performed by theologians when they go about their various tasks."<sup>6</sup>

#### *Working Definitions of Biblical and Systematic Theology*

The definitions of terms may be the most crucial part of theology since these lay the groundwork for *what* the discipline is and *how* results are gathered. Regarding systematic theology, there are a couple of major views as to how it should be defined.<sup>7</sup> B. B. Warfield, perhaps representing the traditionalist camp, defines systematic theology as "nothing other than the saving truth of God presented in systematic form."<sup>8</sup> Bruce Demarest sees systematic theology quite broadly as he states:

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), xi.

<sup>7</sup> Not to mention, D. W. Simon finds systematic theology as a "tautology": the expression 'systematic theology' is really an impertinent tautology. It is a tautology, in so far as a theology that is not systematic or methodical would be no theology . . . and it is an impertinence, in so far as it suggests that there are other theological disciplinæ, or departments of theology, which are not methodical" (D. W. Simon, "The Nature and Scope of Systematic Theology," *BibSac* 51 [1894]: 587).

Systematic theology begins with divine revelation in its entirety, applies the Spirit-illuminated mind to comprehend the revelation, draws out the teachings of Scripture via sound grammatical-historical exegesis, provisionally respects the development of the doctrine in the church, orders the results in a coherent whole, and applies the results to the full scope of human endeavor<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Chafer sees it as:

A science which follows a humanly devised scheme or order of doctrinal development and which purports to incorporate into its system all the truth about God and His universe from any and every source. Systematic Theology may be distinguished from *Natural theology* in that Biblical theology draws its material only from the Bible; and from *Theology Proper* in that Theology Proper is restricted to the consideration of the Person of God, excluding His works.<sup>10</sup>

Included in the definitions of Demarest and Chafer include elements such as the duty of the exegete to rightly interpret the biblical texts and order them into a system and to combine knowledge of God from other sources as well with the truths as revealed in God's Word.

It should be clarified that Systematic Theology is more than a finished product. It may be beneficial to speak of Systematic Theology as a task to be performed rather than a completed project. Carson phrases it well: "systematic theology is not so much a mediating discipline as a culminating discipline."<sup>11</sup> John Murray speaks to this when he writes: "the task of systematic theology is to set forth in orderly and coherent manner the truth respecting God and his relations to men and the world."<sup>12</sup> Stallard defines it as "the discipline which develops and follows a system of doctrine which incorporates into its system all the truth

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Indispensableness of Systematic Theology to the Preacher," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—II*, 2 vols., ed. by John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 2:281.

<sup>9</sup> B. A. Demarest, "Systematic Theology," in *EDT*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1064–65.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:5.

<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, ed. by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 102.

<sup>12</sup> John Murray, "Systematic Theology," *WTJ* 25 (1963), 133 (emphasis added).

about the Christian God, His universe, and his relationship to it, from any and every source available to the mind of man.”<sup>13</sup> Based upon these observations and definitions of systematic theology, a working definition of systematic theology for this paper is as follows: *Systematic theology is the lifelong discipline which pursues, recognizes, and gathers all truth that can be known about the one, true God from His revealed Word and from every source available to mankind with the intended result of bringing about holiness in the Christian life and growth in Christian knowledge to the ultimate glory of God.* Note that in this definition a number of elements are essential:

1. Systematic theology is a **lifelong discipline**. This means it is an *endless* and *ongoing* discipline. Man will continually learn more and more about God (cf. Dan 12:4). Longergan writes: “the mysteries that God alone knows, that he has revealed, that the church has defined, may in the course of time become better understood.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, “the vocation of the systematic theologian remains!”<sup>15</sup>
2. Systematic theology **pursues, recognizes, and gathers all truth** about God. This means that it is a tedious and laborious *work* (cf. 2 Tim 2:15; cp. 1 Tim 4:15–16).<sup>16</sup>
3. Systematic theology desires all truth that can be known about **the One, True God**. This means that the believer wants to and desires to know the only God (2

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Stallard, “A Proposal for Theological Method: Systematic Theology as Model Building,” unpublished course notes: TH1 – Advanced Theological Method (Baptist Bible Seminary, Fall 2009), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Longergan, *Method in Theology*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> John R. W. Stott, “Theology: A Multidimensional Discipline,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, ed. by Donald Lewis, and Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding 2 Timothy 2:15, Chafer accurately comments: “the Apostle’s plea for ‘study’ is also a warning; for the Scriptures will not be ‘rightly divided’ apart from arduous ‘study.’ However, this is the theologian’s distinctive task and his worthiness may be measured, to a large degree, by his analytical knowledge of, and ability to apply, the entire text of God’s Word” (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:117).

Pet 3:18; cp. Phil 3:10). Note that this can only be the case for a believer since nonbelievers do not seek God (Ps 14:1; 53:1; Rom 3:11; 1 Cor 2:14).

4. Systematic theology holds **God's revealed Word** as the primary source of knowledge about this One, true God. This means that the Bible must be the primary tool for understanding all that is revealed about this God (John 17:3, 17).
5. Systematic theology researches **every source available to mankind** to also find information about God. This means that this discipline is a *researching* task (Isa 40:26; Ps 19:1; Rom 1:20).
6. Systematic theology has the end goal of **bringing about holiness in the Christian life and growth in Christian knowledge to the ultimate glory of God**. This means that systematic theology is a *pragmatic* and *goal-oriented* in bringing about the glory of God (Rom 1:5; 16:26; cp. 11:36).<sup>17</sup> In the words of Kenneth Kantzer, systematic theology seeks “to bring together the teaching of the whole of the Bible and apply it to all of life.”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, it is seen from this cursory study that systematic theology is a discipline well worth studying. Indeed, it is a study to which one should devote his entire life!

As for Biblical Theology, it has been referred to as a “movement . . . made up of biblical scholars in N. America and Europe who shared liberal, critical assumptions and methods in an attempt to do theology in relation to biblical studies.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed it is true that

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<sup>17</sup> Stott, “Theology, A Multidimensional Discipline,” 15 affirms that: “Christian theology is doxological theology.”

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth S. Kantzer, “Systematic Theology as a Practical Discipline,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, ed. by Donald Lewis, and Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 23 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> G. F. Hasel, “Biblical Theology Movement,” in *EDT*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 149.

“the theologians of the biblical theology movement remained with both feet planted in the historical-critical method.”<sup>20</sup> However, most biblical theologians would concur with Wayne Ward who understands biblical theology to be:

The popular appeal of biblical theology as the discipline which brings together all of the results of tedious work in textual studies, in archaeological excavations, and in Hebrew and Greek exegesis of the biblical texts themselves, sometimes drew attention away from these basic disciplines, without which serious study of the scriptures cannot proceed.<sup>21</sup>

Biblical theology must be grounded upon a proper hermeneutic implementing historical grammatical exegesis.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, biblical theology should not be an enemy of systematic theology. Though they must be distinguished one from another, they cannot exist without the other as biblical theology plays a vital role in the formulation of systematic theology. Ward writes: “biblical theology must be a historical discipline, transmitting faithfully what the biblical writers thought. Its method must be essentially descriptive and inductive. Dogmatics, on the other hand, is the expression of a particular theologian, conditioned by his own tradition, philosophical presuppositions, purpose, and native ability.”<sup>23</sup>

But how do systematic theology and biblical theology fit together? Warfield offers a proposal:

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<sup>20</sup> Hasel, “Biblical Theology Movement,” 151. B. B. Warfield concurs: “[b]iblical theology came wrapped in the swaddling-clothes of rationalism, and it was rocked in the cradle of the Hegelian recasting of Christianity; it did not present at first, therefore, a very engaging countenance, and seemed to find for a time its chief pleasure in setting the prophets and apostles by the ears” (Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Century’s Progress in Biblical Knowledge,” *HR* 39 [1900]: 201).

<sup>21</sup> Wayne E. Ward, “Towards a Biblical Theology,” *RE* 74, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 371.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*, 382. Ward sees biblical theology as implementing proper exegetical principles and he also sees biblical theology as resulting in application. He writes: a good biblical theology will bring the deep response, “Lord, what will Thou have me to do?” (*ibid.*, 385). (The application of theology to contemporary life—though certainly essential—will later in this paper be shown to be the final step in the process of systematic theology.)

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

The relation of biblical theology to systematic theology is based on a true view of its function. Systematic theology is not founded on the direct and primary results of the exegetical process; it is founded on the final and complete results of exegesis as exhibited in biblical theology. Not exegesis itself, then, but biblical theology, provides the material for systematics. Biblical theology is not, then, a rival of systematics; it is not even a parallel product of the same body of facts, provided by exegesis; it is the basis and source of systematics.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, if Warfield's statement proves correct, then neither can be discarded. Biblical theology is a fundamental step within the entire framework of systematic theology.

Carson acknowledges that both systematic theology and biblical theology are profitable and have important roles and functions in determining one's theology, he writes: "systematic theology tends to be a culminating discipline; biblical theology, though it is a worthy end in itself, tends to be a bridge discipline."<sup>25</sup> These two disciplines should not be antithetical to one another, but when used in conjunction with one another properly, great benefits result. The goal of theology is to produce a "systematic biblical theology."<sup>26</sup> To conclude then, Thomas Oden has it right: "the study of God requires intellectual effort, historical imagination, empathic energy, and participation in a vital community of prayer."<sup>27</sup> And this is what the remainder of the paper seeks to show.

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," in *The Necessity of Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. by John Jefferson Davis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 145.

<sup>25</sup> Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 103. He elaborates by suggesting that "systematic theology tends to be a little further removed from the biblical text than does biblical theology, but a little closer to cultural engagement. Biblical theology tends to seek out the rationality and communicative genius of each literary genre; systematic theology tends to integrate the diverse rationalities in its pursuit of a large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis" (ibid.).

<sup>26</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 25.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 1:340.

## CHAPTER 2

### PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THEOLOGY

#### *The Acknowledgement of Presuppositions*

Presuppositions are inevitable and everyone has them in every field of study. It is impossible to do an objective study of anything without one's presuppositions affecting the results. Giving the right perspective on the existence of and the role of presuppositions, W. Ward writes:

Like every other scientist in every field of human endeavor, the Christian theologian brings some basic presuppositions to his task of research. It is not important that he bring none, for that is impossible. It is important that he bring the *right* ones, and that, so far as possible, they may be explicitly recognized. The right presuppositions for the biblical theologian would be those which grow out of the biblical materials themselves. However subjective this may be, the presuppositions should be continually re-evaluated and corrected or rejected in the light of the results of historical exegesis.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, without attempting to minimize or ignore the presence of presuppositions, they must be acknowledge and delineated for this paper. It is important, however, that the presuppositions derive from the Word of God and correspond to the presuppositions that the Word of God has.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne E. Ward, "Towards a Biblical Theology," *RE* 74, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 382 (emphasis original); cf. Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and The Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 41.

*The Delineation of Presuppositions*

The presuppositions of theology of the present writer that must be understood are the existence of God, revelation of God, the rationality of man, the inspiration of Scripture, and the harmony of Scripture.

First, the existence of God cannot be debated. “It is a first truth, being logically prior to the belief in the Bible. A belief is intuitive if it is universal and necessary.”<sup>2</sup> It is presupposed in the very first sentence of the Bible: “In the beginning, *God*. . .” (Gen 1:1, emphasis added). It is, furthermore, an expression of faith. The author writes to the Hebrews: “Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . . And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”<sup>3</sup> The Word of God has no tender words for the one who tries to prove that God does not exist: “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God,’ They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good” (Ps 53:1; cf. Ps 14:1; Heb 11:6). Because the existence of God is *a priori* assumed in the pages of Scripture, the theologian has every reason to include the existence of God as an *a priori* assumption in his theological method (cf. Rom 1:18–20; 2:14–15).

Second, the revelation of God is a presuppositional factor that cannot be overlooked.<sup>4</sup> As just stated, one must recognize that God exists. But taking that truth to the next step, the Bible reveals that this eternally existing and one true God has revealed Himself (cf. Ps 19:1–9; Rom 1: 18–20; Col 1:15; 2:9; Heb 1:1–3; Rev 1:1). Indeed, systematic theology knows

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. by Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 25.

<sup>3</sup> All English Scripture citations are from the New American Standard Bible (1995 updated edition), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> See Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Revelation,” *BibSac* 94, no. 375 (July-Sep 1937): 269–80.

that God can be known and truths about God can be communicated in meaningful everyday language.<sup>5</sup> Elaborating on this essential truth, C. F. H. Henry considers that:

The firm fact that God's self-disclosure is fully intelligible, and given in the form of rational concepts and valid truths, cuts through the specious notions that the philosopher cannot speak either of God or of his Word or of divine action in man's existence, that theology wholly depends upon speculation for a clarification of its concepts and the linguistic expression of the content of faith, or that any and every philosophical ontology restricts the freedom of God in his revelation and substitutes an alternative and spurious primary authority.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, man could know nothing of the true God unless He first condescended to reveal Himself to humanity. Stott agrees that "Christian theology is a *response* to divine revelation. . . . Without revelation theology would inevitably degenerate into idolatry, since there would be no criterion by which to distinguish between true and false images of God. But the biblical revelation protects us from idolatry."<sup>7</sup>

Third, the rationality of mankind is, in fact, a presupposition.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, this understanding can be taken to utter extremes which are certainly fallacious,<sup>9</sup> yet, as Morrow surmises: "man, made in God's likeness, is a reasoning being and in response to the

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<sup>5</sup> See B. A. Demarest, "Systematic Theology," in *EDT*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1065.

<sup>6</sup> C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 1:194.

<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, "Theology: A Multidimensional Discipline," in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, ed. by Donald Lewis, and Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Oden has five purposes that reason plays in the study of God. For this study, it is beneficial to state them here: (1) to receive revelation [from God]; (2) to decide whether or when revelation has occurred (distinguish truth from falsehood); (3) to show the reasonableness of that which reason itself cannot attain (reveal reason's own limitations by pointing beyond itself); (4) to interpret and apply revealed truth; and (5) to transmit it to new generations (see *Systematic Theology*, 1:392–94).

<sup>9</sup> This was a hallmark of the Enlightenment period of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. C. F. H. Henry speaks to this: When human reasoning is exalted as the source of truth, then the content of truth is soon conformed to the prejudices of some influential thinker or school of scholars, or it may be conformed to the current consensus of opinion, sometimes dignified by the expression "the universal human consciousness . . . Christian theology denies that the human mind or human reasoning is a creative source of revelation content; its proper role is not to fashion revelation or truth, but rather to recognize and elucidate it (*God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999], 1:226).

revelation which God has made, must use his rationality to apprehend God.”<sup>10</sup> Job recognized the rationality and understanding of man as a gift of God when God reminded him with these rhetorical questions: “Who has put wisdom in the innermost being Or given understanding to the mind” (Job 38:36)? That man must acknowledge the ability to think and reason facts as a gift from God is implicit. This is why a systematic theology *can* be accomplished, namely, because Christianity is a rational religion because it is grounded in the rational living God and his meaningful revelation as understood by rational creatures with the mind God has given them.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, the inspiration and authority of the Word of God is assumed in systematic theology (cf. Isa 55:11; Jer 23:29; cp. Isa 45:23; 2 Pet 1:20–21).<sup>12</sup> Regarding the presupposition that the Word of God is inspired, true, authoritative, and sufficient for the theologian, B. B. Warfield wrote concerning this:

The Word of God is to theology as, but vastly more than, these instruments are to astronomy. It is the instrument which so far increases the possibilities of the science as to revolutionize it and to place it upon a height from which it can never more descend. What would be thought of the deluded man, who, discarding the new methods of research, should insist on acquiring all the astronomy which he would admit, from the unaided observation of his own myopic and astigmatic eyes? Much more deluded is he who, neglecting the instrument of God’s Word written, would confine his admissions of theological truth to what he could discover from the broken lights that play upon external nature, and the faint gleams of a dying or even a slowly reviving light, which arise in his own sinful soul. Ah, no! The telescope first made a

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<sup>10</sup> T. W. J. Morrow, “Systematic Theology,” in *NDT*, ed. by Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 671.

<sup>11</sup> See Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:244. B. B. Warfield elaborates: “like all other science, therefore, theology, for its very existence as a science, presupposes the objective reality of the subject-matter with which it deals; the subjective capacity of the human mind so far to understand this subject-matter as to be able to subsume it under the forms of its thinking and to rationalize it into not only a comprehensive, but also a comprehensible whole; and the existence of trustworthy media of communication by which the subject-matter is brought to the mind and presented before it for perception and understanding” (Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” *PRR* 7, no. 26 [April 1896]: 247).

<sup>12</sup> See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:7.

real science of astronomy possible: and the Scriptures form the only sufficing source of theology!”<sup>13</sup>

The authority of Scripture is most certainly affirmed by God the Holy Spirit who confirms His word to His people. Even the very words are inspired, meaningful, and God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16; cp. Matt 5:18).<sup>14</sup> John Calvin recognized this and stated: “If at any time, then, we are troubled at the small number of those who believe, let us, on the other hand, call to mind, that none comprehend the mysteries of God save those to whom it is given.”<sup>15</sup> Again, that presuppositions are inevitable is clear. No historian, scientist, or theologian can proceed without them.<sup>16</sup>

Closely related to the inspiration and authority of Scripture is the harmony of Scripture, also known as the unity of Scripture. This presupposition asserts that God’s Word *can* be connected and unified as a cohesive system of thought without any contradictory or illogical contentions. A careful concern for coherence and unity must certainly be part of the ingredients of the theologian’s presuppositions.<sup>17</sup> For if the Word of God did not cohere then the task of systematic theology would crumble immediately. Certainly acknowledging the progression of Scripture as a necessary ingredient to proper biblical interpretation, one may

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *The Necessity of Systematic Theology*, 2d ed., ed. by John Jefferson Davis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 142.

<sup>14</sup> See Wayne Grudem, “The Perspicuity of Scripture,” *Them* 34, no. 3 (2009): 303 who says: “several Old Testament passages affirm an expectation that the words of Scripture are able to be understood (e.g., Deut 6:6–7); contra John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 394 who writes: “language is always meaning only from outside itself. Language does not have its meaning in its words.”

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (reprint, 1989; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 73.

<sup>16</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:231.

<sup>17</sup> See Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 19.

understand with Henry that: “the Christian system of doctrine prizes internal consistency. The truths of revealed religion do not contradict each other; the theorems derived from the axiom of revelation are self-consistent.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:234.

CHAPTER 3  
CATEGORIZATION OF THEOLOGY

*Introduction*

This section shows how the present author would divide, organize, and categorize theology as though looking to write a large theological tome. Without delving into the particulars of the ten standard theological categories and defining and proving each, the categorization of theology is necessary—albeit ever so briefly. The reason this is necessary is because how one categorizes theology shows how the author builds his theological method and how they logically fit together.

*The Order of the Categories*

To begin, the author is convinced that the first section of the theological work must be the methodology section. This is before even the definitional sections of theology. The reason that this is included in the categorization of theology is because the methodological building blocks must be specified from the beginning. The theologian must acknowledge the existence of presuppositions and specify what those presuppositions are in that specific project. Moreover, this section also includes the author's particular methodology for doing theology. He should pose and answer such questions as: What is his method? How is theology "accomplished"? Seldom is this indicated in systematic theologies. This would then lead one into the definitions of systematic and biblical theology and their relations with other disciplines—science, philosophy, history, experience, and others.

In this regard, note the good example provided by Millard Erickson in his *Christian Theology*.<sup>1</sup> In Part I of his theology, he defines theology, speaks to the relationship of theology and philosophy, and he identifies his methodology among other helpful sections. This is to show the example of a theologian introducing the theology with the methodological section. Contrariwise, one should mark Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* where, on the first page, he immediately begins his study with a section on the existence of God without any explanation whatsoever of his theological method.<sup>2</sup> This shows the diversity among standard theological works regarding the importance of and the specification of a particular theological method at the outset of the theological work.

The second category of theology should be bibliology. The reason is that everything a Christian believes is—or should be—derived from the Word of God as the supreme authority. The author believes that the word of God is to be the starting point for systematic theology. This is where everything begins after one has his theological methodology. The reason bibliology can come next in terms of theological categorization is because of the presuppositions that God has revealed Himself (in His Word), that it is understandable (to the rational minds of man that God has granted), and the inspiration and unity of Holy Scripture. Understanding this, the theologian may begin the theology with the doctrine of bibliology and expound the various concepts and doctrines found here.

After the theologian has established the absolute supremacy of the Word of God over every other source of knowledge should he then turn to the doctrine of Theology Proper, that

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<sup>1</sup> See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 17–149.

<sup>2</sup> See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (reprint; 1958, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 19. To Berkhof's credit, he notes two presuppositions in the work: (1) that God exists, and (2) that He has revealed Himself. But, as far as a methodological section and a definitional section, Berkhof eliminates these completely.

is, the study of God. The reason Theology Proper comes next is because the doctrine of God the Father cannot be known apart from a proper submission to and understanding of the Word of God. The supernatural character of the Bible and the supernatural acts of God must be recognized and believed because the Bible contains these truths. This forces the theologian to surrender to an all-powerful and all-sovereign God who has revealed Himself so that man may know Him, love Him, and glorify Him.

Fourth, after the methodological chapter, and a chapter on both the proper understanding of the Bible and the nature of God the theologian is ready to embark upon Anthropology. Anthropology logically fits next because after recognizing the holiness, transcendence, and utter righteousness of God the case should be constructed for the (biblical) doctrine of man including the *Imago Dei* and the depraved nature of all mankind.

Logically after coming to a seemingly unsolvable crack in the relationship of holy God and wretched man, Christology would make up the following section. It is understandable that after one recognizes the sovereign and unapproachable holiness of God and the corrupt and impure nature of man, the theologian should then embark upon *the* only way to gain access to God, which plunges the theologian into the glorious doctrine of Christology and all its facets and nuances (cf. 1 Tim 2:5; cp. John 14:6).

Christology easily transitions into soteriology where the theologian undertakes the marvelous privilege of observing the wonderful truths of salvation. Following soteriology, the subsequent chapter in the theology would consist of ecclesiology since a person who now is saved and sealed should know *how* to conduct himself in the household of God (1 Tim 3:15). These logically flow one from the other.

However, one doctrine that largely is omitted from systematic theologies is a theological category of Israelology.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this should be prior to eschatology so that the readers comprehend the biblical distinction of Israel and the Church.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the format of this category would appear as follows:

- I. The Origins of the Nation of Israel
- II. The Election of the Nation of Israel
- III. The Distinctiveness of the Nation of Israel
- IV. The Covenants of the Nation of Israel
- V. The Exile of the Nation of Israel
- VI. The Current State of the Nation of Israel
- VII. The Future Restoration of the Nation of Israel

Combining these seven broad categories together would consist of a lengthy treatise on God's dealings and plan for national, ethnic Israel. Indeed, if God has forsaken Israel, then He is a faithless God (Jer 31:35–37; cp. Heb 6:13–20, esp. v.18). This is why, in this author's estimation, Israelology demands its own category.

Israelology would be a fitting category for a full and complete discussion before delving into the similarly related issues of end-times. The truths just aforementioned about Israel and the reality of her future restoration would nicely transition into discussing the future of the world—the tribulation, millennium, and the eternal state. Hence, the final

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<sup>3</sup> See Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Chafer posits the ecclesiology and eschatology volume (which includes a section on Israel as distinct from the Church) not at the end, as usually supposed, but rather right in the middle of the set (vol. 4 out of the 8 vols.).

category in the arrangement would be eschatology and the various concepts and truths thereof.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY OF THEOLOGY

A methodology of theology<sup>1</sup> is vital to a proper grid to be set in order to then undertake the art of biblical interpretation and theological categorization. Regarding introductory matters, Lonergan writes about the importance of method: “method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dot. It is a framework for collaborative creativity. It would outline the various clusters of operations to be performed by theologians when they go about their various tasks.”<sup>2</sup> To state it similarly, the method that the theologian must adhere to is: “not a set of rules but as a prior, normative pattern of operations from which the rules may be derived.”<sup>3</sup> The heart and soul of this paper where one defines, validates, and works out *how* systematic theology is accomplished resides here in this section. Since, if one’s methodology is flawed from the outset, if one’s presuppositions are misguided, if a step in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper gives the reasons for and the way to formulate a proper methodology. Charles Hodge recognizes five erroneous methodologies for constructing a systematic theology which must be acknowledged here (*Systematic Theology*, 1:4–10):

1. The speculative method – speculation assumes *a priori* certain principles and then determines what is and what must be. It decides on all truth from the laws of the mind;
2. Deistic and rationalistic form – this rejects any other source of knowledge of divine things than what is found in nature and the constitution of the human mind;
3. Transcendentalists – These are addicted to the speculative method. They are rationalists, but they make reason to be something different than traditional rationalists. All truth is to be determined by reason and process of thought;
4. Mystical method – this is a matter of feeling. One assumes that feelings alone are to be relied upon, at least in the sphere of religion;
5. Inductive method – it agrees in everything essential with the inductive method as applied to the natural sciences. First, he comes with certain assumptions; second, he perceives, gathers, and combines his facts. Third, he deduces the laws by which they are determined.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the process of theological formulation is omitted, then the process is inadequate. For that reason, the following five sections are five “steps” to performing the task of systematic theology.

*Exegetical Biblical Theology—INTERPRET*

Biblical theology is an invaluable step in the systematic theology process for one cannot compile theological truths together if the theological truths are wrongly interpreted from the biblical text. A complete systematic theology cannot be comprehensive until biblical theology has rightly been applied and the biblical text has rightly been exegeted.

John Murray concurs:

Perhaps the greatest enrichment of systematic theology, when it is oriented to biblical theology, is the perspective that is gained for the unity and continuity of special revelation. Orthodox systematic theology rests on the premise of the unity of Scripture, the consent of all its parts. It is this unity that makes valid the hermeneutical principle, the analogy of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

Biblical theology is the application of grammatical-historical hermeneutics<sup>5</sup> to specific biblical texts so as to ascertain the accurate and authorial intent of a particular passage. This step of interpretation combines observation and grammatical diagramming in implementing the original languages with the result of an exegesis that takes into account the context of that particular passage (and the much larger context as well) so as to know what the *author* meant when he wrote a passage.

This step of exegetical biblical theology may be the most arduous and time-consuming step in the whole process. If this step produces faulty interpretations of biblical texts, then the rest of the process of systematic theology will be flawed. Therefore, this step

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<sup>4</sup> John Murray, “Systematic Theology: Second Article,” *WTJ* 26 (1964): 41.

<sup>5</sup> See Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries), esp. 9–26.

of interpretation proves to be the foundation upon which the rest of the theological method must stand.

*Examine the Entirety of Biblical Revelation—INTERMINGLE*

The methodology of systematic theology must seek to examine the entirety of biblical revelation while seeking to be faithful to Scripture.<sup>6</sup> This is the step where the specific passages are joined next to any and all other passages relating to that same theme so as to find unity among them all. This is crucial as this incorporates the analogy of faith and the analogy of Scripture. Passages cannot contradict each other and they must harmonize with the other Scripture passages. This, then, proves to be the step of intermingling all the relevant passages together and exegeting them individually.

One's hermeneutical bias comes to the fore in this step, however. Covenant theologians prefer to read the Old Testament in light of the New. Dispensational theologians see it best to read the Old Testament by itself and not read the New Testament passages *back* into the Old Testament texts.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the author believes that in matters of ecclesiology, the relevant biblical texts specifically dealing with the "Church" are post-Pentecost (Acts 2) and do not include any passages in the Old Testament which specifically refer to the Church. Nevertheless, this second step reveals that the interpreter must examine the entirety of biblical revelation and join various texts together that hermeneutically can and should be supportive of one another.

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<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, ed. by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 101.

<sup>7</sup> For this, see the helpful articles in John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments, Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), esp. 63–86.

*Synthesize the Finds into Categories—SYNTHESIZE*

Herein is the most common understanding of systematic theology. Note, however, that this is not the starting point, nor is it the ending point in the discipline of systematic theology. At this point in the process, the theologian employs a method of taking the various Scriptures which were found in step #2 above “to seek to organize thematically the various dimensions and emphases of Scripture and in particular to show their inter-relatedness as they communicate the word of God.”<sup>8</sup> This is the step of synthesizing and categorizing the particular finds from biblical theology and exegesis. Additionally, it gathers all the finds from the second step of intermingling all the relevant texts together for a particular subject and synthesizes them together. B. B. Warfield speaks to this important issue: “the condition of [theological] science, then, is that the facts which fall within its scope shall be such as stand in relation not only to our faculties, so that they may be apprehended; but also to our mental constitution so that they may be so far understood as to be rationalized and wrought into a system relative to our thinking.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, in the first few pages of his *Systematic Theology*, Charles Hodge wisely remembers that “if we would discharge our duty as teachers and defenders of the truth, we must endeavor to bring all the facts of revelation into systematic order and mutual relation. It is only thus that we can satisfactorily exhibit their truth, vindicate them from objections, or bring them to bear in their full force on the minds of men.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> T. W. J. Morrow, “Systematic Theology,” in *NDT*, ed. by Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 671.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” *PRR* 7, no. 26 (April 1896): 246–47.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 1:2–3.

This present concept proves why systematic theology, when properly accomplished, is a lifelong task to be done rather than a product to be observed. Chafer assists by noting:

The astronomer or chemist would not attempt to organize his materials or to reach dependable conclusions with a third of the elements or facts pertaining to his science unaccounted for. Nor should the theologian expect to reach any true estimation of his various doctrines when vast field of the divine revelation have been eliminated from his consideration.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, because the theologian indwelt by the Spirit of God should be growing in Christlikeness and in the knowledge of God theology will never be an altogether completed product in this life (2 Pet 3:18; cf. Dan 12:4; Eph 1:18–19; Col 1:9). Theology, indeed, is a “progressive science” because the theologian is—or ought to be—growing in knowledge as he grows in sanctification.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Evaluate Extra-Biblical Sciences—INTEGRATE*

Though the Word of God is, in fact, the primary source<sup>13</sup> for understanding who God is, a wealth of knowledge about God may be gained from extra-biblical sciences. Warfield agrees by stating: “all other sciences are subsidiary to it [theology], and it builds its fabric out of material supplied by them. Theology is the science which deals with the facts concerning

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:11.

<sup>12</sup> Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 263. He continues: “let us assert that the history of theology has been and ever must be a progressive orthodoxy. . . . [p]rogressive orthodoxy implies that first of all we are orthodox, and secondly that we are progressively orthodox, *i.e.*, that we are ever growing more and more orthodox as more and more truth is being established” (ibid., 265).

<sup>13</sup> Warfield affirms this crucial truth by writing: “the revelation of God in His written Word—in which are included the only authentic records of the revelation of Him through the incarnate Word—is easily shown not only to be incomparably superior to all other manifestations of Him in the fullness, richness, and clearness of its communications, but also to contain the sole discovery of much that it is most important for the soul to know as to its state and destiny, and of much that is most precious in our whole body of theological knowledge” (ibid., 252). This does not mean, however, that other disciplines are unimportant, as he continues the same thought: “the glorious character of the discoveries made in [the Bible] throws all other manifestations into comparative shadow” (ibid.). Though God’s Word has preeminent authority over every other source, this does not disregard every other source of revelation about God. On the other hand, some have gone too far in intermingling all the scientific disciplines with theology—most influentially in the philosophical realm—that the result is a cry for ecumenical and universalist theology (see C. J. Curtis, *The Task of Philosophical Theology* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1967], esp. xxi–xxvi) For instance, Curtis notes that “philosophical theology is the product of intense but open minded listening to the dialogue between philosophy and theology” (16).

God and His relations with the universe.”<sup>14</sup> The chief source of revelation for theology is the special revelation incorporated in Holy Scripture even though much may be understood from other sources as well.<sup>15</sup> The authority of biblical revelation certainly does not negate altogether the acceptance of knowledge about God from other fields. “Theology preserves its vitality only when it is sure of its own ground and engages in discourse with other disciplines.”<sup>16</sup> In a word, theology is multidimensional. “Authentic Christian theology, although in our day unceremoniously dislodged from its former throne as ‘Queen of the Sciences,’ nevertheless remains a rich, multidimensional discipline, which demands a cluster of complementary responsibilities.”<sup>17</sup>

In seeking to understand theology and its relationship with science, a few things are presupposed. First, one should allow historical theology to influence theology since over the course of centuries and even millennia Godly men have lived and understood various truths about God, his works, his acts in history, and the truths contained in them. To be sure, one must guard against the errors and heresies that also have arisen over the course of the centuries. Nevertheless, one should not omit this important treasure for gleaning knowledge about God. Second, what theologians call General Revelation is also presupposed. This means that because God has so unmistakably revealed Himself in the universe, science *does* have much to offer the theologian in learning about God, his power, his awesomeness, and

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<sup>14</sup> Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 260.

<sup>15</sup> See John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” *WTJ* 25 (1963): 134; contra Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:11 who states that “the duty of the Christian theologian is to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning himself and our relation to Him. These facts are all in the Bible.”

<sup>16</sup> C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 1:195.

<sup>17</sup> John R. W. Stott, “Theology: A Multidimensional Discipline,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, ed. by Donald Lewis, and Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 4.

his ways. Therefore, Demarest is justified in writing that “systematic theology incorporates the data of exegetical, biblical, and historical theology to construct a coherent explication of the Christian faith.”<sup>18</sup> If it is true that “the discovery of truth is the object of every science”<sup>19</sup> then the field of science has much to offer theological studies.

In addition to historical theology and general revelation, one should allow science to supplement the truths of the Scripture to aid in knowing God more. Obviously, this rejects the scientific finds that blatantly contradict the Bible (e.g., evolutionary theories or a localized flood in Gen 6–9) yet it welcomes the biologists, geologists, chemists, and physicists who research and uncover information and facts that can help theologians and their understanding of who God is and how He has acted and revealed Himself in the world. God has revealed himself in endless ways to His creatures and the responsibility lies on the theologian to rightly intermingle these truths about God into an organic whole. Referring to this, Warfield consents:

But to perceive, as all must perceive, that every method by which God manifests Himself, is, so far as this manifestation can be clearly interpreted, a source of knowledge of Him, and must, therefore, be taken account of in framing all our knowledge of Him into *one organic whole*, is far from allowing that there are no differences among these various manifestations,—in the amount of revelation they give, the clearness of their message, the ease and certainty with which they may be interpreted, or the importance of the special truths which they are fitted to convey.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> B. A. Demarest, “Systematic Theology,” in *EDT*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1066.

<sup>19</sup> Archibald Alexander, “Method: Nature and Evidence of Truth,” in *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield*, ed. by Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 62. Thomas C. Oden concurs in proposing that “a science is a branch of study concerned with the observation and classification of facts (especially with the establishment of verifiable general laws) chiefly through induction and hypothesis) . . . insofar as it seeks to make accurate observations, test evidence, provide fit hypotheses, arrange facts in due order, and make reliable generalizations, the study of God may be called a science” (*Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006], 1:350–51).

<sup>20</sup> Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 251 (emphasis added).

In this fourth step of performing the discipline of systematic theology, there is a second part of this integration of theology which must include verifying theological statements so as to certify their credibility. C. F. H. Henry introduces the issue well:

Theological truth does NOT differ from other truth in respect to intelligibility; therefore, truth must be rationally cognized if it is to be meaningfully grasped and communicated. Nor does the difference lie in the fact that revelation is its source, for God is the source of all truth. The difference rather is that “*theological truth is divinely authorized, infallibly certain, and biblically attested; all other claims for truth are subject to correction and at most are but probable.*”<sup>21</sup>

Ogden lists two criteria for theological statements: (1) appropriateness – a statement is appropriate insofar as the understanding expressed by its concepts is that also expressed by the primary symbols of the witness of faith; and (2) understandability – it meets the conditions of meaning and truth universally established with human existence.<sup>22</sup>

When building a systematic theology and claims to support the theological concepts, one must have a method of certifying and authenticating those claims so as not to be disproved. Stallard and Wolfe give four helpful steps in validating the model of theology. The four steps are laid out as follows.<sup>23</sup>

1. Consistency – This means that within the model of systematic theology as a whole there must be no internal contradictions in any of the parts or assertions.<sup>24</sup>
2. Coherence – This second step of validating theology includes the necessity of unity as the differing and yet independent items of the model interrelate to one

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<sup>21</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:228 (emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, “What is Theology?” *JR* 52, no. 1 (Jan 1972): 25.

<sup>23</sup> Michael D. Stallard, “A Proposal for Theological Method: Systematic Theology as Model Building,” unpublished course notes: TH1 – Advanced Theological Method (Baptist Bible Seminary, Fall 2009), 16–17 and David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, *Contours of Christian Philosophy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 54–55; cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 148–50.

<sup>24</sup> As Gordon H. Clark writes about the first norm of logic is that it “requires a science to be free from self-contradiction” (*Karl Barth’s Theological Method* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963], 53).

another. In other words, not only should there be no contradictions but there should also be a relatedness among the elements.

3. Comprehensiveness – That the theological system must be comprehensive demands that the model is broad enough to encompass everything in the desired realm of study—omitting nothing.
4. Congruity – This is the logical conclusion of validating a model, namely, the assertions must be congruous and applicable to the claims that the model describes.

To conclude, Wolfe is right when he remarks that “without this internal relatedness of the statements to each other, we do not have a single system of assertions at all, but two or more separate sets of assertions arbitrarily placed side by side.”<sup>25</sup>

*Employ the Finds into Contemporary Life—IMPLEMENT*

Theology *is* life. And obviously, systematic theology must conclude with application to the hearts and lives of true believers. Demarest sees the connection when he states: “systematic theology follows a reliable method, namely the method of research that observes, records data, formulates hypotheses, tests the hypotheses, and finally relates the resultant body of knowledge to life.”<sup>26</sup> Demarest is accurate since he recognizes not only that systematic theology is a method of research that observes and implements a wealth of data, yet it does not—or should not—cease there. Wayne Grudem isolates this as an important feature in his theological tome: “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 . . . and theology when studied rightly will lead

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<sup>25</sup> Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Demarest, “Systematic Theology,” 1066.

to growth in our Christian lives, and to worship.”<sup>27</sup> Thus from every aspect of theology there are links to Christian behavior.<sup>28</sup>

Truly it may not be overstating the point in asserting with Ogden who quotes Schleiermacher: “practical theology is the crown of theological study.”<sup>29</sup> In conclusion, it is fitting to quote Warfield at length when he correctly articulates:

We must vindicate a further goal for the advance of theology and thus contend for it that it is an eminently practical science. The contemplation and exhibition of Christianity as truth, is far from the end of the matter. This truth is specially communicated by God for a purpose, for which it is admirably adapted. That purpose is to save and sanctify the soul. And the discovery, study and systematization of the truth is in order that, firmly grasping it and thoroughly comprehending it in all its reciprocal relations, we may be able to make the most efficient use of it for its holy purpose.<sup>30</sup>

And again:

If such [formations of systematic theology] be the value and use of doctrine, the systematic theologian is preeminently a preacher of the Gospel; and the end of his work is obviously not merely the logical arrangement of the truths which come under his hand, but the moving of men, through their power, to love God with all their hearts and their neighbors as themselves; to choose their portion with the Saviour of

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<sup>27</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 16–17 (emphasis original). See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), xii where he agrees: “theology is not just a second-order activity of reflection, but a first-order activity of inquiry pursued in a deepening empirical as well as a theoretical relation to the living God. It is a form of intense intellectual communion with God, in which our minds are taken captive by his love and we come to know God more and more through himself. Even though we are found using third-personal language, theological inquiry of this kind is carried out face to face with God, so that it may properly be regarded as a form of rational worship in which awe and wonder and joy give vent to themselves in prayer and praise.”

<sup>28</sup> See John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 392.

<sup>29</sup> Ogden, “What is Theology?” 34; cf. Gordon D. Kaufman who writes that “theology has always been a constructive activity; it has always been concerned with formulating and reformulating the concept of God and its implications for all human life, in the most adequate and appropriate way possible” (*An Essay on Theological Method*, AAR 5, 3rd ed. [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995], 44).

<sup>30</sup> Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 266.

their souls; to find and hold Him precious; and to recognize and yield to the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit whom He has sent.<sup>31</sup>

Because theology must impact one's life this is an essential and a legitimate step in the task of formulating a systematic theology. God is not pleased with head knowledge and a sheer comprehension of data.<sup>32</sup> He desires that head knowledge to transform a mind and conform a life to the person of Christ (Rom 12:1–2; Eph 5:1; 1 John 2:6).

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that the discipline of systematic theology requires that some steps be taken in order to rightly find, correlate, and apply systematic theology.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>32</sup> Relating this to the art of preaching, Kenneth Kantzer notes: “the heart of biblical preaching, therefore, ought to be the exposition of Scripture, not systematic theology. But the best of such expositional preaching must always be theologically informed, and to be truly profitable exposition of Scripture, it must inform theologically those who are being instructed” (“Systematic Theology as a Practical Discipline,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, ed. by Donald Lewis, and Alister McGrath [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 26).

CHAPTER 5  
CENTRAL INTERPRETIVE MOTIF

*Introduction*

It seems that every theologian forms his theology from the roots of a particular motif. Just as the central theme of the Bible is one out of which many other themes flow, so it is with one's central interpretive motif, the central motif of theology is that concept out of which other doctrines are impacted and interpreted. Every interpreter should have a central interpretive motif through which he accomplishes the above five steps to "doing" systematic theology. In other words, there resides a fundamental motif—theological concept or framework—that undergirds every section and category of theology. For some, that motif may be the glory of God.<sup>1</sup> For others, that may be the magnificence of God.<sup>2</sup> Still, for others "soteriology" and/or "covenantalism" may be that motif.<sup>3</sup> This proffers a suggestion for the proper central interpretive motif in one's dispensational theology. To find that central motif, there are two candidates that, for the dispensationalist, qualify as capable possibilities central interpretive motif. This paper will examine each one briefly before concluding on the one proper central interpretive motif.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 158–59.

<sup>2</sup> See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 78.

<sup>3</sup> See Louis Berkhof, *Textual Aid to Systematic Theology: A Practical Handbook to Professor Berkhof's Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1942), 32; cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (reprint; 1958, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 262–301.

*Plain Hermeneutic*

A hallmark of dispensational theology is that scripture is interpreted in a plain, normal, “literal” way. Nearly all biblical commentators think they interpret the Scriptures in a plain or normal way. The literal hermeneutic takes the words of Scripture at face value and understands them as the language intends the writing to be understood. The literal sense is that sense which is the intention of the author.<sup>4</sup> The controversy between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists has raged for quite some time as both propose to interpret Scripture in a literal and normal fashion. Nevertheless, a dispensational hallmark of hermeneutics consists in the statement that unless there is a clear reason *in the text* to understand the language any other way than the literal sense, it must *always* be interpreted literally.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding the literal sense of any Scripture requires the interpreter to be familiar with the immediate context of a particular passage. Bennetch writes: “doubtless, then, the question of literal or figurative interpretation of a passage in Scripture resolves itself into study of the context, basic as that rule is for all hermeneutics.”<sup>6</sup>

Closely related to the literal hermeneutic is the necessary belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. The connection between bibliology and systematic theology can logically be drawn. Chafer sees this relationship and notes:

Since Systematic, or Thetic, Theology is the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of all facts from any and every source concerning God and His works, and since the Bible in its original writings is by its own worthy claims and by every test devout minds may apply to it the inerrant Word of God, it follows that, if any progress is to be made in this science, the theologian

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<sup>4</sup> See Rowan Williams, “The Literal Sense of Scripture,” *MT* 7, no. 2 (Jan 1991): 123.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, at this point, the supernatural character of Scripture and the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible must be affirmed.

<sup>6</sup> John Henry Bennetch, “Literal Interpretation,” *BibSac* 104, no. 415 (July-Sep 1947): 356.

must be a *Biblicist*—one who is not only a Biblical scholar but also a *believer* in the divine character of each and every portion of the text of the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

This candidate of the literal hermeneutic seems inadequate since every Bible-believing exegete claims to recognize the doctrines of bibliology and suggest their foundational nature for hermeneutics.

### *Doxology—The Glory of God*

The other candidate for the central interpretive motif for the author resides in the simple yet incomprehensible reality that everything exists for God’s glory. James Hamilton assesses that “the glory of God has been so prominent in much Christian theology that—even though systematic theologians are not engaged in the specific discipline of biblical theology—it is surprising that the glory of God is absent from summaries of the proposed centres of biblical theology.”<sup>8</sup> To say it in the form of an adage, everything in life—*everything*—is doxological. Every single thing in life is directly related to the glory of God. It brings about God’s glory in some way. Paul affirms this when he writes: “For from Him and through Him and *to Him* are all things. To Him be the glory forever” (Rom 11:36, emphasis added; cp. Isa 42:8; 43:7; 60:21; Ezek 28:22). This central interpretive motif of the glory of God contains some important features.

First, the doxological nature of systematic theology necessitates a theology that is theocentric. Scripture is by no means man-centered as many would like to think; rather, “it is God-centered because [God’s] glory is the center. The Bible itself clearly teaches that salvation, important and wonderful as it is, is not an end in itself but is rather a means to the

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Introduction to Bibliology,” *BibSac* 94, no. 374 (April-June 1937): 132.

<sup>8</sup> James Hamilton, “The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?” *TynBul* 57, no. 1 (2006): 59. In this article, he argues “that the glory of God in salvation through judgement [*sic*] is the centre of biblical theology by examining what the Bible presents as both the goal and the outcome of arguably the three most significant moments of salvation through judgement [*sic*] in the Bible: the exodus from Egypt, the cross, and the awaited consummation of all things” (ibid., 65).

end of glorifying God.”<sup>9</sup> As John Walvoord writes: “the larger purpose of God is the manifestation of His own glory. To this end each dispensation, each successive revelation of God’s plan for the ages, His dealing with the nonelect as with the elect, and the glories of nature combine to manifest divine glory.”<sup>10</sup> The simple point pressed here is that everything in life ultimately points to God’s magnificence and His glory.

Second, the doxological nature of systematic theology necessitates the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. The doctrine of God’s utter sovereignty is unequivocally affirmed in Scripture. Texts abound supporting the notion that God reigns supremely as King from His sovereign throne over the heavens and the earth. The practical outworking of God’s sovereignty day by day is providence. Berkhof defines providence as “that work of God in which He preserves all His creatures is active in all that happens in the world, and directs all things to their appointed end.”<sup>11</sup> The psalmist rightly exclaims: “The LORD reigns, let the peoples tremble; He is enthroned *above* the cherubim, let the earth shake! The LORD is great in Zion, And He is exalted above all the peoples. Let them praise Your great and awesome name; Holy is He” (Psalm 99:1–3).

Third, the doxological nature of systematic theology necessitates the unity and harmony of the Word of God in all it contains and affirms. The Word of God is “bound together by historical sequence, type and its antitype, prophecy and its fulfillment, and by the anticipation, presentation, realization and exaltation of the most perfect Person who ever

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<sup>9</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 40.

<sup>10</sup> John F. Walvoord, “A Review of ‘Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God,’” *BibSac* 110, no. 437 (Jan 1953): 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine for Senior Classes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1969), 90.

walked the earth and whose glories are the effulgence of heaven.”<sup>12</sup> Because God is glorified in everything necessitates that Scripture supports itself and harmonizes in every way—especially in the doxology of God!

Fourth, the doxological nature of systematic theology necessitates the ultimate honor of God rather than the ultimate honor of any other created person or thing. Chafer wisely reminds that “contrary to man's nature, the Bible tendeth altogether to the glory of God and aims at none other than His honor.”<sup>13</sup> The glory of God as the theme of systematic theology demands that Jesus Christ be the ultimate focal point of everything (cf. Eph 3:21).

Fifth, the doxological motif of systematic theology rightly puts into perspective the troubling and hard times on this earth. James Hamilton argues that the center of biblical theology is the glory of God *through judgment*.<sup>14</sup> A theme that many preachers ignore and sermons frequently omit is that the all sovereign Judge is glorified in expressing his wrath (cf. Rom 9:22; Ezek 28:22).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, “all the events of the created world are designed to manifest the glory of God.”<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the doxological nature of systematic theology motivates the believer to do all for the greater blessing of God. Here, the theologian knows that the life that he lives can—

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<sup>12</sup> See Chafer, “Introduction to Bibliology,” 143.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> See Hamilton, “The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment,” 57–84.

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton writes: “the glory of God is central motif even in God expressing his righteous character and indignation in judgment” (*ibid.*, 65).

<sup>16</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 92.

and should—bring glory to God. Hence, it should be an incentive for godly and righteous living both in the church and outside the church.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, this author suggests that the glory of God is most fitting to serve as the central interpretive motif for one's theological method. Hamilton rightly reminds the reader:

The notion that God pursues his own glory may strike some as inappropriate, but if God were to prioritize anything higher than himself, it seems he would be placing some other god before himself. The God of the Bible, however, is not an idolater. The texts say that God pursues his own glory, and we must reckon with that reality. We might also note, as Jonathan Edwards pointed out long ago, that 'seeking one's own' is only problematic when done by those who are not absolutely worthy. Thus it is wrong for humans to seek their own glory (cf. 1 Cor. 13:5), but since God is inherently and absolutely worthy of all he could ever seek and more, it is not wrong for him to seek his own glory.<sup>18</sup>

If God's glory is the central interpretive motif in one's theological method, then this certainly affects one's theological framework in approaching theology (presuppositions), the task in doing theology (the discipline), and the conduct and application of these truths to one's life (implementation). Hence, the glory of God is a most appropriate central interpretive motif for any theologian to possess.

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<sup>17</sup> See Bryan Chapell, "Facing Two Ways: Preaching to Experiential and Doxological Priorities," *Presbyterian* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 98–117 for a helpful study on the glory of God in preaching.

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, "The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment," 81.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

If Kaufman rightly suggests that “much current theological writing is neither very reliable as phenomenological description or experience nor clear in its theological significance or implications because its methodological underpinnings have not been carefully thought through,”<sup>1</sup> then this paper fills a gaping hole in the realm of systematic theology. The formulation of a methodology for engaging in the lifelong and edifying task of systematic theology is necessary for every theologian and interpreter. This paper has sought to define systematic theology as a lifelong task that will seek out, recognize, and gather all data that can be known about the God of the Bible. This task includes gathering data not only from the Word of God but from other sciences and areas of knowledge outside the Bible as well. At this point, all the data must be synthesized together and be validated lest any propositions, beliefs, or proposals be disprovable. Finally, the task of systematic theology results in what has been known about God affecting the way the Christian lives his life. This brings about the glory of God because His children have applied the theological truths so as to be walking in the Light (1 John 1:7).

If this is the monumental task of doing systematic theology, and if systematic theology is a process forming one’s worldview that will never be perfected in *this* life, then Morrow is right in reminding the theologian “systematic theology is therefore best

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, AAR 5, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 75–76.

engaged . . . in a humble spirit of prayerful submission to the authority of Scripture.”<sup>2</sup>

Concluding a study such as this, it is appropriate to conclude with B. B. Warfield:

And thus we do not make our theology, according to our own pattern, as a mosaic, out of the fragments of the Biblical teaching; but rather look out from ourselves upon it as a great prospect, framed out of the mountains and plains of the theologies of the Scriptures, and strive to attain a point of view from which we can bring the whole landscape into our field of sight. . . . The place that theology, as the scientific presentation of all the facts that are known concerning God and His relations, claims for itself, within the circle of the sciences, is an equally high one with that which it claims among the theological disciplines.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> T. W. J. Morrow, “Systematic Theology,” in *NDT*, ed. by Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 671.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” *PRR* 7, no. 26 (April 1896): 257–58.

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