

SOME NOTES ON THE DEFINITION OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

I have found over the years that students often do not understand the discipline of Systematic Theology (or for that matter, the discipline of Biblical Theology). It is not all the student's fault on several scores.

- First, there are as many definitions, it seems, as teachers.
- Second, beyond that, there is an overlap, especially in the area of how things are to be done in the actual undertaking of these disciplines.
- Third, there is a tradition that has been built up of seeing Systematic Theology as a kind of deposit of revealed truth rather than seeing it as a task to be done. The deposit of revealed truth is the Bible. My systematic theology, which expresses my Christian worldview, is not revealed truth. It is my expression and application of that revealed truth to all areas of life. I would never claim that my own systematic theology notes are inspired by God.
- Fourth, related to # 2 above, there are some genuine semantic differences in the debate over definition. Therefore, it is important for the student to understand where each particular teacher is coming from in use of terminology. For example, the tracing of a particular theme throughout the entire Bible (son of God, arm of God, illumination, stars, blood, etc.) is to some interpreters a task called Biblical Theology. Others, because such tracing crosses authorial and historical boundaries, see this as more properly under the venue of Systematic Theology. What is clear about all of this is that there are levels to the entire process of recognizing inter-textuality with some even using the term "intermediate biblical theology" to describe the tracing of a theme through the entire Word of God. I will discuss this more below.
- Fifth, different confessional faiths use terminology differently. The Presbyterians talk differently than Catholics about such issues. Baptists talk differently than Methodists, etc. All one has to do is read the systematic theology work *Blessed Rage of Order* by the liberal Catholic David Tracy to see readily that what he does in systematic theology is not what I do.

Systematic Theology as the "Queen of the Sciences"

From the outset it must be noted that I do not define Systematic Theology as simply the arrangement of biblical themes in some kind of topical order (Bible, God, Christ, Holy Spirit, etc.), although this would be part of what is done. To define Systematic Theology as only this activity is a post-Enlightenment way of looking at the enterprise. In this scheme, Systematic Theology is just one discipline among many (such as mathematics, natural science, and philosophy), each discipline having its own sphere. This is a limitation that I am not willing to accept.

Instead of this restricted viewpoint, I hold to a view of Systematic Theology that is pre-Enlightenment. Prior to the Enlightenment (18th century), theology was often viewed as the "**Queen of the Sciences.**" What was meant by this expression was the fact that theology was the academic discipline where all academic disciplines were integrated. The result of the integration was a comprehensive worldview with "theology" as the filter for all truth. That is, all truth claims

from various disciplines were validated (or invalidated) by the prior established truth of theology. Unfortunately, in the Middle Ages, much of Christendom performed this validation process by an appeal to church tradition or historical theology. Many in our own day (although they may not call it Systematic Theology) perform this validation using some functional form of religious experience. For those who practice biblical Christianity, the validation process must use **Biblical Theology** as the filter for all truth. That ensures that the worldview that is the product of the process is in genuine and total harmony with the Scriptures.

One significant implication of this approach to Systematic Theology is that it becomes a task to be performed, not just a grocery list of doctrines and passages to be memorized. Furthermore, this task is ongoing since an individual believer's worldview is constantly being updated by several factors, the most prominent being his increased understanding of Scripture and his encountering of extra-biblical questions from current culture.

The "Levels" of Systematic Theology

As I noted earlier, there are levels to the overall theological task. **The most basic level is Biblical Theology**, a discipline that logically precedes Systematic Theology. Here the hard work of exegesis and analysis of the text is undertaken with a strong commitment to literal hermeneutics. Literal hermeneutics is the grammatical-historical approach to interpretation. The goal is the intended meaning of the author taking his language at face value and taking into account the author's historical context, not some later or present-day context. In this way, the progress of revelation is viewed as extremely significant since later revelation cannot unravel any clear teaching given in earlier revelation.

At this most basic level, I follow the lead of many scholars in limiting Biblical Theology as a discipline to a single author, time period, or type of literature given in the Bible. For example, I would attempt a biblical theology of the Pentateuch (one author and time frame) in the Old Testament. I would also see biblical theology in the New Testament as I studied Johannine theology (the writings of John) or Pauline theology (the letters of Paul). These examples show an attempt to respect the uniqueness of the human author whom God chose to give the writings (including his use of terms) and to gauge fairly the historical context of the life of that individual author. Consequently, when I trace a theme through the entire Bible, I do not use the term Biblical Theology. Instead, I view what is being done as step one below in Systematic Theology. The presuppositional/theological grid that one brings to his reading of a text is too strong at the level of integration to see it as the same order of things as tracing a theme through the writings of a given author such as Paul or John.

Now it is possible to discuss the levels of Systematic Theology:

- 1. The first level is the integration or synthesis of texts across authors and history.** When one tries to integrate across authors and historical boundaries in Scripture, there are two areas which are of vital concern: a) literal interpretation, and b) progress of revelation. Concerning literal interpretation, when the interpreter draws synthetic conclusions involving two or more passages at this point in doing theology, his conclusions cannot unravel the literal interpretation that would have been obtained in each passage independently. In other words, each local context must make sense within the assertion of synthesis between the two. A specific application of this principle involves the progress of revelation. Believing that God gave His Word over time is not enough. The progress of revelation is crucial to

interpretation. It guarantees that the interpreter does not read into any passage, but honors the "historical" side of literal interpretation=grammatical-historical. One implication is that later revelation cannot reinterpret earlier revelation. It can elaborate or add to, but it cannot take away. To believe otherwise is to believe that the original audience could not have understood the message God had for them in their own day.

2. **The second level is the categorization or systematization of the results of integration (at the level of all the canon).** This step in Systematic Theology is what the discipline has been famous for, the presentation of the results of synthesis (#1) under various categories of discussion. The standard categories have been:

Prolegomena -- Discussion of methodology

Bibliology -- Study of the doctrine of revelation and the Bible

Theology Proper -- Study of the doctrine of God

Christology -- Study of the doctrine of Christ

Pneumatology -- Study of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit

Angelology -- Study of the doctrine of angels, Satan, and demons (sometimes discussed under the category of theology proper)

Anthropology -- Study of the doctrine of mankind

Harmartiology -- Study of the doctrine of sin (oftentimes discussed under the category of anthropology)

Soteriology -- Study of the doctrine of salvation (including progressive sanctification)

Ecclesiology -- Study of the doctrine of the Church

Eschatology -- Study of the doctrine of last things

Israelology -- Study of the nation of Israel in Scripture (oftentimes discussed most under eschatology)

The last one is not usually listed. The first one is often not mentioned in presentations of the categories and is, in fact, a preliminary discussion. With the exception of the first category of methodology, each of these categories emerge from within the discipline of Biblical Theology. They are not extra-biblical as I sometimes hear students claim. At the level of integration across authors and history, these categories are carried over into the discipline of Systematic Theology.

Each of these categories of Bible teaching are quite broad and do form a basis for outlining major doctrines taught in the Bible. They should be high on anybody's list when presenting theology. However, there is a danger that preoccupation with the top of the outline might lead a Bible student to neglect a lesser overall theme (sub-point in the outline) that a particular biblical author might be stressing.

3. **The third level is the validation or invalidation of all truth claims made from sources outside the Bible (integration of all truth with the Bible as the filter or judge of truth claims).** For this area please go to my paper on *Systematic Theology as Model Building*. Please do not view this paper as all there is to systematic Theology. Some students make that mistake. The paper actually overlaps some with # 2 above. This # 3 step in the theologizing process is aligned largely with the task of **apologetics** which has always been viewed as a subset of Systematic Theology. It is at this point the student should realize that **I am**

defining Systematic Theology as building a Christian world view. Hence, it is more than simply organizing the Bible topically.

4. **The fourth level is the application of the resulting Christian world view to all of life.** This step in the process (along with # 3 above) begins to show the atemporal side of Systematic Theology. By this, I mean that my own Systematic Theology is for my day (although it is based on writings from the past) and, in essence, is not constrained by time. That is different than Biblical Theology which is the theology of each biblical author in his own time. In the discipline of Biblical Theology one should never ask "What does the passage say to me?" One must ask "what does it say to the original audience?" This particular step shows the crucial nature of doing Biblical Theology first before one begins to answer the questions of today. This step is what can also be called **Christian or Biblical Ethics** which is a subset of the discipline of Systematic Theology. It is also the area where **contextualization with respect to present culture** comes into strongest focus as I exegete my culture for the purpose of communicating the truth of God to it. Contextualization would also be a factor in # 3 above.