

## A Case For Systematic Theology —Dr. Robert Lightner

### Systematic Theology Defined

Strong, the great Baptist standard bearer of days gone by, defines systematic theology as “the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.”

Charles Hodge declared that the object of systematic theology is “To systematize [that is a key word] the facts of the Bible and ascertain the principles or general truths, which those facts involve.”

Griffith Thomas, who had a lot to do with the founding of Dallas Theological Seminary, said this about theology:

It is a science. Science is the technical expression of the laws of nature. Theology is the technical expression of the revelation of God. It is the province of theology to examine all the spiritual facts of revelation, to estimate their value and to arrange them into a body of teaching. Doctrine, thus corresponds with generalizations of science.

Emphasis again is on science and the scientific method, which I am going to say more about later. W. G. T. Shedd, another classic theologian, defines systematic theology as:

A science that is concerned with both the infinite and the finite with both God and the universe. The material, therefore, which it includes is vaster than any other science. It is also the most necessary of all the sciences.

Augustine denotes theology to be “Rational discussion respecting the Deity.”

If you know anything about the particular eschatology of the men that I just quoted, you will observe that some of them are amillennialist, some are postmillennialist, and some are premillennialist. Regardless of their eschatological stance, they define systematic theology in basically the same way, including at least a couple of very important things: (1) it is a science; that certainly stands out, and (2) it concerns the relation of facts within that science. It’s not just a listing of facts but a correlation of facts or a systematizing showing relationships within a given doctrine in theology and across doctrinal lines. I believe very strongly that this is an essential.

**In my way of thinking, Systematic theology is not a synonym term for doctrine. Doctrine simply means teaching, and there are doctrines in systematic theology, of course. If you list the teaching of the Bible on a given subject, then you have a doctrine, for instance the doctrine of sanctification, the doctrine of adoption, the doctrine of the new birth, or a thousand other doctrines. You haven’t really set forth a theology just by listing the teaching of the Bible on a given subject. What you have done is a doctrinal study, a very important study and very worthwhile, but it is not theology.**

**A good systematic theology seeks to find relationship within a doctrine. For example, if you are talking about sanctification, the theology would show that there are three aspects to it;**

**the positional stage, the progressive stage, and the perfect stage. It tries to bring together all the various aspects of a doctrine and show how they are related. We must have relationship within all the aspects of a doctrine.**

**Additionally, a good systematic theology must have relationships between teachings in a particular doctrine and teachings of the Scriptures in other doctrines. Is there harmony within and among the various doctrines? Is there consistency here? Is there harmony here? Does it gel? Or, is what I believe about this doctrine in conflict with what I say I believe about some other doctrine. For example, does my doctrine of ecclesiology conflict with my doctrine of eschatology at various points? Chafer said:**

**Systematic theology is the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting and defending of all truth from any, and every, source [a very important addition by his definition] concerning God and his works.**

That's Chafer's definition.

Anyone who reads Chafer knows that he believed the Scriptures are the final authority. Chafer also maintained that in building a systematic theology, occasionally, we reach out beyond the Bible. The Bible is the criterion of judgment over any other sources, but we do use other sources. We use history, the confessions of the Church, historical theology, and what has been believed in the past to build our systematic theology. We do not mind drawing upon natural revelation. For example, we do it in presenting our doctrine of revelation, God revealing Himself in nature. We do it in regard to the existence of God. The cosmological, theological, anthropological, ontological arguments for the existence of God are not found in the Bible. We make no apologies for using these arguments in building our case for the existence of God, but the Bible, mind you, is the final court of appeal. We do not put facts from other sources on the same level as the Bible. They stand under the Bible. We do not hesitate to explore them, to use them, and to relate them to certain areas, not every area, but certain areas of systematic theology. That then is my working definition of systematic theology.

Systematic Theology As A Science

We noted that almost all the definitions of systematic theology include the word science or scientific or a synonym, and I want to affirm that systematic theology is a science. In fact, I will call it the "queen of the sciences." Let's build our case in this way.

First, every science has two basic factors, one is the facts and the other is the ideas concerning those facts. Facts and ideas are the core essentials of any science, but science is more than knowledge. The facts of a subject does not constitute a science. Even an orderly arrangement of these facts, do not constitute a science. Relationship is essential, and that's what I was referring to a moment ago.

I like to say that there are three basic passwords to systematic theology. When I was dating the girl who is now my wife, she and her parents were members of the Grange. It was an organization of farmers whose purpose was to influence farm prices and share ideas. It was somewhat closed and secretive, but on a number of occasions, I went with her to the Grange

meetings. I had no interest in the Grange, but I was interested in her, so I went and acted like I enjoyed it. It was very secretive, and members identified themselves by whispering the password to the guard as they walked in. Using this analogy, I like to think that there are three essential passwords to systematic theology. **The three are relationships, you must have relationships; balance, I will explain this further in a minute; and consistency. These passwords let you in and identify you as holding to a systematic theology.**

### **Relationships, Balance, Consistency**

Balance is seeing both sides of a doctrine and not ignoring passages that conflict with our view. Some passages of scripture on salvation, for example, seem to deny eternal security. Now, I happen to believe that there are answers to all of these, but what I mean by balance is that we need to see both sides, the passages that are a problem to security and the passages that teach it clearly. We do not ignore passages and teachings that seem to conflict with our view.

We have to take the whole counsel of God and not be afraid of passages that our opponents may use. We need to study problem passages and seek to find an answer for them. We search for an answer, we don't throw out the truth because we have a problem passage. We build our doctrine on the clear passages and say this is the best I can do. I'm not going to avoid all the clear passages and hang my doctrinal basket on the problem ones. You build on the clear passages and then try to explain the difficult passages in harmony and in relation to the clear ones. Where you don't have the answer you wait in faith. That's my own approach. That is what I mean by balance.

Consistency is being consistent throughout the Scriptures. Does your system of theology gel? Does it hang together or is it just bits and pieces? Is it a whole? Are you being consistent in what you believe with regard to progressive revelation in the Old Testament and the New Testament or with any other teaching of Scripture? You must be consistent throughout Scripture, and that's not an easy task.

If all you have is a list of facts, you're talking about doctrine. If you join ideas with those facts and see relationship, balance, and consistency, then you begin to think theologically. And I'll say something in advance of my second presentation today, I do not believe that progressive dispensationalists have thought sufficiently theologically. They have come up with a very narrow view on an isolated basis. Progressives have not attempted to see how their teaching of the kingdom as "now not yet" relates to all the other doctrines in the Scripture. How does this teaching gel; how does it dovetail; how does it fit; how does it square with the other great teachings of Scripture? That's thinking theologically. If there is one thing I try to do, and would like to be remembered by, it is to get my students to think theologically. It is very important to think theologically.

### **Deductive Vs. Inductive**

Deductive reasoning reasons from known principles to unknown. It reasons from general ideas to specific concepts. **Inductive reasoning, on the other hand, reasons from particular, specific facts to a general conclusion. I think it's fair to say that in systematic theology we primarily use, though not exclusively, the inductive method.** We come to our study of theology with the same approach that the scientist comes to his study.

## Defense of the Inductive Method

I want to defend now, if I may, the inductive method. Any scientist comes to his study with basic assumptions. He may not verbalize these basic assumptions, but they are inherent in his views. He comes to the subject with basic assumptions like the trustworthiness of sense perceptions, the mental operations of the mind, laws of gravity, and all other things like that. He comes with basic, core, underlying assumptions. Rene Descartes notwithstanding, the mind is not a blank tablet. Any observer comes to his subject with some basic assumptions, and students of theology are no exception. This condition is not wrong that is the way God has constructed the human mind. **Coming with assumptions is not the problem. The problem is, after you have gathered the facts, do they verify your assumptions?**

What facts best verify your assumptions with which you come? The first thing a scientist does is come with assumptions. The second thing he does is gather data based upon his assumptions. He is trying to build a case for his assumptions. He derives and classifies laws from the facts gathered. The law of nature or the law of this or that. Assumptions, facts, laws, that is the scientific method of study. Now, the same principles that are used by the scientist are applied to theology as a science.

The Bible is to us what nature and natural phenomena is to the scientist. I repeat, the Bible is to us what nature is to the scientist. We, too, come with basic assumptions. Although I differ with him on a lot of things, I like what Bernard Ramm, said about the matter in his book, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*.

We assert as our fundamental apologetic thesis the following: There is an infinite, all wise, all powerful, loving God, who has revealed himself by means of natural and supernatural, in creation, in the nature of man, in the history of Israel, in the incarnation of God in Christ and in the heart of the believer by the Gospel.

If I may enlarge a bit on what Ramm says, some of these assumptions are that God is, God has revealed Himself, sin is a reality, God is holy apart from sin, and God is going to punish sin. He is a holy God who is going to judge. We come to our study with these basic assumptions, just like the scientist comes with his basic assumptions. Now, as a scientist we gather facts. We collect them from the Bible and seek to determine whether or not our assumptions are valid. We must ascertain and collect all the facts available to us, not just some to support our views or assumptions, but try to gather all the facts.

Students of the Bible and systematic theology also governed by the same rules as the men of science. What are those rules? The following is a list of the rules that govern scientific investigation:

**(1) The collection of data is made with diligence and great care. We must be serious about making an accurate collection. The collective process involves minutia; it involves scholarship; it involves study.**

**(2) The collection must be comprehensive. Your collection must include all the facts which support and contradict the doctrine being developed. If you are to develop a theology of Christ, you must gather the facts concerning His genuine humanity, as well as, facts in Scripture concerning His genuine deity. To develop the doctrine of the Trinity, you must study all the facts that God is one, and yet, He has manifested Himself in three persons. While on the surface one seems to contradict the other, you still must gather all the facts for both. The scientist is expected to gather all the facts and that is what we are supposed to do.**

**(3) Our principles must be derived. Now this is a tough one. Our principles, which we call our doctrines, which the scientist calls his laws of science, must be derived from the facts and not imposed upon the facts. We must be sure that our doctrines, which we put in the doctrinal statements of our churches and schools and in which we say we believe and affirm, are in fact derived from the facts rather than imposed upon the facts. We're obligated to set forth what God has said. That is why I believe it is valid for us to say systematic theology is a science and is the queen of the sciences.**

History Of Theology

**If you study historical theology, I think you will agree that the basic theology we have on various issues arose in times of controversy. When simple statements of Scripture were challenged, systematic theology arose in response to settle the controversy**

The earliest of the church fathers wrote devotional literature. They weren't theologians and didn't pretend to be. They were trying to encourage the saints. The early church fathers did not try to prove the simple statements of Scripture that they declared, for example the deity of Christ or the deity of the Holy Spirit, they just affirmed belief in them. They just made biblical declarations. But then the opposition questioned these and said, "Well how can He be both God and man? How can the Father, the Son, and the Spirit be equal in deity?"

Controversy arose, and that controversy drove the earliest of our thinkers, church fathers later on, to defend their beliefs. That is when theology began. That is the history of theology. It was begun in controversy, and that is still true today. It's reflected even in our meeting here this week, in a sense. Current opposition and conflict demand a defense of theology that has been traditionally believed and affirmed without a defense. We suddenly realize that we have to defend what we believe and that gets us to think theologically. Controversy is not all bad; it is bothersome, but it does drive us. It motivates us to be sure we understand and have reason to believe our beliefs instead of just affirming them.

The Kinds Of Theology

Chafer calls them descriptions of theology, and he has a rather long list that I won't bore you with. It is on pages 4 and 5 of volume 1. I have boiled down that list. I'm not a Chaferite to the nth degree, because I don't believe in his mode of baptism and a few other things, however, I have a core agreement with his system. I have summarized his long list of varieties of theology. He has the Theology of James, Theology of Peter, and three or four like that, and then, Natural Theology, Historical Theology, Dogmatic Theology, and so on. I have summarized these under

three main headings. All theological study may be classified in three basic categories: (1) Systematic Theology, (2) Biblical Theology, and (3) Historical Theology.

Systematic Theology is the broadest of the three, because it draws upon (according to Chafer's definition) information from any and every source. It is not concerned, particularly, with Moses' contribution to a given doctrine or John's in the book of Revelation. It's not concerned with the comparison between those things. It assumes the progress of revelation, but it's just an attempt to take all that the Bible says about a given subject and develop some laws regarding that subject and a statement of what we believe about that doctrine. That is systematic theology.

#### Biblical Theology

It's easy to get these technical terms confused because we want our systematic theology to be biblical, but I'm talking about the science of biblical theology. I am not talking about biblical versus non-biblical systematic theology, rather, I am talking about a kind of theology. One kind, one major division, is systematic theology and another kind is biblical theology. Biblical theology is concerned with the contribution of a given human writer. You might have Pauline Theology or Johannine Theology in which you study everything that Paul wrote or everything that John wrote, and you rarely go outside of that. Oh, you might try to see some relationships, but the core of your theology is Pauline, Lukine, Petrine, or Johannine. Do you understand? That's biblical theology, and its concern is with theology of a book. You may study the theology of the Pentateuch, or the theology of a given book in the New Testament; that is biblical theology. It has to do primarily with the time in which a book was written, the cultural context in which it was written, the purpose for which it was written, and all of that. But it doesn't go much beyond that writer or that book. Biblical theology is a legitimate science, as well and it is parallel, somewhat, to systematic theology.

#### Historical Theology

Historical Theology, on the other hand, as the name implies, is concerned with what has been believed in the history of the Church. The early church faced the problem of the relation of Christ, the Son of God, to God the Father and how the Holy Spirit relates to all three. Later on, the doctrine of sin and the doctrine of man were formed. By the way, the doctrine of last things or eschatology came in last for discussion, very last. So, it shows the progress, as James Orr calls it, of dogma. The history of theology is a fascinating study and very important to developing your systematic theology. At least be aware of the flow of doctrine, as we are not blazing a trail here. There is not much new under the sun theologically, there may be much for us to discover, but it is not new in reality. I hope you understand the clear distinction between systematic, biblical, and historical theology.

#### The Demand Of Systematic Theology

Our next point is the demand for systematic theology. Here, I want to get a little excited - the demand for systematic theology! I do think there is a demand for it. What I have to say is similar to what Chafer talks about. Not only does he see a demand, a need, a cry for God's people to hold to a systematic theology, but he also deals with the demands, which the subject of theology makes upon the individual.

First, let us talk about the possibility of arriving at a systematic theology. This will overlap somewhat with what I said about presuppositions. If you grant me these three things, then theology is possible, without them, I cannot build a systematic theology. (1) I have to have the reality of theism. I have to believe in God, the God of the Bible. Theism is essential to even the possibility of theology. You can't have theology without theism, not biblical theology. (2) I have to assume that God has endowed his creatures with the ability to know Him, in other words, epistemology. After theism we must have epistemology; we must believe that God created mankind so he can know Him. We can know God's relations with others and know His relations with the universe. We can understand his communications. (3) His revelation—I'm not saying these necessarily in order. If I have theism, epistemology, and revelation, I can begin to build a systematic theology. God has spoken. Have you ever really reveled in that and how wonderful it is that God is not mute? He has revealed Himself. If you give me these assumptions, grant me these things, then theology is possible. Without them, I don't think it is.

Now what about the need for theology in a more practical sense? We are living in a day when serious study of doctrine and the Bible are pretty much antiquated. We are called upon and pressured by our society to just relate to our feelings, what is experiential. How will what I am learning now about this doctrine help me tomorrow morning? Well, it may not help you tomorrow morning, but that doesn't mean it's not important. If it is a part of God's Word, it is important.

In our fundamental churches, people are primarily interested in getting scratched where they itch, and we have to be sensitive to that. But we should seek to apply these great truths of theology to our daily experience, put legs to our theology. Today, there is a certain age group that is more interested in "rap sessions". We may not cross our legs and fold our hands but let's just talk, but let's not talk about doctrine. Doctrine divides; did you know that? Indeed it does, especially, doctrine related to Christ. Even Christ divides, the text says that. "There was a great division among the people," John says, "because of Him," and He's still causing division.

Now we don't need to stir it up, let Him do it. But preach Him and there will be division. The liberals say why don't we just all sit down together and have rap sessions about things, share our ignorance. Why study systematic theology? Again, the liberal cry is theology divides, love unites. Let's just get together and squeeze each other. That has crossed over into some of our very fundamental, evangelical, Bible-believing churches. There is a tendency away from learning systematic theology, or whatever else, you don't have to use that handle. Now, if you have a tightrope walker that just got saved or a bank robber that just got saved, you might be able to get a crowd. But simple declaration of God's truth or an in-depth study of the Word of God, even done excitedly and interestingly, has a "hard row to hoe".

**There is a need for theology, and I have five or six reasons why I think systematic theology is a requirement. It starts with man's condition that he cannot just accept the facts of the Bible, as they are, without trying to systematize them. I hope you don't think that I'm describing a low view of the Bible, but the Bible is not a systematic theology book; it never pretends to be. The Bible does not harmonize the facts through the progress of revelation. That is your job as a student of the Scripture. That is part of cutting a straight edge in the Scriptures. That's my job. God has given us His revelation, but He has not given us**

**systematic theology. He gave us lots of parts and pieces, but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he wants us to put it together**

**Man can't stop with just the facts. We can not simply take the facts of the Bible as they are without seeking to systematize them because of the construction of the human mind. The human mind acknowledges various truths in Scripture and it craves organization. The human mind craves seeing relationships because of how it is constructed. Consequently, I think it is impossible to simply study God's Word without trying to systematize it. I do not care if it is a large group, a small group, how long you pray, how loud you sing, or what you sing, you just can not get together and say, "We're just believing whatever the Bible says, we're biblical students here." However you undertake this study, your mind will compare the various doctrines and seek relationships within and among them.**

**There are things in the Bible that need to be explained, brought together, and harmonized about the person of Christ, about the work of the Holy Spirit, and about every doctrine of the Scriptures. Do you get the point? To do otherwise simply is impossible. The person may say, "I don't have a theology." Oh, yes you do. It's probably a hodgepodge, but you have one, because the mind is so constructed that it strives for order and organization.**

The second reason for the need for theology is that creating a system produces a higher knowledge. Oh, what a claim. Producing a system, in this case a system of theology, produces a higher knowledge. What do I mean by that? I mean, it is one thing to know that islands, oceans, continents, mountains, and rivers exist, but it is another thing to know what causes them. Knowing what has brought about this distribution of land, is a higher knowledge than affirming, yes, mountains exist, rivers exist, and so on. But to understand how they came to be and how they relate to each other is indeed a higher knowledge. Knowledge of the basic facts is essential, but it is a higher knowledge when you understand relationship and system. I think the same thing is true in relation to the Scriptures. A full knowledge of what God has revealed comes to us only when we understand the relation of these truths to each other.

The third reason for the need for theology is that we have no choice in the matter. I got you! At least, I got those of you who are at this conference. If we claim to be servants of God and proclaimers of Scripture, then we must know the relationships between the teachings of Scripture, in order to bring these truths to bear upon men's lives. If we are going to be true teachers of the whole counsel of God, we must have a theology because having a systematic theology brings the whole counsel of God together.

Fourth, evidently, this systematic theology approach is God's will. Whew! This is an even more brazen claim, so let me try to defend it. God does not teach men astronomy. He provides the facts of astronomy that must be discovered and related to each other for a person to become an astronomer. Nor does God teach us theology. He has given us the Scriptures, and it is our task to learn these Scriptures and discover how they relate to each other.

Fifth, I am getting more brazen as the list enlarges. The study of doctrine and theology produces healthy Christians. Show me a person who has been taught doctrine and theology, and I will show you a person who is not so easily moved when the Jehovah's Witnesses come to his door

or by Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy's literature or the New Age Movement or whatever. A believer will not panic immediately if he has been taught scriptural doctrine. A Christian will recognize falsehood if he has been taught systematic theology, even if, you use some other term for it. The study of theology and doctrine produces healthy, well-rounded Christians.

Sixth, the preacher who knows theology becomes a better tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit. I'm not saying that you can not be used unless you have studied systematic theology in a particular school. But one who is theologically trained, either on his own or from a school, is a better tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

Seventh. In case you are interested, I do not stop at seven, the number of perfection, I have eight reasons. Knowing biblical theology will keep us from embracing error. It's impossible, for you as a preacher-teacher, to know all the errors of all the cults and the false religions. You would go crazy trying because there are so many of them. I gave up even trying to know all these. What is essential is that you know the genuine and true; then, you can immediately detect the other.

The two crucial doctrines essential to real Christianity are the doctrines of the Living Word—Jesus Christ, and the written Word—the Bible. Start with these and you will immediately eliminate most of the cults and religions. What think you of Christ and what think you of His Word? Teach your people these doctrines, this theology, and they will be well prepared. They may not know how to answer this little quirk over here or this little supposed nuance. Get away from all of that. What is your view of Jesus Christ? What is your view of the Bible and its claims? Begin with those doctrines, I suggest, and the cults will be packing their bags before long.

Finally, eighth, Scripture exhorts us to systematic study, not to systematic theology, but to systematic study. Oh, really? Yes, John 5:39 says "...Search the Scriptures." Jesus was expressing his disapproval of the way His critics were drawing from the Scripture, but the exhortation to search the Scripture is still there. How about 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul's exhortation to Timothy, "Preach the Word." You can't preach the Word unless you know the truths of the Bible and how they relate to each other. How about Ephesians 4:11, one of the gifts given to the Church in this great passage is teachers, pastor-teachers and teachers. I think this is an affirmation in defense of systematic theology.

How about Titus 1:9, "Exhort in sound doctrine." Here, we are called upon, as God's servants, to exhort in sound doctrine. Drawing an example, an illustration, from Paul himself, in Acts 20:27, Paul told the Ephesian elders he had declared to them the whole counsel of God. Now, that is a defense of systematic theology in my humble opinion. Finally, Paul's word to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15, I love this passage, he exhorted Timothy to rightly (King James translation) divide the Word of truth. The Spirit was drawing upon Paul's knowledge of tentmaking, the moonlighting, part-time job by which he supported himself. In making tents of an animal's hide, Paul had to cut the edges straight, precise, definite, and he applies that to Scripture. Cut a straight edge in your understanding of Scripture and be precise, definite, and exact in your interpretation of Scripture. I think this verse presents an argument for systematic theology.

Conclusion the Derivations of Theology

The Primary source of systematic theology is the written Word of God. I know that Chafer and others list two sources, the written Word of God and Christ, the incarnate Word. But, I'm putting Christ, the incarnate Word, under the heading of written revelation because we know about Him from the written revelation. I am not eliminating the other, but I am simply saying that our primary source is the written Word of God. That applies also to God's revelation in nature, by the way. I am putting both of these, revelation in Christ and revelation in nature, natural revelation, under the heading of God's written revelation, the Word of God, because that is where I learn about natural revelation. That's where I learn about the revelation of God in Christ. I'm not at all minimizing these. I'm just organizing them differently under one heading; the written Word of God is the primary source.

Secondary sources, are what has been believed in church history, the history of dogma, confessions of the church, tradition, and what we learn from nature. All these things take second place and must come under the scrutiny of and not be considered equal to Scripture. That is why I am calling them secondary. Our primary and determining source is the Word of God. The other sources are secondary, but we certainly ought to be aware of them and use them wherever we can to substantiate what the Word of God says.

I will conclude by saying that the sources from which you draw for building a systematic theology are several. The criterion for determining validity is one—The Word of God. We believe things because we find support for them in the Scriptures not because we find information about them in other sources. Sources are several, but the criterion for determining their validity is one—The written Word of God. Thank you for your patience and long-suffering.