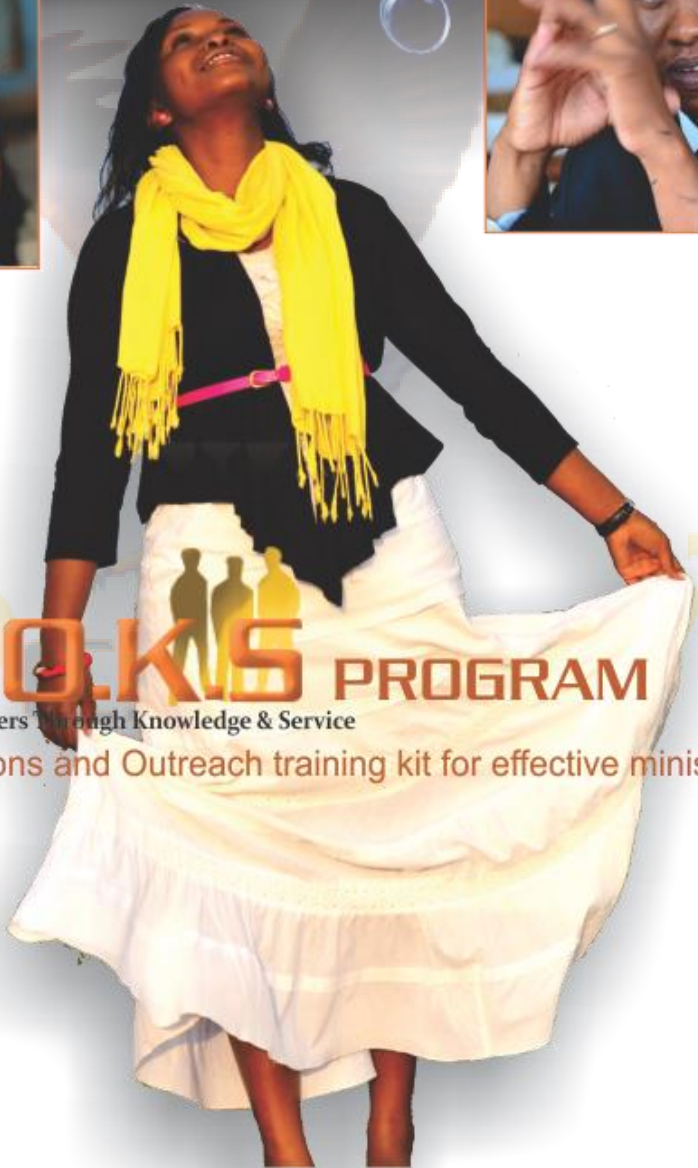


Christhood Outfield Ministries



B.O.K.I.S. PROGRAM

Building Others Through Knowledge & Service

Missions and Outreach training kit for effective ministry.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Introduction

Theology sounds like dry subject in which only seminary professors or studious pastors have an interest. However, in practice everybody is a theologian. We all have beliefs about God and how he relates to the universe. Theology is merely the expression of our beliefs about God in words. These expressions may not be well thought out, comprehensive, or systematic. They may be based on individual experience or traditions, or the result of intensive study. But it is all theology, nonetheless.

The Greek word “*theos*” means God, while the Greek suffix “*-ology*” means “the study of.” So, quite simply put, theology is literally the study of God. Therefore, theology in its simplest terms is rational discussion about God.

In Greek, the word *theologia* referred to discussions amongst the philosophers about divine matters. Plato called the stories of the gods “theologies.” Aristotle considered theology to be the greatest of all scientific studies since its subject, God, was the highest reality. Mark Batterson would echo Aristotle’s thoughts in his claim that every “*-ology*” is a branch of theology.

B. B. Warfield promoted a classic definition as follows: “Theology is the science of God and his relationship to man and the world.” In greater detail, it is the discipline which presents a unified formulation of truth concerning God and his relationship to humanity and the universe as this is set forth in divine revelation; and applies such truths to the entire range of human thought and life. (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology)

Theology: the contents of the Christian faith as set forth in orderly exposition by the Christian community. (Renewal Theology, J. Rodman Williams)

Systematic theology: the study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach us today?” This definition indicates that systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic. (Bible Doctrine, Wayne Grudem)

Doctrine: What the whole Bible teaches about some particular topic. (Bible Doctrine, Wayne Grudem)

Major Doctrine: one that has a significant impact on our thinking about other doctrines or that has a significant impact on how we live the Christian life (examples: authority of the Bible, deity of Christ, justification by faith).

Minor Doctrine: one that has very little impact on how we think about other doctrines and very little impact on how we live the Christian life (examples: differing views of the future, forms of church government, forms of communion and baptism).

Paradox: a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true (example: the doctrine of the Trinity).

Historical Theology: study of Christian doctrines as they have been considered at different points in church history.

Philosophical Theology: a study of theological topics largely without the use of the Bible. Instead, philosophical tools, resources, and methods are used to organize theological thought (example: Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology).

Narrative Theology: a 20th-century development of theological thought predicated on the idea that the Bible should be considered as narrative more than a system of theological truth.

Dogmatic Theology: a study of theology as set forth in the creeds, dogmas, and pronouncements of the church.

Apologetics: a defense of the Christian faith for the purpose of instructing believers or convincing unbelievers.

Ethics: the application of God's Word to real life situations, problems, and questions.

Christian theology looks at God as he has divinely revealed himself in the in His Word the Bible. However, because God is actively involved in his creation, theology must also include a study of God's creative works and his on-going relationship with His creation. Therefore, theology not only is a study of God himself, but also the nature of God's revelation, humanity, salvation, and other spiritual beings such as angels and demons.

Augustus H. Strong, an early 20th century theologian, defines theology as "*the science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.*"

Thomas Aquinas called theology the "queen of the sciences." Aquinas believed theology was preeminent over all other courses of study for two reasons:

1. Most sciences are partly speculative and partly practical. However, theology can be more certain in propositions because it is based on divine knowledge and revelation and not human reason, which can make mistakes.
2. Unlike other sciences, which involve an understanding of temporal things, theology contains the hope of eternal bliss.

But can we really define theology as a science? In Aquinas' 13th century definition, science meant "*knowledge.*" However, by the 18th century, science became more narrowly defined to mean a specific rigid approach to knowledge. Science came to be a method of determining truth through empirical proof, observation, experimentation and strict procedures of inductive logic. This has come to be known as the "scientific method." Clearly, under this definition, theology is not considered a "science." God by definition, cannot be observed, experimented on, and proven empirically. However, neither can many other academic disciplines. Psychology, for example,

cannot adequately employ the scientific method to determine the nature of humanity and personality. For this reason, psychology and other academic pursuits have evolved into “behavioral sciences.” Rather than attempt to describe the makeup of the human spirit, psychology merely observes and measures the behavior of humans. Given this modern understanding of science, theology faces a dilemma. Either it must relinquish its crown as the “queen of sciences,” or it must redefine itself as a behavioral science and thus fit the modern definition. This dilemma divided the study of theology in the 20th century. Some theologians have attempted to redefine the study of theology, changing to the behavioral approach. Others have reacted strongly against that holding to the autonomy of theology.

So is theology a science? Not in the strict definition of science applied commonly today. But in the broader definition of knowledge, theology is certainly the pursuit of knowledge. Furthermore, theology does employ discipline and standardized methodology. It is not mere speculation or the pursuit of mystical experiences. It has a defined subject matter which it investigates objectively using a defined method for verifying propositions through the use of certain tests of logic. Using this basis, we can still agree that theology is indeed the “queen of the sciences.”

Terms of Theological Studies

By definition, God is beyond human understanding (*Isaiah 55:8-9*). Therefore, some theologians believe we can only conclusively say what God is not rather than what God is. This is a theology by negation rather than affirmation. For example, we can only say that God is incorporeal (i.e. he does not have a body), rather than say he is spirit. This is the primary method of theology employed by the Eastern Orthodox Church. It keeps God a mystery and allows us to dwell in the wonder of God.

However, to the extent that God has revealed things about himself, we can indeed describe the nature of God affirmatively. However, we are still limited by our human understanding and we must recognize that God has made accommodations for our finite understanding. God’s revelation uses analogies, symbols and metaphors in order for us to understand his nature. If theology is to have any positive affirmations about God, then we can only make such affirmations using indirect language. For example, the Bible uses terms such as father, son and spirit to help us understand the mystery of the trinity. This, however, is only an analogy, and we must be careful to not take our understanding of “son” too far or we will understate the divinity of the second person of the trinity.

Branches of Theology

There are four classic categories of theology. These categories build upon one another and each have value for the student.

1. Biblical Theology

Biblical theology uses the scriptures alone as its source. But more than just limiting the source, it also specifies how to approach this source. Biblical theology looks at a given period of history or at a given author within the bible and tries to understand how that author or period of time saw

God and His revelation. Biblical theology emphasizes the historical context into which the author was writing. Biblical theology recognizes that God reveals himself differently at different times in history and seeks to understand specifically how this is demonstrated in the progression of the Bible.

Biblical theology is the basis of all other approaches to theology. We must first understand the intent and purpose of the original author and understand exactly how God revealed himself in specific situations at specific points in history to properly develop our own theology. We must understand the methodology employed by biblical theologians to ensure that we are properly observing, interpreting, and applying God's word. The only significant danger in biblical theology is to miss the forest for the trees. That is to say, we can narrowly look at what Isaiah says about the Messiah, and miss how that relates to what the Gospel of John says about Jesus Christ. We must constantly compare various scriptures and see how any particular passage relates to the whole of scripture.

2. Systematic Theology

Systematic theology also uses the Bible as its primary source. However, it attempts to compare and relate all of scripture and create a systematized statement on what the whole Bible says about particular issues. While biblical theology sees God reveal himself in a progressive manner in scripture, systematic theology combines this progression and seeks to make a statement about God and his revelation that transcends history. According to Charles Ryrie,

Systematic theology correlates the data of biblical revelation as a whole in order to exhibit systematically the total picture of God's self-revelation. We will define Systematic theology further in this lesson. This is the approach we will be using for this program.

3. Dogmatic Theology

Dogmatic theology uses as its primary sources the creeds or statements of faith (i.e. dogma). Dogmas are formal statements of systematic theology created by a particular denomination or theologian. Dogmatic theology concentrates on studying the various dogmas. For example, this approach would study the creeds of the Roman Catholic Church or the Westminster Confession. Dogmatic theology emphasizes the contrast between movements, like Calvinism and Armenianism, or Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. Creeds and statements of faith are usually well thought out consistent approaches to theology in a systematic way.

Dogmatic theology is hearsay evidence based on second or third hand information. It is like asking your friends how they liked a movie and what the plot of the movie was, but never going to see the movie for yourself. You can gain an interesting perspective and find truthful information in the second hand report, but until you buy a ticket and watch it for yourself, you can't really understand what the movie is all about.

4. Historical Theology

Historical theology uses as its primary sources the traditions and historic statements of the church and other theologians. Historical theology traces the development of theological ideas

through the centuries and glean from these historic creeds, opinions, and treatises a proper understanding of God and his relation to the universe. There is value in historical theology. The historic traditions of the church cannot be ignored when developing a theological framework. Furthermore, there is significant value in reading the early church fathers and the great theologians through the centuries. We would do well to understand the development of certain theological ideas. For example, examining the events and ideas that led to Martin Luther's break from the Roman church gives us a clearer understanding of such ideas as justification by faith. However, there is also a great danger in historical theology. The church fathers and theologians throughout the centuries are not inerrant. The fact that theology has changed and developed reveals that historical theology is more subjective and relativistic than other approaches to theology.

Sub-categories of Systematic Theology

While the key definition of theology is the study of God, because God has involved himself in His creation, theology also is concerned with God's interaction with His creation. Therefore, Systematic Theology has numerous sub-categories, which investigate various aspects of God's creation and His interaction with creation.

The following are some of the major sub-categories of Systematic Theology:

- Theology Proper – The study of the character of God.
- Bibliology – The study of the bible.
- Christology – The study of Christ.
- Pneumatology – The study of the Holy Spirit.
- Soteriology – The study of salvation.
- Anthropology – The study of the nature of humanity.
- Angelology – The study of angels.
- Ecclesiology – The study of the church.
- Eschatology – The study of the end times.

Comparing Theology with Other Areas of Study

1. Systematic Theology vs. Apologetics

Systematic theology tries to clearly communicate one's belief about particular doctrines. The goal of systematic theology is to help the believer clarify and systematize their own beliefs and ensure that those beliefs are consistent and rational.

Apologetics tries to communicate beliefs to non-believers. The goal of apologetics is to defend beliefs to those who do not share them. Apologetics takes note of objections to one's theology and responds to the objections in a manner that will convince the unbeliever.

2. Systematic Theology vs. Philosophy

Philosophy is the examination of fundamental beliefs. Beliefs are examined against tests of logic and other rational thought. Theology is the articulation of beliefs regarding the nature of God and His interaction with creation. Philosophy can be used to defend or scrutinize theological concepts by providing a rational framework for establishing truth. However, while philosophy serves a useful purpose in providing consistency and logic, it cannot compare to the special revelation of God and must be made a priority, or theology merely becomes a branch of theology.

Why Study Theology?

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (*Ephesians 4:11–16*)

“Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” (*Hebrews 5:13–14*)

Clarification (*Ephesians 4:14*)

Correction (*1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 4:3–5; Hebrews 5:13–14*)

Declaration and Unification (*Ephesians 4:13*)

Obedience (*Psalms 119:11; Matthew 28:19–20; 1 John 2:3*)

Growth (*Ephesians 4*)

To love and glorify God (*Matthew 22:37; Philippians 1:9–11*)

Disadvantages to Theology

So what is the practical need for systematic theology? Why should we study and research this stuff? Isn't just loving Jesus enough? Indeed, the study of theology does have certain disadvantages:

1. Theology can complicate the Christian message, making it difficult for people to understand the simple gospel.
2. Theology has been used to divide the church rather than unite it. Most denominations have arisen out of disagreements over even the most minor points of theology.
3. Theology can breed arrogance and elitism within the church (1 Corinthians 8:1-3). Those who study theology often incorrectly see themselves as more spiritual because they have greater knowledge about God.

Nonetheless, in spite of these disadvantages, theology is a crucial area of study for the church.

Importance of Theology

1. Theology is Essential for Salvation

Correct doctrine is essential to our salvation. Jesus, in Mark 16, asked the disciples, “who do you say that I am?” The answer to this question was not an academic, theological one. It cut to the very core of what it means to be a Christian. All people must answer this basic theological question. It is the very crux of salvation. If theology is the expression of our beliefs about God, then one must have theology in order to be saved. According to Romans 10:9, one must confess with their mouth Jesus as Lord in order to be saved. To put this in technical theological terms, salvation requires that one must articulate their Christology.

2. Clarifies our Beliefs

While we all have a view of God and how he relates to us, very few have laid out their beliefs in a clear manner. Studying systematic theology helps us to understand what we believe and helps us to communicate those beliefs. It helps us to take our bible study and put some systematic framework to our understanding about God and his relationship to us.

3. Defends our Beliefs

We live in an increasingly relativistic world where the only test for truth is based on experience. This is a trend not only in the world, but increasingly so in the evangelical church. The evangelical church has a long tradition of emphasizing the need for a personal, experiential relationship with God. The danger behind this comes when *we make experience the proof of a belief rather than the result of belief*. Systematic theology helps us defend our beliefs by providing an objective singular source that provides a common ground to discuss our beliefs. It also gives us a litmus test for alternate teachings to test their validity. Without this, we are left open to deception.

4. Protects Against False Teaching

The church is constantly being bombarded with false teaching. The secular world’s naturalism and humanism has made great inroads into the church. Other world religions, such as Islam and Buddhism, are growing at an increasing rate. Other groups claim to be Christian, but don’t hold on to orthodox Christian teaching. The scripture tells us to watch out for false teaching and to

test those teachings against right doctrine (*1 John 4:1-3*). The correct way to fight against false teaching is not to study the beliefs of all the alternative viewpoints, but to gain a greater understanding of Christian beliefs. The more we understand what the bible teaches, the easier it is for us to discover counterfeits.

5. Provides a Basis for Maturity

While knowledge of theology does not guarantee that one will grow spiritually, it is hard to grow in our relationship with God without a fundamental understanding of God and his primary revelation (i.e. the Bible). A good understanding of the Bible is crucial to Christian maturity. However, maturity is more than just knowledge. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to change your life based on this knowledge. Systematic theology provides a starting point for this maturity to happen.

Goals of Systematic Theology

We must keep in mind five distinctions of good systematic theology as we develop our personal statements of faith:

1. Biblical

The primary source and basis for authority comes the Bible. While we may use other sources to clarify and test our theology, the ultimate standard is the scriptures.

2. Systematic

By definition, systematic theology must draw from all scripture and correlate and organize the various passages with each other. It must be well thought out and laid out in a consistent orderly manner.

3. Relevant

While our theology must remain true to the authoritative scriptures, it must be communicated in a contemporary way. To be relevant we must address the philosophies and prominent worldviews of our day. Sometimes this means we use outside source to corroborate our point or use reason and experience to confirm the scriptures. The fundamental doctrine should not change significantly over time, but the method and presentation will need to.

4. Practical

Theology can easily become a mere academic exercise. Theologians are notorious for debating fine points of doctrine, which have no practical application in the day-to-day living of the Christian life. Good theology must give us insight that changes the way we think and live.