

On Systematic Theology

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If you are unfamiliar with the term, *Systematic Theology*, please allow me to break it down for you. *Theology* is the study of God, based on his revelation of himself to mankind in his written Word, the Bible. The word *systematic* expresses the desire to be clear, organized and complete. Systematic Theology is an ambitious way to study the Bible because it seeks the full counsel of God regarding the topic or doctrine under consideration. Primary doctrines typically include the Word of God, the Triune Nature of God, Christology (the person and work of Christ), Redemption (God's work of salvation), Pneumatology (the Holy Spirit), Ecclesiology (the church), Eschatology (end time events). Examples of secondary doctrines include Angelology, Marriage, Providence. Thankfully, there are people of faith and brilliant mind who have done the heavy lifting for us. Typical Systematic Theology textbooks can be several thousand pages long or come in multiple volumes.

During my time in vocational church ministry, I wanted to offer our people a Systematic Theology curriculum. I selected an excellent textbook, and developed lesson plans, handouts and presentation slides to help us move efficiently through a myriad of Scripture verses and passages required for each lesson. Another challenge was purely logistical: when, where and how. For us, the best time in church life for a course like this was on Wednesday evening during normal programming for children, youth and adults, which ran from 6:00 to 7:30 pm, after the weekly meal in the fellowship center. I used the largest classroom in our adult education space, which had capacity for about 80 people at tables, with more in chairs for overflow. It also made sense to pace the

course with the lives of our people, which were dictated primarily by the local school schedule. Therefore, we would break for the summer, the holidays, and observe the school system's Spring and Fall breaks. What emerged was a five-year, ten-semester Systematic Theology curriculum. We averaged 80 to 100 people in a classroom environment for an hour and a half each week. It was a Christian educator's dream scenario, and a definite highlight and joy of my time on the church ministry staff.

There are some who say that the Bible should not be studied in depth like this, because doing so only fosters discord and division in the church. Here's what I found. The most common areas for confusion and difference of opinion came in the doctrines of providence and eschatology, but even in these we never once had sharp disagreement because of a simple rule, which I asked the class to abide by: If you assert an opinion, tell the class why you believe it to be true based on the Scriptures. In other words, "I think *this*, because the Bible says *that*." In this way, we kept the opinions of man to a minimum, and gave honor to God by recognizing the authority of his Word over our lives, including the way we think.

Of course, the goal in studying the Bible is not simply to avoid disagreement, but to know God better and more, and a significant by-product of this endeavor is in fact, unity. The body of Christ, that is the church, is to be equipped and built up in the truth concerning Jesus Christ. There is a unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God that we pursue when we open God's Word together. (see Ephesians 4:13) We are to be unified around the good news about Jesus. As common recipients of God's love and grace in Christ, we can be eternally grateful that God has given us the living Word of Jesus Christ himself (see John 1:14) and the written testimony concerning him, the Bible. (see John 5:39-40, Matthew 24:35) There is a purity, excellence and even a nobility in God's people studying the Bible together, all looking at the same unchanging message,

with no agenda other than to honestly seek to understand what God means by what he has said. (see Acts 17:11)

I know some who have expressed a fear of studying God's Word because of what they may learn about him. It's true that God is awesome in his power, holiness and authority, and he should be reverently feared. This is the good starting place. (see Proverbs 1:7) However, the message concerning Christ is one of blessing, life and hope for those who would trust in him, not fear. The person who fears what might be in God's Word, fears irrationally and out of ignorance. If he or she only knew the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ just beyond the veil!

Whenever the church has lost her way in history, it has always been because the church stopped looking to Christ in the Scriptures. She has lost sight of the gospel. The result is always ignorance and fear, and in many cases, an abusive control exerted by church authorities. These sad and shameful episodes have marred the church. But whenever the church has returned to the Scriptures, God's people have always found the gospel of God's grace in Jesus perfectly preserved there. The truth is that the church and every individual in it, in every time, is in constant need of being reformed to Christ and the good news about him, and that good news always begins with, "Do not fear."

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Luke 2:10