

Assembly Introduction - What we believe about God is the most important thing about us...

Introduction to Systematic Theology & Doctrine of the Word

Introduction to Systematic Theology

What is Systematic Theology?

Our word “theology” derived from two Greek words, *theos*, which means “God,” and *logos*, which means “word” or “message.” When we speak of *systematic* theology we mean the orderly arrangement of the study of God into logical, topical divisions.

For example, what does the Bible say about creation? The practice of systematic theology is to gather all the texts that deal with creation, interpret them within the broad storyline of Scripture, and then summarize them in a faithful and coherent manner. If you'll turn to the back of your handout, you'll see the outline for our class and topics we'll be discussing together. (walk through briefly)

Why Study Systematic Theology?

(1) For God's Glory

God is glorified when we seek to know Him (Philippians 1:9-11). So the objective of studying theology is to come to know God better and to increasingly learn how to please Him. 1 John 2:3 says that “*we know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.*”

(2) Corporately Reflect Christ to Others

As the body of Christ, we study theology so that the church can be an accurate reflection of God to the world. In a time when the very concept of truth is called into question, the church needs to be ready to “give a reason for the hope that it has.” For it's through us corporately, it's through the church, says Paul in Ephesians 3 that the manifold witness of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Eph 3.10).

(3) Individual Sanctification and Growth

Individually, we must study theology so that we may be sanctified and grow in knowledge and faith. We don't just want to know about God, as though he can only be known at a distance. No, we actually want to know God personally and to have a relationship with Him. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov.1:7). (Read opening para., pg.13, Dagg's *Manual of Theology*)

Truth fuels worship. Theology sparks doxology. It's good to ask, if our worship feels shallow, could it be because we have shallow theology? Without theology there is no fuel to the fire of our worship. Enduring heat doesn't come by seeking more sparks (motivational speaker, cool new conference, great musical sound). Enduring heat comes as we pour the truth of God's word into our souls. What God's people most fundamentally need is a grand vision of God!

(4) Doctrine Matters

Finally, we should study theology because doctrine matters. Being a disciple goes beyond making a one-time decision. Hear Jesus in John 8:31, "*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.*" We can't just make up what we think God is like or imagine that He will approve this or that. If we did, too often He would look just like us. Perhaps this is why Paul warns Timothy that, "*the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them...teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear*" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

It is the temptation of fallen man to determine our theology much like a lunch buffet, or fantasy football team. But the Bible grants no Christian the right to pick and choose which biblical doctrines he wants to believe. The Bible talks about hell, so we need to know about hell. The Bible talks about election, we need to know all that Scripture says about election.

Doctrine matters not just in the sense that we need to hold to Jesus' teaching but we also need to clarify what Jesus and the Bible doesn't teach. Is Mormonism compatible with Christianity? Does God promise his followers material prosperity? These questions matter!

So, why do we study systematic theology?: We study it for (1) for God's glory; (2) to corporately reflect Christ to others; (3) for individual sanctification and growth; and (4) because doctrine matters.

Having looked at why we want to study systematic theology, let's take a look at some key features of systematic theology.

Doing Systematic Theology - Key Features

Biblically Grounded

Systematic theology should have a few key features. First, it should be *biblically grounded*.

Ultimately, every worldview appeals to a rule, a standard, a final court of appeals when determining what is true. When it comes to matters of theological questions, the Bible is that rule.

While that's the position of this class, know that many would disagree with this claim. Roman Catholicism, for example, argues that the teaching of the Church carries an authority at least on par, if not above, the Bible's own authority.

The "modernist" elevates reason over revelation. They argue that "The proper ground for believing a thing is not that the Bible or tradition contain it, but that reason and conscience commend it." (Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, pgs 50-51)

Whereas the "postmodernist" denies the very ability to make absolute truth claims. There is no Author (capital A) who gives meaning and order to the world. Thus there is no *one* story that defines our existence, no biblical meta-narrative of creation to redemption. Rather, each of us are left with our own languages, experiences, and equally viable versions of the truth. For the "postmodernist" it's nonsensical to appeal to universal truths, or the "rightness" of one religion over another.

But the teaching of *this* church is that the Bible *alone* is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, finally and fully authoritative for faith and life. We'll think about why we believe that in a few moments.

So, first, biblical theology needs to be biblically grounded ...

Historically Informed

Second, our systematic theology should be *historically informed*. That's not to say the Bible takes a back-seat to historical traditions. But it is to say that we don't do theology in a vacuum. We stand on the shoulders of giants. History has much to teach us, and modern-day evangelicals often forget this.

Contextualized

Third, our systematic theology should be contextualized. We don't do systematic theology in a sterile lab. It's anything but cold, dry, and clinical. Read over Paul's example in Athens from Acts 17. We're to take the Bible's teaching and apply it to the

the pressing issues of our day. What does it mean to be male and female? Is there such a thing as truth? How do we define life? ... This has consequences for everything from what we think of co-ed dorms to genetic engineering.

Lived Out

Lastly, our systematic theology should be and must be, lived out. Dead orthodoxy is not true orthodoxy. Remember the church in Sardis from Rev 3.1, the apostle John wrote “*you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!*” They were condemned for not living out the living word they had received. So if you walk out of this class and your affections aren’t stirred, your soul encouraged and your life changed - you’re not doing systematic theology no matter how much head knowledge you have. True theology is living theology. It should strengthen our faith, and bring a skip to our step.

So, we want to make sure any systematic theology that we do is (1) biblically grounded, (2) historically informed, (3) contextualized, and (4) lived out in our lives.

Comments or Questions?

Doctrine of the Word

Introduction

Let’s turn now to our first topic of the class – the doctrine of the Word. Here we will see why we believe that the Bible alone, *sola scriptura* as the Reformers put it, is to be our ultimate authority when it comes to the Christian faith.

Throughout our course we will maintain two assumptions, or presuppositions: (1) there is a God (triune, both sovereign and personal); and (2) he speaks or reveals himself to us.

That’s not a cop out. Every worldview starts with a presupposition, or series of them. For the empiricist it’s that our world is a closed box, we can only know what we can touch, taste, feel, and that our senses are reliable guides. For the rationalist, it’s that we’re given a set of innate ideas in the mind (either because we’re born with them, or because the soul pre-existed), and knowledge comes as we apply reason to those ideas.

For the biblical Christian, it’s that He Is There And He Is Not Silent (famous title by Francis Schaeffer). That God both exists and speaks is in fact one of the primary ways the Bible distinguishes the true God from all other false gods (Below - 1Kings 18.24ff; Ps 115.5ff; Hab 2.18-20).

Think of Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal to a duel and watching as the one true God brings fire to a watered-down pit while the fake Baal god fails to answer.

Or think about the psalmist in Psalm 115 saying, “their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.”

Now, when we say the word of God, we don’t merely mean the Bible. The Bible is simply the word of God *written*. The word of God would include the power by which God brings all things to pass according to the counsel of his will (Eph 1.11), including creation (Gen 1.3: Jn 1.3). It’s his personal presence with his creatures. Paul writes in Romans 10 that “*The word is near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart*” (Rom 10.6-8). God’s word reveals him. So to obey God’s word is to obey God, to despise his word is to despise him (Is 66.2).

We could even say God’s word, or speech, is one of his attributes. He’s a speaking God. That doesn’t mean the Bible is necessary to his being, but communication is. There is fellowship within the Godhead. In the same way God didn’t have to create to be creative, he didn’t have to speak to us in order to prove he’s communicative. We take this for granted, but speech is God’s free gift to us.

And one of the key forms that revelation takes ... is Scripture, God’s special revelation committed to writing.

So, we start with the presuppositions that (1) there is a God and that (2) he speaks or reveals himself to us ...

The Case for the Bible as Our Authority

But how do we know that the Bible is God’s authoritative Word to his people? Do we merely cite 2Tim 3.16, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness?*” No! The Bible as God’s authoritative word pervades the entire Scriptures. It’s not isolated merely to one or two verses.

Old Testament

Going back to the Old Testament, we see that the faith of ancient Israel was based on the authority of the written word. We need look no further than the Ten Commandments, which God penned himself, on two stone tablets.

Moses writes in Deut. 5:22, “*These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud*

and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.” (Deuteronomy 5:22 NIV)

In entering into a covenant relationship with Israel, God gave the people his Word. And as redemptive history unfolds, God consistently brings his people back to his covenantal Word (cf. Deut 32).

And where is this Word put? In the most sacred place, in the Ark of the Covenant. Why? Because it came directly from God!

The rest of Moses’ writings and the later prophetic writings were always regarded as no less divine, no less truly words of God, than the words which God had written with His very own finger. The fact that man penned the words never affected the reality that their authority and inspiration were divine (Rom. 3:2; Acts 4:25, 28:25; Heb. 3:7, 8:8, 10:15). “*Thus says the Lord*” from a prophet is equivalent to God speaking directly.

New Testament Recognizes Authority of OT Writings

And the New Testament shares this same testimony of the Old Testament’s divine authority. Jesus, himself, treated the OT Scriptures as absolutely authoritative. In the Sermon on the Mount, we read that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (shorthand way of speaking of the whole OT), or to correct them, but to fulfill them (Mt 5.17). He not only has a high view of himself, but clearly a high view of the OT Scriptures!

Jesus treated arguments from OT Scripture as having the final say. In John 10:35 Jesus states that “*Scripture cannot be broken*,” referring to the OT. When Jesus says, “*it is written*,” the discussion is over. A good example of this is when Jesus quotes Deuteronomy to the devil when being tempted in the desert.

Further, Jesus Himself abided by the Scriptures. We’re told that he lived a perfect life according to the Old Testament Scriptures. According to his own testimony, even his death on the cross happened because “*everything that was written about [Him] in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms [had to] be fulfilled*.” (Lk. 24.44)

New Testament Recognizes an Authority on Par with OT

But the NT doesn’t just testify to the authority of the OT, it also recognizes it’s own authority on par with the OT. So in Matthew 28, Jesus spoke to the disciples after his resurrection and seems to anoint them particularly to complete his teaching. In John 14 through 16, Jesus promises to send the disciples the Holy Spirit who will remind them of what He has taught them over the course of his ministry and lead them into all truth, including teaching that Jesus did not give during his earthly ministry because it was more than the disciples could bear. (See also 1 Cor. 2:13 and John 16:12-15)

The disciples understood this as well. In 2 Peter 3:16 Peter says of Paul's writings that, *"He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures..."* The Apostle Paul's letters are equated with Scripture.

In I Timothy 5:18 Paul says, *"For the Scripture says..."* and then quotes Deuteronomy and the gospel of Luke, which was not written by an apostle but was clearly approved and affirmed by those apostles who were still alive.

The unmistakable point is this - the OT and NT attests to the Scriptures as God's authoritative revelation to his people. The Bible comes to us in a unified package, which means we don't get to pick and choose what we like (e.g. Thomas Jefferson). If it's God's word, we don't stand above it, determining what we will and will not accept, but we stand underneath it, as those called to humbly submit ourselves to it.

Canon of Scripture

But this raises the question of which writings represent God's authoritative revelation? This is the question of canon. Canon is the Greek transliteration of a Semitic word that means "measuring reed," "rule," or "standard."

Inherent in the discussion are a number of questions. First, how did we get these 66 books? That's the historical question that consumes the airwaves of PBS or The History Channel, where the Bible's history is turned into some seedy political drama with backroom deals to get this book in, keep that book out, etc.

But there are more theological questions as well. So what's the relationship between canon and authority? Which came first? Namely, did the books themselves have an inherent authority that the canon merely recognized, or did the Church create the canon, and thus did the church confer authority on the book by placing it within the canon? Or another question, is the canon closed? If so why?

These are the questions we'll begin considering next week.

Pray