

# Building Systematic Theology

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## Study Guide

LESSON  
ONE

## WHAT IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?



THIRD MILLENNIUM  

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MINISTRIES

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

## STUDY GUIDE

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### How to use this lesson and study guide

- **Before you watch the lesson**
  - **Preparation** — Complete any recommended readings.
  - **Schedule breaks** — Review the outline and the time codes to determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions in the outline.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
  - **Notes** — Use the Notes section to follow the lesson and to take additional notes. Many of the main ideas are already summarized in the notes, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
  - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
  - **Review Questions** — Questions on the basic content of the lesson. Answer review questions in the space provided. Review questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
  - **Application Questions** — Questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

## Outline

- I. Introduction (0:29)
- II. New Testament (2:55)
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    - 3. Traditional (10:46)
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    - 2. Pastoral Character (17:42)
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    - 4. Basic Framework (21:25)
- III. Historical Developments (26:50)
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  - C. Protestant Theology (1:03:00)
    - 1. Early Reformers (1:03:50)
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    - 3. Modern Systematics (1:11:49)
- IV. Values and Dangers (1:15:22)
  - A. Christian Living (1:18:20)
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    - 1. Enhancement (1:25:18)
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  - C. Exegesis of Scripture (1:28:45)
    - 1. Enhancement (1:32:50)
    - 2. Hindrance (1:34:00)
- V. Conclusion (1:35:20)

## Notes

### I. Introduction

If we take the time to arrange our theology in a systematic way, we'll actually be able to get much more done in service to Christ and his kingdom.

Systematic theology is one of the main ways the Holy Spirit has led the Christian church to put its theology in order.

### II. New Testament

All systems of theology other than the Bible reflect the imperfections of sinful human beings. So, we should be very interested in how systematic theology compares to the Bible.

#### A. Systematic Theology

Historically speaking, systematic theology has been one of the most influential ways Christians have built theology.

Some examples of systematic doctrines are:

“Systematic theology seeks to give a systematic presentation of all the doctrinal truths of the Christian religion.” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, ch. 4)

### 1. **Biblical**

For protestant theologians committed to *sola Scriptura*, to say that we focus on doctrinal truths is to say that all of our theology must accord with the Bible.

Wrong foundations for systematic theology include:

- Church tradition or dogma
- Religious experience:
- Non-Christian philosophy

## 2. **Logical**

Systematicians seek to make clear how the teachings of Scripture reveal a unified logical system of beliefs.

## 3. **Traditional**

Systematics interacts not only with the Bible, but also with the main ways the Bible's teachings have been expressed by theologians throughout church history.

Systematicians usually organize the doctrines of Scripture in this way:

1. Bibliology:
2. Theology proper:
3. Anthropology:
4. Soteriology:
5. Ecclesiology:
6. Eschatology:

## **B. New Testament Theology**

Sound Systematicians seek to make their assertions correspond as much as possible to the assertions of the New Testament. Even so, systematics is very different from the New Testament. The contours of New Testament theology differ from those of systematic theology in at least four ways.

### **1. Diversity**

There is much more diversity of terms and categories in the New Testament than in systematic theology.

Organic inspiration: The Holy Spirit guarded biblical writers from error and from contradicting each other, but he did not flatten the vocabulary and categories of New Testament writers so that they were uniform.

### **2. Pastoral Character**

The writers of the New Testament expressed their theology in ways that addressed relatively specific needs in specific ways, rather than in permanent, universal truths.

### 3. Genres

Systematic theology is written in one basic genre: an extended essay or treatise. By contrast, the writers of the New Testament used many different literary forms and styles.

### 4. Basic Framework

New Testament writers largely structured their theology around the theme of the messianic kingdom of God, rather than around the traditional structure of systematic theology.

One of the primary goals of New Testament writers was to explain that the transition from this age of exile and sin to the messianic kingdom of God was going to involve a complex and extended process:

- Inauguration:
  
- Continuation:
  
- Consummation:



### **III. Historical Developments**

Systematic theology came about through a long process of the church responding to and ministering in a changing world.

#### **A. Patristic Theology (AD 150-600)**

##### **1. Cultural Changes**

Gentiles, rather than Jews, became the leading theologians of the church. They began to describe Christianity in terms of the Hellenistic philosophies of their day.

Christian leaders reached out to the world:

- Syncretism:
  
  
- Legitimate Ministry:

## 2. Theological Changes

The dominant philosophical and religious stream in the Mediterranean world was an outlook commonly known as Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism was rooted in the teachings of Plato, but also included new ideas introduced by philosophers such as Plotinus who lived from AD 203-279.

Dualism:

Rationalism:

Mysticism:

Faithful Christian theologians in the Patristic period did not allow their attention to Neo-Platonism to supplant their basic commitments to the true gospel.

Spiritual Priorities

Importance of Reason

Importance of Mysticism

**B. Medieval Theology (AD 600-1500)**

During the Medieval period Christians more consistently applied Hellenistic views of human rationality and logic to Christian theology, which is commonly known as Scholasticism.

**1. Cultural Changes**

The intellectual communities of the Mediterranean world turned away from Neo-Platonism and toward the philosophy of Aristotle.

**2. Theological Changes**

Scholasticism was highly rationalistic, stressing the value of logic in exploring, explaining and defending all of theology. The physical and spiritual worlds, and even God himself, were to be analyzed through the careful application of logic.

Aristotle's views on logic:

Terminology:

Propositions: assertions of fact formed by a subject and a predicate.

Syllogisms: Logical arguments in which propositions are arranged to form premises and conclusions.

Priorities: In order to communicate with their Aristotelian culture, scholastics rigorously structured their doctrinal summaries in the order of theology from above.

## **C. Protestant Theology (AD 1500-present)**

### **1. Early Reformers**

The goal of early protestant theology was to reconstruct Christian theology according to the content of Scripture.

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* displayed a significant concern with Aristotelian logic in the ways he employed technical terms; expressed his theology largely in propositions; constructed syllogisms to reason through issues; and patterned his theology according to the priorities of theology from above.

## 2. Classical Confessions

Protestants in different regions of the world produced a number of classical catechisms and confessions that summarized their faith.

The Westminster Confession embraces Aristotelian logic in the ways it relies heavily on technical terms, how propositions are the central form of expression, the ways careful syllogisms undergird the presentation of theology, and how it orders the topics of theology according to the priorities of theology from above.

## 3. Modern Systematics

Charles Hodge (1797-1878) gave reason and logic a central role as he employed traditional technical terms, relied on propositions, built his case with careful syllogisms and followed the priorities of theology from above.

“The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.” — Charles Hodge

#### **IV. Values and Dangers**

God has provided three main resources upon which we must draw as we build Christian theology: the exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community and Christian living.

These major theological resources help us evaluate the levels of confidence we should grant to particular beliefs we have.

##### **A. Christian Living**

Christian living involves our sanctification and our growth in holiness.

- Thoughts (orthodoxy)
- Actions (orthopraxis)

- Feelings (orthopathos)

### 1. **Enhancement**

Systematic theology is particularly strong in the area of orthodoxy. It provides us with a systematic way of thinking, a conceptual framework for considering rightly the issues we face in our daily lives.

### 2. **Hindrance**

We can become so preoccupied with putting our beliefs into a logical system that we ignore other dimensions of Christian living, especially orthopraxis (conforming our behaviors to the will of God) and orthopathos (conforming our emotions to the will of God).

## **B. Interaction in Community**

Christians interact with each other because we know that the church is the central arena within which the Holy Spirit ministers in the world. And Christ expects us to build our theology in concert with others who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

- Christian heritage:
- Holy Spirit:
- Present Community:

**1. Enhancement**

Systematics constructs theology with an eye to the things the Holy Spirit has already taught the church of Christ, paying attention to how great men and women in the past built theology.

**2. Hindrance**

When we take the traditional focus of systematic theology too far, it can lead us to irrelevance, ignoring what the Holy Spirit teaches the present community and how he informs our private judgment.

**C. Exegesis of Scripture**

The main ways the Holy Spirit has taught the church to interpret the Bible.

- Literary analysis (picture):

Literary analysis seeks to understand the Bible as a document designed by human writers to influence their audiences through conventional literary means.



- Historical analysis (window):

The primary focus of historical analysis has been to reconstruct what happened in biblical history and to understand the significance of those events for people living in those times.

- Thematic analysis (mirror):

We look at the Scriptures as a mirror, as a way of addressing questions, topics, or themes that are important to us, even if they are not prominent in the Bible itself.

## 1. **Enhancement**

This process of collating and combining different verses into a whole helps us avoid treating one thing the Scriptures say about a topic as all that they say on a topic.

## **2. Hindrance**

Systematic theology often hinders exegesis because it does not focus on literary and historical analysis of the Scriptures. It places limitations on what we derive from the Bible.

## **V. Conclusion**



3. In what ways is systematic theology like New Testament theology?

4. In what ways is systematic theology different from New Testament theology?











## Application Questions

1. Why is it helpful to have systematic theology in addition to the Bible itself?
2. What aspect of systematic theology helps you the most in living the Christian life?
3. What aspect of systematic theology helps you the most in interaction in community?
4. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?