

THE VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Dr. Mike Stallard

Shortly after I had finished my doctorate in Systematic Theology, I learned a valuable lesson about how the average Christian views the field in which I had chosen to earn my degree. I was visiting a small rural church in New York state which welcomed me publicly as a visitor. From the pulpit the pastor mentioned I was there as a guest of some relatives and added that I had just finished my doctorate in Systematic Theology. The response of the congregation can best be described as a cross between a low whistle and a collective groan. Although there was no doubt some respect in the response, I suspect that there was also a misunderstanding of Systematic Theology as only a highly academic and impractical area of “deep” Bible study which was not really for the average believer.¹ Little did they know that every Sunday they were getting some Systematic Theology from their pastor.

Systematic theology can be defined *as the discipline which develops and follows a system of doctrine which incorporates into its system all the truth about the Christian God, His universe, and his relationship to it, from any and every source available to the mind of man.*² In other words, it is the development of an **“organized world view”** which arranges the teachings of the Bible in an organized fashion while using the Bible to evaluate all possible claims about God and truth.³ With this view in mind, I want to outline the practical value of Systematic Theology for Christian ministry.

First, Systematic Theology helps the believer to organize his thoughts about God and His creation. The major categories of Systematic Theology (the doctrines of the Bible and Revelation, God, Christ, Holy Spirit, angels, man and sin, salvation, Church, and last things) provide a *framework* that the Bible student can bring to the Bible to help him understand biblical truth. Presentation of biblical teachings can be *simplified* as truth from individual passages is related to the larger, overarching issues of the Bible as a whole.

Second, Systematic Theology helps the believer to see the harmony and unity of Scripture. One of the greatest evidences of the *divine inspiration* of the Bible is the marvelous unity it possesses although it was written by about forty different human authors over a period of at least 15 or 16 centuries. Diversity in the Bible can be seen as the purposes of God are revealed in the various dispensations. However, encompassing all the diversity is a unified plan of God. The organized arrangement of doctrines in our Systematic Theology contributes to our understanding that there are no contradictions within the biblical texts and to our assessment of the unity of God’s Word as we see how the many doctrines fit together. In this way Systematic Theology can strengthen the faith that church members have in the Bible.

Third, Systematic Theology helps the believer to apply spiritual truth to the twentieth (soon to be twenty first) century. Although many “modern” men reject the Bible as irrelevant for our day, the opposite is, in fact, true. For example: **(1)** The theological importance of the *formation of Israel as a nation in 1948* has long been discussed in evangelical/fundamental circles. Biblical prophecy in the Old Testament concerning Israel’s restoration in the latter days (e.g., Isa. 11:11-16) forces one to examine the present reality of Israel’s existence and think through the possible implications a “modern” fulfillment would have on one’s understanding of doctrines related to the Second Coming of Christ.⁴ **(2)** There would also be *questions raised by the present generation which would never have been asked by the human biblical authors.* For example, it is only the last half of this century that mankind has had the ability to destroy itself through *nuclear holocaust* and other means. Such a power in the hands of humans was never envisioned by the apostles and prophets. It is Systematic Theology which brings these modern issues to the biblical texts and asks if there are any principles which the writers gave addressing the issues of their day which might also address those of the twentieth century.

Fourth, Systematic Theology helps the believer to defend the faith. Congregations are susceptible to all kinds of doctrinal error in today's world of television "prophets" and proliferation of wrong information about spiritual truth. However, when a believer has his Systematic Theology "world view" confidently in hand, he cannot be blown around by "every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14) and will be better equipped to state his case as he shares his faith in the world.⁵ To use an analogy, he will be able to understand not just how the radiator, engine pistons, alternator, tires (i.e., the pieces) work, but also how the car runs (the whole picture).

It is difficult to present in a brief article the breadth of value there is to Systematic Theology. However, the significance of the points above should cause the pastor and layman alike to appreciate its usefulness. That means that the next time you enter a Christian bookstore, don't just go to the rack where Chuck Swindoll's books are (as good as they may be). It may be time to read a little Systematic Theology.

¹ Part of this dilemma for Systematic Theology may be that so many of the standard theology textbooks are written in, what is to the modern reader, a boring style more attune to the nineteenth century reader. Even classic novels of the nineteenth century by men like Charles Dickens are not well tolerated today by the average reader of fiction.

² This definition is very close to that of Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:5.

³ There is some confusion concerning the terms **Biblical Theology** and **Systematic Theology**. These terms are used in a technical sense of different academic disciplines. In a general way, one should not fall into the trap of saying that **Biblical Theology** is not systematic (i.e., organized) or that **Systematic Theology** is unbiblical! **Biblical Theology** approaches the biblical texts letting the categories of discussion emerge from the text itself and determining the world view of the human authors in their historical situations as God directed them. **Systematic Theology** should be based upon solid exegesis and **Biblical Theology**, but then expands upon it by 1) bringing categories and questions to the text which the biblical authors may never have struggled with, 2) harmonizing the entire biblical canon, and 3) interacting with and validating all truth claims, even those outside of the Bible. The result of doing Systematic Theology is a Christian world view for the present day and age undergirded by solid biblical teaching. Systematic Theology has been rejected by many liberals because of their historical-critical methodology which views the Bible as a collection of many contradictory traditions which can never be harmonized. Systematic Theology has been rejected by some conservatives who have reacted to abusive "proof-texting" in many theologies which insert theological abstractions into the text which have nothing to do with the author's intended meaning.

⁴ One must be careful here not to let one's understanding of current events "drive" one's interpretation of Scripture. On the other hand, Systematic Theology as the development of a world view would necessitate at least an analytical correlation between current events and biblical predictions. So the Christian believer would cautiously recognize the possibilities and increase his prayers for the coming of the Lord.

⁵ In a related issue, Systematic Theology would also help the believer understand why Christians of other persuasions disagree with his own church tradition. The different denominational positions on biblical issues often have a system or world view that is only slightly skewed from each other because of the history of their particular churches. The believer who understands how the whole fits together (his Systematic Theology) will be better prepared to spot the significance of those differences. In fact, he will be able to discern between those traditions which are genuinely biblical and those which only profess to be biblical.