

# Theological Systems

## I. Introduction

- A. It's a puzzling truth that two or more Bible students, be they trained scholars or average lay persons, can approach one particular text of Scripture and come to two sometimes vastly different understandings of its meaning.
- B. Sometimes, simple lack of training is the primary factor for this. Other times, a lack of careful study could explain the difference. However, in many cases the reasons are deeper and more complex than these.
- C. In reality, passages of biblical prophecy have long been a vector for debate and differing opinions and interpretations among believers. The reason for this stems from disparate theological traditions to which interpreters adhere.
- D. These theological traditions, or "systems" as they will be referred to in this study, form a lens through which students of the Bible see and understand the overall structure of Scripture and the metanarrative of human history.
- E. If we are to understand why eschatology and ecclesiology remain such highly debated issues in the evangelical church, we must reach down past the superstructure of these theological categories by digging up the foundation upon which they rest.

## II. Recognizing Presuppositions

- A. Presuppositions are "beliefs that one presumes to be true without supporting independent evidence from other sources or systems" (<https://answersingenesis.org/presuppositions>)
- B. Presuppositions form the foundation for how we understand the world (our worldview), but they also form the foundation for how we interpret Scripture.
- C. Every interpreter of the Bible comes to the text with certain presuppositions. They derive these presuppositions from
  - 1. Their religious or theological traditions
  - 2. Their personal religious experiences
  - 3. Their theological education
  - 4. Their relative familiarity with Scripture
- D. Presuppositions aren't necessarily wrong or bad. They are simply a reality that every Bible student must recognize as they approach the word of God.
- E. What's more, presuppositions aren't static or concrete. They can be shaped and molded and changed. Once we are aware of our own theological presuppositions and how they influence

our interpretive choices, we can begin to evaluate them based on the biblical text, and, if need be, change them.

### III. The Kinds of Theology

- A. Theology is a compound term derived from the Greek *theos* (“god”) and *logia* (“word”), and in the context of Christian theology refers to “the sustained effort to know the character, will, and acts of the triune God as he has disclosed and interpreted these for his people in Scripture...in order that we might know him, learn to think our thoughts after him, live our lives in his world on his terms, and by thought and action project his truth into our own time and culture” (David Wells, “The Theologian’s Craft,” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World*, 172).
- B. Although the word “theology” is a noun, it’s better to think of the concept as an action. We don’t *study* theology, we *do* theology. It’s an activity in which we engage.
- C. Additionally, it’s important to recognize that every person is a theologian, regardless of their background or training. Every one of us formulate an understanding of who God is and what he is doing in the world. Our responsibility as followers of the Word, both written and incarnate, is to labor as best we can to form our theology out of God’s self-revelation.
- D. Within the broader topic of theology, there are several major kinds of theology which relate to each other (the following is taken from John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017], 35–36):
  - 1. *Biblical theology*: The organization of Scripture thematically by biblical chronology or by biblical author with respect to the progressive revelation of the Bible (properly a component of systematic theology)
  - 2. *Exegetical theology*: The methodical organization of Scripture by dealing exegetically with individual texts of the Bible (properly a component of both biblical and systematic theology)
  - 3. *Historical theology*: The historical study of doctrinal developments after the apostolic era to the present time
  - 4. *Natural theology*: The study of what can be known about God by human reason alone through the empirical study of the natural world
  - 5. *Pastoral/practical theology*: The organization of Scripture with an emphasis on the personal application of doctrinal truth in the lives of the church and individual Christians
  - 6. *Systematic theology*: The organization of Scripture by a synthesis of scriptural teaching, summarized using major categories that encompass the entirety of God’s written revelation (developed from exegetical and biblical theology)

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- E. This last kind of theology—systematic—is an important final step in the process of doing theology because it rests upon the basis of the inspiration of Scripture. If the Bible is truly a work ultimately produced by a single divine author (as superintended through individual human writers) then it will necessarily exhibit unity of thought, purpose, and consistency. When the truths of Scripture are taken in relation to each other in a systematic way, we expect a coherent, unified revelation dealing with God and the world he has created.
- F. Thus, systematic theology deals with every theme or topic in a systematic way, encompassing the totality of biblical revelation.

### IV. Systems of Theology

- A. As theologians undergo the process of doing theology in a systematic way, there begins to develop a coherent system which unifies this theology together.
- B. This is where biblical study and theological presuppositions intersect. At some point, one's theology becomes a lens through which Scripture is understood.
- C. This lens is called a theological system, and there are two major theological systems which have dominated evangelical theology since the Protestant Reformation:
  - 1. Covenant Theology
  - 2. Dispensational Theology
- D. These two systems have become an interpretational grid through which many evangelicals approach Scripture.