

# What Is Systematic Theology and Why Do We Need It?

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Many Christian “ologies” exist: pneumatology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, missiology, eschatology, hamartiology, bibliology, and others. Most notable is Theology—the study of God. Within Theology exist certain subsets which include but are not limited to: Biblical theology, exegetical theology, historical theology, and the umbrella under which all the others subsist, *systematic theology*.

Systematic theology is best defined by [Professor John Frame](#) (retired) and recorded for us by [Dr. Wayne Grudem](#) in his 1994 edition of *Systematic Theology*: “Systematic Theology is any study that answers the question, ‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic” [Systematic theology](#) is comprised of the compilation and comprehension of *all* the pertinent passages in the Bible and then the encapsulation of them in a clear, teachable form so we have a firm foundation for our beliefs. Systematic theology interacts *directly* with Scripture and not with extant sources.

Systematic Theology differs from historical theology in that *historical theology* looks at how Christians of different periods of time have regarded Scripture. In addition, *philosophical theology* studies biblical topics largely without the use of the Bible. Instead, it uses logical reasoning and the observation of the universe and nature to know God.

## What Is the History of Systematic Theology?

Most scholars agree *systematic theology* has existed since the earliest days of the church, although it did not get titled as such until the term originated with German theologian [Bartholomäus Keckermann](#) (1572–1609).

The Bereans practiced systematic theology when they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul and Silas told them was so ([Acts 17:10-12](#)).

The early church fathers most probably were systematic theologians as they researched and answered questions about the Way. In Medieval times, John of Damascus (675-749 AD), a Greek Orthodox theologian, sought to develop instruction for the Church. He compiled four theological books, which, although cited as authoritative, did not receive approval by any church council.

By the 17th century, the Westminster Confession of [Faith](#) became the most highly advanced version of systematic theology. To this day, it continues as an essential statement of faith by many Presbyterian churches.

The Enlightenment (late 17th and early 18th century) caused a falling away from the faith for many until the 1800s with the publication of Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology* (1872-1873). It remains in print and, next to Calvin's *Institutes*, is the most referenced textbook (Reformed).

The most recent generations of Evangelicals are regarded as the most intellectual Christians, and systematic theologies are highly regarded (and used) by a good percentage. A quick survey of bookstores (brick & mortar and online Christian and secular) reveals numerous books on systematic theology and its subsets.

## **What Is the Difference between Biblical and Systematic Theology?**

Systematic theology, as we have defined, makes use of the entire Bible to discover doctrines about biblical topics (The doctrines of the word of God, God, man, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and each of the subsets within each topic). It looks at *all* passages that pertain to any given topic, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament.

*Biblical theology* falls under systematic theology in that it is part of it. *Biblical theology* organizes its topics according to the order they are found in the Bible. It includes both the Old and New Testaments, but it may do a search on the Holy Spirit with the proviso of asking what the Old Testament has to say about the Holy Spirit. The study expanded to the New Testament may ask, *what does Paul have to say about the Holy Spirit?* Unlike Systematic Theology, biblical theology is not all-encompassing (covering the entire Bible). It spotlights the teachings of individual authors within sections of Scripture and places the instruction within its historical context and the development thereof.

A more complete list of theologies includes *historical theology* (how Christians of different eras have understood biblical topics), *philosophical theology* (theology studied largely without the use of the Bible, but instead looking at God through the lens of His creation), and *apologetics* (a defensive posture used to convince unbelievers of the biblical truths).

## **Why Is Systematic Theology Important for Us Today?**

Systematic theology is like everyday rationalizations in that we rely on how the Bible speaks to us according to God's character, His Word, and how He ordered history.

If I want to learn all I can about the doctrine of man (his creation, gender, sinful nature) and his relationship with God, I need to search throughout the whole of the Bible (this is where the Bible tools of a concordance, dictionary, lexicon, and indeed a Systematic Theology reference book are necessary). Another prodigious asset is a website such as the [Blue Letter Bible](#), which includes cross-references, commentaries, topical indexes, and many other useful aids.

Why, though, should we study theology in a systematic way? Why is it important?

*Obedience.* The preeminent One ([Colossians 1:18](#))—Jesus—gives a commission to all believers in [Matthew 28:19-20](#). How are we to teach all He commanded if we have no knowledge of His commands ([1 John 5:2](#))? His directives begin in the Old Testament ([Genesis 2:24](#), [Colossians 1:16](#), [Deuteronomy 34:28](#)) and continue through [Revelation 1:1-3](#), 19; 22;18-19). As an illustration, the whole Bible is necessary for a complete assessment of a topic, we'll look at a few things done by Jesus. He quoted the Old Testament both to refute the devil ([Matthew 4:1-11](#)) and to substantiate His authority ([Luke 4:16-21](#), [John 4:25-26](#); 8:24; 18:6). The Gospels are replete with Jesus' commands, and they are encapsulated and expanded in the books of Acts through Revelation. As Christians, to know His commands is to follow them in obedience.

*To learn about God and love Him more.* What better tutorial about our Creator than the one He Himself wrote ([2 Peter 1:21](#)). Our love for Him will grow as we read what He has done ([John 3:16](#), [1 John 4:19](#)), is doing ([John 14:3](#); 17:9, 20, 26), and will do for us ([John 14:1-3](#)).

*To know why we believe.* This is huge, and it encompasses an apologetic ministry along with evangelism. If we do not know the whys of our faith, we will falter when faced with the world's trials and temptations.

*To understand our history.* In the beginning ([Genesis 1:1](#))...That's where *our* history began. The Bible gives us the whole boundary of who we were, are, and will be (in glory).

*To learn where we will go.* The Bible, while not expansive in its communication about [heaven](#), is definitive in that believers will be there with Jesus ([John 14:1-3](#)).

*To follow the red thread through the Bible.* The *red thread* is a reference to what the Bible has to say about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, throughout Scripture. From Christophanies in the Old Testament to prophecies of His Second Advent, Jesus is the gist of Scripture.

*To facilitate our lessons as we teach others.* Since we are students of the Word, it only makes sense that we should know what we teach. Whether it's a one-on-one discipleship study or a presentation to hundreds, our knowledge of Scripture buttresses our lessons.

*To rejoice in our Savior with praise.* As we pray and then study the word, the Lord opens our eyes and hearts (and oft-times, our lips) to what He reveals to us. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we understand and apply with joy all He is and who we are because of Him. Don't be surprised if He brings hymns to mind as you study. Do take the time to sing in praise of Him.

When we undertake a systematic study of the Bible, it's good to remember this wisdom: *Pray and enlist the help of others.* None of us has reached the point of total knowledge. God has given us His church for mutual edification and encouragement. Find someone who is more mature in the faith. If something stumps both of you, seek counsel from another who is more seasoned.

*With reason.* In everything, go forth with wisdom from the Lord ([Proverbs 2:6](#); 3:5-6;9:10, [James 1:5-6](#)).

Theological study is not for the faint in diligence. It's hard work, yet the rewards exceed our human imaginations and take them to the heights of heaven. Those who have gone before us bequeathed us with wisdom regarding the study of God's Word:

*If you are ignorant of God's Word, you will always be ignorant of God's will.* —Billy Graham

*I never saw a useful Christian who was not a student of the Bible.* —D. L. Moody  
*In fact, the devil is delighted when we spend our time and energy defending the Bible, as long as we do not get around to actually reading the Bible.* —R. C. Sproul, Jr.

*I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from The Savior of the world is communicated to us through this Book. —Abraham Lincoln*

*And this nugget from C.S. Lewis: We come to Scripture not to learn a subject but to steep ourselves in a Person.*

The Bible has been referred to as God's love letter to us ([John 3:16](#)). As we study Him, His Son ([John 1:1](#)), and His Holy Spirit in His Word, we acknowledge and welcome His love for us with emotion and intellect. Study the Bible with a combination of both and enter your study with joyful expectancy of what the Lord will teach you. Then apply it in your life. Your love for Him will grow with every deep journey into the Bible.