

# Theologians & Theology

Christian theologians and their theology

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## Systematic Theology

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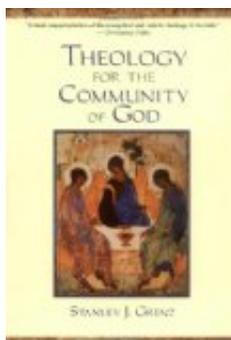
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### Systematic Theology



**Systematic theology** is an academic discipline that aims to give a critical and balanced

account of central themes in Christian belief and practice. In *Theology for the Community of God*, the late theologian Stanley Grenz offers the following definition of *systematic theology*: “the reflection on, and the ordered articulation of, faith” (p. 1). In Europe systematic theology is sometimes called “dogmatics” or “dogmatic theology” since it is an effort to articulate dogmas or doctrines of various theological topics.

### **Systematic Theology: Not System Building**

To gain a clearer understanding of systematic theology, it is helpful to point first to what systematic theology is *not*. First, systematic theology is not about constructing a theological system (e.g., Calvinism, Arminianism, premillennialism, etc.). Why is this not the goal? Because most attempts at these types of systems are mere human constructions. The framer of the system has a key idea in his or her head to start with. Take Calvinism for example. The organizing idea for Calvin was that God is sovereign and perfect. For Calvin, God did not have a plan A and a plan B. Rather, the events of human history are all plan A, entirely God’s will; God pre-programmed everything according to his will. However, such as system requires some difficult explaining when it comes to issues like evil and Scripture’s reports that God changed his mind (e.g., Exodus 32:14).

Another example of system-building is Barthianism. Karl Barth was uncomfortable with Calvin, though he was also drawn to him in certain ways. In particular, Barth was uncomfortable with Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. In his reformulation, Barth hit on the brilliant but wrong idea that the only person predestined for salvation and reprobation was Jesus. He alone would bear the wrath and salvation of humanity. At the heart of Barth’s teaching is “Sachexegese.” “Sache” is German for “matter.” Barth’s question was “what is the matter or message to be obtained via exegesis of the Scripture?” So, the task of theology in this case is to get at the nut or kernel inside the Scripture. The point is to peel away the shell and find the kernel.

The point here is that systematic theologians given to system building—like Calvin or Barth—take their view of this “matter,” or one idea, and reinterpret all of scripture in terms of it. In English this approach is called “theological interpretation.” The problem is that much in Scripture is thrown out with this approach, in an effort to fit Scripture with the “one idea”. The true theological “system” should only be understood as an eschatological goal—something to be aimed for, worked toward, but never reached this side of heaven—and not as a presupposition of one’s systematic theology. Thus, systematic theology should not be understood as a discipline whereby we construct grand theological systems.

### **Systematic Theology: Answering Theological Questions**

With this account of what systematic theology is *not*, we can address what systematic theology *is*. In the simplest terms, systematic theology is about asking questions, and three questions in particular:

1. What do we believe about...[various theological topics]?

2. Why do we believe these things?

3. How do we put these beliefs together with the other things we know and believe?

Systematic theology is a dialogue or conversation between us, the Bible, past theologians, and our traditions. It is an ongoing activity. This dialectical method of theology is not a particularly new way of doing theology: this is Thomas Aquinas's method in the *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is broken into parts and questions that he tries to answer. This seems to be the best approach to systematic theology for the 21st century. Here the "systematic" in systematic theology refers to the way the theologian goes about answering theological questions, i.e., in a thorough, deliberate, systematic way, with a view to how answers to the questions relate to other areas of our knowledge or belief.

Systematic theology may draw on scripture, the history of theology, philosophy, contemporary science, and culture as its sources. Systematic theology goes beyond *biblical theology* in attempting to answer questions that the scripture does not raise. For example, 20<sup>th</sup>-century debates over the inerrancy of scripture were a matter of systematic theology and not biblical theology insofar as the Bible does not raise the specific topic of inerrancy (though it does raise the distinct topic of inspiration).

### **Systematic Theology and Philosophy**

Systematic theology and philosophy have had a mixed and controversial relationship at least since *Tertullian's* famous quip, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Tertullian's statement expresses the view that the Western tradition of philosophy originating in ancient Greece—and Athens in particular—is set against Judeo-Christian thought, and thus that Christians should keep their theological thought separate from the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and others who came after them in the Western tradition.

This sort of hostile, adversarial view of philosophy from the theological camp might also be cast in terms of a conflict between reason and revelation: the contents of Judeo-Christian revelation cannot and need not be shown to be consistent with reason, the central tool of the Western philosopher. This sort of adversarial view of philosophy persists in some (especially conservative Protestant) Christian theological circles today.

Paul's claims in 1 Corinthians 1:20-21 are sometimes adduced in favor of this adversarial view. There Paul writes: "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." According to the adversarial view, Paul is here dismissing philosophy as a means to truth in favor of the "foolishness" of Christian preaching.

However, other Christians have taken a different view of the relation between systematic

theology and philosophy. For example, during the medieval period when systematic theology was sometimes called “the queen of the sciences,” philosophy was often called theology’s “handmaiden”, i.e., a discipline that served the purposes of systematic theology. [Augustine](#)—whose theology is often viewed as foundational to Protestantism (after all, [Martin Luther](#) was an Augustinian monk)—was famous for claiming that “all truth is God’s truth.” With this phrase he suggested that the source of truth—whether philosophy or revelation—was unimportant: regardless of its source, God was its author. Indeed, Augustine famously plundered the thought of Plato and Aristotle for many of his theological views.

The key to viewing philosophy in this more sympathetic way is to realize that use of the methods and content of philosophy need not exclude taking revelation seriously. On this more sympathetic view, Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians is not to exclude philosophy outright from Christian thinking. Rather, his point is to exclude that particular brand of philosophy that would reject the revealed truths of Scripture because of their revelatory character. This more sympathetic view of the relation between philosophy and theology has been more persistent in the Roman Catholic church and is evidenced today by the generally strong commitment to philosophical teaching (alongside theological teaching, of course) in Catholic universities.

In the final analysis, the more sympathetic view of the relation between philosophy and systematic theology seems most sensible. Indeed, of all other academic disciplines, philosophy is closest to the method and approach of systematic theology: both are intellectual disciplines concerned with basic questions of life and death. Moreover, both use a common methodology of posing questions, making logical arguments, and entertaining generally non-empirically based claims (though empirical claims also have a place in both fields).

There are, of course, differences between philosophy and systematic theology. Most obviously, systematic theology claims Scriptural revelation as one of its sources whereas philosophers generally reject it. However, this fundamental difference need not lead systematic theologians to reject philosophy outright. Indeed, many of the best systematic theologians throughout history have benefited greatly from the rigors of philosophical study.

### **Topics of Systematic Theology**

Systematic theology is traditionally divided into the following sub-disciplines: revelation (i.e., the theology of scripture), theology (i.e., the doctrine of God), anthropology (i.e., the theology of human beings), hamartiology (i.e., the theology of human sinfulness), Christology (i.e., the theology of Jesus Christ), pneumatology (i.e., the theology of the Holy Spirit), soteriology (i.e., the theology of salvation), ecclesiology (i.e., the theology of the church), and eschatology (i.e., the theology of last things).



## 4 THOUGHTS ON “SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY”



**Josh**

on **February 28, 2013 at 8:26 pm** said:

What would you consider the strongest systematic theology that was intensely philosophical? I want to read an intensely philosophical ST after I read GK Beale's. Maybe a "Doctrine of God" book like Frame's; or Aquinas's Summas; or maybe Turretin's Institutes. Are there any that you would recommend?



**Theologian**

on **March 2, 2013 at 11:11 pm** said:

Well, I am a big fan of Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. However, it is something that you could spend your entire life reading (if you want to really understand it). For something more modern, you might try Wolfhart Pannenburg's [Systematic Theology](#); it is quite philosophical in nature.



James

on **August 26, 2014 at 2:56 am** said:

Great exposition. Keep sharing your thoughts on the various themes in theology.  
Blessings.



Goodman

on **November 23, 2014 at 5:43 am** said:

May God increase you in wisdom and knowledge. Good exposition.