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THEOLOGY: THE QUEEN OF THE SCIENCES

1 TIMOTHY 4:13

FOUNDER OF DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, Louis Sperry Chafer, wrote in 1947, "Systematic Theology, the greatest of the sciences, has fallen upon evil days. Between the rejection and ridicule of it by the so-called progressives and the neglect and abridgment of it by the orthodox, it, as a potent influence, is approaching the point of extinction." Well, 68 years later, the situation is not much better, in fact, it has improved at all. Chafer continued:

It is no secret that the average minister is not now reading Systematic Theology, nor will such writings be found to occupy a prominent place in his library. . . .

As well might a medical doctor discard his books on anatomy and therapeutics as for the preacher to discard his books on Systematic Theology; and since doctrine is the bone structure of the body of revealed truth, the neglect of it must result in a message characterized by uncertainties, inaccuracies, and immaturity. What is the specific field of learning that distinguishes the ministerial profession if it is not the knowledge of the Bible and its doctrines? To the preacher is committed a responsibility of surpassing import. Men of other professions are tireless in their attempts to discover the truths and to perfect themselves in the use of the forces belonging to their various callings, though these be in the restricted field of material things. The preacher is called upon to deal with the things of God, the supernatural and eternal. His service is different from all others—different as to aims, different as to available forces and, of necessity, different as to adequate preparation. Few clergymen's libraries will include even one work on theology, but a medical doctor will assuredly possess a worthy work on anatomy. A form of modern thinking tends to treat all matters of doctrine with contempt.¹

And again, things are no better today in the ever-thickening and life-choking atmosphere of post-modernism, where truth is in the eye of the beholder and many pastors are more concerned with being relevant to the culture than teaching God's people **doctrine**. As I was writing this article, Dr. Steve Lawson posted on Twitter: "Churches need to stop entertaining the goats, start feeding the sheep, and telling the goats to become sheep."² Sadly, that view is the minority one.

"Oh, but doctrine divides, love unites," we hear many tout. Or, "Theology is dry and not really relevant; we need some-

thing practical." Or, "Doctrine doesn't reach across denominations; it's enough that we all love Jesus." But if those and other such inane platitudes are true, why is it that the word **doctrine** appears no less than 45 times in the NT? Eleven of those, in fact, refer to Jesus' own emphasis, four to what the apostles declared in Acts, two to the Apostle John, and most of the rest to Paul's ministry.

Is it not also particularly significant that 16 of those occurrences appear in the Pastoral Epistles? While most translate *didaskalia*, which to the ancient Greeks meant imparting information and later the teaching of skills, another word, *didachē*, appears twice (note also that some 28 of the other 45 occurrences of **doctrine** in the NT are *didachē*). Why is this noteworthy? Because while its basic meaning is also "teaching," it places more stress upon what is being taught. A noted Greek authority says this about *didachē*:

Paul's use of *didachē* in Romans and 1 Corinthians may be contrasted with the usage found in the Pastoral Epistles. In the former epistles the scope of the word is left undefined, whereas in the Pastorals (cf. 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9) *didachē* has probably become a given body of doctrine which is to be inculcated as such.³

The critical meaning of *didachē*, then, is that it speaks of the content of the teaching, that is, *a body of doctrine*. A key verse here is 2 Timothy 4:2. Writing to Pastor Timothy, Paul declared with no ambiguity, apology, or alternative: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." He goes on in verses 3 and 4 to give a reason for this, namely, that the time will come when people will not put up with this and will seek teachers (false ones) who will humor them and tickle their ears to entertain them. Despite such attitudes, however, Paul commands Timothy to preach anyway, to change absolutely nothing in his method. The modern idea that methods must change with the times is a lie. Think of it! Pastors are supposed to teach the same theology that Paul taught.

That is why Martyn Lloyd-Jones bluntly stated: "The most foolish of all Christians are those who dislike and decry the importance of Theology and teaching. Does not that explain why they fail in practice?"⁴ Puritan Thomas Watson wrote almost three centuries before, "It is the duty of Christians to

be settled in the doctrine of faith. The best way for Christians to be settled is to be well grounded. . . . As feathers will be blown every way, so will feathery Christians.”⁵

With that in mind, I would like to encourage all of us in the importance of Theology by considering four emphases: the science, supremacy, standard, and system of Theology.

The Science of Theology

Our opening quotation of Chafer spoke of theology as “the greatest of the sciences.” But wait, can we actually call Theology a *science*? Are we not being told today by “scientists” that theology is not *science* but *superstition* and is all about *faith* not *fact*. The problem here, of course, is the very narrow view such advocates take concerning what science actually is. They restrict science to *natural* science only, that is: the “scientific method” applies only to what can be observed, tested, repeated, and verified by logic. (Of course, all this goes out the window when it comes to the conjecture of evolution, but that is conveniently ignored because that’s where they choose to put their *faith*. Not very “scientific” after all, is it?)

In contrast, more broadly speaking, our English word “science” comes from the Latin *scientia*, which means “knowledge,” being derived from *sciēns*, “knowing, understanding.” Now notice, the word does not mean “knowledge about only what is natural.” That meaning has conveniently been read into it by the aforementioned “scientists.” As Daniel Webster, who was a Christian, objectively defined it in his 1828 Dictionary, “In a general sense, knowledge, or certain knowledge; the comprehension or understanding of truth or facts by the mind,” also adding, “The science of God must be perfect.” The great Southern Baptist theologian James Petigru Boyce observed:

Theology is defined as a science. It is eminently worthy of that name. It lacks nothing that constitutes a science. It is concerned in the investigation of facts. It inquires into their existence, their relations to each other, their systematic arrangement, the laws which govern them, and the great principles which are the basis of this existence, and these relations.⁶

We can, therefore, conclude that Theology is science simply because it meets the long understood criteria for “scientific knowledge.” *First*, it has a specific object(s) of study, in this case: God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, man, salvation, etc. *Second*, it has a well defined method of carrying on such study, such as, grammar, history, context, etc. *Third*, it considers these subjects objectively; it does not rely upon or even allow for the subjective feelings of the enquirer. *Fourth*, it has a method of verifying its findings, including: comparing Scripture with Scripture (*analogia scriptura*), archeology, and the history of doctrine. *Fifth*, it demonstrates a unity among its findings, resulting in a coherent body of knowledge instead of individual and unrelated facts.⁷

The Supremacy of Theology

Why, then, is Theology the *Queen* of the sciences? How can we be so audacious to say it is supreme over all others? The answer lies in history. During the High Middle Ages (c. 11th–13th-centuries) in Europe—a time of blossoming intellectual, spiritual, and artistic labors—universities utilized the

trivium (Latin, “the place where three roads meet”). This was comprised of grammar, logic, and rhetoric and formed the lower division of the seven liberal arts. This in-turn was the foundation for the higher level *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy).

But above all these subjects, it was Theology that came to be called “The Queen of the Sciences.” Why? Because it was understood that as every wheel must have a hub at its center, so all knowledge has to have a central core, and it was Theology that was recognized as that core. They rightly saw that one’s view of God, and the Truth He reveals in Scripture, will dictate everything else a person believes and lives. And so it was that Theology became the capstone of the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*. Everything that a young man studied was to be considered in the light of Theology. So all-encompassing was this, that all other subjects (including Philosophy) existed primarily to help with theological thought. Yes, the so-called Enlightenment eventually undid much of this, but only because man turned fully inward and deliberately rejected what was clearly obvious (Rom. 1:18–32).

The Standard of Theology

Despite what the Enlightenment tried to do to change the standard, the truth remains. Scripture states this in the clearest of language: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7) and “the beginning of wisdom” (9:10). In other words, *true knowledge begins with a fear of God*. If we are to know anything, we must begin with the presupposition of God and study Him through the discipline of Theology. Scripture goes on to warn us to “[avoid] profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called” (2 Tim. 2:15).

That brings us to our primary text: **Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine** (1 Tim. 4:13).⁸ I do not believe it is an overstatement to say that this verse is among the most crucially important ones concerning the ministry of the Local Church. The Apostle Paul instructs Timothy, pastor of the Church at Ephesus at the time, about the number one priority of the Church and its pastor.

We say that with such confidence simply because of the words **give attendance**, which translate *prosechō*, a nautical term for holding a ship in a direction, to sail onward. So what does Paul instruct Timothy to do? To hold his course. And which course is that? The Word of God. If, indeed, a church and its pastor love God and His Word, there will be this three-fold emphasis at the very core of the ministry. We will sail toward this harbor without deviation.

First, there will be the *declaration of the sacred Word*. There is actually some debate on precisely what **reading** refers to, whether Timothy’s *personal* reading of Scripture or the *public* reading of Scripture in the Church. We submit it is the latter for three reasons, the first being that such public reading was the norm for the day. Because of the scarcity of manuscripts, the practice of reading and explaining Scripture in the synagogue (Acts 15:21; Lk. 4:16) was carried over into the church (Col. 4:16; 1 Thes. 5:27). Second, since the other two principles in the verse are obviously carried on in public, so it would seem for this reading of Scripture. Third, this is all the more emphasized by the definite article preceding all three of these principles in the Greek: *the reading, the ex-*

hortation, and *the doctrine*.

So, first and foremost, it is the public reading (and obvious exposition) of God's Word that should fill our churches. That should be our course. (Practically speaking, this has tragically become increasingly difficult in our day because of the plethora of translations that are in the pews.)

Second, there will be the *demand of submissive obedience*.

Exhortation is *paraklēsis*, an "admonition or encouragement for the purpose of strengthening and establishing the believer in the faith (see Rom. 15:4; Phil. 2:1; Heb. 12:5; 13:22)."⁹ *Exhortation* simply applies the *exposition* that has come from reading (and obviously preaching) the Scripture and demands our obedience.

Third, there will be the *delineation of systematic truth*.

Doctrine here is *didaskalia*, which we noted earlier. The fact that it (with other forms of the word) appears some 26 times in the Pastoral Epistles, coupled with the word *didachē*, makes clear what the pastor's job is: he is to teach the truth of Scripture in a systematic fashion, applying this to the lives of God's people. That very thought leads us to a final emphasis.

The System of Theology

Please consider three additional principles here.

The Methods

Just as any discipline has a systemized method of presenting it, the same is true of Theology. There are four basic divisions (or branches) of theological study. While two of those (Historical and Contemporary) are beyond our scope here, the other two are critical: Systematic and Biblical.

The word "systematic" simply refers to something being put into an organized system. Systematic Theology, therefore, categorizes doctrine according to specific topics and analytically develops each topic by bringing together all the Bible says about it. For example, no single book gives all the information about Christ, so systematics gathers all the information about Him from all the books of the Bible and organizes it into a system called Christology. The same is done for Bibliology (the study of the Bible), Soteriology (the study of salvation), Ecclesiology (the study of the church), and so forth.

My personal view is that this is the foundation of theological study and must be first in the student's experience. I liken this to learning a language. One must first learn the vocabulary before he can make meaningful headway. Likewise, Systematic Theology is the vocabulary of Theology. Henry Thiessen put it well: "Until rather recent times Theology was considered the queen of the sciences and Systematic Theology the crown of the queen."¹⁰

Biblical Theology, in contrast, is the study of the doctrines of the Bible arranged according to their chronology and historical background. In other words, it is the study of a certain book (or books) of the Bible to see the different aspects of theology it focuses on. For example, the Gospel of John is very Christological since it focuses so much on the deity of Christ (John 1:1, 14; 8:58; 10:30; 20:28).

In other words, using the doctrine of Christ to illustrate, here is the basic difference between Systematic and Biblical Theology. Systematic Theology asks, "What does the Bible as a whole say about Christ?" It then examines every passage concerning Christ, draws conclusions, and organizes all the

information into a body of truth called "Christology." The final product is the totality of God's revealed truth on the subject from Genesis to Revelation. Biblical Theology asks, "How did our understanding of Christ develop throughout biblical history?" It then starts with what the book of Genesis teaches about Christ and then traces God's progressive revelation of Him throughout Scripture. This helps us see the Bible as a unified whole, rather than as a collection of doctrinal points.

The Reasons

So why is Theology so critical? Why make such a big deal about all this? We would offer seven reasons.

First, as we've noted, doctrine is repeatedly commanded, which should in itself be enough.

Second, systematic doctrine is necessary simply because of "the organizing instinct of the human mind."¹¹ In other words, it's not enough to have a collection of facts; rather those facts need to be organized, presented in a logical fashion, and related to one another.

Third, doctrine grounds us in the faith. Paul commands again that we should not be "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14-15). As noted earlier, there are many "feathery Christians" who are blown about simply because they are not grounded in the truth. To the Colossians, Paul added that we should "continue in the faith grounded and settled" (Col. 1:23). "Grounded" is *themelioō*, which from ancient Greek onwards means to lay the foundation of something, such as a building. It comes from the root *thēma* (English *theme*), that which is laid down in the sense of being a fundamental. Perhaps so there would be no mistaking his meaning, Paul adds the word "settled," which is *hedraios*, firm, unshakable, and stable. Oh, how we need a stable foundation in our unstable world!

Fourth, doctrine discerns false teaching. Continuing the previous point, consider Ephesians 4:14 again along with 1 John 4:1-3 (cf. 2 John 9-10): "Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God." "Try" is *dokimazō*, "test, pronounce good, establish by trial." A related word, *dokimos*, was originally used as a technical term for coins that were genuine. How are we to try every teacher that comes along? *Just look at his Theology!* Truth will always expose error, and a man's (or woman's) Theology will say much not only about orthodoxy and ministry, but often even about character.

Fifth, doctrine nourishes, feeds, and builds us. As Paul wrote to Timothy: "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained" (I Tim. 4:6). This admonition is twofold: First, the preacher must continually nourish himself so that he in-turn feed the sheep. Second, however, the preacher must continually nourish himself *with good doctrine*. Neither he nor the sheep will ever be nourished by the shallow, trendy, man-centered fare that is popular nowadays. We must all feed on doctrine lest we waste away.

As a pastor, I think I'm qualified to meddle just a little. I would lovingly submit that, more often than not, the bookshelves in a pastor's study say much about him and his ministry. Are we feeding on *trends* or on *truth*? How much solid Theology is on our shelves? Are we concerned about *contemporary fashion* or the *Christian Faith*?

Sixth, doctrine exhorts us. Consider 2 Timothy 4:2 once again, where Timothy is commanded to “exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine.” Not only is the preacher to speak sternly about sin (“rebuke”), but he is also to “exhort” (*parakaleō*), that is, comfort, encourage, and strongly beseech. And how is he to go about all this? Not by coddling, not by counseling techniques, but by *preaching doctrine* (*didachē*).

Seventh, doctrine produces godliness. Once again Paul speaks to Timothy, this time warning him about those who “consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness” (1 Tim. 6:3–6). The principle here is crystal clear: there is a definite correlation between truth and godliness and error and ungodliness. In other words, right doctrine will produce right conduct, while wrong doctrine will produce wrong conduct. This truth is not only biblical but also logical. Why? Because how can we *live* right and *do* right unless we *know* right? Knowledge always comes by doctrine.

The Tools

If you are a pastor, I would respectfully ask, “What are you reading these days (besides this article)?” Further, “What’s currently on your ‘To Read’ list? Are you reading *doctrine* or just *drivel*?” If you are a layperson, I would lovingly ask the same questions.

First, then, let’s consider the basic level. While it goes without saying that regular Bible reading is crucial, and while a daily devotional is certainly good, how about good, solid Theology? Now, I certainly don’t mean you should go pick up a 1,200-page Systematic Theology and trudge your way through it. Rather, I would encourage you to grab hold of Paul Little’s 214-page book *Know What You Believe* (InterVarsity). This contemporary classic lays the foundation stones for ten key doctrines of Scripture, each in its own chapter: the Bible; God; Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ’s death; People and Sin; the Holy Spirit; Salvation; Angels, Satan, and Demons; the Church; Things to Come. It also includes study questions for each chapter. In an easy to read style, Little presents the basic truths of the Christian faith that are crucial for the believer.

To go further, I cannot recommend highly enough *The Moody Handbook of Theology, Revised and Expanded* (Moody Press) by Paul Enns. This 800-page book is a readable, rich, and reliable overview of the five major divisions of theological study: Systematic, Biblical, Dogmatic, Historical, and Contemporary. It is hands down, in my view, the best one-volume survey of Theology ever penned (see my full review: <http://tas-membranas.blogspot.com/>). Beyond that, I would encourage you to the other nine books recommended in TOTT #67, “Ten Books Every Christian Should Read.”

Second, let us now consider the preacher. My dear fellow under-shepherd, I pray that we all will be reminded often that our theological training did not end when we were handed our degree(s). I pray that we’ve still got at least a half dozen good systematic theologies on our shelf and that we reference them often or even occasionally read one of them all the way through.

Now, recommending which of these you should own is like trying to dictate which golf course you should play. Of course, the best scenario in both cases would be “all of them,” but that’s (probably) unrealistic. We each will have our favor-

ites, but I would dare mention a few of my own (theologies, that is). I would also love to hear about your favorites.¹²

So, I would first encourage you to the aforementioned *Moody Handbook*. It’s not just for the layman, and I can (almost) promise that you won’t be disappointed.

Before continuing, I would dare interject a very deep concern. I have noticed of late that many of the systematic theologies that have appeared from the mid-1980s on (including some “big gun” theologians) are not cessationist and are open to the continuing validity of the sign gifts, which is a subtle attack on the sufficiency of Scripture. As I scribbled recently, “The undeniable, irrefutable, and demonstrable fact is that cessationism is the historical position of orthodox Christianity,”¹³ and this unmistakably emerges when you compare the older theologians with the newer. It is for that reason that while there are, of course, some otherwise very good recent theologies, I tend to rely more on the older ones who were not so easily swayed by fashions of the day.

That said, in addition to works on the other divisions of theological study, as well as many other books on individual subjects (e.g., Scripture, justification, the Doctrines of Grace, sanctification and holiness, etc.), the Lord has blessed me with 37 systematic theologies at last count.¹⁴ One of my favorites is the classic *Lectures in Systematic Theology* by Henry Thiessen, former professor at Dallas and Chairman of the Faculty at Wheaton Graduate School (I prefer his original 1949 edition over the revised 1979 edition).

Some readers will flinch at a recommendation of Lewis Sperry Chafer’s 8-Volume *Systematic Theology* (now bound in four volumes from Kregel), but it is still one of my favorites. Few works match its size, substance, and scope. Yes, it will be too dispensational for some, but those parts can be easily discerned so one doesn’t throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water. Volume VII alone, *Doctrinal Summarization*, is a 312-page systematic theology in itself. It presents 184 important subjects in alphabetical order. It is an invaluable source for doctrinal teaching and preaching.

While I am not of the Covenant Theology persuasion, those issues can also be discerned so we don’t ignore some classic theologies. One, of course, is Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*. While the 3-volume work is daunting, there is a very good abridged version published by P&R that has removed lengthy esoteric sections and reduced 2,000 pages to 585 (including indexes). It also includes 20 pages of Study Questions that will help layman and student alike. I also love Thomas Watson’s *A Body of Divinity*.

Other classics on my preferred list include: John Dagg’s *Manual of Theology*; James P. Boyce’s *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (though neither details Bibliology); John Gill’s *A Body of Doctrinal and Divinity*; and Augustus Strong’s *Systematic Theology*. Contemporary titles that also make my list are Michael Horton’s *The Christian Faith* (Zondervan) and *A Theology for the Church* (B&H Academic), edited by Daniel Akin.

That brings us to one other recommendation that simply must make any such list: John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. There are several editions of the *Institutes*. The Beveridge translation is inexpensive, very literal, and accurate, although a little stodgy, while the Battles’ translation is expensive and not as accurate¹⁵ but is very readable and includes excellent footnotes for scholarly study. Some

compare them this way: Beveridge is a formal translation (like the KJV or NASB), while Battles is a dynamic equivalence translation (like the NIV). The underrated translation by John Allen is also available for free online (as is Beveridge). Timothy Tow (Far Eastern Bible College Press) has also done a 500-page abridged version of Allen, which is also available free online. Finally, a wonderful addition to this legacy is a new translation by Robert White of the first French edition of 1541 from Banner of Truth (2014).

Conclusion

Scottish theologian James Orr wrote in 1909:

Every one must be aware there is at the present time a great prejudice against doctrine—or, as it is often called “Dogma”—in religion; a great distrust and dislike of clear and systematic thinking about divine things. Men prefer, one cannot help seeing, to live in a region of haze and indefiniteness in regard to these matters. They want their thinking to be fluid and indefinite—something that can be changed with the times, and with the new lights which they think are being constantly brought to bear upon it, continually taking on new forms, and leaving the old behind.¹⁶

Think of it! That was written more than a century ago! How much truer is it today? My Dear Reader, do you agree that Theology is the Queen of the Sciences? If so, let’s treat her like one.

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NOTES

- ¹ Louis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), Vol. 1, v.
- ² Follow Dr. Lawson at @DrStevenJLawson.
- ³ Colin Brown (Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), vol. 3, 770.
- ⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit* (Baker), 142–143.
- ⁵ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth, 1992 reprint of original 1692), 1.
- ⁶ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Founders Press, 2006; first published 1887), 3.
- ⁷ Adapted and expanded from Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Baker, 1998), 36.
- ⁸ This exposition is taken from the author’s third daily devotional book, which is still being written: *Seek Him Early: Daily Devotional Studies on Knowing, Loving, and Serving Our Lord Jesus Christ*.
- ⁹ Zodhiates, #3874.
- ¹⁰ Henry C Thiessen, *Lectures In Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1949), 23.
- ¹¹ Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Volumes in 1 (Judson Press, 1907, 1993), 15.
- ¹² Share your favorite book on theology on our Facebook Page, www.facebook.com/the.scripture.alone, or mention us on Twitter @TScriptureAlone. Use hashtags #TOTT and #theology.
- ¹³ See TOTT #89 (May/June 2014), “The Historical Importance of Cessationism.”
- ¹⁴ One of my many projects is a paper titled: *A Course of Readings in Evangelical Systematic Theology*.
- ¹⁵ See <http://calvinbattlescorrections.blogspot.com/> for a list of corrections to the Battles’ translation.
- ¹⁶ James Orr, *Sidelights On Christian Doctrine* (A. C. Armstrong & Sons, 1909), 3.

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