

CHAPTER 1

THE IDEA AND VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

THE IDEA OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

We are to be concerned in this work with theology as the orthodox believer in Christianity understands it. The orthodox view of Christianity finds its most consistent expression in the Reformed faith.¹ Fundamental to everything orthodox is the presupposition of the antecedent self-existence of God and of his infallible revelation of himself to man in the Bible. Systematic theology seeks to offer an ordered presentation of what the Bible teaches about God.

Theology, therefore, is not to be defined as the science of religion. It is true that even Reformed theologians have sometimes thus defined it. A. A. Hodge says, "Theology, in its most general sense, is the science of religion."² However, in view of what the term *religion* has come to mean in modern times, it would be unfortunate to confuse

1. Van Til is using the term *orthodox* to mean conforming to right doctrine, not the Eastern Orthodox branch of the Christian church. The Reformed faith refers to the theology associated with the confessions of faith of the Reformed churches in the sixteenth century, in distinction to the Lutheran and Anabaptist branches of the Reformation. It purposes to return to the Scripture as ultimate authority, and thus to represent historic Christian orthodoxy from its origins, newly articulated at the Reformation, particularly in Calvin's theology, and up to the present day.

2. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1878; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 15.

the issue between modern non-Christian and orthodox theology by speaking of theology as the science of religion. Religion, according to the modern definitions given of it (for example, in the “psychology of religion” literature), has nothing to do with the God of the Scriptures. Men say that they can best obtain the “native witness” of religion if they leave out of consideration altogether the question of its objective reference.³ But since Christianity claims to be the true religion, it follows that for it the objective reference is of prime importance. It is the God of the Scriptures about whom we wish to obtain knowledge.

It does not follow from this that it is about God *alone* that we wish to obtain knowledge. It only means that it is *primarily* of God that we speak. We wish to know all that God wishes us to know about anything. The Bible has much to say about the universe. But it is the business of science and philosophy to deal with this revelation. Indirectly even science and philosophy should be theological.⁴ The Scriptures are also full of information about our salvation and about many other things that concern us. But it will not do to say on this account that man is the center of theology. All that the Scriptures say about man, and particularly all that they say about man’s salvation, is after all for the glory of God. Our theology should be God-centered because our life should be God-centered.

Again, there is much in the Scriptures about Christ. After the entrance of sin into the world, Christ is the only way through whom God can be known. He is not only the one through whom we can *more fully* than otherwise know the Father; it is through him *alone* that we can come to the Father. Furthermore, Christ is God, so that when we know him we know God. In spite of all this it should always be remembered that Christ’s work is a means to an end. Even if we think of the fact that Christ is the second person of the Trinity, we ought still to remember that it is the full Godhead with whom we ultimately have to do and about whom, in the last analysis, we wish to know. Hence, theology is primarily God-centered rather than Christ-centered.⁵

3. The “native witness” means the religious instinct, observed by anthropologists. Van Til insists on keeping orthodox theology clear from any such human source and method.

4. While the Bible belongs to *special* revelation, as the record of God’s saving deeds, culminating in the work of Christ, *general* revelation comes to us through the creation and our conscience, and is accessible to the sciences. Yet science is never done in a neutral fashion, but is either faithful or not to revelation.

5. Van Til makes the point here that God is a Trinity. He takes issue with an improper emphasis on the second person, known as *Christomonism*, which he finds in Karl Barth’s theology.

It is well to point out the relation of systematic theology to the other theological disciplines. The name *systematic theology* does not imply that the other theological disciplines do not do their work systematically. It means rather that systematics alone seeks to offer the truth about God as revealed in Scriptures as a *whole*, as a unified system.

Exegesis takes the Scriptures and analyzes each part of it in detail. Biblical theology takes the fruits of the exegesis and organizes them into various units and traces the revelation of God in Scripture in its historical development. It brings out the theology of each part of God's Word as it has been brought to us at different stages, by means of various authors. Systematic theology then uses the fruits of the labors of exegetical and biblical theology and brings them together into a concatenated system. Apologetics seeks to defend this system of biblical truth against false philosophy and false science. Practical theology seeks to show how to preach and teach this system of biblical truth, while church history traces the reception of this system of truth in the course of the centuries.⁶

About the matter of theological encyclopedia there has been a great deal of debate among Reformed theologians. There is only one point in this debate that we are here concerned to mention. That is the question of the relation of systematic theology to apologetics. On this point Dr. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, and with him the "Princeton school" of theology, differ from Dr. Abraham Kuyper and Dr. Herman Bavinck and the "Dutch school" of theology.⁷

The point of difference concerns chiefly the nature of apologetics. Warfield says that apologetics as a theological discipline has to establish the presuppositions of systematic theology, such as the existence of God, the religious nature of man, and the truth of the historical revelation of God given us in the Scriptures. In contrast to this,

6. This succinct presentation of the encyclopedia of the disciplines represents a framework for organizing knowledge, and the seminary curriculum. Particularly important is the three-part relationship between exegetical, biblical-theological, and systematic considerations. Note also the three carriers of systematics: apologetics, practical theology, and church history.

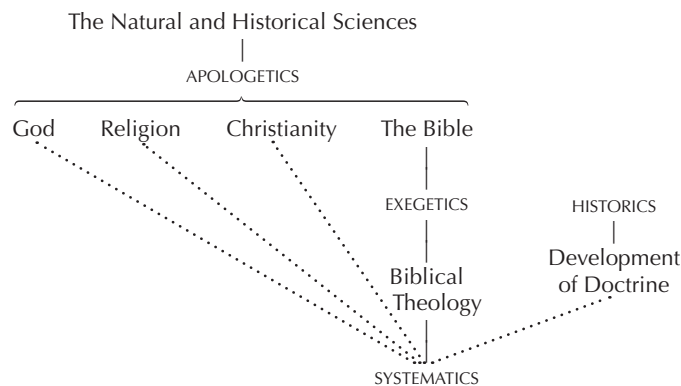
7. In what follows, Van Til outlines his interpretation of Warfield's and Kuyper's views of apologetics in relation to systematics. Warfield wants apologetics to come first, so that we can be sure the systematics we are elucidating are factually true to begin with. Kuyper wants apologetics to be a subset of dogmatics (systematics) and ethics, a discipline that deals with the assaults of philosophy. Although he does not agree with Kuyper that apologetics is only secondary and primarily negative, Van Til does side with him against Warfield, because apologetics should have neither content nor criteria that differ from systematics. It is not clear to this editor that Van Til did full justice to Warfield's position.

Kuyper says that apologetics must seek only to defend that which is given it in systematics.⁸ Warfield argues that if we were to follow Kuyper’s method, we would first be explicating the Christian system, and afterwards we would be asking ourselves whether perchance we had been dealing with facts or with fancies. Kuyper argues that if we allow apologetics to establish the presuppositions of theology, we have virtually attributed to the natural man the ability to understand the truth of Christianity and have thus denied the doctrine of total depravity.

We cannot and need not discuss this debate in detail. Kuyper’s basic contention that we must always keep in mind the distinction between the regenerate mind and the unregenerate mind need not imply that apologetics must come after systematics and must be negative only. Apologetics can very well come first and presuppose in general the system of truth brought out in systematics. It is true that the best apologetics can be given only when the system of truth is well known. But it is also true that the system of truth is not well known except it be seen in its opposition to error. Systematic theology itself has been developed, to a large extent, in opposition to error. The two disciplines are therefore mutually dependent upon one another.

On the other hand, we hold that the basic contention of Kuyper with respect to Warfield’s position is correct. Warfield often argues as though apologetics must use a method of approach to the natural man that the other disciplines need not and cannot

8. B. B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 57, and especially his scheme on p. 74 (reproduced below); Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries, “Introduction” by B. B. Warfield (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898).



use.⁹ He reasons as though apologetics can establish the truth of Christianity as a whole by a method other than that of the other disciplines because it alone does not presuppose God. The other disciplines must wait, as it were, till apologetics has done its work and receive from it the facts of God's existence, etc. This distinction between the method of apologetics and the method of the other disciplines we believe to be mistaken. *All the disciplines must presuppose God, but, at the same time, presupposition is the best proof.* Apologetics takes particular pains to show that such is the case. This is its chief task. But in so doing, it is no more neutral in its method than are the other disciplines. One of its main purposes is to show that neutrality is impossible and that no one, as a matter of fact, is neutral. We conclude then that apologetics stands at the outer edge of the circle of systematic truth given us by systematics in order to defend it.¹⁰

Some theologians prefer the name *dogmatic theology*, while others prefer to speak of *systematic theology*. This is not a matter of great importance. The reason why some prefer the term *dogmatics* is that it seems better than the term *systematics* to express the idea that we deal in this discipline with the dogmas or the truths of the church.¹¹ This brings up the question of the relation of systematics to the confessions of the church. Does systematics deal primarily with these confessions? Or should we say that systematics deals primarily with the *dogmas* or truths of Scripture? Basically, there is agreement among all leading Reformed theologians on this point. All agree that the dogmas of the church have been derived from the Scripture. Hence it is true that ultimately systematics seeks to expound the system of truth as given in the Scriptures. It was not till after a great deal of work had been done on the Scriptures by systematic theologians that the church was able to formulate its dogmas. The creeds of the church are, as far as their content is concerned, no more than a systematic statement of the truth of Scripture. They are distinguished from the systematic statement of Scripture given by systematic theology (a) by their brevity, limiting themselves as they do to the most essential matters; and

9. B. B. Warfield, "Apologetics," in *Studies in Theology*, 3–21.

10. The image of an outer edge signifies that apologetics is in effect a part of systematic theology, one that focuses on defense.

11. From the Greek, *dokeima*, an opinion; dogma has come to mean the instruction or doctrines of the church. Van Til is indifferent to the superiority of the nomenclature *systematic theology* versus *dogmatic theology*, as long as it is agreed that all doctrine be derived from the Scriptures first and only then put into systems or creeds.

(b) by their authoritative character, since they have been officially accepted as standards by the councils of the church.

Once these standards or dogmas of the church have been accepted, it goes without saying that a theologian who writes a work on systematics will write it in accordance with the interpretation given in those standards. To say that this hampers his freedom is to say that he has not himself freely adopted these creeds as a member of the church.¹² Moreover, to interpret in accordance with these standards does not mean that one ignores the Scriptures. It must be shown over and over again that the standards are based on the Scriptures. In addition to this, the systematic theologian has to go beyond the standards to see whether he can possibly find a more specific formulation of truths already spoken of in the standards, and whether he can find a formulation of truths of Scriptures not yet spoken of in the standards. In this way he may himself help in some small way the further implication of the church into the truth of Scripture. Creeds must be revised and supplemented from time to time. But it is not until systematic theology has progressed beyond the creeds that the creeds themselves can be revised.

It is of the utmost importance to note how creeds must be revised. The creed of the United Presbyterian Church, adopted in 1925, affords an instructive example of how creeds ought not to be revised. This creed proposes to be a revision of the Westminster Confession. However, it tones down the specific and exact teachings of Scripture found in the Westminster Confession to vague generalities. This sort of credal revision is *worse than useless; it is retrogressive*. What the church needs is a more exact formulation of its doctrines against heresies as they appear in every new and changing form, and a fuller statement of biblical truth.¹³

Warfield points out how it is true of any science that it seeks not less but more and more specific knowledge of its subject. He says:

In any progressive science, the amount of departure from accepted truth which is possible to the sound thinker becomes thus ever less and less, in proportion as investigation and study

12. Here and throughout, Van Til uses the masculine generically.

13. Van Til agrees that creeds can be improved, but only when systematics has progressed so that greater clarity and precision can be brought into the creeds. His critique of the revisions of 1925 are mild compared to his opposition to the Confession of 1967. See his *The Confession of 1967: Its Theological Background and Ecumenical Significance* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967).

result in the progressive establishment of an ever increasing number of facts. The physician who would bring back today the medicine of Galen would be no more mad than the theologian who would revive the theology of Clement of Alexandria.¹⁴

THE VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

When we speak of the value of systematics, or, for that matter, of the value of any other theological discipline, we do not take the pragmatic position. The question of value is not the first question we should ask. The question of truth and of duty is primary. It is a God-given duty that we should take the content of Scripture and bring it together into a systematic whole. It is plain that we are required to know the revelation that God has given us. Yet we would not adequately know that revelation if we knew it only in its several parts without bringing these parts into relation to each other. It is only as a part of the whole of the revelation of God to us that each part of that revelation appears as it is really meant to appear. Our minds must think systematically. It is with our God-created minds, which must think systematically, that we must rework the content of revelation.

We may observe, however, that what is simply our plain God-given task is, at the same time, most profitable for our spiritual life.¹⁵ Warfield says:

We do not possess the separate truths of religion in the abstract; we possess them only in their relations, and we do not properly know any one of them nor can it have its full effect on our life . . . except as we know it in its relation to other truths, that is, as systematized. What we do not know, in this sense, systematically, we rob of half of its power on our conduct; unless indeed we are prepared to argue that a truth has effect on us in proportion as it is unknown. To which may be added that when we do not know a body of doctrine systematically, we are sure to misconceive the nature of more

14. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," 78. Galen was a physician and philosopher born in Pergamum, A.D. 129, and had considerable influence on the ancient world as well as European medicine, up until the nineteenth century. Clement of Alexandria, ca.150–215, a Greek father, is best known for calling philosophy the "handmaid" of theology, and for his studies on the Logos as the path to true knowledge.

15. In what follows, Van Til argues that because of our human heart-centered unity, the knowledge of systematic theology helps us steer away from extremes.

or fewer of its elements; and to fancy that that is true which a more systematic knowledge would show us to be false, so that our religious belief and therefore our religious life would become deformed and misshapen.¹⁶

The unity and organic character of our personality demands that we have unified knowledge as the basis of our action. If we do not pay attention to the whole of biblical truth as a system, we become doctrinally one-sided, and doctrinal one-sidedness is bound to issue in spiritual one-sidedness. As human beings we are naturally inclined to be one-sided. One tends to be intellectualistic, another tends to be emotional, and still another tends to be activist. One tends to be only prophetic, another only priest, and a third only king. We should be all these at once and in harmony. A study of systematic theology will help us to keep and develop our spiritual balance. It enables us to avoid paying attention only to that which, by virtue of our temperament, appeals to us.

Moreover, what is beneficial for the individual believer is also beneficial for the minister and in consequence for the church as a whole.¹⁷ It is sometimes contended that ministers need not be trained in systematic theology if only they know their Bibles. But “Bible-trained” instead of systematically trained preachers frequently preach error. They may mean ever so well and be ever so true to the gospel on certain points; nevertheless, they often preach error. There are many “orthodox” preachers today whose study of Scripture has been so limited to what it says about soteriology that they could not protect the fold of God against heresies on the person of Christ. Oftentimes they themselves even entertain definitely heretical notions on the person of Christ, though perfectly unaware of the fact.

If we carry this idea one step further, we note that a study of systematic theology will help men to preach theologically.¹⁸ It will help to make men proclaim the whole counsel of God. Many ministers never touch the greater part of the wealth of the revelation of God to man contained in Scripture. But systematics helps ministers to preach the whole counsel of God, and thus to make God central in their work.

16. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” 83.

17. The special responsibility of the minister as teacher is emphasized in this material. As signaled in his preface, Van Til highlights apologetics and connects it to the minister’s training in systematic theology.

18. Here Van Til argues that the knowledge of systematic theology ought to ensure a God-centered preaching, which avoids both worldliness and other-worldliness.

The history of the church bears out the claim that God-centered preaching is most valuable to the church of Christ. When the ministry has most truly proclaimed the whole counsel of God, the church has flourished spiritually. Then, too, it is well-rounded preaching of this sort that has kept the church from worldliness. On the other hand, it has kept the church from an unhealthy *otherworldliness*. Well-rounded preaching teaches us to use the things of this world because they are the gifts of God, and it teaches us to possess them as not possessing them, inasmuch as they must be used in subordination to the one supreme purpose of man's existence, namely the glory of God.

It is but natural to expect that, if the church is strong because its ministry understands and preaches the whole counsel of God, then the church will be able to protect itself best against false teaching of every sort. Non-indoctrinated Christians will easily fall prey to the peddlers of Russellism, spiritualism, and all of the other fifty-seven varieties of heresies with which our country abounds.¹⁹ One-text Christians simply have no weapons of defense against these people. They may be able to quote many Scripture texts which speak, for instance, of eternal punishment, but the Russellite will be able to quote texts which, by the sound of them and taken individually, seem to teach annihilation. The net result is, at best, a loss of spiritual power because of loss of conviction. Many times, such one-text Christians themselves fall prey to the seducer's voice.

We have already indicated that the best apologetic defense will invariably be made by him who knows the system of truth of Scripture best. The fight between Christianity and non-Christianity is, in modern times, no piece-meal affair. It is the life-and-death struggle between two mutually opposed life-and-world views.²⁰ The non-Christian attack often comes to us on matters of historical, or other, detail. It comes to us in the form of objections to certain teachings of Scripture, say, with respect to creation, etc. It may seem to be simply a matter of asking what the facts have been. Back of this

19. A reference to Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses. His distinctive approach to reading the Bible led to unorthodox doctrines. He taught that deciphering biblical chronology could determine key dates in history. The group denies the full divinity of Christ and teaches "annihilation," that is, the destruction of unbelievers rather than their eternal punishment. Van Til argues that Christians who take particular texts out of the context of the whole, and thus deny systematic theology, cannot effectively argue against Russell's followers or their ilk.

20. As he argues in other places, such as *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003), 128–35, the right apologetics is "by presupposition," opposing worldview against worldview, respecting the systems of belief and unbelief, rather than piecemeal, where factual claims merely compete with other factual claims.

detailed attack, however, is the constant assumption of the non-Christian metaphysics of the correlativity of God and man. He who has not been trained in systematic theology will often be at a loss as to how to meet these attacks. He may be quite proficient in warding off the attack as far as details are concerned, but he will forever have to be afraid of new attacks as long as he has never removed the foundation from the enemy's position.

It should not be forgotten in this connection that the minister's duty is increasingly that of an apologist for Christianity.²¹ The general level of education is higher than it has ever been. Many young people hear of evolution in the high schools and in the colleges where their fathers never heard of it except as a far distant something. If the minister would be able to help his young people, he must be a good apologete, and he cannot be a good apologete unless he is a good systematic theologian.

In conclusion, we should observe that just as a thorough knowledge of the system of truth in Scripture is the best defense against heresy, so it is also the best help for the propagation of the truth. This is but the other side of the former point. As an army well organized is not so likely to be overcome by a surprise attack and is not so likely to be shattered as an army poorly organized, so also an army well organized is better able to attack the enemy than an army poorly organized. Each unit will have the support and the protection of the whole army as it goes on to the attack. The morale will be better. When the enemy comes with cannon, we must be able to put atomic bombs over against them. When the enemy attacks the foundations, we must be able to protect these foundations.

The church will have to return to its erstwhile emphasis upon its teaching function if it is to fulfill its God-given task of bringing the gospel to all men. Its present recourse to jerky evangelism as almost the only method of propaganda is itself an admission of paupery. It is remarkable that what the church, generally speaking, still does in the way of teaching is shot through with modernism.²² The propaganda of orthodoxy seems to be limited almost exclusively to evangelization in the narrow sense of the term. When this propaganda turns

21. For Van Til, this is not simply from personal interest. The times require apologetics. Further, good apologetics is rooted in good theology.

22. "Modernism" refers to views that oppose the historic Christian view, despite surface resemblances to it. The term was favored by J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), the intellectual leader of the orthodox in their controversies against liberal theology in the early twentieth century.

to teaching as a means, it all too frequently employs uncritically the conceptions of “reason” and “fact” as these are understood by those who make no profession of Christianity. The result is that there is no teaching of Christianity as a challenge to unbelief. Revivalists ought to make themselves unnecessary as quickly as possible. Orthodoxy must take over the teaching function of the church anew, and do it with a better knowledge of the requirements of that work than ever before.²³

It goes without saying that if all these benefits are to come to us as ministers and as a church, we must undertake our work in a spirit of deep dependence upon God and in a spirit of prayer that he may use us as his instruments for his glory.

23. Van Til is sharply critical of evangelists (“revivalists”) whose methods cannot really challenge unbelief, because they do not do justice to a full-orbed Christian position. Their apologetics thus fails to uncover the biased view of such areas as “reason” and “fact,” which are never neutral.