

Systematic Theology

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The sermon emphasizes the importance of systematic theology in understanding and articulating the coherent doctrines of Christianity as a unified whole.

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:13, 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Systematic Theology", "Christian Apologetics"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches on the challenges of truly understanding and practicing the theology of Christ, emphasizing the importance of not taking shortcuts to belief out of fear or convenience, as it leads to a shallow end of Christianity. He highlights the necessity of systematic theology in constructing a coherent doctrinal understanding of Christianity, rooted in biblical truth and essential for apologetics, biblical interpretation, and maintaining a balanced Christian life. Curtis stresses the significance of speculative reasoning in systematic theology, as it helps bridge biblical truths and deepen the understanding of redemption in Jesus Christ, ultimately aiming to reveal the entire plan of redemption as an organic whole.

Transcript

We conclude that though it is always easy for thoughtless men to be orthodox, yet to grasp with any strong practical apprehension the theology of Christ is a thing as hard as to practice his moral law. Yet, if he meant anything by his constant denunciation of hypocrites, there is nothing which he would have visited with sterner censure than that short cut to belief which many persons take when, overwhelmed with the difficulties which beset their minds, and afraid of damnation, they suddenly resolve to strive no longer, but, giving their minds a holiday, to rest content with saying that they believe and acting as if they did. A melancholy end of Christianity indeed

-- John Robert Seeley, *Ecce Homo*, pp. 89, 90.

Do I then utterly exclude the speculative reason from theology? No! it is its office and rightful privilege to determine on the negative truth of whatever we are required to believe. The doctrine must not contradict any universal principle; for this would be a doctrine that contradicted itself. Or philosophy? No. It may be and has been the servant and pioneer of faith by convincing the mind that a doctrine is cogitable, that the soul can present the idea to itself; and that if we determine to contemplate, or think of, the subject at all, so and in no other form can this be effected.

-- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, Works, i, 222.

Biblical or New Testament theology deals with the thoughts, or the mode of thinking, of the various New Testament writers; systematic theology is the independent construction of Christianity as a whole in the mind of a later thinker. Here again there is a broad and valid distinction, but not an absolute one. It is the Christian thinking of the first century in the one case, and of the twentieth, let us say, in the other; but in both cases there is Christianity and there is thinking, and if there is truth in either, there is bound to be a place at which the distinction disappears.

-- James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, p. 5.

In our Introduction the aim was to secure an anthropological foundation for Christian theology, by showing that man's personal and moral development can be normally completed only under the terms of the Christian religion. With that foundation laid, there now comes to us a greater task, namely, to construct a system of Christian doctrine. In using the term systematic theology the emphasis is to be placed upon the word systematic. It is not enough to discuss the doctrines separately. It is not enough to show precisely what the Bible, on the surface, teaches concerning every doctrine. The doctrines are all interlocked at the root. Between them there is an underlying philosophical connection. This philosophical connection must be revealed. Not only so, but the connection must be brought out in such a way as gradually to exhibit the Christian faith as one mighty organic whole.

This systematic view of Christianity, seeing it as a coherent doctrinal total, is important for several reasons: First, because it has an apologetic value. Dr. William F. Warren once said, "An adequate system of doctrine is the only adequate Christian apologetics." It is only when one catches a vision of the Christian organism, from an inside doctrinal standpoint, in such a work, say, as Martensen's *Christian Dogmatics*, that he can begin to feel the tremendous force of Christian evidence. And yet we must at this point note a caution. Systematic theology should never be an intentional apology. There ought not to be in it even the tiniest trace of mediation tactics. Rather should it be so steeped with the Christian severities -- with all those Christian peculiarities which tax the natural man -- as to be positively obnoxious to any man who is not straining himself in moral endeavor. A negative test of a worthy systematic theology would be that its important message had incurred the dislike of two sorts of men, those who have a slender ethical purpose, and those who are trying to make Christianity "easier for this scientific age." But the man who is morally open to Christian appeal, the man whose heart is breaking under an impossible moral burden, the man who prefers to confess that his life is a moral failure rather than to compromise with any utilitarian makeshift -- if that man can be led to perceive the doctrinal continuity, the undersweeping granite ledge of the Christian -- system, he will find the apologetics he needs for conviction. Second, because it has a biblical value. Systematic theology is almost as necessary to any comprehensive biblical theology as biblical theology is necessary to any worthy systematic theology. Often the profounder understanding of the Bible teaching involves a philosophical grasp of all Christian truth. Who, for instance, could ever master the Epistle to the Romans without such philosophical grasp? There are in that epistle single statements which are in root-relation to almost every primary doctrine of the Christian system. Third, because it has a practical value in balancing and steadying the Christian life. A Christian experience which is nourished by isolated, unrelated doctrine is likely to lose all balance, and to become an exceedingly unwholesome thing. Take the great doctrine of personal faith itself and tear it out of its moral and Christian connections, and what a dangerous transformation it undergoes! It was faith, but now it is presumption of the most perilous degree. Can you not see that systematic theology tends to prevent this exaltation of the fragment at the expense of the whole?

Had that Christian man who has so eagerly accepted "Christian Science" only once been able to see Christianity stand out in its total meaning and in all its bearings upon life, could he, think you, have taken, in place of Christianity, a weak trituration of pantheism?

In constructing a system of Christian doctrine the source for all the data is the Bible, and the Bible alone. The data, however, are not obtained by making a collection of "proof-texts." Whether a text is to be used or not depends upon its relation to the entire biblical organism. One text may tersely express a gospel trend, and so may have the utmost worth, while another text may express but a passing phase of the historic movement, and so may contribute nothing to the final system.

First of all, the systematic theologian must have, as a basis, a genuine biblical theology. And I mean here something far beyond the fragmentary works which are often published in the name of biblical theology. The whole Bible must be philosophically grasped as a Christian unity which is manifested in variety. The moment this is done there will be seen a center to the Bible; and without doubt that center is the death of our Lord. There is no possibility of any profound biblical study without instant and constant recognition of that center.

But even this is not enough. Not only must all biblical values be determined from the center; but also the result must be regarded afresh over against the consciousness of the Christian church. All the doctrinal struggles in the past, all the great creeds, all the great works in theology, all the Christian biographies, everything which expresses Christian experience, must be studied by the systematic theologian to get at the Christian consciousness. This Christian consciousness is not a source, it furnishes no data; but it lights up the data, it unfolds the norms, it helps one to see the biblical truth more Christianly.

"A man's eye is not authority on an elm tree, but it enables him to see the tree." But even this is not enough. The systematic theologian must study his own age day and night, until he can distinguish between the real Christian consciousness of his own time and the *Zeitgeist*. The *Zeitgeist* is a spirit of the world always rationalistic, never Christian, and seldom even profoundly ethical. Surely that theologian is extremely unfortunate who ever needs to say to the *Zeitgeist*, "What will you allow me to believe?"

But if the assertion in the real Christian consciousness of our day is beginning to change; if men are now actually converted, if they grow in grace, if they possess the richest joys in Christian experience, if they have large consolation in their sorrows, if they are in constant Christian fellowship, if they are giving their lives in self-sacrificing service -and yet in all this experience and fellowship and service they manifest no interest in this or that doctrine, no need of it, no certainty about it -- we here have a Christian situation which demands the most serious attention of the systematic theologian.

But even all this is not enough. The systematic theologian has something himself. He too has a new life in Christ. He has a new conception of God, of man, and of the universe. "Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. He has personal certainties which speak in his consciousness with the urgency of thunder. He has a vision in which the Christian total stands out like the outline of a continent. Can he throw all this experience away? He dare not. By all the moral worth and spiritual majesty of this new life which God has given to him he must be absolutely and sacredly true to himself.

His task, then, is to take his own Christian consciousness, together with that of the present time, together with that of all Christian history, and with the aid of all these so to interpret and relate the normative biblical data as to reveal the whole organic plan of redemption.

Now an admission should be made which may tend to increase the prevailing prejudice against systematic theology. No systematic theology, worth the making, can be constructed without more or less tentative speculation. The practical man has such a dread of speculation that when the word is mentioned he instantly thinks of the doctrinaire. But every great step in practical invention and discovery, and even in the sciences, is made by speculation. Professor Huxley called it "the scientific imagination"; but he meant exactly what I mean by tentative speculation. You have the unyielding data in the various facts. To all these facts you must tenaciously hold. Then you must imagine harmonizing connections; you must fling bridges from fact to fact until they are all interrelated. There is a test of the worth of your work in its social confirmation; that is, in the actual use of your bridges by other men. Or, coming to Christian thinking, suppose that we can make a philosophical connection between future punishment and the integrity of moral personality, protecting every statement in the Bible, and make this connection in such a manner that every converted man responds to it, we will have in this response a Christian confirmation of the reality of the connection made by speculation. And there is further confirmation if our speculative work at this point suggests deeper meanings for other Christian facts, or tends to bring out more sharply the significance of redemption as a totality.

If you have fully caught my conception, you can readily see that a genuine systematic theology is a work having no formal authority whatever. It is a mistake, I think, to call it dogmatics, or to give it any ecclesiastical position, or in any way to relate it to doctrinal lordship. It is not your ruler, but your friend, trying to make Christianity satisfy your entire manhood, by bringing out all the profound moral connections, and by showing that the redemption in Jesus Christ's atonement is the one key to all there is in the universe. Saint Paul himself began to indicate the province of systematic theology, for he could not keep from philosophical thinking in his greater epistles; and he expressed the real spirit of the matter when he said, "Not that we have lordship over your faith, but are helpers of your joy."

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

THE INTRODUCTION

1. Man as a moral person related to the Christian religion.
2. Man as a social and racial person related to the Christian religion.
3. The philosophy of Christian certainty.
4. The Bible as the basis of a system of doctrine.

THE SYSTEM

1. The Conception of Systematic Theology.

The interpretation of the doctrinal data of the Bible, from the standpoint of Christian consciousness, with the purpose of revealing the plan of redemption as an organic whole.

2. The Central Note.

The redemption of man as a racial brotherhood of individual moral persons.

3. The Doctrinal Divisions.

First Division--Man's need of redemption.

Second Division--Jesus Christ, our Lord and Redeemer.

Third Division--Our Lord's redemptive work.

Fourth Division--Redemption realized in the new man.

Fifth Division--Redemption realized in the new race.

Sixth Division The Triune God revealed in redemption.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/olin-alfred-curtis/systematic-theology/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net