

Systematic Theology

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We are in the midst of a general surge of interest in the writing of Systematic Theologies. I say “writing” since any examination of the state of the churches would indicate a lack of interest in the pursuit of Systematic Theology in general, perhaps unmatched in the whole history of the Church. Still, it is encouraging that a list such as this can be drawn up today.

It is hard to place one’s finger on the single best work in any field, and for that reason I have decided to recommend those works that I find myself returning to again and again.

The first of these is John Calvin’s classic *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the definitive edition of the 1559 work is translated by F.L. Battles and is superb. It is well known that Calvin employed a Biblico-theological method (according to John Murray this is the reason for the continual appeal of the work). Since Calvin is probably the greatest non-inspired theologian, no self-respecting student of theology will be without this set.

While I’m with the golden oldies I must mention the recent translation of Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* in three volumes. This is a storehouse of solid theology set out by way of an affirmation or denial to a stated proposition. This scholastic approach makes it a bit ponderous, but it is filled with scriptural references and good Protestant reasoning, and avoids overmuch speculation. Along with this is the famous *Marrow of Theology* of William Ames. Not as long, but still a little tough to get through, although definitely worth the effort.

Next up I would go for either Millard Erickson’s *Christian Theology* or Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*. It’s not that I agree with them all the way (particularly not with Grudem on the gift of prophecy etc.), but they are extremely well organized and mature. In fact, Grudem’s work is the best actual *system* I’ve seen and is a model of good communication. In matters soteriological I think Erickson is better, being more doggedly exegetical. Both are historic premillennialists, whereas I tend to a moderate dispensational view of eschatology.

High up on the list is Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, especially the 2nd edition, which has ironed out some flawed statements on the Creeds. Reymond has an excellent prolegomena – one of the best available. His style is serious, yet worshipful – qualities which should see it outlast many of its contemporaries. He is supralapsarian in the order of the decrees and decidedly covenantalist in theology. He does not like dispensationalism, even charging it with leading to the governmental theory of atonement. Notwithstanding, it is a fine book.

Louis Berkhof’s famous *Systematic Theology* is an excellent resource combining good definitions and a neat, pithy style. He has a good separate volume on *Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Berkhof is strongly influenced by Herman Bavinck, whose

magisterial four volume ***Reformed Dogmatics*** is finally in English translation. Bavinck's work is quite outstanding (though suffering from a too ready acceptance of evolutionary dating, an age carried over into most theologies of the 19th and early 20th centuries). But be warned, it is not for the faint of heart. It demands much from the reader.

In the same broad category is the three volume ***Systematic Theology*** of Charles Hodge and the newly re-edited ***Dogmatic Theology*** of W.G.T. Shedd. Both have much to contribute, though Hodge is more precise, while Shedd is more speculative and discursive, a trait I actually like so long as it is within the limits of the Scripture. This pays off in his discussions of the Trinity and origin of the soul. A.A. Hodge's ***Outline of Theology*** is very good on definitions and should be picked up if possible. One might add to this the very respectable work ***Lectures in Systematic Theology*** of Robert L. Dabney, though I think it is less easy to use.

Another work I like is ***Integrative Theology*** by Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest. It is comprehensive and well organized (though I personally don't care for its verificational approach). This is a good student's resource, but is too convoluted to be a first choice as a textbook. On eschatology the authors differ among themselves. Lewis is dispensational, while Demarest is historic premil.

A fine treatment reflecting the old Westminster of Murray and Van Til is the two volume ***Systematic Theology*** by Morton H. Smith (not to be mistaken for another Morton Smith who is liberal). Not to be missed is his study of the aspects of man. Another good work is ***A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*** by J. Oliver Buswell. Buswell is his own man and sometimes takes unusual positions (e.g. mid-trib rapture). His empiricism sometimes gets in the way of his formulations (e.g. Scripture). There is an unusual mix of Reformed covenantalism with dispensational premillennialism.

A book I really like is W.H. Griffith-Thomas's ***Principles of Theology***, which is basically his commentary on the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles. The work is moderately Calvinistic and moderately dispensational. It also contains a lot of good historical theology. Also dispensational are Lewis Sperry Chafer's eight volume ***Systematic Theology***. Some dispensationalists regard this book with an enthusiasm which borders on veneration. It is very good in some areas (e.g. the atonement; the Holy Spirit), and rather light in others (e.g. Prolegomena; Theology Proper). As a study in eschatology it is quite important, although he falls into the error of teaching two New Covenants. Charles Ryrie's ***Basic Theology*** is a good introductory text, which is helped by the author's trademark felicity in clear expression. A little more advanced is Henry Thiessen, ***Introduction to Systematic Theology***. Again, it is dispensational, with an Arminian slant (although the Arminianism has been toned down in the second edition revised by Vernon Doerksen). Thiessen follows Strong (see below) in many places, and (unwittingly) sounds kenotic in his description of Christ's dual natures. Far better from an Arminian point of view is the set by Thomas Oden, who mines the early fathers to great profit (and Richard Baxter), even if his views are a bit too anthropocentric. It is delightfully written and should not be snubbed.

The best introductory systematic is unquestionably that of John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*. Even when I can't agree with his Reformed Presbyterianism I find myself greatly valuing his opinions. For what it's worth I think Frame is the best theologian writing today.

Some Other Systematic Theologies:

There are a number of other theologies that I would be a little more wary of, although this is not to say they aren't without value. The most comprehensive of these is Donald G. Bloesch's seven-volume "*Christian Foundations*" series. There are quite a few issues with Bloesch's fideistic approach. He denies propositional revelation and inerrancy, is rather fuzzy on election, and his eschatology is uncertain to say the least. He is clearly influenced by proto-Barthian scholar P.T. Forsyth, and his writings evidence a similar pietistic strain. Also by Bloesch is his earlier *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* in two volumes. Alister McGrath's *Christian Theology* is now in its third edition. The Oxford scholar is excellent on historical matters and good at presenting most doctrines. He doffs his cap a bit to the new perspective on justification and is a theistic evolutionist.

"What about A.H. Strong?", the American Baptists say. Well, I am one of those (like J. Murray and B.B. Warfield) who believes that he is more trouble than he is worth. He rejects inerrancy, accepts both evolutionary dogma and historical criticism, and, furthermore, lurches toward pantheism in his so-called ethical monism. Evangelicals should fish in better waters!

On the contemporary left of evangelicalism is Stanley Grenz's *Theology for the Community of God* which has been used widely. It is strong on historical matters (usually), but includes the author's lack of enthusiasm for propositionalism and a fondness for coherentism as an epistemological base. This impacts his exegesis in crucial areas.

Individual Theological Topics:

A number of well known theologians have not published full Systematic Theologies, but it would be a huge *faux-pas* to overlook them. Among these are the premier Reformed theologians B.B. Warfield and John Murray. Warfield's works have been reprinted in 10 volumes and show him to be an extremely erudite historical theologian as well as an outstanding exegetical theologian. Indeed, he is something of an exemplar in both fields.

Murray (4 vols) is in the same vein, though no duplicate of Warfield. His essays often go to the center of an issue quickly and work it out with exegetical precision, and are less encumbered by the rampant inductivism of the 19th century writers. Depth and clarity characterize his work.

At the same level, and influenced greatly by Murray (and Van Til), is John Frame. His "*Theology of Lordship*" series (4-5 volumes projected) promises to be something of a milestone. Already *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* and *The Doctrine of God* have set new standards in recent evangelical theological writing.

A famous Dutch theologian (and one, incidentally, that Frame finds hard to read) is G.C. Berkouwer. It seems to be a problem with these Dutch writers to write in a fashion that can be easily followed. Though he gets through 14 volumes of theology he never presents a prolegomena or a theology proper. His book on *Holy Scripture* has been very influential in the States with those on the ‘Evangelical Left’ who oppose inerrancy and propositionalism. Nevertheless, Berkouwer has written some excellent theological books, the best of which are (in my opinion) *Divine Election*, in which he dismisses double predestination as a rationalistic imposition on the statements of Scripture regarding the damnation of the lost; *The Providence of God* where he takes a determined biblical stand against certain theodicies; *General Revelation* where he rejects natural theology; *The Work of Christ* and *Sin*, two outstanding works in their field. Berkouwer has no separate volume on the Holy Spirit, but the Third Person is conspicuous in some of his books, especially those dealing with salvation. Berkouwer tends to mix historical matters a bit too regularly to make it easy to discern his exact views on everything. Still, he is clearly well inside Reformed confessionalism on most things.

While not taking any time to list their works I would recommend almost anything by J.I. Packer – a writer so imbued with the Puritan spirit that he is always edifying. His style is crisp and clear, so he is a good read. Why he signed the ECT document I shall never know (his explanation notwithstanding). His Puritans would have disowned him for it. Still his *Knowing God* is a classic, and his *Keep in Step with the Spirit* isn’t far behind.

Bernard Ramm is something of a mixed bag. An excellent writer, his concise books on *The Pattern of Authority*, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* and *The Witness of the Spirit* (where he basically expounds Calvin’s teaching), are really good. His *After Fundamentalism* is a rallying call to “liberal” evangelicals. He never tires of labeling conservatives as “obscurantists” as he fawns over the contributions of Karl Barth.

Finally, I mention D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ *Great Doctrines of the Bible*. By and large it is very good. It is devout and edifying, which make it worth reading. I think his distinction between ‘doctrine’ and ‘theology’ is overdone. More seriously, I think he is way off with his view of the baptism of the Spirit being subsequent to salvation (though not a second blessing).