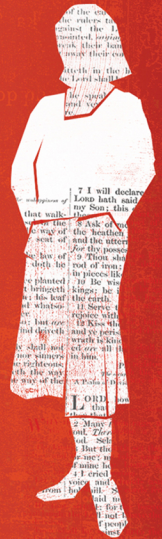




R.C. SPROUL



EVERYONE'S A THEOLOGIAN

AN INTRODUCTION
to SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY



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Professor of Theology Emeritus
Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, N.C.

R.C. SPROUL

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AN INTRODUCTION
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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Everyone's a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology

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Adapted from the teaching series *Foundations: An Overview of Systematic Theology* (1999), published by Ligonier Ministries.

Published by Ligonier Ministries
421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771
Ligonier.org

Printed in China

RR Donnelley

0000421

First edition, eighth printing

ISBN 978-1-56769-365-2 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-64289-202-4 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-56769-369-0 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-56769-370-6 (Kindle)

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Cover design: Gearbox Studios

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sproul, R.C. (Robert Charles), 1939-2017

Everyone's a theologian : an introduction to systematic theology /

R.C. Sproul.

pages cm

ISBN-13: 978-1-56769-365-2 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 1-56769-365-2 (hardcover)

1. Theology, Doctrinal--Popular works. I. Title.

BT77.S7183 2014

230--dc23

2013037126

To my family,
who has been so loving and supportive
through the years of my ministry

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Part One

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1



WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

Several years ago, a well-known Christian school invited me to address the faculty and administration on this question: “What is a Christian college or university?” Upon my arrival, the dean gave me a tour of the campus. During the tour, I noticed this inscription on a set of office doors: “Department of Religion.” When it came time to address the faculty that evening, I mentioned the inscription I had seen, and I asked whether the department had always been called by that name. An older faculty member replied that years ago the department had been called the “Department of Theology.” No one could tell me why the department name had been changed.

“Religion” or “theology”—what difference does it make? In the academic world, the study of religion has traditionally come under the broader context of either sociology or anthropology, because religion has to do with the worship practices of human beings in particular environments. Theology, by contrast, is the study of God. There is a big difference between studying human apprehensions of religion and studying the nature and character of God Himself. The first is purely natural in its orientation. The second is supernatural, dealing with what lies above and beyond the things of this world.

After explaining this in my lecture to the faculty, I added that a true Christian college or university is committed to the premise that the ultimate truth is the truth of God, and that He is the foundation and

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source of all other truth. Everything we learn—economics, philosophy, biology, mathematics—has to be understood in light of the overarching reality of the character of God. That is why, in the Middle Ages, theology was called “the queen of the sciences” and philosophy “her handmaiden.” Today the queen has been deposed from her throne and, in many cases, driven into exile, and a supplanter now reigns. We have replaced theology with religion.

THEOLOGY DEFINED

In this volume, we are concerned with theology, specifically with systematic theology, which is an orderly, coherent study of the principal doctrines of the Christian faith. In this chapter, I will give a brief introduction to the science of systematic theology and some basic definitions.

The word *theology* shares a suffix, *-ology*, with the names of many disciplines and sciences, such as *biology*, *physiology*, and *anthropology*. The suffix comes from the Greek word *logos*, which we find in the opening of John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Greek word *logos* means “word” or “idea,” or, as one philosopher translated it, “logic” (it is also the term from which we get the English word *logic*). So when we study biology, we are looking at the word or logic of life. Anthropology is the word or logic about humans, *anthrōpos* being the Greek word for *man*. The primary part of the word *theology* comes from the Greek *theos*, which means “god,” so theology is the word or logic of God Himself.

Theology is a very broad term. It refers not only to God but to all that God has revealed to us in sacred Scripture. Included in the discipline of theology is the study of Christ, which we call “Christology.” It also includes the study of the Holy Spirit, which we call “pneumatology,” the study of sin, which is called “hamartiology,” and the study of future things, which we call “eschatology.” These are subdivisions of theology. Theologians also speak of “theology proper,” which has specific reference to the study of God Himself.

Many are comfortable with the word *theology* but cringe when they

hear the qualifying term *systematic*. This is because we live in a time of widespread aversion to certain kinds of systems. We respect inanimate systems—computer systems, fire alarm systems, and electrical circuitry systems—because we understand their importance for society. However, when it comes to systems of thought or to understanding life and the world in a coherent manner, people are uncomfortable. Part of the reason for that has to do with one of the most influential philosophies to emerge in Western history—existentialism.

THE INFLUENCE OF PHILOSOPHY

Existentialism is a philosophy of existence. It presupposes that there is no such thing as essential truth; rather, there is distinctive existence—not essence, but existence. By definition, existentialism abhors a generic system of reality. It is an anti-system that holds to truths but not to *truth* and to purposes but not to *purpose*. Existentialists do not believe that reality can be understood in an orderly fashion because they see the world as ultimately chaotic and without meaning or purpose. One simply confronts life as it happens; there is no overarching viewpoint to make sense of it all, because ultimately life does not make sense.

Existentialism has had a tremendous impact in Western culture along with its offspring, relativism and pluralism. The relativist says, “There is no absolute truth except the absolute truth that there is absolutely no absolute truth. All truth is relative. What is true for one may be false for another.” There is no effort to bring opposing views into harmony (something a system would seek to do) because, according to relativists, there is no possibility of a systematic understanding of truth.

Such philosophy has also had a strong impact on theology, even in the seminaries. Systematic theology is rapidly becoming a forgotten discipline, not only because of the impact of existential thought and of relativism and pluralism, but also because some people misunderstand systematic theology as an attempt to force the Bible into a philosophical system. Some *have* attempted to force the Bible into a philosophical system, as was the case with René Descartes and his rationalism and with

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John Locke and his empiricism. Those who make such attempts do not hear the Word of God or seek to understand it on its own terms; rather, they seek to bring a preconceived system to bear on the Scriptures.

In Greek mythology, a bandit named Procrustes attacked people and cut off their legs to fit them into the dimensions of an iron bed rather than simply enlarging the bed. Attempts to force Scripture into a preconceived system of thought are similarly misguided, and the result has been an aversion to systematic theology. However, systematic theology does not attempt to force Scripture into a philosophy or system, but instead it seeks to draw out the teachings of Scripture and understand them in an orderly, topical way.

ASSUMPTIONS OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Systematic theology is based on certain assumptions. The first assumption is that God has revealed Himself not only in nature but also through the writings of the prophets and the Apostles, and that the Bible is the Word of God. It is theology *par excellence*. It is the full *logos* of the *theos*.

The second assumption is that when God reveals Himself, He does so according to His own character and nature. Scripture tells us that God created an orderly cosmos. He is not the author of confusion because He is never confused. He thinks clearly and speaks in an intelligible way that is meant to be understood.

A third assumption is that God's revelation in Scripture manifests those qualities. There is a unity to the Word of God despite the diversity of its authors. The Word of God was written over many centuries by many authors, and it covers a variety of topics, but within that diversity is unity. All the information found in Scripture—future things, the atonement, the incarnation, the judgment of God, the mercy of God, the wrath of God—have their unity in God Himself, so that when God speaks and reveals Himself, there is a unity in that content, a coherence.

God's revelation is also consistent. It has been said that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, but if that were true, we would have

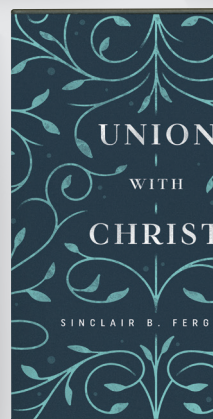
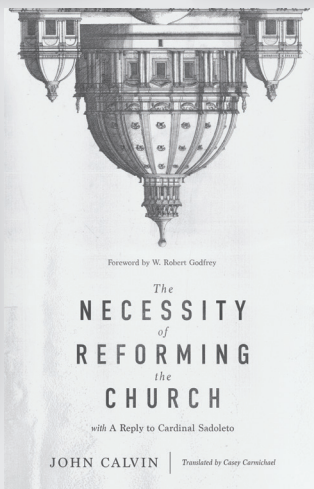
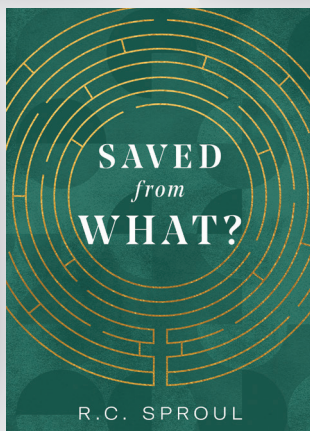
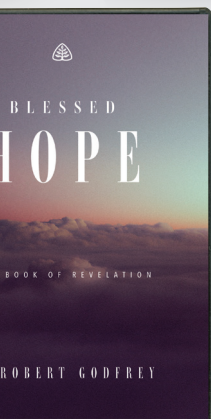
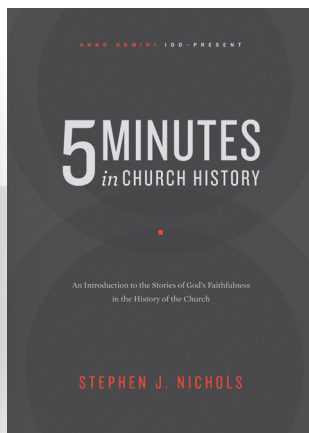
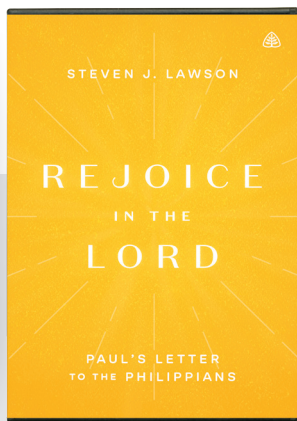
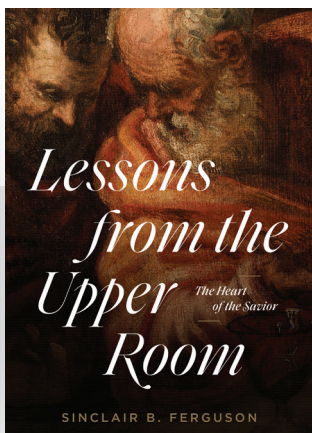
WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

to say that God has a small mind, because in His being and character, He is utterly consistent. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

These assumptions guide the systematic theologian as he goes about his task of considering the whole scope of Scripture and inquiring how it all fits together. At many seminaries, the systematic theology department is separate from the New Testament department and the Old Testament department. This is because the systematic theologian has a different focus than the Old Testament professor and the New Testament professor. Biblical scholars focus on how God has revealed Himself at various points over time, while the systematician takes that information, puts it all together, and shows how it fits into a meaningful whole. This is a daunting task, to be sure, and I am convinced that no one has ever done it perfectly.

As I engage in systematic theology, I never cease to be amazed by the specific, intricate coherence of the scope of divine revelation. Systematic theologians understand that each point in theology addresses every other point. When God speaks, every detail He utters has an impact on every other detail. That is why our ongoing task is to see how all the pieces fit together into an organic, meaningful, and consistent whole. That is what we will be doing in this volume.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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