

The Dangers of Systematic Theology

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary, College Edition*, to reflect is to think seriously and to express carefully considered thoughts. The same source defines the word *reflections* as “thoughts or opinions arriving from careful consideration.” I have been reflecting, thinking seriously, on the dangers of systematic theology for decades, and I wish now to express as reflections certain thoughts and opinions on the dangers that I believe are inherent in the enterprise of systematic theology, perils that threaten the spiritual well-being of those who are engaged in this task. I wish to make clear, however, that my intention here is neither to discredit the practice of systematic theology nor to calumniate professional, academic systematic theologians. To warn others of the dangers of driving on the Los Angeles freeway system is not to disparage this system; rather, it is to issue a warning to drive with care. Likewise, while recognizing the benefits that many derive from systematic theology and without disparaging either such theology or those who promote it, I would like to convey as personal reflections my thoughts regarding the perils of systematic theology. My intention is to advance certain provocative ideas but to do so in a forthright yet pleasant manner, even with an irenic spirit, and I hope that my readers will respond in kind, without taking umbrage and without knee-jerk reactions.

As an operational definition of systematic theology, I take the one offered by Bruce A. Demarest: “An attempt to reduce religious truth to an organized system” (1064). Let us consider the elements of this definition. *Attempt* suggests exerting effort without certainty of success. In its primary definition, *reduce* means to “diminish in extent, amount, or degree.” To reduce the truth in the Word of God may have the unintentional effect of diminishing or lessening the truth or of subtracting from it. *Religious truth*, although perhaps intended to refer to the divine revelation in the Scriptures, is actually a generic term denoting various religious verities. The goal of reducing the divine truth is an *organized system*.

Organized signifies that which is put together into a formally structured whole, often with a hierarchical arrangement, and a *system* may be understood to be an organized set of interrelated ideas, concepts, or principles. First, the divine truth in the Bible is reduced to, or recast in, manageable units, and then it is formed into an organized system of doctrines. This indicates, I say with concern, that what begins as a revelation from God passes through a process of reduction leading to the construction of an organized theological system—a system that may (again unintentionally) involve the transmutation of the original divine revelation into a form that caters to the inveterate system-building tendency of the natural human mind.

So described, systematic theology involves various dangers, and what follows, obviously in a brief, initial presentation, are some of my reflections upon them.

The divine truth in the Bible can be reduced to an organized theological system that transmutes the original divine revelation into a form that caters to the inveterate system-building tendency of the natural human mind.

The Danger of Catering to the Tendency of the Natural Mind to Create Conceptual Systems

Acknowledging that the Bible is not a system of theology, Charles Hodge claims that “the Bible contains the truths which the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit in their internal relation to each other” (1). The function of systematic theology, he goes on to say, is “to take those facts [of the Scripture], determine their relation to each other and to other cognate truths, as well as to vindicate them and show their harmony and consistency” (2). In response to the suggestion that believers should simply take the revealed truths as God has unveiled them and not trouble themselves with attempts to produce a dogmatic system, Hodge argues (contrary to reality) that “it cannot be done” (2); that is, it is impossible not to recast biblical truths into a system. Hodge asserts, “Such is the constitution of the human mind that it cannot help endeavoring to systematize and reconcile the facts which it admits to be true...There is a necessity, therefore, for the construction of systems of theology” (2). In other words, we must cater to the

tendency, even the craving, of the natural mind to create conceptual systems. The human mind requires this, and thus it must be done. The mind rules. Believers must, Hodge insists, “adjust and bring into harmonious arrangement all the facts which the Bible teaches” on any given subject (2). Since, according to Hodge, the natural mind cannot receive truths as God has seen fit to reveal them in the Word, the mind, instead of being set on the spirit (Rom. 8:6) and being ruled by the indwelling Christ, should be allowed to fulfill its lust for system-building.

The danger of allowing the fallen, natural human mind to have its unbridled way to produce harmonious theological systems is extremely serious, for the mind then becomes the ruling agent in one’s being. Robert Govett was aware of this danger. “It is the glory of man’s intellect,” he tells us in *The Twofoldness of Divine Truth*, “to produce oneness. His aim is to trace different results to one principle, to clear it of ambiguities, to show how, through varied appearances, one law holds” (3). Can it reasonably be denied that systematic theology appeals to and even exalts “the glory of man’s intellect”? Certainly not! In systematic theology the human mind is allowed to dominate one’s being, suppressing the regenerated human spirit, where God dwells (Eph. 2:22).

Systematic theology can have an adverse effect on a believer’s mind, causing the mind to be trusted, exalted, and glorified as it erects high things rising up against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:5). In nearly fifty years of observation and experience, I have witnessed this kind of development in the minds of fellow believers; as they built up a theological system, they built up themselves, exhibiting for self-glory their intellectual prowess. Although I would never counsel mindlessness in the pursuit of genuine spiritual understanding, I would caution God’s people concerning the peril of giving preeminence to the human mind as they yield to the demands of their intellect to construct systems of theology.

The Danger of Ignoring the Twofoldness of Divine Truth

I have already referred to Govett’s incisive booklet on the twofold nature of divine truth in the Word of God. Because it is the glory of humankind to produce systems in which everything is harmonized, the “twofoldness of truth as offered to our view in Holy Writ is one strong argument of its not being the work of man” (3). The scriptural revelation seems to be deliberately asystematic, and there is no command from God in the Word that we resolve apparent contradictions by forcing God’s truth into a system. “It is not necessary to reconcile them before we are bound to receive and act upon the two. It is enough that the Word of God distinctly affirms them

both” (6). Not to reconcile means not to systematize the divine truths. In one portion of the Word, God unfolds one aspect of a certain truth; in another portion, He unveils a different and, perhaps, seemingly contrary aspect. The systematic theologian cannot tolerate such a thing; there must be a harmonious system. Govett warns against this:

From this twofoldness of truth designed difficulties arise. Thus does God try mankind. Thus does He try His people. Will they receive both His statements on His simple assertion? Most will not, for they are one-sided. They will force everything to unity. (20)

Forcing to unity: this is precisely the danger of systematic theology. But, Govett advises, biblical truth “does not need first to be reduced to system and brought under the arrangement of a theory” (21).

Systematic theology, by its very nature, demands that divine truths be reduced to a system and then brought under an overarching arrangement of dogmatic principle. Systems of theology, simply by being systems, lead to distortion or neglect of particular truths for the sake of systematic theological coherence. Furthermore, adherence to a system can make it impossible for one to recognize and receive truths that, although they are divine and are taught in the Word, are alien to or incompatible with the system. Once constructed, the system controls the minds and lives of believers, closing them to truths that their kind of systematic theology cannot embrace or make part of its harmonious whole.

I have discovered, therefore, that believers will eventually face a “fork in the road” in their walk in the truth, and they must choose between the way of systematic theology, which reduces divine truth to an organized and hierarchical system, and God’s way of presenting truth—a way in which He reveals two (contrary or complimentary) aspects of crucial truths and then requires acceptance of both. If we take the way that is according to the twofoldness of divine truth, we will be able, without contradiction yet without fashioning a system, to receive every aspect of every truth in the Word of God. Govett concludes his remarkable treatise with a prayer concerning this: “The Lord give us a single yes, and the teaching of His Holy Spirit that each part of His Word may leave its due impression on our judgments, our hearts, and our conduct!” (23).

A. W. Tozer agrees with Govett. Instead of being enamored with the truth only as it is formulated in a particular theological system, we should, in Tozer’s words, see that truth, like a bird, has “two wings” (*Christian* 59). Regrettably, as he goes on to say, “many of the doctrinal divisions among the churches are the result of a blind and

stubborn insistence that truth has but one wing” (59). Elsewhere Tozer remarks, “The follower of Christ is called upon to embrace all truths and every truth. That is, he must open his heart to God’s truth, and having done so he must be prepared to accept all truths and reject none” (*God* 131). Sadly, this is not the practice of many, if not most, systematic theologians. For instance, some will accept the objective truth of Christ’s resurrection and affirm that in resurrection Christ has a body of flesh and bones (Luke 24:39), but they may ignore or dilute the corresponding subjective truth that Jesus Christ, the resurrected, pneumatic One, is actually in us (John 14:20).

The Danger of Replacing the Light of Divine Truth with Mere Doctrine

The Lord’s word is truth (17:17), and this truth—the divine truth—is intrinsically related to God as light (1 John 1:5). Systematic theology, however, in its preoccupation with truth regarded as mere doctrine (as exemplified in the writings of Gordon Clark) may replace the light of truth with objective doctrine grasped and interpreted by no human faculty other than the mind.

The divine light is the nature of God’s expression (vv. 5-6; John 1:4; 8:12). Light is God’s shining, God’s expression; when God is expressed, the nature of that expression is light (1 John 1:5). To walk in the divine light is to live, move, act, and have our being in the divine light, which is God Himself (v. 7). The shining of the divine light makes everything new (2:7-8). If we are under God’s dispensing, we participate in God’s nature as light and are constituted with this element of His nature (John 1:5; 2 Cor. 4:6).

The divine light shines in the divine life (John 1:4; 8:12). A great principle in the Bible is that light and life go together (Psa. 36:9). Where light is, there is life, and where life is, there is light (John 1:4). The light of life shines within the regenerated believers in Christ by the inner sense of life to deliver us from sin (8:11-12; 1:5) and to bring us into the full knowledge of the truth. When we receive the divine light and believe in Christ as the light of the world, we are born of God to become sons of light (vv. 6-12; 12:35-36). Then we may walk in the truth and be constituted with the truth for the glory of God.

The divine light is the source of the divine truth (1:5, 9; 18:37). When the divine light shines upon us, it becomes

the truth, which is the divine reality (8:12, 32). When the divine light shines, the divine things become real to us. Because light is the source of truth, and truth is the issue of light, when we walk in the light, we practice the truth (1 John 1:6-7).

The divine light that shines in the divine life and issues in the divine truth is embodied in the Lord Jesus, God incarnate (John 1:1, 4, 14; 8:12; 9:5; 14:6). Hence, He is the truth. What a tragedy it is that practitioners of systematic theology, in their life with the Lord, may be deprived of the light of the divine truth and have nothing more than doctrine. They resemble those who have menus and recipes but no food and who condemn as mystics and pietists those who actually eat and enjoy the food. Seminaries are famous for producing those who know theological recipes but who live in darkness and hunger, having neither the light of the truth nor the spiritual food to nourish and satisfy their hungry, empty being.

What I am describing here is not a theory or opinion—it is a dreadful fact. One of the perils or pitfalls of systematic theology is that believers may be occupied with forming or understanding or promulgating a dogmatic system but have only objective teachings about God, not the truth of God, which is the Triune God shining into believers as light through His living and abiding word.

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The Danger of Not Knowing the Father and the Son

To the extent that systematic theology makes one “wise and intelligent” in the sight of God, or causes one to be lifted up in heart and to suppose that he or she is wise and intelligent, systematic theology may pose a danger of hindering its adherents from knowing the Father and the Son. The biblical source of this remark is found in Matthew 11:25-27:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I extol You, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for thus it has been well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one fully knows the Son except the Father; neither does anyone fully know the Father except the Son and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

The Lord’s word is clear. The Father hides the divine

things—especially the reality of the Father and the Son and their knowledge of each other—from the wise and intelligent and reveals them to infants, to those who are absolutely dependent upon and open to Him. Those who pride themselves as being among the wise and intelligent may therefore place themselves in a situation where the Father decides—and is even well-pleased—to conceal the divine revelation from them, thus making it impossible for them to fully know the Father and the Son. The Lord’s word has been fulfilled numerous times throughout the centuries, as the Father hid the Son from the intelligent and unveiled Him to infants.

Not long ago, one theologian wrote in a demeaning way of someone who asked why God is triune, saying that no “intelligent orthodox Trinitarian” would ever ask such a question but would be content with the fact that God is triune by nature. He went on to testify of his own capacity to understand recondite theological tomes and then, by contrast, to belittle those whose writings on the Triune God are (to him) incomprehensible, for those writers, unlike him, are not “intelligent orthodox Trinitarians.” For this theologian it is not sufficient for a believer in Christ to be orthodox regarding the doctrine of the Divine Trinity—one must be intelligent, and this intelligence should be recognized and uplifted.

To be sure, this theologian regards himself as intelligent and looks down upon those who, in his estimation, are not. His remarks brought to mind the Lord’s words quoted above, and I was freshly impressed with the spiritual peril of assuming in the presence of God the posture of being wise and intelligent. Systematic theologians may be wise and intelligent, but it is difficult to find among their ranks believers who are infants to whom the full knowledge of the Son has been given by the Father and the full knowledge of the Father has been given by the Son.

Let the learned theologians boast and glory in their intelligence! Spiritually, it is much better to be humble and dependent as a little child for entering into the kingdom of God. “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child shall by no means enter into it” (Luke 18:17). The wise and intelligent cannot receive truth that does not harmonize with their precious doctrinal system, and they cannot ask childlike questions like, “Why is God triune?” Because they are filled with theological notions, they are far from being poor in spirit and pure in heart (Matt. 5:3, 8).

A little child, not filled with and occupied by old concepts, can easily receive a new thought. Hence, people need to be like little children and, with an unoccupied heart, receive the kingdom of God as a new thing. (Recovery Version, Luke 18:17, note 1)

Andrew Murray wrote wonderfully about this:

The wise and prudent are the men who are conscious and confident of their power of mind and reason to aid them in their pursuit of Divine Knowledge. The babes are those whose chief work is not the mind and its power, but the heart and its disposition....With the wise and prudent head-knowledge is the first thing; from them God hides the spiritual meaning of THE VERY THING THEY THINK THEY UNDERSTAND. With the babes, not the head and its knowledge but the heart and FEELING, the sense of humility, love and trust, is the first thing, and to them God reveals, in their inner life and experience, THE VERY THING THEY KNOW THEY CANNOT UNDERSTAND...All Evangelical Christians believe in regeneration. How few believe that when a man is born of God, A BABE-LIKE DEPENDENCE ON GOD FOR ALL TEACHING AND STRENGTH OUGHT TO BE HIS CHIEF CHARACTERISTIC...The first and chief mark of being a child of God, of being like Jesus Christ, is AN ABSOLUTE DEPENDENCE UPON GOD FOR EVERY BLESSING, AND SPECIALLY FOR ANY REAL KNOWLEDGE OF SPIRITUAL THINGS...The first disposition needed for receiving that revelation is a babe-like spirit. (77-80)

The Danger of Being Lured to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and of Depreciating the Tree of Life

Perhaps the gravest danger of systematic theology is that its practitioners follow the principle of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, using the data of Scripture as mere knowledge that results in spiritual death, instead of coming to the Lord in the Word of eternal life and following the way of life to receive the word of God as spirit and life (John 5:39-40; 6:63).

The tree of life signifies the Triune God as life to man in man’s relationship with Him (Gen. 2:9; Psa. 36:9). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil signifies Satan, the devil, the evil one, as death to man in man’s fall before God (Gen. 2:17). These two trees signify two principles, and it is these principles that are most relevant to our discussion here. The principle of the tree of life is the principle of dependence on God (John 15:5; Gen. 4:4); the exercise of this principle leads to life.

The principle of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the principle of independence from God (Jer. 17:5-6; Gen. 4:3); the exercise of this principle leads to death. In reading the Bible and in pursuing theological understanding, we must choose the first principle and reject the second, depending on God through the exercise of the spirit in prayer and denying the independent mind that dares to find the knowledge of God without needing God or depending on Him. At this juncture, a stanza from a hymn is helpful:

Just to touch the Word for knowledge
Is to take the very way
By which Eve was lured by Satan
And by knowledge led astray;
But as life to take the Scripture
Is the tree of life to eat;
Thus the Word we must be taking
In the spirit as our meat. (*Hymns*, #816)

William Law, after undergoing a profound and radical change in his spiritual life, acquired a rich spiritual understanding of the significance of the two trees in Genesis as two principles and of how the theologians of his day were feeding on the tree of death:

Why is it that we see Bible scholars equally pleased with and contending for the errors and absurdities of every system of theology under which they happen to have taken their education? Because natural genius and human wisdom can feed on no other food than the deceptive fruit of that ancient tree of knowledge...Look at the origin of the first sin, and you see it all. Had Eve desired no knowledge but that which came from God, Paradise had still been the habitation of her and of all her offspring. If Christians had desired no knowledge but that which comes alone from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Church had been a kingdom of God and communion of saints to this present day...But now corruption, sin, death, and every evil of the world have entered into the Church, the spouse of Christ, just as they entered into Eve, the spouse of Adam, in Paradise. And in the very same way, and from the same cause: namely, a desire for knowledge other than that which comes from the inspiration of the Spirit of God alone. This desire is the serpent's voice in every man, doing everything to him and in him which Satanic deception did to Eve in the garden. It carries on the first deceit, it shows and recommends to him that same beautiful tree of human wisdom, self-will, and self-esteem springing up within him, which Eve saw in the garden. And this love of human wisdom and knowledge so blinds man, that he cannot see that he is eating of the same forbidden fruit and keeping up in himself all the death and separation from God which the first hunger for knowledge brought forth. (51-53)

To a very great extent, systematic theology is used by Satan today as a means to lure God's people away from Christ as the tree of life and to entice them to satiate their desire for knowledge, even theological knowledge about God, by eating the death-inducing fruit

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Whenever the believers, relying on their wise and intelligent mind and acting independently of the indwelling Spirit of God, come to the Bible or to theological texts with the goal of gaining more knowledge—more data and doctrines associated with God and His truth—they are actually ingesting the fruit produced by the tree of death. The way of systematic theology may seem right to human eyes, but the end of that way is death.

Is it not extremely serious to limit divine truth to what matches a theological system or, for the sake of maintaining the harmony and coherence of a cherished system of doctrine, to violate the principle of the twofoldness of divine truth? Certainly it is! Is it not perilous to exalt the capacity of the natural mind and then to consider oneself wise and intelligent, and is it not a grave danger to conduct theological study according to the principle and issue of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? It surely is! Let every believer who is committed to any system of theology and or who seeks to construct such a system by reducing divine truth to a body of organized doctrine beware of the dangers of systematic theology. This is a matter of life and death.

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