

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by beginning a study of systematic theology. Dr. Spencer, I think it would be a good idea to define what systematic theology is.

Dr. Spencer: That would certainly be a good place to start. The word theology comes from two Greek words, *theos* (θεός), which means God, and *logos* (λόγος), which can mean word, or statement, or reasoning.¹ It is the origin of our English word logic, for example. But it is also the root of a suffix in many words, like anthropology or archaeology, where it has come to mean the study of something. So, theology is the study of God.

There are different kinds of theology and the modifiers aren't always used in a consistent way. In our podcast introductions we have been saying that we are studying "biblical theology", by which we mean theology according to the Bible. But, according to the 19th-century theologian Charles Hodge, biblical theology would, strictly speaking, be a compilation of the facts presented in the Bible.² In contrast, systematic theology looks for the relations between these facts and seeks to draw conclusions from them. He uses geology as an illustration. You can simply compile a list of facts; for example, the locations, size shape and so on of different rivers. Or you can study the causes and relations between different geological facts, which is, in general, more useful.

Overall, I like the definition given by Wayne Grudem the best. In his book *Systematic Theology*, he writes that "Systematic theology is any study that answers the question, 'What does the whole Bible teach us today?' about any given topic."³

Marc Roby: Now, I have to point out that that definition originally came from John Frame.

Dr. Spencer: OK, I knew you'd been itching to get a reference in to one of your favorite theologians. And you're right, the definition comes from Frame and Grudem does give him credit in a footnote.

Marc Roby: Just wanted to make sure the record was straight.

Dr. Spencer: I think it's straight. And it is a good definition. What we are interested in doing is seeing what the whole Bible teaches us, specifically about what we are to believe, and how we are to live our lives.

Marc Roby: Alright, where do we want to begin?

Dr. Spencer: We want to begin, as Wayne Grudem and many others have done, with the Word of God itself.

Marc Roby: Perhaps I should remind our listeners that we have already covered this topic to some extent. In Session 4 we discussed the fact that the Bible itself claims to be the very Word of

¹ E.g., see *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Walter Bauer, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pp. 477-478

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. I, pp. 1-2

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, pg. 21

God and that it alone is the ultimate standard, or authority, for a Christian. Then, in Sessions 5 and 6, we discussed the Bible's authority and its progressive revelation of Jesus Christ as the Savior. So, what else do you want to say about the Word of God?

Dr. Spencer: I want, first, to stress the importance of the Word of God. Although it is not the only revelation we have from God, it is the only revelation we have that tells us what we must do to be saved. Theologians often speak of both general and special revelation. General revelation refers to creation itself, including man, our conscience, reasoning and entire being. While special revelation is often used to refer to the Bible, although we'll see in a few minutes there is more to it.

General revelation is so named because it is available to everyone in general. We are told about it in Romans 1:20-21, which says that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him".⁴ This is a very important point. General revelation is sufficient for the purpose of leaving men without excuse. We should know that there is a God, we should give him glory and thanks, and we should seek to know him and please him. But, in our natural state, we do none of those things.

Marc Roby: And, of course, because men reject God, Paul tells us in Romans 1:18-19 that "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them."

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And that is where special revelation comes into the picture. It is called special revelation because it is *not* available to every single person. And it is only in special revelation that God reveals to us how we can be reconciled to him and have the sentence of his wrath removed from us.

Marc Roby: Which is, of course, by being united to Jesus Christ by faith.

Dr. Spencer: Right. That's the core of the gospel message. In his natural state, man is a sinner who has rejected God and is under his wrath. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1 that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. But, if we repent of our sins and place our trust in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, we'll be saved.

It is the unique job of God's special revelation to give us this gospel message.

Marc Roby: But it gives us a lot more than just the bare gospel.

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Dr. Spencer: It absolutely does. It gives us everything we need for life and doctrine. In other words, it tells us everything we must believe and everything we must do. Not only to be saved, but to live a life pleasing to God. And not only does it tell us these things, it is our only infallible, objective guide for salvation and the Christian life. Remember in Sessions 2 and 3 we examined the answer to Question 3 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which states that the Bible “principally teaches, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” That is the same as saying it teaches us doctrine and life.

Marc Roby: Now I can hear some Christians objecting at this point, because they will say that God reveals to them directly, by his Holy Spirit, what they are to do.

Dr. Spencer: I believe that God *does* reveal things to his people by his Holy Spirit. But, the Holy Spirit is also the author of the Bible, and God cannot lie, and he cannot change or contradict himself. So, the subjective revelation that a Christian may get from the Holy Spirit must always be subservient to the objective Word of God.

If you think the Holy Spirit has revealed something to you that contradicts the Bible, then you are wrong. And we need this kind of objective standard, because we are all prone to misunderstanding the prompting of the Holy Spirit, or to thinking the Holy Spirit is speaking when, in fact, it is either our own sinful nature welling up, or a suggestion even of the devil. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 2:11 that “we are not unaware of [Satan’s] schemes”. In the Greek, the word the NIV translates here as “schemes”, and which the ESV and other versions translate as “devices” is *noama* (νόημα), and the root meaning is really “thoughts”. So, the verse could perhaps be better translated as “we are not unaware of Satan’s thoughts.” In other words, Satan puts thoughts into our minds. And we need some objective standard for distinguishing between our own sinful thoughts, the thoughts of Satan, and the thoughts the Holy Spirit brings to us.

Marc Roby: And the Bible is that objective standard.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is, which is why we have said a number of times in these podcasts that the Bible must be the ultimate standard of truth for a Christian. We can’t let our subjective experiences be the ultimate rule because they can simply be wrong. And there is no way for anyone else to help me if my subjective understanding is the ultimate standard. Suppose, for example, I tell you that God has spoken to me and told me that I should do something, if my subjective experience is the ultimate standard, then you can’t say much at that point. Who are you to contradict God? So, if you think I’m wrong, your only options would be to leave it alone or call me a liar. But, if I tell you that I think God spoke and told me to do something, you *can* speak to me if what I think God wants me to do is unbiblical. You can, and should, say to me, “Richard, I don’t think that is the Holy Spirit speaking. Let’s look at what the Holy Spirit said in the Scripture.”

Marc Roby: And I think we all need that kind of correction from time to time.

Dr. Spencer: We absolutely do. Which is why being a member of good church and having good Christian fellowship is so important.

Marc Roby: It reminds me of the apostle Paul rebuking and correcting Peter in Galatians 2:11.

Dr. Spencer: That is a great example. We aren't told the entire conversation, but I'm confident that if Peter didn't immediately recognize he was wrong and repent, Paul would have argued from the Scriptures to show him that he was wrong.

Marc Roby: Of course, the apostles had the advantage of having heard Jesus himself speak.

Dr. Spencer: That certainly was a great privilege. But, I think that in many ways we are far more privileged today.

Marc Roby: How so?

Dr. Spencer: Because God has provided us with a written record of all the words and deeds of Jesus that it is important for us to know about. We don't have to rely on our memories.

Marc Roby: That is certainly a good thing, especially as we get older!

Dr. Spencer: I agree. My memory is sometimes pretty bad. But, we have an even greater advantage because not only do we have the written record, we have nearly 2,000 years of scholarship and exhortations from godly men and women to help us understand and apply the Word of God, and to encourage us to hold firmly to the faith.

Marc Roby: That is a tremendous benefit indeed. And it is sometimes astounding, as well as humbling and edifying, to read the insights of some of the great saints of the past.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely true. But, I also want to point out that the Bible is not going to be properly understood by anyone unless and until that person is born again. What I mean by "properly understood" here is that the message is received and responded to with saving faith. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Marc Roby: That is so true.

Dr. Spencer: The fact that the Bible cannot be properly understood without the Holy Spirit working in us is why I said there was more to special revelation than just the Bible itself. Since the whole point of the term "special revelation" is to talk about what is needed for salvation and living the Christian life, we need to keep in mind this necessary work of the Holy Spirit even if we say that special revelation is the Bible, as is frequently done.

I think James Boice makes a good point in his wonderful book called *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. He writes that "special revelation has three stages. First, there is *redemption in history*. This centers in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He died in the place of sinners and rose as proof of their divine justification. Second, there is a *revelation in writing*. This is the Bible. God has provided interpretive records of what he has done for our redemption. Finally, there is the *application* of these truths to the mind and heart of the individual by the Holy Spirit.

As a result the individual is born again, receives the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior, and is enabled to follow him faithfully until life's end."⁵

Marc Roby: It is clear from my own experience that we need the Holy Spirit to apply the truths of the Bible to our own lives.

Dr. Spencer: My experience is the same. Not only must we be born again, we must also be walking in humble obedience and be filled with the Spirit or our reading of the Bible will not be as useful as it could be. God refuses to speak to someone who is sinning and refusing to repent. But, when we are right with God, his Holy Spirit causes the Bible to come alive. When we read it we see ourselves, and it brings us to repentance, greater faith, a deeper understanding of God, and a clearer understanding of what he wants us to do.

Marc Roby: I find it amazing how you can read a passage you've read many times before and yet, because of your different situation, God shows you something completely new and different in the passage.

Dr. Spencer: I've had the exact same experience. But, as I've been saying, this standard is an objective standard. And one of the things that means is that I'm not free to run off and go crazy with my subjective interpretations of what the Word of God says. That is part of the reason it is so important that this revelation be in written form. If I have misinterpreted it, I need to be able to sit down with someone and have him show me where I went wrong.

Marc Roby: That, of course, requires that we agree on how to read the Word of God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we must agree on how to properly read and understand the Word. The science of properly interpreting the Word of God is called Hermeneutics, and we will get into that in a later session. For now, I want to move on to mention four key characteristics of special revelation.

Marc Roby: What are those?

Dr. Spencer: They are sufficiency, necessity, authority and perspicuity.

Marc Roby: I'm sure at least some of our listeners are not familiar with the word perspicuity.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure you're right. Perspicuity means clarity. So, perhaps, we could say that the word perspicuity is not particularly perspicuous.

Marc Roby: Maybe it would be better not to have said that.

Dr. Spencer: Yeah, perhaps you're right. In any event, I thought it was important to at least introduce the term since it is used in theology and since the acronym you will sometimes hear for these four characteristics is SNAP, which stands for sufficiency, necessity, authority and

⁵ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 37

perspicuity. But, if you like, we can change the acronym to SNAC, standing for sufficiency, necessity, authority and clarity.

Marc Roby: Why are these terms so important?

Dr. Spencer: They are important because they tell us some very important things about the Word of God given to us in the Bible. First, it is sufficient, which of course begs the question, “Sufficient for what?” And the short answer is, that it provides sufficient information for salvation and as our guide for living. The Bible is also necessary, which again begs the same question, “Necessary for what?” And the short answer is also the same, it is necessary for salvation and a proper Christian life. There is only one way to be saved, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. But, the only place we learn who Christ is, what he did, and how we can be saved is the Bible. So, either a person has to read it for himself, or he has to be told what it says by someone sent to preach the gospel to him. Thirdly, the Bible is authoritative, which again begs the question, “Authoritative for what?” This time the answer is more comprehensive. The Bible is authoritative for everything it speaks about. As we have pointed out several times, it is a Christian’s ultimate authority. And, finally, we come to clarity, or using the old term, perspicuity. What this means is that the Bible is clear about those things for which it is necessary and sufficient. In other words, the basic message of salvation and how to live a life pleasing to God is clear. You don’t need a degree in theology, nor do you need to be exceptionally bright in order to understand the basic message of the Bible. A child is able to understand it sufficiently to be saved.

Marc Roby: But, of course, there is so much more there as well. Even a very intelligent and learned person can spend a lifetime studying the Word of God and never fully plumb the depths.

Dr. Spencer: That is certainly true. There is always more that we can learn about from the Word of God.

Marc Roby: I look forward to exploring the Word of God further, but we are out of time for today. I want to close by reminding and encouraging our listeners to send their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.