

Comparison with Biblical Theology:

While BT is concerned with the storyline, ST is concerned with the bottom line. (Michael Lawrence)

Defining Systematic Theology:

ST: “the attempt to summarize in an orderly and comprehensive manner what the whole Bible has to say about any given topic.” (Lawrence)

- Take all that’s said on a topic in the Bible and
  - Collect it
  - Collate it
  - Relate it
  - Comprehensively summarize it

In terms of our tree, ST is both the culmination, at the top of the tree trunk, of everything we’ve done so far, but also the grounding or foundation from which all the ministry disciplines

Culmination – also *synthesis* - synthesizing key themes from the entire Bible

ST helps us answer the question: *What do we believe* about...?

- Sin
- Who God is
- Christ
- Salvation, etc.

Comprehensive –

- everything that Scripture teaches that is relevant on the main themes/questions present

Andrew Fuller: “strongly advocated the systematization of doctrine in order that the Christian might understand the ‘various connections in which acknowledged truths are introduced in the Scriptures, and the practical purposes to which they are there actually applied.’” (quotation from Tom Nettles)

“ST is the attempt to organize all Christian doctrines in a logical order.” (Gerald Bray)

- Today, the normal order is to start with the doctrine of Scripture, then move into the doctrine of God, and go from there (doctrine of man, doctrine of Christ and the Holy Spirit, doctrine of salvation, doctrine the church, doctrine of last things)
- ST “seeks to formulate these summaries into precise and accurate doctrines that define the boundaries between truth and error, between orthodoxy (right belief) and heresy.” (Lawrence)
  - i. Orthopraxy (right practice) can only arise out of orthodoxy (right belief)

History:

This has been going on since the earliest days of the church. We see the roots of ST in the early creeds. It continued to develop through the Middle Ages, esp. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*).

Reformation led to an increase in the exercise of compiling STs.

- Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559 version is the “definitive” version)
- Creeds – WCF (1646) and 2LBCF (1689)

- Charles Hodge (1870s) – Reformed
- John L. Dagg (1850s) and James P. Boyce (1887) – American Reformed (Southern) Baptists
- Louis Berkhof (1939) – Dutch-American Reformed
- Lewis Sperry Chafer (1947) – Dispensational
- Modern proliferation of ST works:
  - Michael Horton, John Frame, Robert Reymond, Millard Erickson, Gerald Bray, Douglas Kelly
  - Wayne Grudem – incredibly popular, especially because of its accessibility
  - Stephen Wellum – in progress; with categories derived by BT

Leads to the obvious question: *Why so many systematic theologies????*

Answer:

1. Different ways of reading the Bible will lead to different ways of relating and summarizing all the doctrines (dispensational vs. covenantal; baptist vs. paedobaptist; relates to our BT).
2. ST attempts something else BT doesn't: show the current contemporary relevance of that particular understanding

- ST attempts to pull together comprehensively what the Bible teaches but also in light of a particular setting or contemporary or cultural context
- The early creeds responded to the pressing doctrinal issues of the day – they addressed what needed to be addressed at the time; likewise, the Doctrines of Grace were a direct response out of the Synod of Dort to “The Remonstrance,” a document by “The Remonstrants” (followers of Jacob Arminius) in which they outlined how they disagreed with Calvin on the doctrine of salvation.
- Examples (more recent):
  - STs in the past ~200 years needed to start addressing the question of evolution (and related issues). Before then, it was not much of an issue that needed addressing by the church within that culture
  - past ~20-40 years: more explicit issues of human sexuality and homosexuality, clarifying the institution of marriage, etc.
  - past ~5-10 years: transgender issues (manhood-womanhood), racial justice (“woke” theology), etc.
    - church statements of faith can often be thought of as a mini-ST
- the surrounding culture changes with location and time. Therefore the issues that ST addresses must flow with the hot-button cultural issues of the time that the church needs to speak into.
  - It's not that our theology needs to change with the culture, rather...
  - what issues the church addresses directly change with the issues arising within the culture; therefore the theology must clearly address new issues as they come up

Summarizing comparison by Lawrence: “Biblical theology is how we read the Bible. Systematic theology is how the story of the Bible is shown to be normative in our lives.” Understand in order to apply.

Example:

James 2:24 – “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Romans 3:28 – “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

How does ST help us with this apparent contradiction?

Go back to the beginning – doctrine of the Word of God/(& canon) and doctrine of God  
[the following truths are not just attestations of man, but come directly out of God’s Word]

- The Word of God – “God-breathed,” inerrant, infallible, a revelation directly from God to His creation
- God – He never lies; not the author of confusion → there is no contradiction between James and Paul
- Order of salvation (*ordo salutis*)
  - God’s decree
  - Predestination
  - Election
  - Outward call
  - Effectual (inward) call / **Regeneration** / New Birth
  - Conversion
    - **Saving Faith**
    - **Repentance**
  - **Justification**
  - Adoption
  - Sanctification
  - Perseverance
  - Death
  - Glorification
- If saving faith comes before regeneration, then it would be valid to say that we are justified by some combination of faith and works, because our saving faith would be something the believer could boast about, and thus a work. But boasting “is excluded” (Rom 3:27 and Eph. 2:8-9).
  - There’s more to the argument  
e.g., repentance is also a gift along with saving faith (2 Tim 2:25)
- By our doctrine, derived from the Word, we know neither scriptural author is wrong. Now what?
- Look at the context of the passages
  - Paul uses the word “justification” in these passages to speak about a person’s justification before God
  - James writes about justification before other people
    - hence the example of Abraham and what James quotes – Gen 15:6, which occurred before binding of Isaac (Gen 22)

None of these doctrines are blind assertions, but are built upon and arise out of the Word itself.

Practical outworkings of this example:

- our justification before God is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, but a true saving faith will always be accompanied by works that demonstrate the presence of that faith.

Suggested Reading: Michael Lawrence. *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*. [Has an outstanding chapter on the difference between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology]