

THINK BIBLICALLY

Lesson 1: The Canon

Systematic Theology

This new series is as an introduction to systematic theology. Theologian Wayne Grudem defines systematic theology as "any study that answers the questions, 'What does the whole Bible teach us today?' About any given topic." Every Christians engages in systematic theology regardless of whether they realize it. We may express belief in a triune God or say things like, "The Bible teaches salvation by faith alone in Christ alone." These are statements about what the whole of the Bible teaches. There are two keys to developing our systematic theology. First, it is a process that must consider all available Biblical data. Therefore, as we continue studying the Bible and learning new things, we should expect and be willing to make adjustments to what we believe. Second, and as a corollary to the first, we must avoid putting the cart before the horse. Systematic theology must follow rigorous study of individual books of the Bible. If we determine our systematic theology first, then when we study the Bible we will only find what we expected.

1. **The Canon:** Before we can develop a systematic theology, it is imperative we know which writings should be in the Bible. By **canon** we mean the list of all books or writings that properly belong in the Bible.

2. **The Old Testament Canon:** The OT canon began with the Ten Commandments (Ex. 31:18, 32:16), then the writing of the Torah by Moses (e.g., Deut. 31:24-26; Ex. 24:4, 34:27; Num. 33:2). Other writers continued as God directed. (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:25; 1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 20:34; Jer. 30:2) Jesus generally affirmed the OT canon (Luke 24:44). In AD 95, the Jewish history Josephus affirmed the books of the OT canon.

3. **The New Testament Canon:** The New Testament canon primarily includes the writings of the apostles, who were promised empowerment for this role. (John 14:26, 16:13-14)

— The apostles recognized they were writing Scripture. (2 Peter 3:2; 1 Cor. 2:9-13, 14:37; 2 Cor. 13:3; 1 Thes. 2:13, 5:27)

— Note especially 2 Peter 3:15-16 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18 (where Paul quotes Deut. 25:4 AND Luke 10:7)

— The early church accepted the authentic writings of the apostles as part of the canon, and if we accept the traditional understanding of who authored these books, then the canon surely includes Matthew, John, Romans to Philemon, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation

— This leaves 5 books, Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, and Jude, and these were accepted by the early church because of their affiliation with the apostles or with James

— It is likely the apostles themselves gave guidance to the churches concerning preserving writings as Scriptures (see Col. 4:16; 2 Thess. 3:14; 2 Peter 3:16)

— The KEY to being in the canon is divine authorship (through human authors), and if the early church, under direction of the apostles, preserved a writing as Scripture then it belongs in the canon. We should recognize God's hand in this process as part of his redemptive history.

— AD 367, the Thirty-Ninth Paschal Letter of Athanasius contained a list of all 27 NT books (eastern churches), and in AD 397 the Council of Carthage, representing the west, agreed on the same list

— Should we expect more books to be added? See Hebrews 1:1-2 and Revelation 22:18-19

— What about books left out like the Gospel of Thomas?