

Classification of Reference Books for Bible Study

by

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Systematic Theologies

Definition

Somehow "theology" has become a pejorative term in many churches. The etymology of the word is quite simple: the study or science of God. Historically, therefore, theology has been called the "queen of the sciences." To disparage the study of theology, then, is yet another indicator of the shallowness of contemporary Christianity. Robert Culver in his book, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, writes as follows:

One may rightly say Christian theology is the study or organized treatment of the topic, God, from the standpoint of Christianity. To leave the matter there, however, would be grossly misleading, for theology is not merely an interpretation of the meaning of God from the outside; theology is a part or aspect of Christianity itself. On a deeper level, theology is the essence of Christianity. It is so much the essence that to dispense with theology is to dispense with Christianity.

Before defining "systematic theology," it is helpful to introduce a few other terms. Again to quote Culver:

When what the church teaches is announced as it emerges portion by portion from the Bible, the discourse is properly called EXPOSITION. The process of exploring the texts and bringing out the meaning in preparation for exposition is EXEGESIS. Particular teachings are DOCTRINES . . . When these doctrines are organized in some logically coherent arrangement, there is systematic theology.

Therefore, the following would be a simple way to define systematic theology:

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: a topical study and exploration of the teachings or major themes of the Bible.

Systematic theology is often distinguished from BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, which traces the major themes of the Bible chronologically through the books of the Bible.

The major divisions of systematic theology are these:

- Bibliology: the study of the doctrine of revelation and inspiration of Scripture
- Theology proper: the study of the doctrine of God (his nature and attributes)
- Anthropology: the study of the doctrine of man (his creation and nature)
- Hamartiology: the study of the doctrine of sin (its origin and effects)
- Christology: the study of the doctrine of Jesus Christ (his person and work)
- Soteriology: the study of the doctrine of salvation (accomplished and applied)
- Ecclesiology: the study of the doctrine of the church (definition, ordinances, and polity)

- Eschatology: the study of the doctrine of last things (personal and general)

A serious student of the Bible should have at least two or three books on systematic theology.

Examples

Conservative:

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Reformed)
 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dispensational)
 Robert Lewis Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Reformed)
 Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*
 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*
 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Reformed)
 Francis Pieper, *Church Dogmatics* (Lutheran)
 William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*
 Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Baptist)

Neo-orthodox:

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*

Liberal:

Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*

Early works in theology:

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Roman Catholic)
 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Commentaries

Definition

Commentaries are verse-by-verse, exegetical studies of individual books of the Bible. Sometimes a publishing company publishes a series of commentaries. A Christian's goal should be to have at least one commentary on every book of the Bible.

Examples

Series:

Frank E. Gaebelein, editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 volumes).
 Gordon D. Fee, editor, *New International Commentary* (NT, 18 volumes)
 Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., editor, *New International Commentary* (OT, 22 volumes)

Individual:

H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*
John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*
Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*

Introductions

Definition

"Introductions" to the Bible, the Old Testament, or the New Testament are not quite what you would think. They are specific and technical but essential to a thorough understanding of the Bible.

An introduction deals with the specifics of the following issues regarding each book in the Bible: author, date of writing, historical background at the time of writing, purpose or theme of the book, and a brief overview of the contents. The following examples should be in every Christian's library.

Examples

Zahn, Theodor, *Introduction to the New Testament*
Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*
D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, *Introduction to the New Testament*
Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*

Surveys

Definition

"Surveys" of the Bible, the Old Testament, or the New Testament are similar to introductions with an important difference. While they might touch on matters of introduction to the books (authorship, dates, etc.), their main emphasis is to give a rather comprehensive summary of the contents of each book.

Examples

Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*
Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*

Encyclopedias and Dictionaries

Definition

These are generally large, multi-volume works. At least one set should be in the library of every Christian serious about learning the Bible.

Examples

Geoffrey W. Bromiley, editor, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (4 volumes).
Merrill C. Tenney, editor, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (5 volumes).

Concordances

Definition

An exhaustive concordance is an alphabetical list of every word used in the Bible with every reference where each word is used. An English concordance is based on a specific translation of the Bible. There are concordances based on the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, but productive use of these generally requires a knowledge of the original languages.

Examples

KJV: *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*

NASB: *The Strongest NASB Exhaustive Concordance*

NIV: *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance*

Church History

Definition

Books on church history are similar to other history textbooks. However, it is most important for Christian to have at least a cursory knowledge of the history of the church. The classic work in this area is the eight-volume set by Philip Schaff.

Examples

Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (8 volumes)

Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 volumes)