

From Acorn to Oak
An Introduction to the Very Practical Historic Christian Systematic Theology
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What follows in this part of my Web site, From Acorn to Oak, is a study with the same title of the six main themes or doctrines in historic Christian systematic theology. The focus is on how practical this theology is. Through the centuries erudite theologians have added to these doctrines until many writings have become so complicated and obfuscated with multisyllabic disciplinary jargon that even other theologians have had to read a paragraph at least two or three times before being able to understand what was said.

What then is further overshadowed if not lost is how practical historic Christian theology is. My purpose as a pastor, theologian, and educator is to offer a basic overview and explanation of the key points of this theology for church members no matter what their background is so that Christians, and others who are interested, can find riches and profound truths of God's Word at whatever level they are reading, whether it's the entry level of one who is just getting started in reading theology, or the wise older Christian who has walked with the Lord for many decades, or someone in between on this continuum of theological comprehension. Thus the purpose of this part of the Web site is to explain briefly the doctrines and then draw some of the exciting practical applications of each doctrine for all ages and stages of maturing in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

We need to know the six main doctrines of historic Christian systematic theology.

The six main themes are the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of salvation (also called the application of redemption, with a major emphasis on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit), the doctrine of the church, and the doctrine of eschatology. Each major and historic Christian denomination in its statement of belief typically holds to these six doctrines, and in their logical order, though some denominations have certain distinctive concepts that differ from others within some of the doctrines.

These six doctrines constitute the six major themes that recur throughout the Bible and how they relate to and connect with each other. In historic Christian systematic theology each doctrine is a statement of all that the Bible teaches pertaining to that doctrine. Thus, the doctrine of God is an explanation organized by subtopics of all that the Bible teaches about God. In the essays that follow I base what I say not on my opinion but on the teaching of the historic Christian church concerning the interpretation of the applicable Bible passages.

You should keep in mind that the word theology is used in two related but different senses. The word theology is formed from two Greek words, *theos* (God) and *logos* (word, study). Thus, theology is words about and the study of God, as described briefly in the preceding paragraph. Yet, since all true and accurate theology is drawn from and based on God's Word, including all that he says about mankind (anthropology), Jesus Christ (Christology), the application of Christ's redemption (soteriology > Greek *soter* = to save + *logos*), ecclesiology (the church), and

eschatology (the last things, the end of life and history), therefore all these subjects together are referred to as theology in the broader sense.

Theology is very important. It is a type of Bible study but more by subject. I'm always the first one to advocate traditional Bible study, but under the best of conditions (e.g., an exceptional leader using outstanding print and sometimes audio-visual materials and in a pleasant location with few distractions), still if people only study, let's say, Isaiah in the fall, Luke in the winter, Ephesians in the spring, Psalms in the summer, to use an analogy they'll have a very good understanding of a particular tree but won't have a clue as to where in the forest they are.

Systematic theology helps people understand the basic message of the Bible, its overall flow, and how all the pieces fit together in an organized whole. Therefore, when reading, studying, memorizing, and/or meditating on a passage in the Bible, one knows where he or she is in the context of the whole Bible, which is God's progressive unfolding of his plan of redeeming his creation from the tragic and far-reaching effects of Adam's and Eve's disobedience to God. He or she sees how the rest of Scripture informs and interacts with the passage or book being focused on.

With this understanding a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ has a much more satisfying comprehension of God's Word and the basis for a stronger and more helpful faith. The six themes are logically interconnected and provide an easy-to-remember way to understand the main teaching of the Bible that is very helpful also in listening to sermons in church, attending classes, preparing to teach a lesson, and explaining to others what he or she believes and why.

Briefly, what are the six main doctrines of historic Christian systematic theology and how do they fit together?

As a theologian, I'd like to briefly review the six doctrines and key components of each that we'll look at more closely and fully in the pages and chapters throughout this book. Far from obtuse esoteric philosophy, notice how eminently practical and helpful is our theology. The components of each doctrine include, but of course are not limited to, the following:

1. **Theology** is a study of all the Bible teaches about God, including who he is (e.g., triune, sovereign, personal, transcendent and immanent), what he is like, and how he is involved with his creation and the goodness it had when he made it out of nothing. Theology includes what the Bible teaches about God's character, that while he is essentially love to the core of his being, that love issues forth in his other characteristics or attributes, including being Most Holy, righteous, and just. The Bible explains what those qualities of God's essence are like and their significance to his creation, including to us.
2. **Anthropology** is a study of all the Bible teaches about mankind, including who we are and what we are like, that God created human beings in his image (and what that means) and that the first humans were good, but that they disobeyed God, ignoring his warning of what would occur if they did, resulting in a total corruption of human nature issuing in a disastrously destructive four-fold

disharmony: between oneself and God; within oneself; with and among other human beings; and throughout God's creation, such that all creation groans in travail. (Romans 8:22) In this study of Biblical anthropology very practical implications and applications will be discussed. Thus sinful mankind is separated from God who is most holy, but because God is also love to the core of his being (1 John 4:8) he is unwilling to destroy the crown of his creation. How does he bring people into his holy presence without compromising his integrity? We see how in Christology.

3. **Christology** shows how the whole Bible is God's progressive plan of saving sinful human beings who are unworthy to be in his presence and how that plan points to and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Christology engages all God's Word teaches about who Jesus Christ is (e.g., the only-begotten Son of the Father, thus the Second Person of the triune God, that he has two natures, being 100% human and at the same time 100% divine, thus with pure love coming from the core of his being); what he is like (e.g., that he did not sin and kept the entire law of God perfectly and that he loves and died for all people, but that his death is efficacious only for those who truly believe in him); what he came to do (e.g., how he is God's only provision for reconnecting humans with God, that his righteousness is credited to those who believe in and follow him); and that he is coming again to complete God's plan of redemption for all creation. Christ's sovereign power is sufficient to transform the life of any sinner; Christ's sovereign power can pull any human being out of any condition. Christ Jesus has defeated Satan and bound him so he is powerless to stop the spread of the Gospel through all nations and to all people whom God wills to be in his Kingdom. Salvation is available to all who believe in and follow Jesus Christ.
4. **Soteriology** is a study of all the Bible teaches about how the redemption Christ provides is applied to and becomes operational in human beings. Soteriology explains the process of salvation (> Greek, *soter* = to save), including the application of Christ's work in the lives of individual people by the operation of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the triune God (e.g., providing the regeneration, new birth in Christ that brings a human being out of death into eternal life and helping the believer grow in sanctification, i.e., becoming holy and maturing in Christ-likeness), and the Spirit's provision of specific gifts for and fruit of ministry that glorifies God and accomplishes his purposes. Part of what this means for those who've been struggling with any sin is that they have a new nature; the old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17) including a new identity and freedom in the power of the risen and reigning Christ! This doesn't mean for any of us that we instantly become all we should be; sanctification is both positional and progressive. Belief in Christ Jesus as our Savior and Lord places us in a new position, holy to God, but we need to develop in that holy state in cooperation with the Holy Spirit in a life-long maturation process in Christ. Is it easy? Not always. Is it possible? Yes with God's help! He helps us directly through his Holy Spirit, and also through his church.

5. **Ecclesiology** is the study of all the Bible teaches about the church (> Greek: *ekklesia* = church > *ek* [out of] + *kaleo* [to call]), those saved individuals who are called out by God and gathered together as his church whom he will employ as the main means through whom he will work to accomplish his redemption of his creation. The church is both an organism, the body of Christ consisting of his believers united in and called to serve God, and an organization, as the many individuals organize to accomplish with planned purpose what they could not do individually. Through worship, learning, and nurture the church grows more Christ-like and serves the Lord ever more effectively in the mission God has given it to bring the Good News of redemption and reconciliation with God to every nation, tribe, people, and language, for it is God's will that all come into his Kingdom. (Revelation 7:7; 1 Timothy 2:4)

6. **Eschatology** informs us of all the Bible teaches about the end (> Greek: *eschaton*, last), involving several main categories, including inaugurated and future, individual and corporate, i.e., the latter referring to a human being's own personal end (specifically what occurs when he or she dies) and the end of history (specifically what occurs at the end of time when Jesus' returns in his Second Coming)? This subject is important for many reasons, including first of all because it's part of God's Word and that a key aspect of this doctrine for everyone is *hope*. A study of the Biblical teaching in eschatology is primarily about the great hope we have in Christ, and it's not entirely a future hope but one that is already being experienced in part, resulting in what theologian Anthony Hoekema calls "an inaugurated eschatology,"¹ indicating that some aspects of the Kingdom of God (cf. Luke 17:21) and the end times are already here, blessings currently being enjoyed by the redeemed community in Christ, but not yet in their fullest, the completion of which is yet to come.

While this doctrine is often considered last, it is not an afterthought or a peripheral or less important concept as is often maintained by many people who focus only on certain parts of this teaching of the Bible. The first indication of the essence of eschatology, and that it's a major doctrine and theme throughout God's Word, is already found in Genesis 3:15, when God in judging Satan reveals in rudimentary form his plan in Jesus Christ to undo the tragic effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Genesis 1-3 is the preface of the Bible and essential for understanding all the rest of God's Word. Everything following chapter three is an explanation of the unfolding of God's plan to redeem and renew his creation, culminating with Revelation 21-22.

As Hoekema and fellow theologian Jurgen Moltmann have observed, eschatology is at the core of Christian theology and the plan of God's redemption and renewal of his creation. In his classic text, *The Bible and the Future*, Hoekema writes,

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, pp. ix, 1, 17-18, 126-127.

PROPERLY TO UNDERSTAND BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY,
WE must see it as an integral aspect of all of biblical revelation.
Eschatology must not be thought of as something which is found
only in, say, such Bible books as Daniel and Revelation, but as
dominating and permeating the entire message of the Bible.”²
[Emphasis his]

Hoekema then quotes Moltmann as follows:

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of the Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set...Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, and of every Christian existence and of the whole Church.³

As the outstanding New Testament scholar, William Hendriksen emphasizes in his excellent commentary on the Book of Revelation, *More than Conquerors*, which contains the theme of Revelation in its title, the Apocalypse was written to give hope to the heavily persecuted church at the end of the first century. Writing under guard as a political prisoner on the island of Patmos where he was sent in 95 A.D., the Holy Spirit led the apostle John to write to the church that was being severely oppressed by the vicious Roman Emperor, Domitian.

John wrote Jesus as telling the church to be and remain faithful, to loyally, steadfastly, and resolutely oppose the demands of emperor worship and the other evil from Satan and his followers. To get that message past the Roman guards and across the Aegean Sea to the mainland, he had to write in cryptic language, the meaning of which was well known among God’s people at least since the time of Daniel but viewed as gobbledygook to the Roman censors. Hendriksen says the theme of the book “is the victory of Christ and of His Church over the dragon (Satan) and his helpers. The Apocalypse is meant to show us that things are not what they *seem*.”⁴ [Emphasis Hendriksen’s] The theme in the text itself is seen throughout the book but nowhere clearer than in 17:14, “They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.”

What great comfort to the church undergoing such horrific persecution! What great comfort to those today experiencing martyrdom in many places throughout the world

² Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 3.

³ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 16 quoted in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 3.

⁴ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, p. 8.

today. What great comfort and hope for homosexuals and people struggling with SSA, longing to be free from enslavement to demonic and human abusers, passions, lusts, diseases, violence, and other dangers!

Virtually all Christian denominations adhere to these six doctrines and present them in the systematic presentation which shows their logical progression and interconnection in a framework that is easily understood and explained in many ministry settings, such as teaching, preaching, and in a witness for Jesus Christ, though each church will also include its denominational distinctives within the six main themes. Even churches that place minimal emphasis on the intellectual and written articulation of Biblical doctrine, preferring to emphasize the heartfelt affective dimensions of God's Word and their application, still explain the great truths of Scripture including these six main themes in their logical progression.

We must be able to explain why we believe.

Before we begin our study of these six key doctrines of historic Christian systematic theology and their practical implications and applications, we should prepare to answer what is called in the field of philosophy the epistemological question, i.e., how do you know? Epistemology is a study of the quest for a valid, reliable, and trustworthy rationale for what one believes about a particular subject. In daily life on the street the epistemological question typically appears in such words as: "How do you know that's true?"

God tells us through the apostle Peter we should prepare to hear the epistemological question pertaining to our faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed we not only expect to hear that question, we hope to hear it, for it gives us an opportunity, an invitation, an open door, to be Christ's witnesses that is at the heart of our calling from God to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole world. Let us not fail to prepare to walk through that door in confidence and in love.

For Christians the epistemological question comes in the form of the query the apostle Peter tells us to be ready to address. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..." (1 Peter 3:15 NIV) The Greek word translated by the NIV, "give an answer" is *ἀπολογία* *apologia*, a defense, as in the NASB translation of this verse. This word and concept is the basis for the study in historic Christian theology called apologetics, thus the process of defending the Bible.

All of us therefore need to be able to make such a defense when asked and to do so with gentleness and respect. We need to be able to explain why someone should believe the Bible is God's Word and why it is true and trustworthy. If not already, we will be called upon to make such an explanation in our conversations with others, in our witness for Christ, in classes we teach, and in other ways.

As Christians we should welcome that question. It's a question that should be asked by everyone. Raising that question of false religions frequently indicates to the adherent of such a religion that it cannot be defended, whether he or she admits it or not. We Christians on the other hand should thank the person for asking and then roll up our sleeves and say, "I'm glad you asked; let's explore why I'm persuaded that God's Word, the Bible, is true and trustworthy.

In addition to being interested in this question ourselves, since we may be asked why we believe any of these six doctrines, and since the six doctrines are all based on the Bible, we need to be able to explain why we believe the Bible is true and why people can depend on it. Therefore, we should now turn to what in Christian theology is called the prolegomena, the prefatory words providing the basis for and defense of what follows. We gladly do so not only for our own edification but also as a means of how we can effectively make this explanation to others in our important service for the triune God whom we love and who has called us to be holy to him and to serve him.