

THE TASK AND METHOD OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Benjamin B. Warfield

Benjamin Warfield's explanation of systematic theology's role in organizing knowledge of God, addressing sources of theological knowledge and the discipline's relationship to other theological sciences.

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The Task and Method of Systematic Theology Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921) BY "Systematic Theology" is meant that department or section of theological science which is concerned with setting forth systematically, that is to say, as a concatenated whole, what is known concerning God. Other departments or sections of theological science undertake other tasks. Whether such a being as God exists needs to be ascertained, and if such a being exists, whether He is knowable; whether such creatures as men are capable of knowing Him, and, if so, what sources of information concerning Him are accessible. This is the task of apologetical theology. These matters being determined, it is necessary to draw out from the sources of information concerning God which are accessible to us, all that can be known of God. This is the task of exegetical theology. A critical survey of previous attempts to draw from the sources of information concerning God what may be known of God, with an estimate of the results of these attempts and of their testing in life, is next incumbent on us. This is the task of historical theology. Finally we must inquire into the use of this knowledge of God and the ways in which it may be best applied to human needs. This is the task of practical theology. Among these various departments or sections of theological science there is obviously place for, or rather there is positively demanded, yet another, the task of which is to set forth in systematic formulation the results of the investigations of exegetical theology, clarified and enforced by the investigations of historical theology, which are to be applied by practical theology to the needs of man. Here the warrant of systematic theology, its task, and its encyclopedic place are at once exhibited. It is the business of systematic theology to take the knowledge of God supplied to it by apologetical, exegetical, and historical theology, scrutinize it with a view to discovering the inner relations of its several elements, and set it forth in a systematic presentation, that is to say, as an organic whole, so that it may be grasped and held in its entirety, in the due relation of its parts to one another and to the whole, and with a just distribution of emphasis among the several items of knowledge which combine to make up the totality of our knowledge of God.

It is clear at once that "systematic theology" forms the central, or perhaps we may better say the culminating, department of theological science. It is the goal to which apologetical, exegetical, and historical theology lead up; and it provides the matter which practical theology employs. What is most important in the knowledge of God - which is what theology is - is, of course, just the knowledge of God; and that is what systematic theology sets forth. Apologetical theology puts us in the way of obtaining knowledge of God. Exegetical theology gives us this knowledge in its disjecta membra. Historical theology makes us aware how it has been apprehended and transmuted into life. Practical theology teaches us how to propagate it in the world. It is systematic theology which spreads it before us in the form most accessible to our modes of conception, pours it, so to speak, into the molds of our minds, and makes it our assured possession that we may thoroughly understand and utilize it. There is nothing strange, therefore, in the common manner of speech by which systematic theology absorbs into itself all theology. In point of fact, theology, as the science of God, comes to itself only in systematic theology; and if we set systematic theology

over against other theological disciplines as a separable department of theological science, this is not that we divide the knowledge of God up among these departments, retaining only some of it - perhaps a small or a relatively unimportant portion - for systematic theology; but only that we trace the process by which the knowledge of God is ascertained, clarified, and ordered, up through the several stages of the dealing of the human mind with it until at last, in systematic theology, it stands before our eyes in complete formulation. The choice of the term "systematic theology" to designate this department of theological science has been made the occasion of some criticism, and its employment has been accompanied by some abuse. It is, no doubt, capable of being misunderstood and misused, as what term is not? It ought to be unnecessary to explain that its employment is not intended to imply that other departments of theological science are prosecuted in an unsystematic manner, that is to say, in a disorderly way and to no safe results. Nor ought it to be necessary to protest against advantage being taken of the breadth of the term "systematic," in its popular usage, to subsume under it a series of incongruous disciplines which have nothing in common except that they are all systematically pursued. What the term naturally designates is that department of theological science in which the knowledge of God is presented as a concatenated system of truth; and it is not merely the natural but the perfectly explicit and probably the best designation of this department of theological science. At all events none of its synonyms which have from time to time been in use - such as theoretical, thetical, methodical, scholastic, didactic, dogmatic theology - seems to possess any advantage over it. The most commonly employed of these synonyms, since its introduction by Lucas Friedrich Reinhard in his "Synopsis theologiae dogmaticae," 1660, has been "dogmatic theology." This designation differs from "systematic theology" by laying stress upon the authority which attaches to the several doctrines brought together in the presentation, rather than upon the presentation of them in a system. A dogma is, briefly, an established truth, authoritative and not to be disputed. The ground of its authoritativeness is indifferent to the term itself, and will vary with the point of view of the dogmatician. The Romanist will find it in the decrees of the Church, by which the several dogmas are established. The Protestant will find it in the declarations of Scripture: "Verbum Dei," say the Smalkald Articles, "condit articulos fidei, et praeterea nemo, ne angelus quidem." "Moderns" will attenuate it into whatever general considerations exist to commend the propositions in question to our credit, and will not pause until they have transmuted dogmas into - to put it shortly - just our "religious beliefs." "A dogma," says Dr. A. J. Headlam, "means a truth to be believed"; and it is the task of dogmatics, according to him, "to investigate, to expound, and to systematize those truths about God and human destiny, whether derived from nature or revelation, which should be believed" - a definition which, if taken literally, might seem to imply that there are some "truths" about God and human destiny - whether derived from nature or from revelation - which should not be believed. This ambiguity in the connotation of the term "dogma" is fatal to the usefulness of its derivative "dogmatic" as a designation of a department of theological science. It undertakes to tell us nothing of the department to which it is applied but the nature of the elements with which it deals; and it leaves us in uncertainty what the nature of these elements is, whether established truths or only "religious beliefs."

"Systematic theology" is attended with no such drawbacks. It properly describes the department to which it is attached, according to its own nature: it is the department in which the truths concerning God, given to us by the other departments of theological science, are systematized and presented in their proper relations to one another and to the whole of which they form parts. The authority of

the truths with which it deals does not constitute its peculiarity as a department of theological science. These truths were just as authoritative as presented by exegetical theology one by one to our separate consideration, as when presented by systematic theology to our view in their concatenation with one another into a consistent whole. Their authority was not bestowed on them by their systematization; and they do not wait until presented by systematic theology to acquire authority. What constitutes the peculiarity of this department of theological science is that in it these truths are presented not one by one in isolation, but in a mutually related body - in a system. What more truly descriptive name for it could be invented than just "systematic theology"?

There are some, no doubt, to whom it may seem presumptuous to attempt to systematize our knowledge of God. If we possess any knowledge of God at all, however, the attempt to systematize it is a necessity of the human spirit. If we know so much as two facts concerning God, the human mind is incapable of holding these facts apart; it must contemplate them in relation to one another. Systematization is only a part of the irrepressible effort of the intelligence to comprehend the facts presented to it, an effort which the intelligence can escape only by ceasing to be intelligence. It may systematize well, or ill; but systematize it must whenever it holds together, in its unitary grasp, more facts than one. Wherever God is in any degree known by a being of a systematically working mind, therefore, there is a theology in the express sense of that word, that is, a "systematic theology." Only the atheist or the agnostic on the one side, the idiot or the lunatic on the other, can be without such a theology. If there is a God; if anything whatever is known of this God; if the being possessing this knowledge is capable of orderly thought - a theology in this sense is inevitable. It is but the reflection in the orderly working intelligence of God perceived as such; and it exists, therefore, wherever God is perceived and recognized. Doubt and hesitation before the task of systematizing our knowledge of God - be that knowledge great or small - is therefore not an effect of reverence, but an outgrowth of that agnostic temper which lurks behind much modern thinking. The leaven of agnosticism underlying much of modern thought to which allusion has just been made, manifests itself more distinctly in the continuous attempt, which is more or less deliberately made, to shift the object of the knowledge which systematic theology systematizes from God to something else, deemed more capable of being really known by or more accessible to such beings as men. Theology, *ex vi verbi*, is the systematized knowledge of God; and if God exists and any knowledge of Him whatever is accessible to us, there must be such a thing as a systematic knowledge of Him, and it would seem that this would be the proper connotation of the term "theology." Nevertheless, we are repeatedly being told that theology is not the science of God, its object-matter being God in His existence and activities, but the science of religion or of faith, its object-matter being the religious phenomena manifested by humanity at large, or observable in the souls of believers. A whole generation of theologians, having the courage of their convictions, accordingly almost ceased to speak of "systematic theology," preferring some such name as the "science of faith" (*Glaubenslehre*). It was Schleiermacher, of course, who gave this subjective twist to what he still spoke of as "Dogmatics." Dogmas to him were no longer authoritative propositions concerning God, but "conceptions of the states of the Christian religious consciousness, set forth in formal statement"; and dogmatics was to him accordingly nothing more than the systematic presentation of the body of such dogmas in vogue in any given church at any given time. Accordingly he classified it frankly, along with "Church Statistics," under the caption of "The Historical Knowledge of the Present Situation of the Church." Undoubtedly it is very desirable to know what the Church at large, or any particular

branch of the Church, believes at any given stage of its development. But this helps us to a better knowledge of the Church, not of God; and by what right the formulated results of such a historical inquiry can be called "dogmatics" or "systematic theology" simpliciter and not rather, historically, "the dogmatic system of the German Lutheran Church in the year 1821," or "the doctrinal belief of the American Baptists of 1910," it would be difficult to explain. The matter is not in principle altered if the end set before us is to delineate, not the doctrinal beliefs of a particular church at a particular time, but the religious conceptions of humanity at large. We are still moving in the region of history, and the results of our researches will be that we shall know better, not God, but man - man in his religious nature and in the products of his religious activities. After all, the science of religion is something radically different from systematic theology. We cannot thus lightly renounce the knowledge of the most important object of knowledge in the whole compass of knowledge. Over against the world and all that is in the world, including man and all that is in man, and all that is the product of man's highest activities, intellectual and, in the noblest sense the word may bear, spiritual, there after all stands God; and He - He Himself, not our thought about Him or our beliefs concerning Him, but He Himself - is the object of our highest knowledge. And to know Him is not merely the highest exercise of the human intellect; it is the indispensable complement of the circle of human science, which, without the knowledge of God, is fatally incomplete. It was not without reason that Augustine renounced the knowledge of all else but God and the soul; and that Calvin declares the knowledge of God and ourselves the sum of all useful knowledge. Without the knowledge of God it is not too much to say we know nothing rightly, so that the renunciation of the knowledge of God carries with it renunciation of all right knowledge. It is this knowledge of God which is designated by the appropriate term "theology," and it, as the science of God, stands over against all other sciences, each having its own object, determining for each its own peculiar subject-matter.

Theology being, thus, the systematized knowledge of God, the determining question which divides theologies concerns the sources from which this knowledge of God is derived. It may be agreed, indeed, that the sole source of all possible knowledge of God is revelation. God is a person; and a person is known only as he expresses himself, which is as much as to say only as he makes himself known, reveals himself. But this agreement is only formal. So soon as it is asked how God reveals Himself, theology is set over against theology in ineradicable opposition. The hinge on which the controversy particularly turns is the question whether God has revealed Himself only in works, or also in word: ultimately whether He has made Himself known only in the natural or also in a supernatural revelation. Answer this question as we may, we shall still have a theology, but according to our answer, so will be our theology, not merely in its contents but in its very method. By revelation may be meant nothing more than the evolution of religious ideas in the age-long thinking of the race, conceived (whether pantheistically or more or less theistically) as the expression of the divine mind in the forms of human thought. In that case, the work of systematic theology follows the lines of the psychology and phenomenology of religion; its task is to gather out and to cast into a systematic statement the metaphysical implications of the results of these departments of investigation. Or revelation may be summed up in the impression made by the phenomenon of Jesus on the minds of His believing followers. Then, what theology has to do is to unfold the ideas of God which are involved in this experience. Or, again, revelation may be thought to lie in a series of extraordinary occurrences, conceived as redemptive acts on the part of God, inserted into the course of ordinary history. In that case the task of theology is to draw out the

implications of this series of extraordinary events in their sequence, and in their culmination in the apparition of Christ. Or, once more, revelation may be held to include the direct communication of truth through chosen organs of the divine Spirit. Then the fundamental task of theology becomes the ascertainment, formulation, and systematization of the truth thus communicated, and if this truth comes to it fixed in an authoritative written record, it is obvious that its task is greatly facilitated. These are not questions raised by systematic theology; nor does it belong to systematic theology to determine them. That task has already been performed for it by the precedent department of theological science which we call apologetics, which thus determines the whole structure and contents of systematic theology. The task of systematic theology is not to validate the reality, or to define the nature, or to determine the method of revelation; nor, indeed, even to ascertain the truths communicated by revelation; but to systematize these truths when placed in its hands by the precedent disciplines of apologetical, exegetical, and historical theology. The question of the sources of our knowledge of God culminates obviously in the question of the Scriptures. Do the Scriptures contain a special revelation of God; or are they merely a record of religious aspirations and attainments of men - under whatever (more or less) divine leading? Are they themselves the documented revelation of God to man; or do they merely contain the record of the effect on men of the revelation of God made in a series of redemptive acts culminating in Christ, or possibly made in Christ alone? Are the declarations of Scripture the authoritative revelations of God to us which need only to be understood to become items in our trustworthy knowledge of God; or are they merely human statements, conveying with more or less accuracy the impressions received by men in the presence of divine manifestations of more or less purity? On the answers which our apologetics gives to such questions as these, depend the entire method and contents of our systematic theology. Many voices are raised about us, declaring "the old view of the Scriptures" no longer tenable; meaning by this the view that recognizes them as the documented revelation of God and treats their declarations as the authoritative enunciations of truth. Nevertheless men have not commonly wished to break entirely with the Scriptures. In one way or another they have usually desired to see in them a record of divine revelation; and in one sense or another they have desired to find in them, if not the source, yet the norm, of the knowledge of God which they have sought to set forth in their theologies. This apparent deference to Scripture is, however, illusory. In point of fact, on a closer scrutiny of their actual procedure, it will be discovered that "modern thinkers" in general really set aside Scripture altogether as source or even authoritative norm of our knowledge of God, and depend, according to their individual predilections, on reason, on Christian experience, corporate or personal, or on tradition, for all the truth concerning God which they will admit. The formal incorporation by them of Scripture among the sources of theology is merely a fashion of speech derived from the historical evolution of their "new" views and is indicative only of the starting-point of their development. Their case is much the same as the Romanist's who still formally places Scripture at the base of his "rule of faith" in the complicated formula: Scripture plus tradition, as interpreted by the Church, speaking through its infallible organ, the pope - while in point of fact it is just the pope, speaking *ex cathedra*, which constitutes the actual authority to which he bows. A striking illustration of how men cling to such old phraseology after it has become obsolete to their actual thought may be derived from a recent writer whom we have already taken occasion to quote. Dr. A. C. Headlam, whose inheritance is Anglican while his critical point of view is "modern," really recognizes no source of theological beliefs (for with him dogmatics deals with beliefs, not truths) but tradition and the living voice of the

Church. Yet this is the way he describes the sources of his theology: "The continuous revelation of the Old Testament as accepted in the New, the revelation of Christ in the New Testament, the witness of Christian tradition, and the living voice of the Christian Church." The statement is so far incomplete that it omits the revelation of "nature," for Dr. Headlam allows that nature may teach us somewhat of its Maker: it includes the sources only of what Dr. Headlam would perhaps call "revealed theology." What is to be noted is that it avoids saying simply that these sources are Scripture, tradition, and the living voice of the Church, as a Romanist might have said, reserving of course the right of further explanation of how these three sources stand related to one another. Dr. Headlam has gone too far with modern Biblical criticism to accept the Scriptures as a direct source of dogma. He therefore frames wary forms of statement. He does not say "the Old Testament," or even "the continuous revelation of the Old Testament." He introduces a qualifying clause: "The continuous revelation of the Old Testament as accepted in the New." This is not, however, to make the New Testament the authoritative norm of theological truth. Proceeding to speak of this New Testament, he does not say simply "the New Testament"; or even "the revelation embodied in the New Testament." He restricts himself to: "The revelation of Christ in the New Testament." It is not, we see, the Old and New Testaments themselves he is thinking of; he does not accord authority to either of them as is done, for example, when they are spoken of in the old phrase, "God's Word written." His appeal to them is not as the documented revelation of God, nor even, as might be perhaps supposed at first sight, as the trustworthy record of such revelations as God has given; but simply as depositories, so far, of Christian beliefs. The Scriptures, in a word, are of value to him only as witness to Christian tradition. He says explicitly: "The Scriptures are simply a part of the Christian tradition"; and he is at pains to show that Christianity, having antedated the New Testament, cannot be derived from it but must rather be just reflected in it. He does not even look upon the Scriptures as a trustworthy depository of Christian tradition. The tradition which they preserve for us is declared to be both incomplete and distorted. They cannot serve, therefore, even as a test of tradition; contrariwise, tradition is the norm of Scripture and its correction is needed to enable us safely to draw from Scripture. "It is tradition," we read, "which gives us the true proportions of apostolic teaching and practice," by which the one-sidedness of the Scriptural record is rectified. If, then, Dr. Headlam's view of the sources of dogmatics were stated with succinct clearness, undeflected by modes of speech which have become outworn to him, we should have to say that these sources are just "tradition" and "the voice of the living Church." Scripture is to him merely an untrustworthy vehicle of tradition.

Dr. Headlam is an Anglican, and when the authority of Scripture dissolves in his hands, he drops back naturally on "the Church," - its "tradition," its "living voice." Others, born under different skies, have only the authority of the Christian's own spirit to fall back on, whether as a rationally thinking entity, or as a faith-enlightened soul. A mighty effort is, indeed, made to escape from the individualistic subjectivism of this point of view; but with indifferent success. It is not, however, to the Scriptures that appeal is made in this interest. Rather is it common with this wholeschool of writers that it is not the Scriptures but "the gospel" which supplies the norm by which the faith of the individual is regulated, or the source from which it derives its positive content. This "gospel" may be spoken of, indeed, as "the essential content and the inspiring soul of the Holy Scriptures." But this does not mean that whatever we may find written in the Scriptures enters into this "gospel," but rather that of all which stands written in the Scriptures only that which we esteem the "gospel" has religious significance and therefore theological value. What this "gospel" is, therefore,

is not objectively but subjectively determined. Sometimes it is frankly declared to be just that element in Scripture which awakens our souls to life; sometimes more frankly still it is affirmed to be only what in Scripture approves itself to our Christian judgment. "What is a proper function of a Christian man," demands an American writer not without heat, "if not to know a Christian truth when he sees it?" - just Paul's question turned topsy-turvy, since Paul would draw the inference that whoever did not recognize his words as the commandments of God was therefore no Christian man. Sometimes, with an effort to attain a greater show of objectivity, the "gospel" is said to include all that measures up to the revelation of God in Christ. But the trouble is that the Christ which is thus made the touchstone is Himself a subjective creation. He is not the Christ of the gospel narrative, as He stands out upon the pages of the evangelists; for even in its portraiture of Jesus the Scriptures are held untrustworthy. The Jesus by which we would try Scripture is rather a reflection back upon the page of Scripture of what we conceive the revelation of God in Christ ought to be. When our very touchstone is thus a subjective creation, it is easy to estimate how much real objective authority belongs to the Scriptural revelation determined by it. One of the most interesting, and certainly one of the most strenuous attempts to preserve for Scripture a certain recognition in theological construction from this point of view is supplied by Julius Kaftan. Kaftan is emphatic and insistent that the faith-knowledge which, according to him, constitutes the substance of dogmatics, takes hold upon objective realities which are matters of revelation and that this revelation is recorded in the Scriptures. But unfortunately he is equally emphatic and insistent that this "revelation" witnessed by the Scriptures is not a communication of truths, but a series of occurrences, testified to as such, indeed, by the Scriptures (when historico-critically dealt with), but by no means authoritatively, or even trustworthily interpreted by the Scriptures. And therefore it is utilizable for the purposes of dogmatics only as it is taken up by "faith" and transmuted by faith into knowledge; which is as much as to say that faith may, indeed, be quickened by Scripture, but the material which is to be built into our dogmatics is not what Scripture teaches but what we believe. "Dogmatics," we are told explicitly, "derives none of its propositions directly from the Scriptures; . . . what mediates for Dogmatics between the Scriptures and the dogmatic propositions, is faith." "The dogma of which Dogmatics treats is the dogma that is recognized by the community." All of which, it would seem, would be more clearly expressed, if it were simply said that the source of dogmatics is not Scripture but faith - the faith of the community. This is not the place to vindicate the objective authority of Scripture as the documented revelation of God. That is the task of apologetics. What we are now seeking to make clear, is only that, as there are apologetics and apologetics, so there are, following them, systematic theologies and systematic theologies. Systematic theology, as the presentation of the knowledge of God in systematized form, can build only with the materials which the precedent departments of theological science give it and only after a fashion consonant with the nature of these materials. If our apologetics has convinced us that we have no other knowledge of God but that given us by a rational contemplation of the world, recognized as the work of His hands; or that given us by an analysis of the convictions which form themselves in hearts fixed on Him - our procedure will take shape from the character of our sources and the modes by which knowledge of God is elicited from them. But equally if our apologetics assures us that God not only manifests Himself in His works, and moves in the hearts which turn to Him in faith, but has redemptively intervened in the historical development of the race (without this redemptive intervention lost in sin), and that not merely in acts but in words, and has fixed the record of this intervention in authoritative Scriptures, our whole procedure in

systematizing the knowledge of God thus conveyed to us will be determined by the character of the sources on which we depend. Taking from the hands of apologetics the natural knowledge of God which its critical survey of the results of human science brings us, and from the hands of Biblical theology the supernaturally revealed knowledge of God which its survey of the historical process of revelation yields us, and viewing all in the light of the progressive assimilation of the body of knowledge of God by His people, through twenty centuries of thinking, and feeling, and living - systematic theology essays to cast the whole into a systematic formulation, conformed to the laws of thought and consonant with the modes of conception proper to the human intelligence.

Systematic theology is thus, in essence, an attempt to reflect in the mirror of the human consciousness the God who reveals Himself in His works and word, and as He has revealed Himself. It finds its whole substance in the revelation which we suppose God to have made of Himself; and as we differ as to the revelation which we suppose God to have made, so will our systematic theologies differ in their substance. Its form is given it by the greater or less perfection of the reflection of this revelation in our consciousness. It is not imagined, of course, that this reflection can be perfect in any individual consciousness. It is the people of God at large who are really the subject of that knowledge of God which systematic theology seeks to set forth. Nor is it imagined that even in the people of God at large, in their present imperfect condition, oppressed by the sin of the world of which they still form a part, the image of God can be reflected back to Him in its perfection. Only the pure in heart can see God; and who, even of His redeemed saints, are in this life really pure in heart? Meanwhile God is framing the knowledge of Himself in the hearts of His people; and, as each one of them seeks to give expression in the forms best adapted to human consciousness, to the knowledge of God he has received, a better and fuller reflection of the revealed God is continually growing up. Systematic theology is therefore a progressive science. It will be perfected only in the minds and hearts of the perfected saints who at the end, being at last like God, shall see Him as He is. Then, the God who has revealed Himself to His people shall be known by them in all the fullness of His revelation of Himself. Now we know in part; but when that which is perfect is come that which is in part shall be done away.

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