

What About...Systematic Theology?

BY DR. DAVID A. DEWITT

It's common to hear somebody criticizing Systematic Theology. I hear things like, "God is not a theological system." "You can't put God in a box." "We should be united in faith, not divided in doctrine" (a statement I recently heard).

Systematic theology is "a discipline of Christian theology that formulates an orderly, rational, and coherent account of the doctrines of the Christian faith" (Wikipedia).

We think systematically. All this criticism of systematic theology overlooks the fact that all credible thinking is done systematically, in "an orderly, rational, and coherent" manner. Thinking coherently does not create a box, unless you put a box around your thinking, like the Pharisees of the New Testament did. Rational study is not exhaustive study. For example, the human body is more than medicine, but that does not make medicine an illegitimate way to study the human body. Limited as it is, medicine is "an orderly, rational, and coherent" way to study the human body.

For certain, God is more than theology. But that does not prohibit the study of God in "an orderly, rational, and coherent" way—systematically.

It is impossible to think about any complex subject without using some descriptive terms that have to make some sort of systematic sense in order for us to comprehend them. The problem comes not with thinking systematically, but when we stop thinking and just repeat our former conclusions and judge further research based on old conclusions.

Christianity is the only religion with the goal of knowing God. Jesus prayed, *This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent* (John 17:3). God is immutable (James 1:17), He doesn't change, so we can learn about Him, knowing what we learn will be true yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He is also infinite, so we can always be learning more about Him.

As we look into the Bible, we get glimpses of God. It's like the kid who didn't want to buy a ticket to a baseball game, so he looked at it through various knotholes in a board fence. From one knothole he got a glimpse at the pitcher. Then he ran over and

looked through another knothole and got a view of home plate. From another, he could see the outfield. He could never see the whole game, nonetheless, he could put all of what he could see together in "an orderly, rational, and coherent" way and get an accurate, even though incomplete, idea of what was going on in the game.

The same is true of any significant study of a complex subject. As we look at the pieces of information we have, we can systematize them into a valuable, though incomplete, picture of whatever we are studying. So it is in theology. We can only look through those knotholes God has given us, but they are significant, and they can be systemized into a true, even though limited, concept of things that pertain to God.

Theology is a fence, of sorts. But the fence of theology is not designed to keep others out. It's designed to keep us in. It's to give us a defined territory to build upon. There is an old illustration of the farmer who wanted to buy a fence on credit, since he did not have the money to pay for it. The farm store owner said, "That depends. Are you fencing in or fencing out? If you are fencing in, then I'll let you have the fence on credit because you are building something. If you are fencing out, then you are just mad at somebody."

