

Lewis Sperry Chafer's

A Review of Lewis Sperry Chafer's "Systematic Theology"

—
John F. Walvoord

The appearance of the eight-volume work in *Systematic Theology* by President Lewis Sperry Chafer of Dallas Theological Seminary is without question an epoch in the history of Christian doctrine. Never before has a work similar in content, purpose, and scope been produced. Its appearance in a day when liberal interpretation and unbelief have riddled the Biblical basis for theological study is in itself highly significant.

Protestant systematic theology had its origin in the early works of the Reformers. Among the first was the *Loci Theologici* of Melancthon published in 1521. Zwingli produced his *Commentarius de vera et falsa religione* in 1525. William Farel brought out his theological manual in 1534 with the title, *Summaire briefue declaration daucuns lieux fort necessaires a ung chascun Chrestien pour mettre sa confiance en Dieu et ayder son prochain*. The most famous early work was that of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first published in 1536, and later entirely rewritten and enlarged through successive editions until the definitive edition of 1559. No one can question that these works shaped the theological thinking of their own and successive generations and played a large part in the formation of creeds still recognized today. They were in the main a return to Biblical teaching in the fields of bibliology, anthropology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. The issues were the doctrine of illumination—the work of the Holy Spirit teaching the Scriptures without the medium of priest or church, the priesthood of every believer, justification by faith, and the authority of the Bible. The Protestant theology of the Reformers was occasioned by the revolt against the corruption and misuse of Biblical revelation. It concerned itself largely with correcting these abuses by a return to the Scriptures.

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As in any revolt, the emphasis was placed on the area of controversy. The root difficulty of Roman Catholic interpretation of the Bible was only partially realized. The point of departure for the Roman Church was the failure to interpret the Bible literally. The Old Testament theocracy given to Israel had been made the justification for the papal system. The church became an

institution rather than a living organism of believers baptized into the body of Christ. The future of Israel was denied, and her promises and destiny transmuted into a program for the church. For the most part, the Reformers dealt with the results rather than the causes of the corrupt system of Romanism of their day. The return to the Bible was not complete and the church of the Reformers too soon became another institution. Their eschatology contented itself with a denial of purgatory and a reaffirmation of final resurrection of all men and a final judgment. The immense scope of Old Testament prophecies regarding the completion of God's program for Israel and a righteous, earthly kingdom ruled by the Son of David was ignored and considered the frenzied aberrations of chiliastic fanatics. The attitude of John Calvin was typical. He declared that the millennium must be rejected because it limited heaven to one thousand years. The time of the Reformers was clearly not an age for the dispassionate consideration of the Scriptural revelation of eschatology.

The theological concepts of the Reformers held sway for three hundred years. During this period many important works in systematic theology appeared. In the broad scope of theological systems, the characteristic doctrines of Reformed theology returned in some measure to Roman concepts. Arminianism revived the semi-Pelagianism of the Roman system, softened predestination, and rejected the doctrine of perseverance to which the Roman church objected so strenuously. The rise of Socinianism, while relatively unproductive of systematic theology, hastened the decline of belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures, the Trinity, the [\[BSac 105:417 \(Jan 48\) p. 117\]](#) deity of Christ, and substitutionary atonement for which the Reformers stood. In eschatology, amillennialism became more vocal, divided into different systems of interpretation within themselves, and postmillennialism, an offshoot of Socinianism, came into vogue. For the most part, the Roman background of amillennialism and the unitarian background of postmillennialism¹ did not deter many who continued in the Reformed theology as a whole from embracing one or the other view of eschatology.

While theologians were grinding out reproductions of Reformed theology, it remained for a widespread movement for direct Biblical studies to find the fatal defect in the Reformed treatment of Roman doctrine. Springing from Bible study groups such as the Plymouth Brethren, attention was directed to the teachings of the Scripture on such important subjects as the nature of the true church, the need for consistent literal interpretation of Scripture, and the important place given to eschatology in the Bible. The result was a revived interest in the second coming of Christ, a movement away from the established church as a decadent institution, and a return to the more simple Biblical and apostolic concepts, methods, and beliefs. The movement was not without its excesses, but it came as a refreshing breath of new life to Biblical interpretation. In the course of time, this new interest in Bible study and the

new recognition that the Bible was intended to be understood by all Christians in its apparent literal meaning gave rise to many new groups. Bible institutes sprang up. There were great revivals. Gradually the doctrines of the new movement came to be known by the name of Fundamentalism and by similar titles. Without any organizational unity, a system of doctrine gradually developed, greatly aided by the widespread use of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, the teachings of Bible institutes, prophetic conferences, and summer Bible conferences.

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There was evident need for careful study of the findings of this restudy of the Scriptures based upon a literal method. Preachers needed to be trained more thoroughly and extensively in the interpretation of the entire Bible. Seminaries for the most part ignored the new movement and followed curriculums which left much to be desired. To help to meet this need Dallas Theological Seminary was founded by President Chafer in 1924. Out of the years of teaching systematic theology in the classrooms of this institution there came a conviction of a need for a formal statement of Biblical doctrines from this new standpoint, embracing the findings of literal interpretation, sane dispensational distinctions such as the difference between Israel and the church, the content of premillennialism and the complete provision of God for the salvation and spiritual life of the believer. As early as 1934, President Chafer challenged the theological world by his article on *Unabridged Systematic Theology*.² This was followed by a further statement of the evils arising from the usual abridged theology being offered in most seminaries.³ President Chafer called attention to the current neglect and indifference to bibliology and the study of the Bible itself. Angelology and Satanology are currently ignored in theological literature. Soteriology is too often restricted to controversy on the meaning of the death of Christ without the unfolding of the whole program of salvation as revealed in the Scriptures. Ecclesiology is usually reduced to an apology for a particular form of church government, and to arguments upholding a view of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The teachings of Scripture on the character of the church as the Body of Christ are ignored along with the tremendous body of Scripture dealing with the walk and spiritual life of the believer. In the field of eschatology, there is even more tragic neglect and disagreement. The negative effect of amillennialism on eschatology and the vagaries of postmillennial optimism combined with a denial of [*BSac* 105:417 (Jan 48) p. 119] literal interpretation made impossible an objective study of the great body of Scripture dealing with this doctrine. The divine program for the ages, the contribution of prophecy as a whole, the divinely purposed illustrations afforded in typology, and the blessed hope of the imminent return of Christ are important doctrines which determine the

value and content of the message of the preacher. Yet these are either denied or ignored in the traditional method of theological study. The need for a new definitive work in systematic theology which would be unabridged, premillennial, dispensational, and following a literal interpretation of Scripture became imperative. President Chafer felt called of God to undertake this sacred and unprecedented task. The result of ten years of reducing the studies of a lifetime to writing was recently completed and has now been reproduced in eight beautiful volumes, totalling 2,700 pages.

The importance of this new treatise in the field of systematic theology is highlighted by the current disrepute of theology. The inroads of higher criticism on the doctrine of the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture and the current indifferentism and secularism in the organized church have reduced the recent notable theological works to a trickle. About the only works which have gained widespread recognition in theology have been the restatements of modernism and liberal theology in the form of crisis theology and neo-orthodoxy which have in some respects indicated a reaction from extreme liberalism. As far as furnishing a new and effective approach to Biblical studies their doctrines have been utterly opposed to the theology of the Reformation as well as to modern premillennialism. Modern Christianity has too often been reduced to promotion of an idealistic moralism and a desire for organizational unity.

The general features of *Systematic Theology* by President Chafer make it clear that we have here something entirely different than any previously written theology. For the first time the whole scope of theology is considered from the standpoint of premillennial interpretation. The work is [BSac 105:417 (Jan 48) p. 120] remarkably Biblical. The appeal is constantly to Biblical authority rather than to philosophy, tradition, or creed. There has been proper appreciation of the doctrinal heritage of the Church Fathers and the Protestant Reformers. The work is in no sense iconoclastic. In the treatment of bibliology and theology proper as well as in later discussions President Chafer quotes extensively with approbation from the best theological statements extant. In general a broad and moderate Calvinism is followed in the theology. The work as a whole definitely belongs within the limits of Reformed theology with certain important additions and qualifications. It is however quite distinct from various restatements of Reformed theology. It is a fresh and creative work, a pioneer in a new field, a gathering together in theological system of an interpretation of Biblical doctrines never before treated in this way. It is essentially an exposition and systematization of premillennial and dispensational theology rather than an apology for it. The doctrines which it contains have been preached in various forms by most of the great premillennial Bible teachers of the last fifty years. For the first time these doctrines have been reduced to a written system of theology, related to theological problems, and expanded into all the fields in which revelation has

provided teaching. It provides for all who hold the premillennial interpretation of the Scriptures a systematic statement of the content, implications, and relations of their doctrines. For those who would be instructed in what are the proper inclusions of premillennialism it provides an ordered statement of the doctrine as a whole such as has never been provided in one work before. Regardless what theological position may be assumed by the reader, he will find this work definitive in its field.

An analysis of the content of each volume provides ample proof of these general conclusions. While it is impossible within reasonable limits to reproduce the scope of contents, the contribution of each volume may be considered in its separate presentation.

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Volume I

Preface and Prolegomena, Bibliology, Theology Proper

The preface and prolegomena provide the background for the entire series. The unfortunate abridgement that characterizes most systematic theologies is decried. Imperative to a proper consideration of systematic theology in addition to subjects ordinarily included are such great themes of Scripture as the divine program of the ages, the Pauline doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, the teachings of Scripture on human conduct and the spiritual life, an unabridged angelology, the contribution of typology, the important place of prophecy in theology, and the significance of the present session of Christ. The prolegomena provides the necessary consideration of definitions and premises which underlie systematic theology. The requirements essential to theological study are carefully delineated.

The presentation of bibliology in the main follows the doctrines of the Reformed faith. The supernatural origin of the Bible is outlined and the character of revelation, inspiration, canonicity, authority, illumination, interpretation, animation and preservation of Scripture are presented in full discussion. A unique and valuable section is on the general divisions of the Bible—its time periods, dispensations, covenants, and prophetic periods. Throughout bibliology the verbal and plenary inspiration and infallibility of Scripture is upheld.

Theology proper follows the time-honored division into theism and trinitarianism. Theism is considered in its positive contribution from naturalistic theism. Anti-theistic theories are refuted. Major emphasis is given Biblical theism. The personality and the attributes of God are considered under the divisions, personality and constitutional attributes. Special attention is given to the subject of divine decrees, which are presented from the Calvinistic point of view. The basic problems of will and the moral problem of sin are

faced. The treatment of theism closes with a discussion of the names of God.

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Trinitarianism is introduced by a pointed declaration of the three dishonors of unitarianism—dishonor to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, and to the Scriptures. Reason and revelation are submitted as proofs of the trinitarian doctrine. Separate treatment is given each Person of the Trinity, beginning with God the Father. In the consideration of God the Son, His preexistence, names, deity, incarnation, humanity, kenosis and the hypostatic union are discussed. Trinitarianism concludes with a section on the Holy Spirit including His Person, deity, place in the Old Testament, witness of the New Testament, His titles, relationship, and adorable character. Taken as a whole, the first volume is remarkable for its constant use of Scripture, for its clarity, and unabridged discussion. While following somewhat the traditional pattern of systematic theology, it is nevertheless a fresh and complete treatment of the subjects involved.

Volume II Angelology, Anthropology, Hamartiology

Comprising the larger division of created beings, the second volume deals with angels, man, and the doctrine of sin. In contrast to the usual custom of omitting or curtailing consideration of the doctrine of angels and Satan, a full treatment is given. The general facts about angels are fully discussed, including their ministry and their participation in the moral problem. Particular emphasis is given to Satan, his original sin, his subsequent career and power, the present authority of Satan in the cosmos, and his present and ultimate judgments. It is by far the most extensive treatment of this doctrine in any systematic theology known to the writer.

Anthropology is introduced by consideration of his creation, original state in innocence, his perpetuation in the race, and his fall. In the thorough discussion of this section the usual problems are met. As an outgrowth of anthropology, the doctrine of hamartiology is given a full treatment. The nature of sin, the problem of divine permission of sin, the factors which enter into sin in the human [*BSac* 105:417 (Jan 48) p. 123] race are presented. Of great value from a practical viewpoint is the discussion of the divine remedy for sin, whether the sin nature, imputed sin, or sin in the life of the Christian. The treatment is again fresh, original, Biblical, and practical. The discussion covers a field which is usually neglected in most discussions of anthropology.

Volume III

Soteriology

The contribution of President Chafer in the field of soteriology has been hailed as the most important of all his theological works. The treatment is divided into six sections, the first dealing with Christ as the Savior. The positions of Christ, His offices, His sonship, the hypostatic union, and the sufferings of Christ are included in this discussion. The doctrine is presented in such a complete way that it is difficult to make adequate comparisons. The second and third sections deal with the doctrine of election and the answer to the question, "For whom did Christ die?" In general the Calvinistic position characterizes the teaching here, but the viewpoint of unlimited atonement is maintained. The saving work of God and the doctrine of eternal security occupy the fourth and fifth sections. The wonders of the saving work of God, the grace of God and the contrasting positions of Calvinism and Arminianism on eternal security are discussed in full. The discussion of soteriology concludes with a division on the terms of salvation in which the simple exhortation of "Believe" is contrasted to all confusions which arise from adding other conditions. The final section is most practical and helpful. The volume on soteriology, if it stood alone, would in itself assure the author a place among notable writers of Christian doctrine. There is no volume in the field of systematic theology which approaches it in Biblical insight, spiritual comprehension of the saving work of God, and unabridged treatment of the great work of God in salvation. It deals fully with the technical problems of theology in this field and yet is brilliant and moving in its presentation.

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Volume IV Ecclesiology, Eschatology

From the standpoint of originality, the fourth volume stands supreme. In a field of doctrine which is usually greatly limited in ordinary treatment, the discussion is extensive and inclusive of neglected Biblical truths. Ecclesiology is organized under three divisions: the church as an organism, the church as an organization, and the rule of life for the believer. Under the first section clear distinction is made between the purpose of God for Israel and for the church. The Scriptural teachings on the nature of the church are treated in full. The validity of the concept of the organized church is also defended and the various senses in which this is presented in Scripture are discussed. In the third division dealing with the believer's rule of life the contrast of life under different dispensations is treated. In particular, the present economy of grace is defended from encroachment of Mosaic legalism by sharp distinctions

between law and grace.

In the presentation of eschatology, the full advantages of the premillennial position come to the fore. Included in the consideration are all Scriptures which contained future prediction when written. General features of eschatology are treated first, beginning with a brief history of chiliasm, both Biblical and historical. This is followed by discussion of the Biblical conception of prophecy as a whole.

The “major highways of prophecy” are treated first. Included in this discussion is prophecy concerning Christ, Israel’s covenants, the Gentiles, Satan and evil, apostate Christendom, the great tribulation, and the church. The field of prophecy is then presented from the standpoint of themes in the Old Testament and themes in the New Testament. An interesting section which follows presents forty-four major predicted events in their order. Two important sections conclude the treatment of eschatology: the judgments, and the eternal state. The treatment of eschatology as a whole is distinguished by its inclusion of all important [BSac 105:417 (Jan 48) p. 125] elements, by its close adherence to Biblical teachings, and by its unfolding of premillennial truth in this field. The entire volume again reflects the original approach of the author and constitutes a new landmark in the field of eschatological literature.

Volume V Christology

Having treated the doctrine of Christ in theology proper and soteriology, President Chafer presents here the entire doctrine systematically in new form and additional content. In general following the chronological pattern, the preincarnate person and work of Christ are considered first. Major attention is given to the incarnation, which is presented as an event of immense theological significance. Considered first are His birth, childhood, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, miracles, and His extensive teachings. The sufferings and death of Christ and the resurrection which followed are treated historically and doctrinally. A thorough discussion follows on the ascension and heavenly session of Christ—material often omitted from theologies. The treatment of Christology is concluded by discussion of the second coming of Christ, the Messianic kingdom and His eternal kingdom.

Volume VI Pneumatology

The need for a comprehensive statement of the entire doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit called for this volume. After an introductory chapter on the name of the Holy Spirit, the deity of the Spirit is

sustained by delineation of the Scriptural evidence found in His divine attributes and in His divine works. Also treated are the types of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, and the distinct character of His present work.

With rare clarity and insight into Scriptural revelation, President Chafer presents the work of the Holy Spirit in the world and in the Christian. The Holy Spirit convicts the world. He regenerates, indwells, baptizes, and seals the [BSac 105:417 (Jan 48) p. 126] Christian. All of these great works of the Spirit are accomplished simultaneously in the believer when he is saved.

Of greatest importance is the presentation of the believer's responsibility in relation to the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Spirit is presented as the source of power to overcome sin and is the author of the fruit of the Spirit. The filling of the Spirit is offered to all who meet the three conditions: "Grieve not the Holy Spirit," "Quench not the Spirit," and "Walk in the Spirit."

The same clear distinctions which have made his earlier work, *He That Is Spiritual*, such a blessing to the Christian public are followed in this volume. It presents material almost always omitted from systematic theologies. The writer knows no volumes on systematic theology that even approach the clarity and insight into the doctrine which appear here. Like the volume in Christology, *Pneumatology* is complete in itself and at the same time gathers together previous material in the series on the subject. It will take its place among the truly great works on the Holy Spirit.

Volume VII Doctrinal Summarization

The value of a doctrinal summarization is apparent. In presenting a system of theology various aspects of important doctrines are necessarily treated separately in different places and are often subordinated to the doctrine being considered. The need for gathering pertinent material on important Biblical and theological themes is apparent not only to the theologian but also to the preacher.

In this unique volume, one hundred and eighty-four important subjects are treated in alphabetical order. The volume stands on its own merits and presentation and is also a summary of the doctrinal material which precedes it. The value of this volume to those seeking material on a particular subject is obvious. It is an invaluable source-book for doctrinal teaching and preaching. It constitutes almost an encyclopedia of Scriptural doctrines.

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Volume VIII

Index

To provide easy access to related material in the entire series a separate volume of indices has been prepared, including a Scriptural index, an index of authors, and a subject index. The index to Scripture references has been limited to passages which are actually discussed, comprising several thousand entries. The index to the authors is arranged alphabetically and provides a bibliography of all quotations. The subject index provides the key to discussion of themes which appear repeatedly throughout the seven preceding volumes. A brief biographical sketch of the author is included, written by Dr. C. F. Lincoln, who has been closely associated with President Chafer for many years.

The Work as a Whole

Taken as a whole the eight volumes in *Systematic Theology* constitute a monument in the field of theological literature. It is the first consistently premillennial systematic theology ever written. For the first time modern Fundamentalism has been systematized in an unabridged systematic theology. The work is definitely creative and original. There is no other work in systematic theology which is comparable to it. Its form of treatment, method of interpretation, and unabridged character have no parallel. Unlike most systematic theologies, it is presented in highly readable form, deals with practical as well as doctrinal problems, and constitutes a veritable thesaurus of sermonic material for the preacher. It abounds in devotional passages and is closely linked with the content of the Scriptures. As a product of a lifetime of study, the work has been tested and tempered through years of classroom and public ministry in which the author was recognized internationally as an outstanding expositor of the Scriptures. As a representative, authoritative, and comprehensive treatment of systematic theology it will occupy a place filled by no other publication.

¹ Daniel Whitby, founder of postmillennialism, is called a “convinced Unitarian” by *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, XII, 339. Whitby’s *Last Thoughts* were published in 1841 by the Unitarian Association.

² *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January-March 1934, pp. 8-23.

³ *Ibid.*, April-June 1934, pp. 134-154; July-September 1934, pp. 261-285.