

The Idea of Systematic Theology

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THE term “Systematic Theology” has long been in somewhat general use, especially in America, to designate one of the theological disciplines. And, on the whole, it appears to be a sufficiently exact designation of this discipline. It has not, of course, escaped criticism. The main faults that have been found with it are succinctly summed up by a recent writer in the following compact phrases:

The expression “systematic theology” is really an impertinent tautology. It is a tautology, in so far as a theology that is not systematic or methodical would be no theology. The idea of rational method lies in the word *logos*, which forms part of the term theology. And it is an impertinence, in so far as it suggests that there are other theological disciplinæ, or departments of theology, which are not methodical.¹

Is not this, however, just a shade hypercritical? What is meant by calling this discipline “Systematic Theology” is not that it deals with its material in a systematic or methodical way, and the other disciplines do not; but that it presents its material in the form of a system. Other disciplines may use a chronological, a historical, or some other method: this discipline must needs employ a systematic, that is to say, a philosophical or scientific method. It might be equally well designated, therefore, “Philosophical Theology,” or “Scientific Theology.” But we should not by the adoption of one of these terms escape the ambiguities which are charged against the term “Systematic Theology.” Other theological disciplines may also claim

¹ Professor D. W. Simon, D.D., “The Nature and Scope of Systematic Theology,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, li. 1894, p. 587.

to be philosophical or scientific. If exegesis should be systematic, it should also be scientific. If history should be methodical, it should also be philosophical. An additional ambiguity would also be brought to these terms from their popular usage. There would be danger that “Philosophical Theology” should be misapprehended as theology dominated by some philosophical system. There would be a similar danger that “Scientific Theology” should be misunderstood as theology reduced to an empirical science, or dependent upon an “experimental method.” Nevertheless these terms also would fairly describe what we mean by “Systematic Theology.” They too would discriminate it from its sister disciplines, as the philosophical discipline which investigates from the philosophical standpoint the matter with which all the disciplines deal. And they would keep clearly before our minds the main fact in the case, namely, that Systematic Theology, as distinguished from its sister disciplines, is a science, and is to be conceived as a science and treated as a science.

The two designations, “Philosophical Theology” and “Scientific Theology,” are practically synonyms. But they differ in their connotation as the terms “philosophy” and “science” differ. The distinction between these terms in a reference like the present would seem to be that between the whole and one of its parts. Philosophy is the *scientia scientiarum*. What a science does for a division of knowledge, that philosophy essays to do for the mass of knowledge. A science reduces a section of our knowledge to order and harmony; philosophy reduces the sciences to order and harmony. Accordingly there are many sciences, and but one philosophy. We, therefore, so far agree with Professor D. W. Simon (whom we have quoted above in order to disagree with him), when he says that “what a science properly understood does for a sub-system; that, philosophy aims to do for the system which the subsystems constitute.” “Its function is so to grasp the whole that every part shall find its proper place therein, and the parts, that they shall form an orderly organic whole”: “so to correlate the *reals*, which with their interactivities make up the world or the universe, that the whole shall be seen in its harmony and unity; and that to every individual real shall be assigned the place in which it can be seen to be discharging its proper functions.”¹ This, as

¹*Loc. Cit.*, p. 592.

will be at once perceived, is the function of each science in its own sphere. To call “Systematic Theology” “Philosophical Theology” or “Scientific Theology” would therefore be all one in essential meaning. Only, when we call it “Philosophical Theology,” we should be conceiving it as a science among the sciences and should have our eye upon its place in the universal sum of knowledge: while, when we call it “Scientific Theology,” our mind should be occupied with it in itself, as it were in isolation, and with the proper mode of dealing with its material. In either case we are affirming that it deals with its material as an organizable system of knowledge; that it deals with it from the philosophical point of view; that it is, in other words, in its essential nature a science.

It is possible that the implications of this determination are not always fully realized. When we have made the simple assertion of “Systematic Theology” that it is in its essential nature a science, we have already determined most of the vexing questions which arise concerning it in a formal point of view. In this single predicate is implicitly included a series of affirmations, which, when taken together, will give us a rather clear conception not only of what Systematic Theology is, but also of what it deals with, whence it obtains its material, and for what purpose it exists.

I. First of all, then, let us observe that to say that Systematic Theology is a science is to deny that it is a historical discipline, and to affirm that it seeks to discover, not what has been or is held to be true, but what is ideally true; in other words, it is to declare that it deals with absolute truth and aims at organizing into a concatenated system all the truth in its sphere. Geology is a science, and on that very account there cannot be two geologies; its matter is all the well-authenticated facts in its sphere, and its aim is to digest all these facts into one all-comprehending system. There may be rival psychologies, which fill the world with vain jangling; but they do not strive together in order that they may obtain the right to exist side by side in equal validity, but in strenuous effort to supplant and supersede one another: there can be but one true science of mind. In like manner, just because theology is a science there can be but one theology. This all-embracing system will brook no rival in its sphere, and there can be two theologies only at the cost of one or both of them being imperfect, incomplete, false. It is because theology, in accordance

with a somewhat prevalent point of view, is often looked upon as a historical rather than a scientific discipline, that it is so frequently spoken of and defined as if it were but one of many similar schemes of thought. There is no doubt such a thing as Christian theology, as distinguished from Buddhist theology or Mohammedan theology; and men may study it as the theological implication of Christianity considered as one of the world's religions. But when studied from this point of view, it forms a section of a historical discipline and furnishes its share of facts for a history of religions; on the data supplied by which a science or philosophy of religion may in turn be based. We may also, no doubt, speak of the Pelagian and Augustinian theologies, or of the Calvinistic and Arminian theologies; but, again, we are speaking as historians and from a historical point of view. The Pelagian and Augustinian theologies are not two coördinate sciences of theology; they are rival theologies. If one is true, just so far the other is false, and there is but one theology. This we may identify, as an empirical fact, with either or neither; but it is at all events one, inclusive of all theological truth and exclusive of all else as false or not germane to the subject.

In asserting that theology is a science, then, we assert that, in its subject-matter, it includes all the facts belonging to that sphere of truth which we call theological; and we deny that it needs or will admit of limitation by a discriminating adjectival definition. We may speak of it as Christian theology just as we may speak of it as true theology, if we mean thereby only more fully to describe what, as a matter of fact, theology is found to be; but not, if we mean thereby to discriminate it from some other assumed theology thus erected to a coördinate position with it. We may describe our method of procedure in attempting to ascertain and organize the truths that come before us for building into the system, and so speak of logical or inductive, of speculative or organic theology; or we may separate the one body of theology into its members, and, just as we speak of surface and organic geology or of physiological and direct psychology, so speak of the theology of grace and of sin, or of natural and revealed theology. But all these are but designations of methods of procedure in dealing with the one whole, or of the various sections that together constitute the one whole, which in its completeness is the science of theology, and which, as a science, is inclusive of all the

truth in its sphere, however ascertained, however presented, however defended.

II. There is much more than this included, however, in calling theology a science. For the very existence of any science, three things are presupposed: (1) the reality of its subject-matter; (2) the capacity of the human mind to apprehend, receive into itself, and rationalize this subject-matter; and (3) some medium of communication by which the subject-matter is brought before the mind and presented to it for apprehension. There could be no astronomy, for example, if there were no heavenly bodies. And though the heavenly bodies existed, there could still be no science of them were there no mind to apprehend them. Facts do not make a science; even facts as apprehended do not make a science; they must be not only apprehended, but also so far comprehended as to be rationalized and thus combined into a correlated system. The mind brings to every science somewhat which, though included in the facts, is not derived from the facts considered in themselves alone, as isolated data, or even as data perceived in some sort of relation to one another. Though they be thus known, science is not yet; and is not born save through the efforts of the mind in subsuming the facts under its own intuitions and forms of thought. No mind is satisfied with a bare cognition of facts: its very constitution forces it on to a restless energy until it succeeds in working these facts not only into a network of correlated relations among themselves, but also into a rational body of thought correlated to itself and its necessary modes of thinking. The condition of science, then, is that the facts which fall within its scope shall be such as stand in relation not only to our faculties, so that they may be apprehended; but also to our mental constitution so that they may be so far understood as to be rationalized and wrought into a system relative to our thinking. Thus a science of æsthetics presupposes an æsthetic faculty, and a science of morals a moral nature, as truly as a science of logic presupposes a logical apprehension, and a science of mathematics a capacity to comprehend the relations of numbers. But still again, though the facts had real existence, and the mind were furnished with a capacity for their reception and for a sympathetic estimate and embracing of them in their relations, no science could exist were there no media by which the facts should be brought before and communicated to the

mind. The transmitter and intermediating wire are as essential for telegraphing as the message and the receiving instrument. Subjectively speaking, sense perception is the essential basis of all science of external things; self-consciousness, of internal things. But objective media are also necessary. For example, there could be no astronomy, were there no trembling ether through whose delicate telegraphy the facts of light and heat are transmitted to us from the suns and systems of the heavens. Subjective and objective conditions of communication must unite, before the facts that constitute the material of a science can be placed before the mind that gives it its form. The sense of sight is essential to astronomy: yet the sense of sight would be useless for forming an astronomy were there no objective ethereal messengers to bring us news from the stars. With these an astronomy becomes possible; but how meager an astronomy compared with the new possibilities which have opened out with the discovery of a new medium of communication in the telescope, followed by still newer media in the subtle instruments by which our modern investigators not only weigh the spheres in their courses, but analyze them into their chemical elements, map out the heavens in a chart, and separate the suns into their primary constituents.

Like all other sciences, therefore, theology, for its very existence as a science, presupposes the objective reality of the subject-matter with which it deals; the subjective capacity of the human mind so far to understand this subject-matter as to be able to subsume it under the forms of its thinking and to rationalize it into not only a comprehensive, but also a comprehensible whole; and the existence of trustworthy media of communication by which the subject-matter is brought to the mind and presented before it for perception and understanding. That is to say: (1) The affirmation that theology is a science presupposes the affirmation that God is, and that He has relation to His creatures. Were there no God, there could be no theology; nor could there be a theology if, though He existed, He existed out of relation with His creatures. The whole body of philosophical apologetics is, therefore, presupposed in and underlies the structure of scientific theology. (2) The affirmation that theology is a science presupposes the affirmation that man has a religious nature, that is, a nature capable of understanding not only that God is, but also, to some extent, what He is; not only that He stands in

relations with His creatures, but also what those relations are. Had man no religious nature he might, indeed, apprehend certain facts concerning God, but he could not so understand Him in His relations to man as to be able to respond to those facts in a true and sympathetic embrace. The total product of the great science of religion, which investigates the nature and workings of this element in man's mental constitution, is therefore presupposed in and underlies the structure of scientific theology. (3) The affirmation that theology is a science presupposes the affirmation that there are media of communication by which God and divine things are brought before the minds of men, that they may perceive them and, in perceiving, understand them. In other words, when we affirm that theology is a science, we affirm not only the reality of God's existence and our capacity so far to understand Him, but we affirm that He has made Himself known to us — we affirm the objective reality of a revelation. Were there no revelation of God to man, our capacity to understand Him would lie dormant and unawakened; and though He really existed it would be to us as if He were not. There would be a God to be known and a mind to know Him; but theology would be as impossible as if there were neither the one nor the other. Not only, then, philosophical, but also the whole mass of historical apologetics by which the reality of revelation and its embodiment in the Scriptures are vindicated, is presupposed in and underlies the structure of scientific theology.

III. In thus developing the implications of calling theology a science, we have already gone far towards determining our exact conception of what theology is. We have in effect, for example, settled our definition of theology. A science is defined from its subject-matter; and the subject-matter of theology is God in His nature and in His relations with His creatures. Theology is therefore that science which treats of God and of the relations between God and the universe. To this definition most theologians have actually come. And those who define theology as "the science of God," mean the term God in a broad sense as inclusive also of His relations; while others exhibit their sense of the need of this inclusiveness by calling it "the science of God and of divine things"; while still others speak of it, more loosely, as "the science of the supernatural." These

definitions fail rather in precision of language than in correctness of conception.

Others, however, go astray in the conception itself. Thus theologians of the school of Schleiermacher usually derive their definition from the sources rather than the subject-matter of the science — and so speak of theology as “the science of faith” or the like; a thoroughly unscientific procedure, even though our view of the sources be complete and unexceptionable, which is certainly not the case with this school. Quite as confusing is it to define theology, as is very currently done and often as an outgrowth of this same subjective tendency, as “the science of religion,” or even — pressing to its greatest extreme the historical conception, which as often underlies this type of definition — as “the science of the Christian religion.” Theology and religion are parallel products of the same body of facts in diverse spheres; the one in the sphere of thought and the other in the sphere of life. And the definition of theology as “the science of religion” thus confounds the product of the facts concerning God and His relations with His creatures working through the hearts and lives of men, with those facts themselves; and consequently, whenever strictly understood, bases theology not on the facts of the divine revelation, but on the facts of the religious life. This leads ultimately to a confusion of the two distinct disciplines of theology, the subject-matter of which is objective, and the science of religion, the subject-matter of which is subjective; with the effect of lowering the data of theology to the level of the aspirations and imaginings of man’s own heart. Wherever this definition is found, either a subjective conception of theology, which reduces it to a branch of psychology, may be suspected; or else a historical conception of it, a conception of “Christian theology” as one of the many theologies of the world, parallel with, even if unspeakably truer than, the others with which it is classed and in conjunction with which it furnishes us with a full account of religion. When so conceived, it is natural to take a step further and permit the methodology of the science, as well as its idea, to be determined by its distinguishing element: thus theology, in contradiction to its very name, becomes Christocentric. No doubt “Christian theology,” as a historical discipline, is Christocentric; it is by its doctrine of redemption that it is differentiated from all the other theologies that

the world has known. But theology as a science is and must be theocentric. So soon as we firmly grasp it from the scientific point of view, we see that there can be but one science of God and of His relations to His universe, and we no longer seek a point of discrimination, but rather a center of development; and we quickly see that there can be but one center about which so comprehensive a subject-matter can be organized — the conception of God. He that hath seen Christ, has beyond doubt seen the Father; but it is one thing to make Christ the center of theology so far as He is one with God, and another thing to organize all theology around Him as the theanthropos and in His specifically theanthropic work.

IV. Not only, however, is our definition of theology thus set for us: we have also determined in advance our conception of its sources. We have already made use of the term “revelation,” to designate the medium by which the facts concerning God and His relations to His creatures are brought before men’s minds, and so made the subject-matter of a possible science. The word accurately describes the condition of all knowledge of God. If God be a person, it follows by stringent necessity, that He can be known only so far as He reveals or expresses Himself. And it is but the converse of this, that if there be no revelation, there can be no knowledge, and, of course, no systematized knowledge or science of God. Our reaching up to Him in thought and inference is possible only because He condescends to make Himself intelligible to us, to speak to us through work or word, to reveal Himself. We hazard nothing, therefore, in saying that, as the condition of all theology is a revealed God, so, without limitation, the sole source of theology is revelation.

In so speaking, however, we have no thought of doubting that God’s revelation of Himself is “in divers manners.” We have no desire to deny that He has never left man without witness of His eternal power and Godhead, or that He has multiplied the manifestations of Himself in nature and providence and grace, so that every generation has had abiding and unmistakable evidence that He is, that He is the good God, and that He is a God who marketh iniquity. Under the broad skirts of the term “revelation,” every method of manifesting Himself which God uses in communicating knowledge of His being and attributes, may find shelter for itself—whether it be through those visible things of nature whereby His

invisible things are clearly seen, or through the constitution of the human mind with its causal judgment indelibly stamped upon it, or through that voice of God that we call conscience, which proclaims His moral law within us, or through His providence in which He makes bare His arm for the government of the nations, or through the exercises of His grace, our experience under the tutelage of the Holy Ghost — or whether it be through the open visions of His prophets, the divinely-breathed pages of His written Word, the divine life of the Word Himself. How God reveals Himself — in what divers manners He makes Himself known to His creatures — is thus the subsequent question, by raising which we distribute the one source of theology, revelation, into the various methods of revelation, each of which brings us true knowledge of God, and all of which must be taken account of in building our knowledge into one all-comprehending system. It is the accepted method of theology to infer that the God that made the eye must Himself see; that the God who sovereignly distributes His favors in the secular world may be sovereign in grace too; that the heart that condemns itself but repeats the condemnation of the greater God ; that the songs of joy in which the Christian's happy soul voices its sense of God's gratuitous mercy are valid evidence that God has really dealt graciously with it. It is with no reserve that we accept all these sources of knowledge of God — nature, providence, Christian experience — as true and valid sources, the well-authenticated data yielded by which are to be received by us as revelations of God, and as such to be placed alongside of the revelations in the written Word and wrought with them into one system. As a matter of fact, theologians have always so dealt with them; and doubtless they always will so deal with them.

But to perceive, as all must perceive, that every method by which God manifests Himself, is, so far as this manifestation can be clearly interpreted, a source of knowledge of Him, and must, therefore, be taken account of in framing all our knowledge of Him into one organic whole, is far from allowing that there are no differences among these various manifestations — in the amount of revelation they give, the clearness of their message, the ease and certainty with which they may be interpreted, or the importance of the special truths which they are fitted to convey. Far rather is it *a priori* likely that if there are “divers manners” in which God has revealed

Himself, He has not revealed precisely the same message through each; that these “divers manners” correspond also to divers messages of divers degrees of importance, delivered with divers degrees of clearness. And the mere fact that He has included in these “divers manners” a copious revelation in a written Word, delivered with an authenticating accompaniment of signs and miracles, proved by recorded prophecies with their recorded fulfillments, and pressed, with the greatest solemnity, upon the attention and consciences of men as the very Word of the Living God, who has by it made all the wisdom of men foolishness; nay, proclaimed as containing within itself the formulation of His truth, the proclamation of His law, the discovery of His plan of salvation: this mere fact, I say, would itself and prior to all comparison, raise an overwhelming presumption that all the others of “the divers manners” of God’s revelation were insufficient for the purposes for which revelation is given, whether on account of defect in the amount of their communication or insufficiency of attestation or uncertainty of interpretation or fatal one-sidedness in the character of the revelation they are adapted to give.

We need not be surprised, therefore, that on actual examination, such imperfections are found undeniably to attach to all forms of what we may, for the sake of discrimination, speak of as mere manifestations of God; and that thus the revelation of God in His written Word — in which are included the only authentic records of the revelation of Him through the incarnate Word — is easily shown not only to be incomparably superior to all other manifestations of Him in the fullness, richness, and clearness of its communications, but also to contain the sole discovery of much that it is most important for the soul to know as to its state and destiny, and of much that is most precious in our whole body of theological knowledge. The superior lucidity of this revelation makes it the norm of interpretation for what is revealed so much more darkly through the other methods of manifestation. The glorious character of the discoveries made in it throws all other manifestations into comparative shadow. The amazing fullness of its disclosures renders what they can tell us of little relative value. And its absolute completeness for the needs of man, taking up and reiteratingly repeating in the clearest of language all that can be wrung from their

sometimes enigmatic indications, and then adding to this a vast body of still more momentous truth undiscoverable through them, all but supersedes their necessity. With the fullest recognition of the validity of all the knowledge of God and His ways with men, which can be obtained through the manifestations of His power and divinity in nature and history and grace; and the frankest allowance that the written Word is given, not to destroy the manifestations of God, but to fulfill them; the theologian must yet refuse to give these sources of knowledge a place alongside of the written Word, in any other sense than that he gladly admits that they, alike with it, but in unspeakably lower measure, do tell us of God. And nothing can be a clearer indication of a decadent theology or of a decaying faith, than a tendency to neglect the Word in favor of some one or of all of the lesser sources of theological truth, as fountains from which to draw our knowledge of divine things. This were to prefer the flickering rays of a taper to the blazing light of the sun; to elect to draw our water from a muddy run rather than to dip it from the broad bosom of the pure fountain itself.

Nevertheless, men have often sought to still the cravings of their souls with a purely natural theology; and there are men to-day who prefer to derive their knowledge of what God is and what He will do for man from an analysis of the implications of their own religious feelings: not staying to consider that nature, “red in tooth and claw with ravin,” can but direct our eyes to the God of law, whose deadly letter kills; or that our feelings must needs point us to the God of our imperfect apprehensions or of our unsanctified desires — not to the God that is, so much as to the God that we would fain should be. The natural result of resting on the revelations of nature is despair; while the inevitable end of making our appeal to even the Christian heart is to make for ourselves refuges of lies in which there is neither truth nor safety. We may, indeed, admit that it is valid reasoning to infer from the nature of the Christian life what are the modes of God’s activities towards His children: to see, for instance, in conviction of sin and the sudden peace of the new-born soul, God’s hand in slaying that He may make alive, His almighty power in raising the spiritually dead. But how easy to overstep the limits of valid inference; and, forgetting that it is the body of Christian truth known and assimilated that determines the type of Christian experience,

confuse in our inferences what is from man with what is from God, and condition and limit our theology by the undeveloped Christian thought of the man or his times. The interpretation of the data included in what we have learned to call “the Christian consciousness,” whether of the individual or of the Church at large, is a process so delicate, so liable to error, so inevitably swayed to this side or that by the currents that flow up and down in the soul, that probably few satisfactory inferences could be drawn from it, had we not the norm of Christian experience and its dogmatic implications recorded for us in the perspicuous pages of the written Word. But even were we to suppose that the interpretation was easy and secure, and that we had before us, in an infallible formulation, all the implications of the religious experience of all the men who have ever known Christ, we have no reason to believe that the whole body of facts thus obtained would suffice to give us a complete theology. After all, we know in part and we feel in part; it is only when that which is perfect shall appear that we shall know or experience all that Christ has in store for us. With the fullest acceptance, therefore, of the data of the theology of the feelings, no less than of natural theology, when their results are validly obtained and sufficiently authenticated as trustworthy, as divinely revealed facts which must be wrought into our system, it remains nevertheless true that we should be confined to a meager and doubtful theology were these data not confirmed, reinforced, and supplemented by the surer and fuller revelations of Scripture; and that the Holy Scriptures are the source of theology in not only a degree, but also a sense in which nothing else is.

There may be a theology without the Scriptures — a theology of nature, gathered by painful, and slow, and sometimes doubtful processes from what man sees around him in external nature and the course of history, and what he sees within him of nature and of grace. In like manner there may be and has been an astronomy of nature, gathered by man in his natural state without help from aught but his naked eyes, as he watched in the fields by night. But what is this astronomy of nature to the astronomy that has become possible through the wonderful appliances of our observatories? The Word of God is to theology as, but vastly more than, these instruments are to astronomy. It is the instrument which so far increases the possibilities

of the science as to revolutionize it and to place it upon a height from which it can never more descend. What would be thought of the deluded man, who, discarding the new methods of research, should insist on acquiring all the astronomy which he would admit, from the unaided observation of his own myopic and astigmatic eyes? Much more deluded is he who, neglecting the instrument of God's Word written, would confine his admissions of theological truth to what he could discover from the broken lights that play upon external nature, and the faint gleams of a dying or even a slowly reviving light, which arise in his own sinful soul. Ah, no! The telescope first made a real science of astronomy possible: and the Scriptures form the only sufficing source of theology.

V. Under such a conception of its nature and sources, we are led to consider the place of Systematic Theology among the other theological disciplines as well as among the other sciences in general. Without encroaching upon the details of Theological Encyclopedia, we may adopt here the usual fourfold distribution of the theological disciplines into the Exegetical, the Historical, the Systematic, and the Practical, with only the correction of prefixing to them a fifth department of Apologetical Theology. The place of Systematic Theology in this distribution is determined by its relation to the preceding disciplines, of which it is the crown and head. Apologetical Theology prepares the way for all theology by establishing its necessary presuppositions without which no theology is possible — the existence and essential nature of God, the religious nature of man which enables him to receive a revelation from God, the possibility of a revelation and its actual realization in the Scriptures. It thus places the Scriptures in our hands for investigation and study. Exegetical Theology receives these inspired writings from the hands of Apologetics, and investigates their meaning; presenting us with a body of detailed and substantiated results, culminating in a series of organized systems of Biblical History, Biblical Ethics, Biblical Theology, and the like, which provide material for further use in the more advanced disciplines. Historical Theology investigates the progressive realization of Christianity in the lives, hearts, worship, and thought of men, issuing not only in a full account of the history of Christianity, but also in a body of facts which come into use in the more advanced disciplines, especially in the way of the manifold

experiments that have been made during the ages in Christian organization, worship, living, and creed-building, as well as of the sifted results of the reasoned thinking and deep experience of Christian truth during the whole past. Systematic Theology does not fail to strike its roots deeply into this matter furnished by Historical Theology; it knows how to profit by the experience of all past generations in their efforts to understand and define, to systematize and defend revealed truth; and it thinks of nothing so little as lightly to discard the conquests of so many hard-fought fields. It therefore gladly utilizes all the material that Historical Theology brings it, accounting it, indeed, the very precipitate of the Christian consciousness of the past; but it does not use it crudely, or at first hand for itself, but accepts it as investigated, explained, and made available by the sister discipline of Historical Theology which alone can understand it or draw from it its true lessons. It certainly does not find in it its chief or primary source, and its relation to Historical Theology is, in consequence, far less close than that in which it stands to Exegetical Theology which is its true and especial handmaid. The independence of Exegetical Theology is seen in the fact that it does its work wholly without thought or anxiety as to the use that is to be made of its results; and that it furnishes a vastly larger body of data than can be utilized by any one discipline. It provides a body of historical, ethical, liturgic, ecclesiastical facts, as well as a body of theological facts. But so far as its theological facts are concerned, it provides them chiefly that they may be used by Systematic Theology as material out of which to build its system.

This is not to forget the claims of Biblical Theology. It is rather to emphasize its value, and to afford occasion for explaining its true place in the encyclopedia, and its true relations on the one side to Exegetical Theology, and on the other to Systematics — a matter which appears to be even yet imperfectly understood in some quarters. Biblical Theology is not a section of Historical Theology, although it must be studied in a historical spirit, and has a historical face; it is rather the ripest fruit of Exegetics, and Exegetics has not performed its full task until its scattered results in the way of theological data are gathered up into a full and articulated system of Biblical Theology. It is to be hoped that the time will come when no commentary will be considered complete until the capstone is placed

upon its fabric by closing chapters gathering up into systematized exhibits, the unsystematized results of the continuous exegesis of the text, in the spheres of history, ethics, theology, and the like. The task of Biblical Theology, in a word, is the task of coördinating the scattered results of continuous exegesis into a concatenated whole, whether with reference to a single book of Scripture or to a body of related books or to the whole Scriptural fabric. Its chief object is not to find differences of conception between the various writers, though some recent students of the subject seem to think this is so much their duty, that when they cannot find differences they make them. It is to reproduce the theological thought of each writer or group of writers in the form in which it lay in their own minds, so that we may be enabled to look at all their theological statements at their angle, and to understand all their deliverances as modified and conditioned by their own point of view. Its exegetical value lies just in this circumstance, that it is only when we have thus concatenated an author's theological statements into a whole, that we can be sure that we understand them as he understood them in detail. A light is inevitably thrown back from Biblical Theology upon the separate theological deliverances as they occur in the text, such as subtly colors them, and often, for the first time, gives them to us in their true setting, and thus enables us to guard against perverting them when we adapt them to our use. This is a noble function, and could students of Biblical Theology only firmly grasp it, once for all, as their task, it would prevent this important science from being brought into contempt through a tendency to exaggerate differences in form of statement into divergences of view, and so to force the deliverances of each book into a strange and unnatural combination, in the effort to vindicate a function for this discipline.

The relation of Biblical Theology to Systematic Theology is based on a true view of its function. Systematic Theology is not founded on the direct and primary results of the exegetical process; it is founded on the final and complete results of exegesis as exhibited in Biblical Theology. Not exegesis itself, then, but Biblical Theology, provides the material for Systematics. Biblical Theology is not, then, a rival of Systematics; it is not even a parallel product of the same body of facts, provided by exegesis; it is the basis and source of Systematics. Systematic Theology is not a concatenation of the

scattered theological data furnished by the exegetic process; it is the combination of the already concatenated data given to it by Biblical Theology. It uses the individual data furnished by exegesis, in a word, not crudely, not independently for itself, but only after these data have been worked up into Biblical Theology and have received from it their final coloring and subtlest shades of meaning — in other words, only in their true sense, and after Exegetics has said its last word upon them. Just as we shall attain our finest and truest conception of the person and work of Christ, not by crudely trying to combine the scattered details of His life and teaching as given in our four Gospels into one patchwork life and account of His teaching; but far more rationally and far more successfully by first catching Matthew's full conception of Jesus, and then Mark's, and then Luke's, and then John's, and combining these four conceptions into one rounded whole: so we gain our truest Systematics not by at once working together the separate dogmatic statements in the Scriptures, but by combining them in their due order and proportion as they stand in the various theologies of the Scriptures. Thus we are enabled to view the future whole not only in its parts, but in the several combinations of the parts; and, looking at it from every side, to obtain a true conception of its solidity and strength, and to avoid all exaggeration or falsification of the details in giving them place in the completed structure. And thus we do not make our theology, according to our own pattern, as a mosaic, out of the fragments of the Biblical teaching; but rather look out from ourselves upon it as a great prospect, framed out of the mountains and plains of the theologies of the Scriptures, and strive to attain a point of view from which we can bring the whole landscape into our field of sight.

From this point of view, we find no difficulty in understanding the relation in which the several disciplines stand to one another, with respect to their contents. The material that Systematics draws from other than Biblical sources may be here left momentarily out of account. The actual contents of the theological results of the exegetic process, of Biblical Theology, and of Systematics, with this limitation, may be said to be the same. The immediate work of exegesis may be compared to the work of a recruiting officer: it draws out from the mass of mankind the men who are to constitute the army. Biblical Theology organizes these men into companies and regiments and

corps, arranged in marching order and accoutered for service. Systematic Theology combines these companies and regiments and corps into an army — a single and unitary whole, determined by its own all-pervasive principle. It, too, is composed of men — the same men which were recruited by Exegetics; but it is composed of these men, not as individuals merely, but in their due relations to the other men of their companies and regiments and corps. The simile is far from a perfect one; but it may illustrate the mutual relations of the disciplines, and also, perhaps, suggest the historical element that attaches to Biblical Theology, and the element of all-inclusive systematization which is inseparable from Systematic Theology. It is just this element, determining the spirit and therefore the methods of Systematic Theology, which, along with its greater inclusiveness, discriminates it from all forms of Biblical Theology, the spirit of which is purely historical.

VI. The place that theology, as the scientific presentation of all the facts that are known concerning God and His relations, claims for itself within the circle of the sciences is an equally high one with that which it claims among the theological disciplines. Whether we consider the topics which it treats, in their dignity, their excellence, their grandeur; or the certainty with which its data can be determined; or the completeness with which its principles have been ascertained and its details classified; or the usefulness and importance of its discoveries: it is as far out of all comparison above all other sciences as the eternal health and destiny of the soul are of more value than this fleeting life in this world. It is not so above them, however, as not to be also a constituent member of the closely interrelated and mutually interacting organism of the sciences. There is no one of them all which is not, in some measure, touched and affected by it, or which is not in some measure included in it. As all nature, whether mental or material, may be conceived of as only the mode in which God manifests Himself, every science which investigates nature and ascertains its laws is occupied with the discovery of the modes of the divine action, and as such might be considered a branch of theology. And, on the other hand, as all nature, whether mental or material, owes its existence to God, every science which investigates nature and ascertains its laws, depends for its foundation upon that science which would make known what God is and what the relations are in

which He stands to the work of His hands and in which they stand to Him; and must borrow from it those conceptions through which alone the material with which it deals can find its explanation or receive its proper significance.

Theology, thus, enters into the structure of every other science. Its closest relations are, no doubt, with the highest of the other sciences, ethics. Any discussion of our duty to God must rest on a knowledge of our relation to Him; and much of our duty to man is undiscoverable, save through knowledge of our common relation to the one God and Father of all, and one Lord the Redeemer of all, and one Spirit the Sanctifier of all — all of which it is the function of theology to supply. This fact is, of course, not fatal to the existence of a natural ethics; but an ethics independent of theological conceptions would be a meager thing indeed, while the theology of the Scriptural revelation for the first time affords a basis for ethical investigation at once broad enough and sure enough to raise that science to its true dignity. Accordingly, a purely natural ethics has always been an incomplete ethics even relatively to the less developed forms of ethics resting on a revealed basis. A careful student has recently told us, for example, that:

Between the ethics of pagan antiquity and that of the Old Testament there is a difference of the widest and most radical kind. There is no trace of gradual transition from the one to the other. That difference is first seen in the pagan conception of God and of man's ethical relation to Him. . . . It was essentially a morality between man and man. For where man's relation to a personal God is not apprehended, anything approaching an universal ethics is impossible, and only individual virtues can be manifested. Ethics was thus deprived of its unity. . . . Morality became but a catalogue of separate virtues, and was deprived of that penetrating bond of union which it receives when the realm of human personalities is bound by innumerable links to the great central personality, God.¹

¹W. S. Bruce, "The Ethics of the Old Testament," 1895, pp. 12-14.

We must not, however, on the ground of this intimacy of relation, confound the two sciences of theology and ethics. Something like it in kind and approaching it in degree exists between theology and every other science, no one of which is so independent of it as not to touch and be touched by it. Something of theology is implicated in all metaphysics and physics alike. It alone can determine the origin of either matter or mind, or of the mystic powers that have been granted to them.¹ It alone can explain the nature of second causes and set the boundaries to their efficiency. It alone is competent to declare the meaning of the ineradicable persuasion of the human mind that its reason is right reason, its processes trustworthy, its intuitions true. All science without God is mutilated science, and no account of a single branch of knowledge can ever be complete until it is pushed back to find its completion and ground in Him. In the eloquent words of Dr. Pusey:

God alone *is* in Himself, and is the Cause and Upholder of everything to which He has given being. Every faculty of the mind is some reflection of His; every truth has its being from Him; every law of nature has the impress of His hand; everything beautiful has caught its light from His eternal beauty; every principle of goodness has its foundation in His attributes. . . . Without Him, in the region of thought, everything is dead; as without Him everything which is, would at once cease to be. All things must speak of God, refer to God, or they are atheistic. History, without God, is a chaos without design, or end, or aim. Political Economy, without God, would be a selfish teaching about the acquisition of wealth, making the larger portion of mankind animate machines for its production; Physics, without God, would be but a dull inquiry into certain meaningless phenomena; Ethics, without God, would be a varying rule,

¹Cf. the ground-texts which Professor Laidlaw has placed at the head of the first division of his "The Bible Doctrine of Man," 1895: "The truth concerning the soul can only be established by the word of God." — Plato, "Timæus," 72 D. "How can the knowledge of the substance of the rational soul be sought or had from philosophy? It must surely be derived from the same divine inspiration from which the substance of the soul first emanated." — Bacon, "De Augmentis Scientiarum," lib. Iv. Cap. Iii. § 3.

without principle, or substance, or centre, or regulating hand; Metaphysics, without God, would make man his own temporary god, to be resolved, after his brief hour here, into the nothingness out of which he proceeded.¹

It is thus as true of sciences as it is of creatures, that in Him they all live and move and have their being. The science of Him and His relations is the necessary ground of all science. All speculation takes us back to Him; all inquiry presupposes Him; and every phase of science consciously or unconsciously rests at every step on the science that makes Him known. Theology, thus, as the science which treats of God, lies at the root of all sciences. It is true enough that each could exist without it, in a sense and in some degree; but through it alone can any one of them reach its true dignity. Herein we see not only the proof of its greatness, but also the assurance of its permanence. “What so permeates all sections and subjects of human thought, has a deep root in human nature and an immense hold upon it. What so possesses man’s mind that he cannot think at all without thinking of it, is so bound up with the very being of intelligence that ere it can perish, intellect must cease to be.”²

It is only in theology, therefore, that the other sciences find their completion. Theology, formally speaking, is accordingly the apex of the pyramid of the sciences by which the structure is perfected. Its relation to the other sciences is, thus, in this broader sphere quite analogous to its relation to the other branches of the theological encyclopedia in that narrower sphere. All other sciences are subsidiary to it, and it builds its fabric out of material supplied by them. Theology is the science which deals with the facts concerning God and His relations with the universe. Such facts include all the facts of nature and history: and it is the very function of the several sciences to supply these facts in scientific, that is, thoroughly comprehended form. Scientific theology thus stands at the head of the sciences as well as at the head of the theological disciplines. The several sciences deal each with its own material in an independent

¹E. B. Pusey, “Collegiate and Professional Teaching and Discipline,” Oxford: Parker, 1854, pp. 215, 216.

²A. M. Fairbairn, “Theology as an Academic Discipline,” in *The Contemporary Review*, li. 1887, p. 202.

spirit and supply a multitude of results not immediately useful to theology. But so far as their results stand related to questions with which theology deals, they exist only to serve her. Dr. Flint well says:

The relevant data of natural theology are all the works of God in nature and providence, all the phenomena and laws of matter, mind, and history, — and these can only be thoroughly ascertained by the special sciences. The surest and most adequate knowledge of them is knowledge in the form called scientific, and therefore in this form the theologian must seek to know them. The sciences which deal with nature, mind, and history hold the same position towards natural theology which the disciplines that treat of the composition, genuineness, authenticity, text, development, etc., of the Scriptures do towards Biblical theology. They inform us, as it were, what is the true text and literal interpretation of the book of creation. Their conclusions are the premisses, or at least the data, of the scientific natural theologian. All reasonings of his which disregard these data are *ipso facto* condemned. A conflict between the results of these sciences and the findings of natural theology is inconceivable. It would be a conflict between the data and conclusions of natural theology, and so equivalent for natural theology to self-contradiction. . . . The religion of the Bible . . . is but one of a multitude of religions which have left traces of themselves in documents, monuments, rites, creeds, customs, institutions, individual lives, social changes, etc.; and there is a theological discipline — comparative theology — which undertakes to disclose the spirit, delineate the character, trace the development, and exhibit the relations of all religions with the utmost attainable exactitude. Obviously the mass of data which this science has to collect, sift, and interpret is enormous. They can only be brought to light and set in their natural relationships by the labours of hosts of specialists of all kinds. . . . Christian dogmatics has to make use of the results of natural theology, Biblical theology, and comparative theology, and to raise them to a higher stage by a comprehensive synthesis which connects

them with the person and work of Christ, as of Him in whom all spiritual truth is comprehended and all spiritual wants supplied.¹

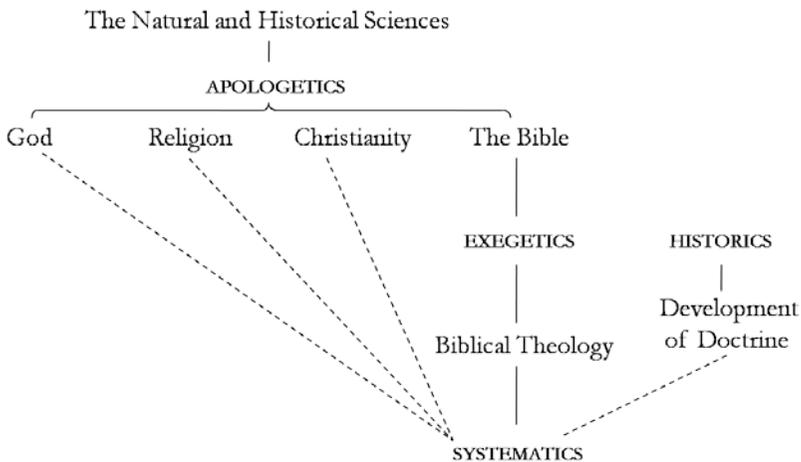
The essence of the matter is here admirably set forth, though as connected with some points of view which may require modification. It would seem to be a mistake, for example, to conceive of scientific theology as the immediate and direct synthesis of the three sources — Natural Theology, Biblical Theology, and Comparative Theology — so that it would be considered the product in like degree or even in similar manner of the three. All three furnish data for the completed structure; but if what has been said in an earlier connection has any validity, Natural and Comparative Theology should stand in a somewhat different relation to Scientific Theology from that which Biblical Theology occupies — a relation not less organic indeed, but certainly less direct. The true representation seems to be that Scientific Theology is related to the natural and historical sciences, not immediately and independently for itself, but only indirectly, that is, through the mediation of the preliminary theological discipline of Apologetics. The work of Apologetics in its three branches of Philosophical, Psychological, and Historical, results not only in presenting the Bible to the theological student, but also in presenting to him God, Religion, and Christianity. And in so doing, it supplies him with the total material of Natural and Comparative Theology as well as with the foundation on which exegesis is to raise the structure of Biblical Theology. The materials thus provided Scientific Theology utilizes, just as it utilizes the results of exegesis through Biblical Theology, and the results of the age-long life of men under Christianity through Historical Theology. Scientific Theology rests, therefore, most directly on the results of Biblical exegesis as provided in Biblical Theology; but avails itself likewise of all the material furnished by all the preceding disciplines, and, in the results of Apologetics as found in Natural Theology and Comparative Theology, of all the data bearing on its problems, supplied by all the sciences. But it does not make its direct appeal crudely and independently to these sciences, any more than to exegesis and Christian history, but as it receives the one set of results from the

¹Article “Theology,” in the “Encyclopedia Britannica,” ninth edition, xxiii. 1888, pp. 264 f.

hands of Exegetics and Historics, so it receives the others from the hand of Apologetics.¹ Systematic Theology is fundamentally one of the theological disciplines, and bears immediate relation only to its sister disciplines; it is only through them that it reaches further out and sets its roots in more remote sources of information.

VII. The interpretation of a written document, intended to convey a plain message, is infinitely easier than the interpretation of the teaching embodied in facts themselves. It is therefore that systematic treatises on the several sciences are written. Theology has, therefore, an immense advantage over all other sciences, inasmuch as it is more an inductive study of facts conveyed in a written revelation, than an inductive study of facts as conveyed in life. It was, consequently, the first-born of the sciences. It was the first to reach relative completeness. And it is to-day in a state far nearer perfection than any other science. This is not, however, to deny that it is a progressive science. In exactly the same sense in which any other science is progressive, this is progressive. It is not meant that new revelations are to be expected of truth which has not been before within the reach of man. There is a vast difference between the progress of a science and increase in its material. All the facts of psychology, for instance, have been in existence so long as mind itself has existed; and the progress of this science has been dependent on

¹It may be useful to seek to give a rough graphic representation of the relations of Systematic Theology as thus far outlined:



the progressive discovery, understanding, and systematization of these facts. All the facts of theology have, in like manner, been within the reach of man for nearly two millenniums; and the progress of theology is dependent on men's progress in gathering, defining, mentally assimilating, and organizing these facts into a correlated system. So long as revelation was not completed, the progressive character of theology was secured by the progress in revelation itself. And since the close of the canon of Scripture, the intellectual realization and definition of the doctrines revealed in it, in relation to one another, have been, as a mere matter of fact, a slow but ever advancing process.

The affirmation that theology has been a progressive science is no more, then, than to assert that it is a science that has had a history — and a history which can be and should be genetically traced and presented. First, the objective side of Christian truth was developed: pressed on the one side by the crass monotheism of the Jews and on the other by the coarse polytheism of the heathen, and urged on by its own internal need of comprehending the sources of its life, Christian theology first searched the Scriptures that it might understand the nature and modes of existence of its God and the person of its divine Redeemer. Then, more and more conscious of itself, it more and more fully wrought out from those same Scriptures a guarded expression of the subjective side of its faith; until through throes and conflicts it has built up the system which we all inherit. Thus the body of Christian truth has come down to us in the form of an organic growth; and we can conceive of the completed structure as the ripened fruit of the ages, as truly as we can think of it as the perfected result of the exegetical discipline. As it has come into our possession by this historic process, there is no reason that we can assign why it should not continue to make for itself a history. We do not expect the history of theology to close in our own day. However nearly completed our realization of the body of truth may seem to us to be; however certain it is that the great outlines are already securely laid and most of the details soundly discovered and arranged; no one will assert that every detail is as yet perfected, and we are all living in the confidence so admirably expressed by old John Robinson, “that God hath more truth yet to break forth from His holy Word.” Just because God gives us the truth in single threads which we must

weave into the reticulated texture, all the threads are always within our reach, but the finished texture is ever and will ever continue to be before us until we dare affirm that there is no truth in the Word which we have not perfectly apprehended, and no relation of these truths as revealed which we have not perfectly understood, and no possibility in clearness of presentation which we have not attained.

The conditions of progress in theology are clearly discernible from its nature as a science. The progressive men in any science are the men who stand firmly on the basis of the already ascertained truth. The condition of progress in building the structures of those great cathedrals whose splendid piles glorify the history of art in the Middle Ages, was that each succeeding generation should build upon the foundations laid by its predecessor. If each architect had begun by destroying what had been accomplished by his forerunners, no cathedral would ever have been raised.¹ The railroad is pushed across the continent by the simple process of laying each rail at the end of the line already laid. The prerequisite of all progress is a clear discrimination which as frankly accepts the limitations set by the truth already discovered, as it rejects the false and bad. Construction is not destruction; neither is it the outcome of destruction. There are abuses no doubt to be reformed; errors to correct; falsehoods to cut away. But the history of progress in every science and no less in theology, is a story of impulses given, corrected, and assimilated. And when they have been once corrected and assimilated, these truths are to remain accepted. It is then time for another impulse, and the condition of all further progress is to place ourselves in this well-marked line of growth. Astronomy, for example, has had such a history; and there are now some indisputable truths in astronomy, as, for instance, the rotundity of the earth and the central place of the sun in our system. I do not say that these truths are undisputed; probably nothing is any more undisputed in astronomy, or any other science, than in theology. At all events he who wishes, may read the elaborate arguments of the “Zetetic” philosophers, as they love to call themselves, who in this year of grace are striving to prove that the earth is flat and occupies the center of our system. Quite in the

¹“Commend me,” says Coleridge, “to the Irish architect who took out the foundation of stone to repair the roof” (“Anima Poetæ,” 1895, p. 139). Such architects seem rather numerous in the sphere of theology.

same spirit, there are “Zetetic” theologians who strive with similar zeal and acuteness to overturn the established basal truths of theology — which, however, can nevermore be shaken; and we should give about as much ear to them in the one science as in the other. It is utter folly to suppose that progress can be made otherwise than by placing ourselves in the line of progress; and if the temple of God’s truth is ever to be completely built, we must not spend our efforts in digging at the foundations which have been securely laid in the distant past, but must rather give our best efforts to rounding the arches, carving the capitals, and fitting in the fretted roof. What if it is not ours to lay foundations? Let us rejoice that that work has been done! Happy are we if our God will permit us to bring a single capstone into place. This fabric is not a house of cards to be built and blown down again a hundred times a day, as the amusement of our idle hours: it is a miracle of art to which all ages and lands bring their varied tribute. The subtle Greek laid the foundations; the law-loving Roman raised high the walls; and all the perspicuity of France and ideality of Germany and systematization of Holland and deep sobriety of Britain have been expended in perfecting the structure; and so it grows.

We have heard much in these last days of the phrase “progressive orthodoxy,” and in somewhat strange connections. Nevertheless, the phrase itself is not an inapt description of the building of this theological house. Let us assert that the history of theology has been and ever must be a progressive orthodoxy. But let us equally loudly assert that progressive orthodoxy and retrogressive heterodoxy can scarcely be convertible terms. Progressive orthodoxy implies that first of all we are orthodox, and secondly that we are progressively orthodox, that is, that we are ever growing more and more orthodox as more and more truth is being established. This has been and must be the history of the advance of every science, and not less, among them, of the science of theology. Justin Martyr, champion of the orthodoxy of his day, held a theory of the intertrinitarian relationship which became heterodoxy after the Council of Nicea; the ever struggling Christologies of the earlier ages were forever set aside by the Chalcedon Fathers; Augustine determined for all time the doctrine of grace, Anselm the doctrine of the atonement, Luther the doctrine of forensic justification. In any

progressive science, the amount of departure from accepted truth which is possible to the sound thinker becomes thus ever less and less, in proportion as investigation and study result in the progressive establishment of an ever increasing number of facts. The physician who would bring back to-day the medicine of Galen would be no more mad than the theologian who would revive the theology of Clement of Alexandria. Both were men of light and leading in their time; but their time is past, and it is the privilege of the child of to-day to know a sounder physic and a sounder theology than the giants of that far past yesterday could attain. It is of the very essence of our position at the end of the ages that we are ever more and more hedged around with ascertained facts, the discovery and establishment of which constitute the very essence of progress. Progress brings increasing limitation, just because it brings increasing knowledge. And as the orthodox man is he that teaches no other doctrine than that which has been established as true, the progressively orthodox man is he who is quick to perceive, admit, and condition all his reasoning by all the truth down to the latest, which has been established as true.

VIII. When we speak of progress our eyes are set upon a goal. And in calling theology a progressive science we unavoidably raise the inquiry, what the end and purpose is towards an ever increasing fitness to secure which it is continually growing. Its own completeness and perfecting as a science — as a department of knowledge — is naturally the proximate goal towards which every science tends. And when we consider the surpassing glory of the subject-matter with which theology deals, it would appear that if ever science existed for its own sake, this might surely be true of this science. The truths concerning God and His relations are, above all comparison, in themselves the most worthy of all truths of study and examination. Yet we must vindicate a further goal for the advance of theology and thus contend for it that it is an eminently practical science. The contemplation and exhibition of Christianity as truth, is far from the end of the matter. This truth is specially communicated by God for a purpose, for which it is admirably adapted. That purpose is to save and sanctify the soul. And the discovery, study, and systematization of the truth is in order that, firmly grasping it and thoroughly comprehending it in all its reciprocal relations, we may be

able to make the most efficient use of it for its holy purpose. Well worth our most laborious study, then, as it is, for its own sake as mere truth, it becomes not only absorbingly interesting, but inexpressibly precious to us when we bear in mind that the truth with which we thus deal constitutes, as a whole, the engrafted Word that is able to save our souls. The task of thoroughly exploring the pages of revelation, soundly gathering from them their treasures of theological teaching, and carefully fitting these into their due places in a system whereby they may be preserved from misunderstanding, perversion, and misuse, and given a new power to convince the understanding, move the heart, and quicken the will, becomes thus a holy duty to our own and our brothers' souls as well as an eager pleasure of our intellectual nature.

That the knowledge of the truth is an essential prerequisite to the production of those graces and the building up of those elements of a sanctified character for the production of which each truth is especially adapted, probably few will deny: but surely it is equally true that the clearer, fuller, and more discriminating this knowledge is, the more certainly and richly will it produce its appropriate effect; and in this is found a most complete vindication of the duty of systematizing the separate elements of truth into a single soundly concatenated whole, by which the essential nature of each is made as clear as it can be made to human apprehension. It is not a matter of indifference, then, how we apprehend and systematize this truth. On the contrary, if we misconceive it in its parts or in its relations, not only do our views of truth become confused and erroneous, but also our religious life becomes dwarfed or contorted. The character of our religion is, in a word, determined by the character of our theology: and thus the task of the systematic theologian is to see that the relations in which the separate truths actually stand are rightly conceived, in order that they may exert their rightful influence on the development of the religious life. As no truth is so insignificant as to have no place in the development of our religious life, so no truth is so unimportant that we dare neglect it or deal deceitfully with it in adjusting it into our system. We are smitten with a deadly fear on the one side, lest by fitting them into a system of our own devising, we cut from them just the angles by which they were intended to lay hold of the hearts of men: but on the other side, we are filled with a

holy confidence that, by allowing them to frame themselves into their own system as indicated by their own natures — as the stones in Solomon’s temple were cut each for its place — we shall make each available for all men, for just the place in the saving process for which it was divinely framed and divinely given.

These theoretical considerations are greatly strengthened by the historical fact, that throughout all the ages every advance in the scientific statement of theological truth has been made in response to a practical demand, and has been made in a distinctly practical interest. We wholly misconceive the facts if we imagine that the development of systematic theology has been the work of cold, scholastic recluses, intent only upon intellectual subtleties. It has been the work of the best heart of the whole Church driving on and utilizing in its practical interests, the best brain. The true state of the case could not be better expressed than it is by Professor Auguste Sabatier, when he tells us that:

The promulgation of each dogma has been imposed on the Church by some practical necessity. It has always been to bring to an end some theological controversy which was in danger of provoking a schism, to respond to attacks or accusations which it would have been dangerous to permit to acquire credit, that the Church has moved in a dogmatic way. . . . Nothing is more mistaken than to represent the Fathers of the Councils, or the members of the Synods as theoreticians, or even as professional theologians, brought together in conference by speculative zeal alone, in order to resolve metaphysical enigmas. They were men of action, not of speculation; courageous priests and pastors who understood their mission, like soldiers in open battle, and whose first care was to save their Church, its life, its unity, its honor — ready to die for it as one dies for his country.¹

In quite similar manner one of the latest critics (M. Pannier) of Calvin’s doctrinal work feels moved to bear his testimony to the practical purpose which ruled over the development of his system. He says:

¹A. Sabatier, “Esquisse d’une philosophie de la religion,” 1897, p. 306; cf. “The Vitality of Christian Dogmas,” London, 1898, pp. 31-33.

In the midst, as at the outset of his work, it was the practical preoccupations of living faith which guided him, and never a vain desire for pure speculation. If this practical need led [in the successive editions of the “Institutes”] to some new theories, to many fuller expositions of principles, this was not only because he now desired his book to help students of theology to interpret Scripture better — it was because, with his systematic genius, Calvin understood all that which, from the point of view of their application, ideas gain severally in force by forming a complete whole around one master thought.¹

Wrought out thus in response to practical needs, the ever growing body of scientific theology has worked its way among men chiefly by virtue of its ever increasing power of meeting their spiritual requirements. The story of the victory of Augustinianism in Southern Gaul, as brought out by Professor Arnold of Breslau, is only a typical instance of what each age has experienced in its own way, and with its own theological advances. He warns us that the victory of Augustinianism is not to be accounted for by the learning or dialectic gifts of Augustine, nor by the vigorous propaganda kept up in Gaul by the African refugees, nor by the influence of Cæsarius, deservedly great as that was, nor by the pressure brought to bear from Rome: but rather by the fullness of its provision for the needs of the soul.

These were better met by Christianity than by heathenism; by Catholicism than by Arianism; by the enthusiasm of asceticism than by the lukewarm worldliness of the old opponents of monachism: and they found more strength and consolation in the fundamental Augustinian conception of divine grace, than in the paltry mechanism of the synergistic moralism.²

¹Jacques Pannier, “Le Témoignage du Saint-Esprit,” 1893, p. 79.

²C. F. Arnold, “Caesarius von Arelate,” 1894, p. 343.

Here is the philosophy, *sub specie temporis*, of the advance of doctrinal development; and it all turns on the progressively growing fitness of the system of doctrine to produce its practical fruits.¹

It may possibly be thought, however, that these lessons are ill-applied to systematic theology properly so called: that it may be allowed indeed that the separate truths of religion make themselves felt in the life of men, but scarcely that the systematic knowledge of them is of any value for the religious life. Surely, however, we may very easily fall into error here. We do not possess the separate truths of religion in the abstract: we possess them only in their relations, and we do not properly know any one of them — nor can it have its full effect on our life — except as we know it in its relations to other truths, that is, as systematized. What we do not know, in this sense, systematically, we rob of half its power on our conduct; unless, indeed, we are prepared to argue that a truth has effect on us in proportion as it is unknown, rather than in proportion as it is known. To which may be added that when we do not know a body of doctrine systematically, we are sure to misconceive the nature of more or fewer of its separate elements; and to fancy, in the words of Dr. Charles Hodge, “that that is true which a more systematic knowledge would show us to be false,” so that “our religious belief and therefore our religious life would become deformed and misshapen.” Let us once more, however, strengthen our theoretical opinion by testimony: and for this let us appeal to the witness of a recent French writer who supports his own judgment by that of several of the best informed students of current French Protestantism.² Amid much external activity of Christian work, M. Arnaud tells us, no one would dare say that the life lived with Christ in God is flourishing in equal measure: and his conclusion is that, “in

¹It is only another way of saying this to say with Professor W. M. Ramsay, when speaking of another of the great controversies (*The Expositor*, January, 1896 [Fifth Series, iii.], p. 52): “Difficult, however, as it is to appreciate the real character of the Arian controversy as a question of social life, on the whole we gather, I think, that the progressive tendencies were on the side of Basil, and acquiescence in the existing standard of morality characterized the Arian point of view. The ‘Orthodox’ Church was still the champion of higher aspirations, and Basil, however harsh he was to all who differed from him, was an ennobling and upward-struggling force in the life of his time.”

²Arnaud, “Manuel de dogmatique,” 1890, p. ix.

order to be a strong and living Christian, it does not suffice to submit our heart and will to the gospel: we must submit also our mind and our reason.” “The doctrines of Christianity,” he adds:

The doctrines of Christianity have just as much right to be believed as its duties have to be practised, and it is not permissible to accept these and reject those. In neglecting to inquire with care into the Biblical verities, and to assimilate them by reflection, the Christian loses part of his virtue, the preacher part of his force; both build their house on the sand or begin at the top; they deprive themselves of the precious lights which can illuminate and strengthen their faith, and fortify them against the frivolous or learned unbelief as well as against the aberrations of false individualism, that are so diffused in our day.

In support of this judgment he quotes striking passages, among others, from Messrs. F. Bonifas and Ch. Bois. The former says:¹

What strikes me to-day is the incomplete and fragmentary character of our faith: the lack of precision in our Christian conceptions; a certain ignorance of the wonderful things which God has done for us and which He has revealed to us for the salvation and nourishment of our souls. I discover the traces of this ignorance in our preaching as well as in our daily life. And here is one of the causes of the feebleness of spiritual life in the bosom of our flocks and among ourselves. To these fluid Christian convictions, there necessarily corresponds a lowered Christian life.

Mark Bois similarly says:²

There does not at present exist among us a strongly concatenated body of doctrine, possessing the conscience and determining the will. We have convictions, no doubt, and even strong and active convictions, but they are, if I may so speak, isolated and merely juxtaposed in the mind, without any deep

¹“De la valeur religieuse des doctrines chrétiennes,” p. 14.

²*Revue théologique* de Montauban, 13^e Année, p. 14.

bond uniting them into an organism. . . . Upon several fundamental points, even among believers, there is a vagueness, an indetermination, which leave access open to every fluctuation and to the most unexpected mixtures of belief. Contradictory elements often live together and struggle with one another, even in the most positively convinced, without their suspecting the enmity of the guests they have received into their thought. It is astonishing to observe the strange amalgams which spring up and acclimate themselves in the minds of the young theological generations, which have been long deprived of the strong discipline of the past. This incoherence of ideas produces weakness and danger elsewhere also, besides in the sphere of doctrine. It is impossible but that spiritual life and practical activity should sustain also serious damage from this intellectual anarchy.

Cannot we see in the state of French Protestantism as depicted in these extracts, a warning to ourselves, among whom we may observe the beginnings of the same doctrinal anarchy? And shall we not, at least, learn this much: that doctrine is in order to life, and that the study of doctrine must be prosecuted in a spirit which would see its end in the correction and edification of life? Shall we not, as students of doctrine, listen devoutly to the words of one of the richest writers on experimental religion of our generation,¹ when he tells us that

Living knowledge of our living Lord, and of our need of Him, and of our relations to Him for peace, life, testimony, service, consistency, is given by the Holy Comforter alone. But it is given by Him in the great rule of His dealings with man, only through the channel of doctrine, of revealed, recorded, authenticated truth concerning the Lord of life.

And shall we not catch the meaning of the illustrations which he adds:

¹Principal H. C. G. Moule, in his paper entitled "On the Relations Between Doctrine and Life," printed in "The Church and her Doctrine" (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1892), pp. 185-188.

Does the happy soul, happy because brought to the “confidence of self- despair,” and to a sight of the foundation of all peace, find itself saying, “O Lamb of God, I come,” and know that it falls, never to be cast out, into the embraces of ever-living love? Every element in that profound experience of restful joy has to do with doctrine, applied by the Spirit. “O Lamb of God” would be a meaningless incantation were it not for the precious and most definite doctrine of the sacrifice of propitiation and peace. That I may “come just as I am” is a matter of pure Divine information. My emotions, my deepest and most awful convictions, without such information, say the opposite; my instinct is to cry, “Depart, for I am a sinful man.” The blessed doctrine, not my reveries, says, “Nay; He was wounded for thy transgressions; come unto Him.” . . . And when [one] . . . draws towards the journey’s end, and exchanges the trials of the pilgrimage for the last trial, “the river that hath no bridge,” why does he address himself in peace to die, this man who has been taught the evil of his own heart and the holiness of the Judge of all? It is because of doctrine. He knows the covenant of peace, and the Mediator of it. He knows, and he knows it through revealed doctrine only, that to depart is to be with Christ, and is far better. He knows that the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But he knows, with the same certainty, that God giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ; and that His sheep shall never perish; and that He will raise up again at the last day him that has come to God through Him. All this is doctrine. It is made to live in the man by the Holy Ghost given to him. But it is in itself creed, not life. It is revealed information.

If such be the value and use of doctrine, the systematic theologian is preeminently a preacher of the gospel; and the end of his work is obviously not merely the logical arrangement of the truths which come under his hand, but the moving of men, through their power, to love God with all their hearts and their neighbors as themselves; to choose their portion with the Saviour of their souls; to find and hold Him precious; and to recognize and yield to the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit whom He has sent. With such truth as

this he will not dare to deal in a cold and merely scientific spirit, but will justly and necessarily permit its preciousness and its practical destination to determine the spirit in which he handles it, and to awaken the reverential love with which alone he should investigate its reciprocal relations. For this he needs to be suffused at all times with a sense of the unspeakable worth of the revelation which lies before him as the source of his material, and with the personal bearings of its separate truths on his own heart and life; he needs to have had and to be having a full, rich, and deep religious experience of the great doctrines with which he deals; he needs to be living close to his God, to be resting always on the bosom of his Redeemer, to be filled at all times with the manifest influences of the Holy Spirit. The student of systematic theology needs a very sensitive religious nature, a most thoroughly consecrated heart, and an outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon him, such as will fill him with that spiritual discernment, without which all native intellect is in vain. He needs to be not merely a student, not merely a thinker, not merely a systematizer, not merely a teacher — he needs to be like the beloved disciple himself in the highest, truest, and holiest sense, a divine.