



Our Daily Bread  
University

# THEOLOGY DEFINITIONS

UPDATED

MAY 10, 2019

[www.ChristianUniversity.org](http://www.ChristianUniversity.org)

## WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

The word *theology* comes from two Greek words: *theos* (meaning "God") and *logos* ( meaning "word" or "study of"). Together these words refer to "the study of God." And while the study of theology seeks to know Who God is and what He has said to us, several other topics of interest fall under the discipline of theological studies. Below you will find several entries that reflect the vast landscape that the study of theology seeks to address.

## SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

The term *systematic* is taken from the Greek word *sunitano*, which carries the idea of "to organize" or "stand together." The apostle Paul viewed doctrine, or theology, as an anchor to the soul of the true believer. Of this he writes, "holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9 NKJV).

Not only are we to learn Bible doctrine for ourselves, but we are also to teach others in order to ground them in the Word: "But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). Because Bible study requires cross-referencing of verses on the same truth, the effective use of systematic theology can be helpful. This discipline should be part of the background for every Bible student.

In order to familiarize ourselves with this field of study, therefore, let us read what some theologians have to say about systematic theology.

Charles Hodge wrote, "The Bible is no more a system of theology, than nature is a system of chemistry or of mechanics. We find in nature the facts which the chemist or the mechanical philosopher has to examine, and from them to ascertain the laws by which they are determined. So the Bible contains the truths which the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit in their internal relation to each other . . . to vindicate them and show their harmony and consistency" (1981).

Systematic theology is not a science in the sense of chemistry and physics. Nonetheless, it requires a system of understanding as science does. Placing a much-needed emphasis on harmony and consistency, systematic theology should be painstaking in showing respect for the context and intent of each Bible verse it enlists to support a larger Bible truth.

A more simplified definition has been provided by Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary: "Systematic Theology may be defined as the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of all facts and every source concerning God and His works" (1947, 1:6).

Chafer has seen that systematic theology deals with "all facts and every source concerning God and His works." Even doctrines on sin and demonology will only make sense if they are connected to the person and work of the Creator and redemptive God of the Bible.

Millard Erickson, author of *Christian Theology*, makes this observation:

A systematic theology of the Bible in order to be faithful to the text and contemporary life experience must have five major aspects: 1. It should use time-tested tools for biblical interpretation, 2. It must provide a coherent system which draws on all of Scripture, 3. It ought to be relevant to contemporary culture through different fields such as philosophy and psychology, 4. It must be contemporary, addressing key trends and issues in our current time, 5. It must be life related, addressing truth to life experience. (1983, 1:17-149)

The goal of systematic theology is not just to proclaim the truths of the Bible but also to apply them to thought and life experience. What matters in this process is letting Scripture rule over a contemporary subject and not the opposite.

The central categories of systematic theology are: theology proper (doctrine of God); bibliology (doctrine of the Bible); Christology (doctrine of Christ); pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit); angelology (doctrine of angels); demonology (doctrine of demons); anthropology (doctrine of man); hamartiology (doctrine of sin); soteriology (doctrine of salvation); ecclesiology (doctrine of the church); and eschatology (doctrine of the end times).

Each systematic scheme may claim truth. At best, each system is an attempt for approximating it. Only the Bible itself is inerrant and eternal in its witness to the truth.

For further reading, see *Systematic Theology* by Charles Hodge; *Systematic Theology* by Lewis Sperry Chafer; *Christian Theology* by Millard Erickson; and *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns (pp. 149-429).

## **ARMINIAN THEOLOGY**

Arminian theology is that doctrinal system developed by Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) in protest against the teachings of John Calvin (1509-1564). Because of this, we will examine Arminian theology in comparison to Reformed theology, specifically Calvinism. In essence, Calvinism stresses the sovereignty of God and Arminianism emphasizes the free will of man.

Calvin's five points can be simplified for memory by the acrostic TULIP: **T**otal Depravity, **U**nconditional Election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rresistible Grace, and **P**erseverance of the Saints. (For more information on Calvinism, see "Calvinistic Theology.")

These five Calvinistic assertions were challenged by the five points held by Arminius which are as follows: Election Based on Knowledge, Unlimited Atonement, Natural Ability, Prevenient Grace, and Conditional Perseverance. Here is a brief explanation of each point.

### **DEPRAVITY**

*Total Depravity* (Calvin): Humans are spiritually dead, and their sinfulness extends to every aspect of their being to such an extent that they must be supernaturally regenerated through the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit *before* they can accept God's gracious gift of salvation.

*Natural Ability* (Arminius): Man cannot save himself but *can believe* the gospel. The Holy Spirit works with the person's faith to affect new birth.

### **ELECTION**

*Unconditional Election* (Calvin): In eternity past, God chose a precise group of human individuals to be saved. His choices were not in any way based on what they would do or on His foreknowledge of what they would believe.

*Election Based on Knowledge* (Arminius): God elected those whom He knew of their own free will would believe in Christ and persevere in the faith.

### **ATONEMENT**

*Limited Atonement* (Calvin): Christ died only for the elect, not for the rest of humanity.

*Unlimited Atonement* (Arminius): In His atonement, Christ provided redemption for mankind, making all mankind savable. However, Christ's atonement becomes effective *only* in those who believe.

## CALL

*Irresistible Grace* (Calvin): Those God has elected cannot reject the gospel or resist the Holy Spirit's supernatural work of regeneration and sanctification.

*Prevenient Grace* (Arminius): The preparatory work of the Holy Spirit enables believers to respond to the gospel and cooperate with God in salvation. However, a sinner *can* say "no" to the call of God for salvation.

## PERSEVERANCE

*Perseverance of the Saints* (Calvin): Because the elect are sovereignly chosen and their faith divinely enabled, they will continue in faith to the end of their lives and go to heaven.

*Conditional Perseverance* (Arminius): Believers have been empowered to live a victorious life, but they are capable of turning from grace and losing their salvation.

The emphasis on human free will in salvation and sanctification underlies each of the major points of Arminianism. The basis for believers' election is their own free choice to trust Christ as Savior. In the past, God's foreknowledge enabled Him to see exactly when the believer would express saving faith. This means that the Arminian evangelist is not looking for only the elect to respond but that "whosoever will may come."

The Arminian view teaches that Jesus Christ died on the cross for every sin committed by every human being who has ever lived. However, only saving faith can apply Christ's atonement to the sinner. Arminius believed that man cannot save himself, but he can freely exercise faith and choose to believe in Christ. Therefore, in a witnessing situation, Arminians often appeal to the sinner's will to be freely used in salvation.

Also, in the evangelistic offer of salvation, Arminianism teaches that God's call to respond most definitely can be resisted by the unbeliever. However, prevenient grace prepares the repentant sinner to freely trust Christ at salvation. "Prevenient grace" refers to the grace given by God prior to a sinner freely exercising saving faith in Jesus Christ. The term is used in contrast to "irresistible grace" held by the Calvinist.

Finally, the Arminian view teaches that free will demands the possibility of a Christian choosing against God and losing one's salvation. Arminians do not believe the Christian life will be unspotted by sin or lived in perfect obedience. However, when a believer willfully turns against God, denies the faith, and lives in an unrepentant state of rebellion, this former believer will be condemned to hell along with unbelievers. Some aspire to a state of "sinless perfection" in which disobedience is no longer part of one's spiritual life.

Some major Protestant denominations that hold to an Arminian theology include Anglican or Episcopalian, Wesleyan, Methodist, Nazarene, Holiness Movement, Pentecostal, and Free Will Baptist. (Some have observed that the Christian thinker C. S. Lewis was quite Arminian in his theology.)

For further reading, see *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns (pp. 517-30); and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arminianism>

## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

The term *biblical theology* is used to describe an historic method by which truth is examined within each of the specific books of the Old and New Testaments. Charles Ryrie has defined biblical theology as "that branch of theological science which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible" (1959, 12). This differs from systematic theology, which studies doctrines under certain topics, and historical theology, which traces the development of theology as understood over 2,000 years of church history.

## Old Testament Theology

*Edenic Era:* Recorded in the book of Genesis, this theme of beginnings tells the story of an all-powerful, holy God who created the world out of nothing. Men and women, the apex of God's creation, sinned through choosing to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God graciously intervened and promised a Savior who would provide forgiveness of sin, the defeat of Satan, and the reestablishment of God's righteous rule.

*Noahic Era:* This portion of the Bible records the further depravity of humankind, which results in God's righteous judgment on a rebellious race. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord and he and his family were spared from a great flood through the building of an ark. Noah had three sons—Ham, Shem, and Jephtha. Shem was prophesied to be the progenitor of God's chosen people who would give the world the promised Messiah.

*Patriarchic Era:* The promised kingdom gains greater focus through the call of Abram to follow God from Ur of the Chaldees to the Promised Land. Abram is given a covenant with God that is unconditional and everlasting: to call out a special people for His name. It includes a land, descendants, and blessing through redemption (Gen. 12:1-3). The Patriarchic Era includes the life stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their offspring.

*Mosaic Era:* Joseph is instrumental in saving his extended family from a famine by offering them refuge in Egypt. In the generations that followed, the children of Israel multiplied mightily and a Pharaoh arose who did not remember the favored status of Joseph in Egypt. In order to subjugate the Jews, Pharaoh enslaved them. In response to the cries of His people, God revealed Himself to Moses and sent him to deliver the Jews through a series of miracles. Leading the Hebrews to Mt. Sinai, Moses ascended the mountain to receive God's Ten Commandments. The nation of Israel was established and a system of blood atonement was set up through the tabernacle and attending Levitical priesthood.

*Monarchical Era:* The Jewish people did not want to be ruled by the invisible God of their fathers but asked for a king. God provided Saul, but Saul was prone to disobey and lost his right to the throne. In his place, God selected David, a man after His own heart. Through David, God established an eternal Davidic covenant and throne. David's line shows a series of ungodly kings resulting in a divided kingdom (Israel and Judah) and exile to Assyria and Babylon. While in captivity, the Hebrews recommitted themselves to the one true God and His Law.

*Prophetic Era:* Beginning with the anointing of the first king in Israel until the last prophetic voice of Malachi, the prophets fulfilled important roles in ancient Israel. Isaiah predicted the future arrival of the Suffering Servant who would redeem Israel. Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant yet to come. Ezekiel looked into the future and saw a renewal of true worship. Daniel interpreted visions describing future empires that would eventually mark the return of the Messiah and the end of world. Joel spoke in dramatic pictures of the future day of the Lord. Zechariah reinforced the future expectation of the Messiah.

## New Testament Theology

*Synoptics:* Three of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—describe the events in Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension in remarkably similar and complementary ways. The Greek word *soon* means "together with" and *optikos* means "to see;" hence, "to see together."

*Autopic:* John has been called the autopic gospel because it has very different themes and content than the other three gospels. *Autos* means "by itself" and *optikos* means "to see;" hence, "to see by itself." An example of one of the unique themes would be the "I AM" references of Christ: the Light of the World, the resurrection and the life, etc.

*Acts:* This important book in the New Testament traces the development of the church from a small Jewish sect to an ever-expanding, largely Gentile fellowship as a worldwide movement. Important theological themes are the gospel of grace versus Jewish legalism, grace offered to Gentiles of faith, the *kerygma* or core teaching of the gospel through Christ, the establishment of church order, and the witness of the Holy Spirit.

*James:* This epistle was written by Jesus's half-brother James. It shows a great familiarity with the Old Testament and stresses obedience to the Word of God. It was written to encourage Jewish believers who faced persecution. Sometimes James's emphasis on works is contrasted with Paul's emphasis on faith. However, both are two sides of the same coin. A true saving faith will evidence itself in good works and witness.

*Paul:* This apostle wrote the majority of the New Testament letters. Paul's extraordinary missionary efforts most likely span from AD 46 to 67. As he established believing communities in key cities, he wrote inspired letters that bear the name of the city or the person to which they were written. These include Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and Romans, which contain themes on Soteriology and Eschatology; Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, which present different aspects of Christology; and finally, Titus and Timothy, instructing them on church order.

*Hebrews:* Some have attributed this epistle to Paul, while others think Apollos may have been its author. Hebrews was written to Christian Jews who had experienced persecution and needed encouragement to persevere in their faith. The author cites numerous elements from the Old Testament such as the tabernacle and priesthood as illustrations of the redemptive work completed in Jesus Christ. Hebrews is valued for its marvelous insights into Christology, salvation, and sanctification.

*Peter and Jude:* Peter, the leader of the apostles, wrote two epistles. The first addresses a godly response to persecution. Quieting false accusations through exemplary living and perseverance are central to his exhortations. The second epistle affirms the Word of God and warns against false teachers and antinomianism (lawless living). It also references the activity of good and evil angels in spiritual warfare and the return of Christ. Interestingly, Jude, a half-brother of Jesus, has written an epistle with similar content to 2 Peter. This short epistle examines Christology, Soteriology, and Angelology.

*John:* The apostle John gave us his gospel record of Christ, three letters that bear his name, and a book on future things often called the Apocalypse or the book of Revelation. As mentioned earlier, John's record of Christ's life is different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is more thematic and theological. The "I AM's" of Christ are seen by many as God's self-revelation from the burning bush to Moses. John's epistles address—in simple but profound language—descriptors of what should characterize the loving, godly, and growing Christian. John's final book, Revelation, was written when he was exiled on the Isle of Patmos. It is filled with many stark symbols of God's judgment and the end of the world. Many Bible scholars see strong parallels between John's view of the future and prophecies made centuries earlier by Daniel.

Through biblical theology, we study God's revelation within the context of each author's inspired book. The goal in doing this is to see with greater clarity each author's intent in context.

For further reading, see *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* by Charles Ryrie (pp. 441-42); *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns (pp. 21-146); and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_theology)

## REFORMED THEOLOGY

Calvinism is the main branch of the Reformed movement within Protestantism. The name Calvinism is derived from John Calvin (1509-1564), the systematic theologian whose influence came to dominate the Reformed movement, both through his writing and the influence of Geneva, his adopted hometown, as a hub of Protestant education and evangelism.

The Reformed/Calvinist branch of the Protestant Reformation held three foundational theological principles: *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture is the primary authority for the Christian); *Sola Fide/Gratia* (justification is entirely by faith, through grace); and the *Priesthood of the Believer*.

These three foundational principles involved, among other things, the rejection of: papal authority, the saving merit of indulgences and good works, the mediation of Mary and the saints, the confessional, all sacraments except Baptism and the Lord's Supper, transubstantiation, purgatory, and prayers for the dead. The central organizing principle of Calvinism is the sovereignty and glory of God: *Soli Deo Gloria*. Calvin was deeply influenced by Augustine of Hippo's philosophical approach to the interpretation of Scripture. Calvin was one of the most systematic in setting forth the implications of predestination and applying them.

The principles of Calvinism were officially established at the Synod of Dort in 1618- 19 in response to the Remonstrants, a group that followed the Dutch Reformed theologian Jacob Arminius. (Those who followed Arminius's theology emphasizing human free will were later referred to as Arminians).

The basic principles of Calvinism have since become associated with the acronym TULIP: **T**otal Depravity, **U**nconditional Election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rresistible Grace, and **P**erseverance of the Saints.

*Total Depravity:* Humans are spiritually dead, and their sinfulness extends to every aspect of their being to such an extent that they must be supernaturally regenerated through the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit before they can accept God's gracious gift of salvation.

*Unconditional Election:* In eternity past, God chose a precise group of human individuals to be saved, and He consigned the rest to be objects of His wrath. His choices were not in any way based on what they would do or on His foreknowledge of what they would do.

*Limited Atonement:* Christ died only for the elect, not for the rest of humanity.

*Irresistible Grace:* Those God has elected cannot reject the gospel or resist the Holy Spirit's supernatural work of regeneration and sanctification.

*Perseverance of the Saints:* Because the elect are sovereignly chosen and their faith divinely enabled, they will continue in faith to the end of their lives and go to heaven.

On the basis of normal rules of biblical interpretation, however, some passages of Scripture seem to be in tension with the Calvinistic emphasis on God's sovereignty versus human free will (Isa. 6:8; 53:5-6; Matt. 23:37; John 3:16; 21:17; 1 Tim. 2:1-6; 4:9-10; Heb. 12:14-15; 1 Peter 5:8; 2 Peter 1:10; 2:1; 3:9; 1 John 2:2; etc.). Denominations that hold to Calvinistic theology include Reformed, Presbyterian, and some Baptists.

For further reading, see Zondervan's *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (pp. 177-82); <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism>; and *The Moody Theology Handbook* by Paul Enns (pp. 503-16).

## CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

The term *contemporary theology* may refer to those major strands of Christian thought that have been influenced by The Enlightenment and those who followed in its stream of thought. The Enlightenment, or Age of Reason (1650-1750), was a movement among European intellectuals who sought to rationally reform church and state through challenging traditional ideas and social structures. Its roots can be found in the Renaissance which preceded it. Around the same time as the Reformation, the rediscovery of ancient Greek rational and scientific thought were used to challenge many of the religious ideas of the Medieval Period. A Renaissance (1350-1650), a "new birth" of rationality, scientific exploration, and humanism began to blossom in Continental Europe. Leading thinkers of the Renaissance began to argue for the sufficiency of human reason to solve the problems of the human race.

In the Enlightenment that followed (1650-1750), key thinkers continued to promote a reason-centered philosophy and worldview. "Enlightened" philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, and Hegel became influential in reforming thought based on reason, humanism, and an optimistic view of progress. Contemporary theology has been influenced by these thinkers and others who followed.

### Liberal Theology

In general, the term *liberal theology* refers to the school of thought that seeks to critique traditional orthodox Christian doctrines based on reason. The focus of liberal religious scrutiny has been the supernatural truth claims of Christianity. From the time of Christ, Christians have believed that God become a man in Christ, was born of a virgin, died and rose again, and ascended to heaven. These beliefs, which go against a reductionist view of science, were seen to be out of step with a secular view of reality. Therefore, a number of Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson rejected them. Nonetheless, major theologians in the liberal camp did not want to dismiss all of the Christian faith *en toto*.

They saw the value that religious belief had on making a society more stable and for bolstering the criminal justice system. The problem was how to reject the miraculous in Christianity while retaining the meaning and moral guidance it provided. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1763-1834) rejected many of the traditional doctrines of Christianity and instead argued for the believer experiencing God based on feeling. Similarly, theologian Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) did not accept the supernatural witness of the Bible but argued that Christianity should provide moral values by which to live. He saw a distinction between real history and *geschichte*, that is, the story of religious myth found in the Bible. In concert with these thoughts, a new discipline of "biblical criticism" began to critique the Bible book by book based on rationalism, cross-comparison with ancient literature that influenced its composition, and with an assumption that all miraculous reports are myth. As a result, liberal theology often questioned the authorship of books of the Bible and dismissed their supernatural claims as later additions added by a community of faith.

### Neoorthodoxy

The term *neoorthodoxy* means the "new orthodoxy." While this sounds like a fresh affirmation of established Christian truths, there are a number of sharp distinctions that set neoorthodoxy apart from traditional orthodox Christian belief.

Karl Barth, the father of neoorthodoxy, was a pastor trained in the theological liberalism of Continental Europe. Ministering to people who had suffered the savagery and heartbreak of World War I, he found that his cold, rational and moralistic version of Christianity did not meet the needs of people



in his parish. In frustration, Barth turned to the pages of Scripture to find answers. There he said he discovered a “new world” of insight.

After much study, Karl Barth published his *Commentary on Romans* in 1919. The reaction in the theological world was revolutionary. Barth had adopted as his hermeneutic the dialectical thought of Soren Kierkegaard, who viewed Scripture as containing many different self-contradictory truths or paradoxes. For example, God loved Abram and condemned the practice of child sacrifice. Yet, as a test of faith, he commanded Abram to take his son Isaac and offer him up as a sacrifice on an altar. Kierkegaard concluded that since scriptural truth could not be grasped rationally, it must be embraced through a leap of faith. Barth took this concept and began to develop a theology that saw truth as coming to the believer by the Holy Spirit’s power in subjective experience and not by the objective words of the Bible. In this way, Karl Barth was able to retain a higher critical view of Scripture in which he viewed the objective record as prone to error. But Barth taught that the Bible’s spiritual truth was preserved by *experiencing* it through the Holy Spirit. The Bible became central again to the Christian life, not with objective propositional truth claims, but an individual subjective experience of spiritual truth.

A variety of other theologians would follow. Many of them would not have as high a view of experiencing spiritual truth as did Barth; but the label *neoorthodoxy* has been applied to many of them. Some of these would include Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, and John A. T. Robinson.

## Liberation Theology

Clearly, from the Russian Revolution of 1917 until the Berlin Wall’s destruction in 1989, Marxism has been a global movement challenging the existing social structures of many countries. Marx believed that class struggle between the “haves and have-nots” would continue until a worldwide system of communism enforced economic resources to be shared among all. To realize this proletariat dream of the future would require revolution in which the workers would take over the means of production in each nation and establish an international system of socialism.

Ideas have a way of moving from one discipline into another. And this is true of Marxism and theology. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann was influenced by Marxist ideology while studying theology at the University of Tübingen. Carrying on Marxist-Christian dialogue, Moltmann published his book *Theology of Hope* in 1967. Over the course of the years, he emphasized that the church is to be used by God to reconcile the rich and poor and the different races. The believer is to challenge unjust social structures and to seek to change them (in some cases even by revolution). This stream of thought has become known as liberation theology.

In response to Moltmann’s ideas, a number of influential theologians have added to his thought. James H. Cone is a leading African American thinker who has applied liberation theology to the interests of oppressed blacks. He has written *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Gustavo Gutierrez, professor of theology in Lima, Peru, has raised social awareness from a Latin American viewpoint in *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Other Latino liberation scholars include Jose Miguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo, and Jose Porfirio Miranda.

## Dispensational Theology

Theologian Charles Ryrie has summarized dispensational theology in this way: "Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His 'household world' God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies" (1995).

The contemporary influence of a dispensational approach to the Bible is traceable to C. I. Scofield, whose published reference Bible became popular in the 20th century. This was largely due to its "layman friendly" explanations of different time periods in biblical history and helpful interpretive footnotes. It also correlated unfulfilled prophecies with the modern world appealing to the "any moment return" of Jesus Christ for His bride, the church. The *Scofield Reference Bible* has significantly influenced recent generations with a dispensational view of Scripture.

Theologically, there are two aspects to a dispensation. First, it is a "stewardship" (*oikonomia*), in which humanity is given a test of obedience to the revealed will of God (Luke 16:1-13). Second, it is an "age" (*aión*) or time period of testing followed by divine judgment for man's disobedience (Matt. 28:20).

While there are a variety of dispensational views, Scofield saw seven dispensations in the Bible:

- Man Innocent (from creation to expulsion from Eden)
- Man under Conscience (from Eden to Flood)
- Man in Authority over the Earth (Noah to Abraham)
- Man under Promise (Abraham to Moses)
- Man under Law (Moses to Christ)
- Man under Grace (death of Christ to the Rapture)
- Man under the Personal Reign of Christ (millennial reign of Christ)

Strong proponents of a dispensational approach to the Bible claim that it offers a consistent way of interpreting Scripture, respects a distinction between Israel and the church, and places God's glory as the ultimate purpose of the world.

Critics of dispensationalism are often found among those who believe in covenant theology. Covenant theologians see Scripture organized around two great covenants. The first is *The Covenant of Works*, which failed with the people of the Old Testament times. From the time of the New Testament, *The Covenant of Grace* is being offered to all who will believe in the gospel of Christ. Covenant theology sees one people of God in both Old and New Testament, while dispensational theology sees a sharp distinction between Israel and the church.

Critics of dispensationalism sometimes accuse the system of being a new development in church history. The reason for this is that the teachings of John Nelson Darby (AD 1800-1882) were a major influence on C. I. Scofield. In response to this objection, dispensationalists cite Scripture and key historic figures such as Justin Martyr (AD 110-165), Irenaeus (AD 130-200), Augustine (AD 354-430), and others whom they claim held views very similar to contemporary dispensationalism.

Some examples of denominations that have been impacted by dispensational theology are Plymouth Brethren, Grace Brethren, Bible chapels, Bible churches, Independent Baptist churches, and

Independent Fundamental churches. Some academic institutions with dispensational theology are Dallas Theological Seminary, Grace Theological Seminary, and Moody Bible Institute. A contemporary popularizer of a form of dispensational prophecy has been the *Left Behind* book and film series.

**Note:** A recent innovation of dispensational theology merits a brief comment. *Progressive Dispensationalism* is: "a mediating position ... [which] seeks to retain a natural understanding of the prophetic Scriptures that appears to assign a significant role to the nation Israel in the future. It also sees the program of God as unified *within* history, in agreement with nondispensationalists, and it denies a radical discontinuity between the present church-age and the messianic kingdom promises" (Saucy 1993, 27).

For further reading see, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns (pp. 547-63); *Scofield Reference Bible*; and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispensationalism>

## EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

*Orthodox* means in the Greek language "correct belief." The Orthodox Church believes it is the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." The term *catholic* comes from the Greek word *katholika* or universal. Eastern Orthodox Churches are comprised of geographic areas in Eastern and Southeastern Europe: Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus.

Although they have many similarities, the Orthodox Church views itself as differing from the Roman Catholic Church. Like the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox believers trace their origins in an unbroken line of authoritative bishops back to the original apostles.

They recognize the authority of seven Nicene councils going up to the year AD 787. Many of the early councils defined the doctrines of Christ, Trinity, canon of Scripture, and other vital beliefs.

Many doctrines are shared by both Roman Catholics and Orthodox. So then why are Roman Catholic churches and Orthodox churches divided from each other today? Near the end of the first millennium of the Christian era, theological and political tensions between Roman Catholicism in the West and Eastern Orthodoxy in the East resulted in what has been called the Great Schism in 1054.

A central point of disagreement was the *filioque*, Latin for the phrase "and the Son." In 589, the Roman Catholic Church added this phrase to the Nicene Creed. The original wording of the Nicene Creed had been formulated earlier by a unified church in the East and West in AD 325. The new version said that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father *and the Son*. The Orthodox held to the original formulation, which said the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone. This may seem like a small distinction, but the underlying point was that Rome had assumed a higher authority in rewriting theology without full Eastern Church cooperation.

Orthodox churches also recognized shared power between equal regional bishops called metropolitans. With the rising supremacy of the bishop of Rome, the Eastern Church broke from the West rather than submit to the pope as the head of the universal church.

One of the most notable features of Eastern Orthodox liturgy is the veneration of icons or painted images of sacred persons and scenes. In addition, a spiritual discipline of Eastern Orthodoxy is known as *hesychas*, in which someone relies on God for spiritual light and peace through certain prayer practices. The aim of Orthodox believers is to draw closer to God throughout life. This is called *theosis*, or deification, and involves a spiritual pilgrimage in becoming progressively more like Jesus Christ each day (2 Peter 1:4).

## Central Orthodox Beliefs and Practices

**Authority of Scripture**—Orthodox Christians believe the Holy Scriptures (as interpreted and defined by church teaching in the first seven ecumenical councils) and Holy Tradition are of equal value and importance.

**Baptism**—Orthodox Christians believe baptism is the initiator of the salvation experience. The Orthodox Church practices baptism by full immersion.

**Eucharist**—The Eucharist is the center of worship in the Orthodox Church. Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that during the Eucharist, believers partake mystically of Christ's body and blood and through it receive His life and strength.

**Holy Spirit**—Orthodox Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is one of the persons of the Trinity, who proceeds from the Father and is one in essence with the Father. The Holy Spirit is given as a gift to the church, to empower for service, to place God's love in our hearts, and to impart spiritual gifts for the Christian life and witness.

**Jesus Christ**—Orthodox Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity, God's Son, fully divine and fully human. He became flesh through Mary but was without sin. He died on the cross as man's Savior. He resurrected and ascended to heaven. He will return to judge all men.

**Mary**—Orthodox Christians believe Mary has supreme grace and is to be highly honored, but they reject the doctrine of Immaculate Conception (that is, Mary was born without sin).

**Predestination**—Orthodox Christians believe God has foreknowledge of man's destiny, but He does not predestine him.

**Saints and Icons**—Orthodox Christians practice veneration of icons; reverence is directed toward the person they represent and not the relics themselves.

**Salvation**—Orthodox Christians believe salvation is a gradual, life-long process by which Christians become more and more like Christ. This requires faith in Jesus Christ working through love.

**The Trinity**—Orthodox Christians believe there are three persons in the Godhead, each divine, distinct, and equal. The Father God is the eternal head; the Son is begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. (Fairchild 2017)

For further reading, see *Zondervan's International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (pp. 322-25).

## HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

Historical theology is that discipline which traces the origin and development of Christian doctrine. It recognizes the formation of central beliefs in historic context such as the nature of God, the Person of Christ, the origin of sin, redemption, and other doctrinal themes. Scholars recognize that historic events and trends have influenced how doctrines were formulated and passed on to subsequent generations.

The best way of becoming familiar with historical theology is by placing its development within four different eras: (1) ancient theology (first century-AD 590), (2) medieval theology (AD 590-1517), (3) Reformation theology (1517-1750), and modern theology (1750-present).

### Ancient Theology (first century-AD 590)

The first century was the time of the incarnation, when the Son of God walked on this planet, taught about His Father's kingdom, performed miracles, was crucified, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. The apostles, who learned from Christ, wrote their inspired narratives and letters at this time. Beginning in the second century and continuing into the fourth, a new generation of spiritual leaders became known as the church fathers. Some of them are familiar to us at least in name: Clement,

Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. A significant work of these men often related to opposing heresy such as Marcion's, which questioned the canon of Scripture. Other heresies challenged the deity of Jesus Christ. This resulted in a vigorous debate among orthodox believers about the nature of Christ and about which books should be included in the Bible. In AD 325, the Council of Nicea delineated sound doctrine on the Trinity and the person of Christ. In the fourth century, the theologian Augustine defended the doctrine of grace against Pelagius. In short, ancient theology deals with the writing and acceptance of Bible books and the formulation of foundational creeds that opposed false teaching.

### **Medieval Theology (AD 590-1517)**

Many scholars place the time of the Medieval Church from AD 590 to 1517. This time period is distinct from that of the church fathers, which came before it, and that of the Reformation, which followed it. It was roughly an entire millennium in which church and state were united in many European countries.

During this era, a number of religious doctrines and practices developed which have been characteristic of Roman Catholic Church beliefs then and now. These include purgatory, praying to the Saints (especially the Virgin Mary), canonizing exemplary believers into sainthood, celibacy of the priesthood, the rosary, transubstantiation of the wine and bread into the body and blood of Christ through consecration of a priest at Mass, the confessional, and the seven sacraments.

Although many countries in continental Europe during the medieval period considered themselves Christian, this time in church history was not without religious controversy. A movement arose that sought to remove or destroy all Catholic religious statues.

Proponents of this view were called the iconoclasts, that is, image destroyers. Also, the Eastern Orthodox Church broke off from the Western Roman Catholic Church in AD 1054 over doctrinal and faith practice issues. In essence, medieval theology traces the development of Roman Catholic doctrines that survive in Catholic teaching today.

### **Reformation Theology (1517-1750)**

On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, nailed 95 theses on the door of the Wittenburg Chapel. This act of protest was made in response to the corrupting influence of the selling of indulgences, that is, sins forgiven based on paying a fee.

Luther's conscience had been taken captive by the Word of God; and as the father of the Protestant Church, Luther soon galvanized many to embrace *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia*—the Bible alone, faith alone, and grace alone. This threefold emphasis became the battle cry of the Reformation. The Lord's Supper, or Communion, tended to create a divided opinion among the Reformers. Catholics held to transubstantiation, that is, in the bread and wine Christ's body and blood mysteriously reside as a means of grace. Lutherans believed in consubstantiation, that is, the body and blood of Christ do not literally reside in the bread and wine, but, like a fire emanating from a hot poker, permeate them. Calvinists believed in the real presence—that Jesus Christ somehow spiritually communes with believers during communion. Ulrich Zwingli emphasized the Memorial View of the Lord's Supper, that is, believers partake of bread and wine to be reminded of what Jesus did on the cross. Reformation theology turned from Catholicism's claim of apostolic authority and tradition to the Bible alone as the center for doctrinal belief.

Reformation theology continues to provide many core doctrinal beliefs for present-day evangelicalism.

## Modern Theology (1750-present)

Whereas, the Reformation used Scripture to challenge the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, the Enlightenment used reason to challenge the authority of Scripture. Modernist theology can be traced to the Enlightenment as the catalyst for modernist streams of thought. The Enlightenment can be tracked from the middle of the 1700s to our present day. Major influences in this era were Descartes in philosophy and Issac Newton in science. Although some point to the Napoleonic Wars as the end of the Enlightenment, nonetheless, the emphasis upon reason, the scientific method, and belief in human progress continued to impact liberal theology even today.

In the realm of modern theology, three men were especially influential. Immanuel Kant elevated reason and rejected other means of truth. Friedrich Schleiermacher rejected all doctrines and creeds and put religious feeling in their place. George Hegel promoted the idea that truth was ever evolving between two opposing views that eventually come together in synthesis. In the 19th century, a "scientific" approach was used by liberal theologians to explain Scripture in strictly naturalistic terms. Using "higher criticism" to analyze Bible texts, modernist scholars sought to remove both the divine origin of its authorship and the miraculous events claimed within its pages.

In the 20th century, Karl Barth emphasized the Word of God coming into experience through the Holy Spirit's illumination of a Bible passage. But he did not have a high view of objective Scripture. His view became known as neoorthodoxy. In essence, liberal theology has emphasized an optimistic view of human nature, skepticism toward the miracles of the Bible, and a confidence in human progress.

For further reading, see *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns (pp. 433-36); and <http://www.theopedia.com/Historical-theology>

## KINGDOM THEOLOGY

The kingdom of God may be defined as "the sovereign activity of God as king in saving men [and women] and overcoming evil, and the new order which is thus established" (Tenney 1975, 801).

Dr. Alva McClain, in his work *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, sees the kingdom of God as consisting of three essential elements: "first, a ruler with adequate authority and power; second, a realm of subjects to be ruled; and third, the actual exercise of the function of rulership" (2001, 17).

Kingdom theology teaches that the rule of God takes on different forms as the theme is traced through the Old and New Testaments. God's sovereign reign over heaven and earth is taught (Ps. 103:19-22). As God begins to work through His covenants with Abraham and other patriarchs, the kingdom is theocratic, that is, a rule of God through select leaders in Israel (1 Sam. 10; 2 Sam. 7). When the Lord Jesus Christ appears on the scene, there is a high expectation among the Jews that God would send a Messiah to deliver them from Roman occupation (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15; Acts 1:1-8). However, because of Israel's national rejection of Christ as their king, God now works through the church in this age until Christ's return and the establishment of the kingdom on earth (Rev. 20).

Although all evangelical theologians would agree that the kingdom of God includes the rule of God, subjects to it, and a realm where this takes place, not all agree on how this is manifested in Scripture. A major point of disagreement has to do with the role the millennium takes in the outworking of the kingdom of God.

Premillennialists are those who believe we are living prior to a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ upon the earth (Rev. 20). They take the words of Revelation 20:4 as yet to be fulfilled: "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had

been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years." Premillennialism is a distinctive of dispensational theology, which views the Bible in distinct time periods when God tests the human race: Innocence (Gen. 1-3), Law (Ex. 13:21; 1 Kings 11:11-13), Grace (Acts 2; 2 Thess. 4:16-17), and so on. Although God is working through the church today, the literal fulfillment of His promises to Old Testament characters such as Abraham and David will be realized in the 1,000-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20). Premillennial teaching is most often found in Baptist and Bible churches and some charismatic denominations.

Amillennialists do not believe Revelation 20 is to be interpreted literally. Those who hold this position point out that the book of Revelation is by its very nature a highly symbolic book. Why would one see the figures in Revelation of angels and bowls of wrath as symbolic and then take the description of the 1,000-year rule of Christ as literal? They instead take the millennium to refer to the church age. They teach that Jesus Christ is reigning from heaven right now and that the devil has been defeated. Those unfulfilled Old Testament promises made to Abraham and David are now fulfilled in the church spiritually. Because of this, amillennialists do not believe that there is a future for national Israel in the Holy Land. Christians are the "spiritual Israel" of whom Paul wrote (Rom. 9). Amillennialism is most influential in the Reformed tradition, Lutheran, Calvinist, Evangelical Presbyterian, and so on.

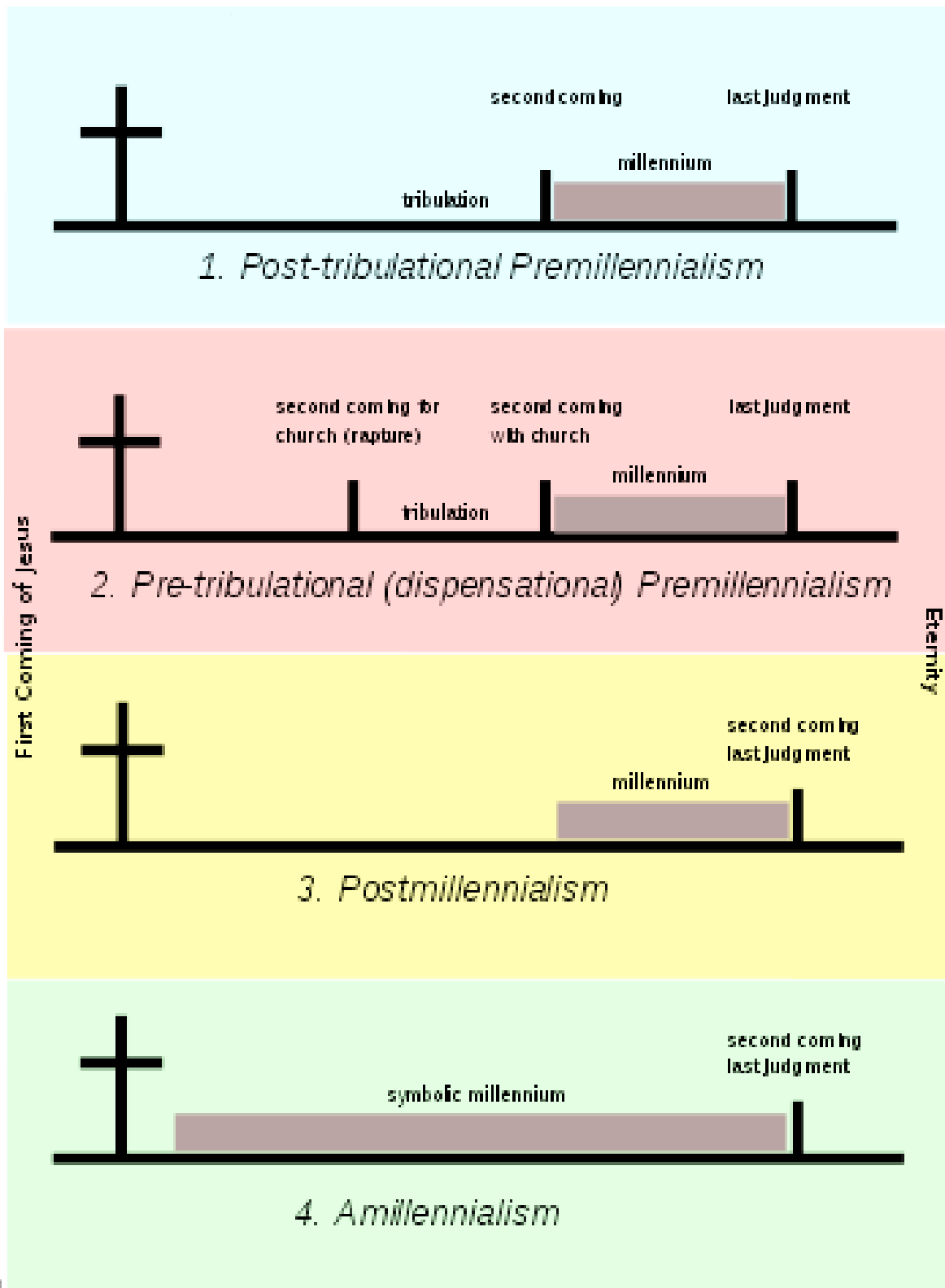
Postmillennialists are those who hold an optimistic view of the church as being salt and light in a fallen world. This view was very popular during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Positive social reforms taken during that period were viewed as the means by which Christianity would ultimately change society for the better, making it worthy of the return of Christ. The term uses the word *post* not to indicate that we are living after the millennial rule of Christ. Instead, it means we are in the millennium now, perfecting society through Christian reform. Interestingly, the religious periodical *The Christian Century* began at the beginning of the 20th century implying that this would be the century characterized by Christian transformation. However, the devastating reality of two major world wars raised serious doubts as to the feasibility of such an optimistic view. Postmillennial views can sometimes be found in certain liberal mainline denominations that emphasize social reform, such as United Methodist and United Presbyterian. [See the chart below to see premillennial, amillennial, and postmillennial views illustrated.]

Despite these different views of the kingdom of God, the biblical agreement holds to the rule of God in our hearts through Jesus Christ and His future return. A common theme that links many of these views in one sense is "the now but the not yet." The kingdom of God is at work in our midst, but its full manifestation will someday appear in the future. The theologian Louis Berkhof described it this way: "The primary idea of the kingdom of God in Scripture is that the rule of God established and acknowledged in the hearts of sinners by the powerful regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, insuring them of the blessings of salvation,—a rule that is realized in principle on earth, but will not reach its culmination until the visible and glorious return of Jesus Christ" (1996, 568).

For further reading, see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 3, (pp. 801); *The Greatness of the Kingdom* by Alva McClain; and *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns (pp. 540).

Comparison of Christian millennial interpretations (source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premillennialism>):

# Comparison of Christian millennial teachings





## ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the world. The word *catholic* comes from the Greek word *katholikos*, which means universal. This universality refers to the visible community of Christians as resident within Roman Catholic congregations worldwide. The term *Roman* indicates that Roman Catholics recognize and submit to the authority of the pope in Rome as Christ's vicar (representative) on earth. The Catholic Church was a unified whole until the Eastern Church (now called the Eastern Orthodox Church) broke off from the Western Church in 1054. In the 16th century, the Protestant movement resulted in many leaving the Roman Catholic Church to set up their own congregations and denominations based upon the Bible as the authority for faith and practice.

The Roman Catholic faith and practice may be characterized as asserting the following:

*The pope* has been given apostolic authority by Jesus Christ through an unbroken line of apostolic succession from Peter to our present day (Matt. 16:18).

*Jesus Christ* is recognized as perfect humanity and undiminished deity united in one Person forever. This was formulated by the *First Council of Nicea* and expressed in the *Nicene Creed*.

*Transubstantiation* takes place in the offering of the Eucharist by an ordained Catholic priest, during which the bread and wine of the Mass are transformed into the mystical body and blood of Christ as sacrament.

*The Roman Catholic Church* itself is the vessel of the full teachings of Christ, resting upon the authority of its ordained clergy, the model of ritual and truth included in sacred tradition, and in the written, inspired Christian Scriptures.

God has provided the means of grace working with faith to merit the means of salvation through sacrament and good works. These seven sacraments are as follows:

*Baptism* is the sprinkling or pouring of water on an infant that removes original sin and imparts the Holy Spirit.

*Confirmation* affirms a believer's religious knowledge and desire to pursue the Catholic-Christian way.

*Communion*—the believer receives the spiritually sustaining body and blood of Christ through the bread and the wine of Mass.

*Confession*—the repentant believer is absolved of sin through confessing their transgression to a priest who gives the believer an act of penance to perform.

*Marriage* provides a righteous outlet for the sexual union resulting in children and the protection of family life.

*Holy Orders* are the religious institutions of celibate monks and nuns who join a particular religious order for a deeper spiritual life.

*Anointing of the Sick* (or Last Rites) is a final taking of the Eucharist, confession, and anointing in preparation for facing God after death.

Various sacred sensory aids are used in worship: sacred images such as statues, stained glass and paintings, candles, vestments, music, incense, and water.

*Saint Mary*, the mother of Jesus, is to be venerated and prayed to as *theotokos*, that is, "the mother of God." Other holy Roman Catholic believers now deceased who have been canonized as saints are also to be venerated. God receives *adoration* (*latria*) and the saints receive *veneration* (*dulia*).

Faithful Roman Catholics who have died must face a time of final cleansing in purgatory after death. Prayer for these believers is understood to shorten their time in the flames of purgatory.

For further reading, see *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns (pp. 565-79).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berkhof, Louis. 1996. *Systematic Theology*. WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Chafer, Lewis Sperry. 1947. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press.

Erickson, Millard. 1983. *Christian Theology*, vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Fairchild, Mary. 2017. "Eastern Orthodox Beliefs: How Eastern Orthodoxy Sought to Preserve 'Right Beliefs' of the Early Church." *ThoughtCo*. Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.thoughtco.com/eastern-orthodox-church-beliefs-700622>.

Hodge, Charles C. 1981. *Systematic Theology*. Hendrickson Pub.

McClain, Alva. 2001. *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God*. BMH Books.

Ryrie, Charles C. 1959. *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.

———. 1995. "What is a Dispensation?" In *Dispensationalism*, 23-43. Chicago: Moody Press. Accessed October 15, 2018. [http://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/dis\\_dispensation.html](http://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/dis_dispensation.html).

Saucy, Robert L. 1993. *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Tenney, Merrill C., ed. 1975. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.