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Think God's Thoughts After Him

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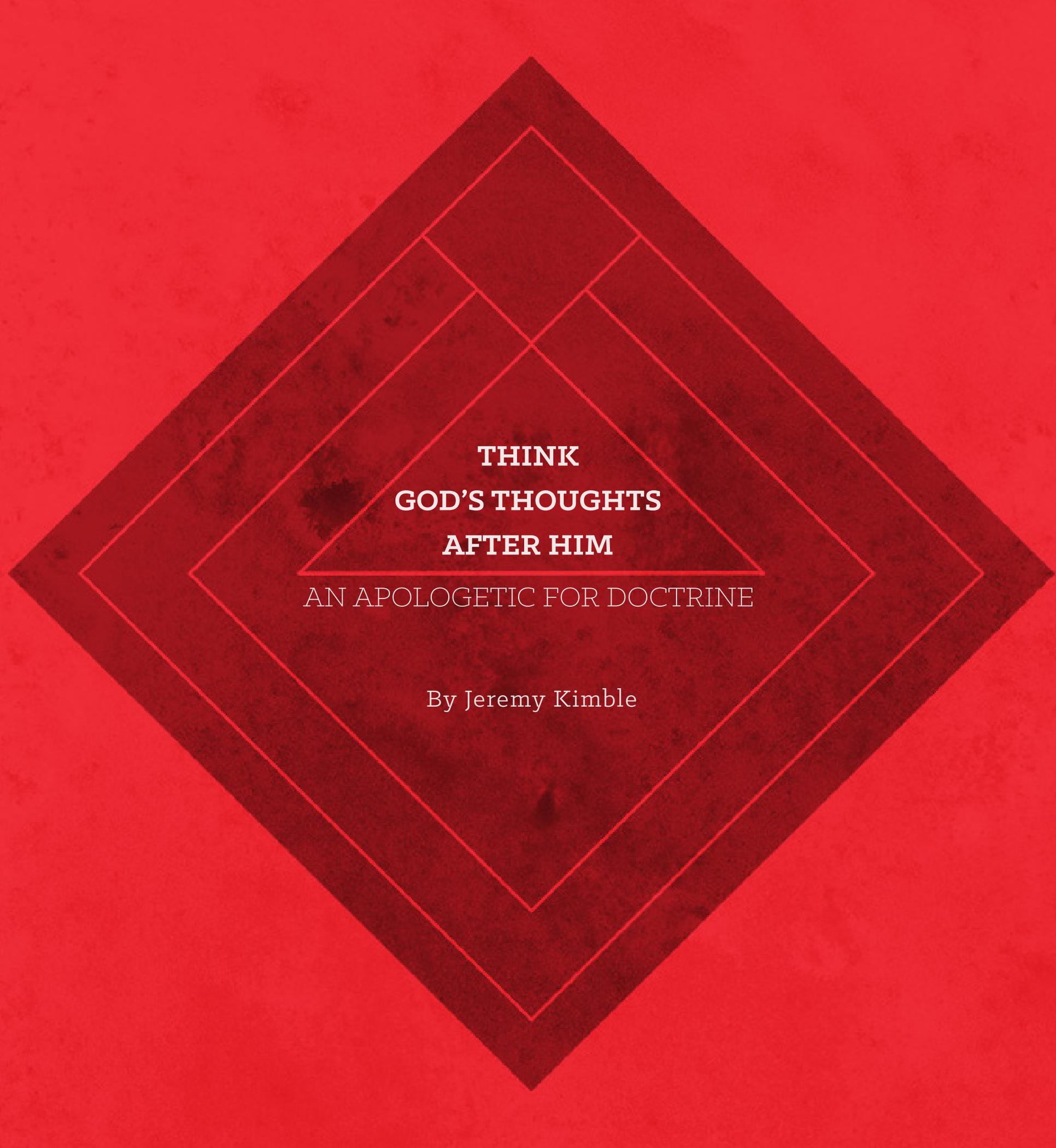
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**THINK
GOD'S THOUGHTS
AFTER HIM**

AN APOLOGETIC FOR DOCTRINE

By Jeremy Kimble

A STUDY OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IS NOT MEANT TO KILL YOUR HEART FOR WORSHIP; RATHER IT IS INTENDED TO ENLIVEN YOUR AFFECTIONS FOR GOD AND HIS GREATNESS.

Systematic theology is a phrase that may bring exhilaration to some hearts, but more often it can bring thoughts of boredom, irrelevance, and even trepidation. Many churchgoers hear the word “theology” and automatically think such content is simply beyond them. In some conversations I have heard people claim that theology is unnecessary and even dangerous, as it is likely to kill your heart for worship. “Knowledge puffs up,” they say, and therefore it is best to avoid such matters.

This claim, however, misunderstands the intention of theology. A study of systematic theology is not meant to kill your heart for worship; rather it is intended to enliven your affections for God and his greatness. The right study of God should lead to an ever-deepening love for God and a desire to participate in the mission he has given us. As such, doctrine is of utmost importance, and not just for those in the academy, but also for all who are believers in Jesus Christ and part of the church.

My aim in this article is first to define systematic theology, then to offer a brief autobiographical synopsis of how I came to love systematic theology, and, finally, to demonstrate the importance and relevance of systematic theology to the Christian life. In all of this, my goal is to offer an apologetic for Christian doctrine, so that, as Jonathan Edwards said, people’s affections for God can be elevated, cultivated, and strengthened by the truth of who God is and what he has done on our behalf.

What is systematic theology?

In his popular textbook, *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem has defined systematic theology simply as “any study that answers the question

‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic.” In other words, systematic theology takes more of a topical focus and analyzes the teaching of the entirety of Scripture on a major theme, such as the Trinity, the nature of sin, the person and work of Christ, or the doctrine of the church. Wellum and Gentry agree with this definition, but give more precision, saying that theology involves “the application of Scripture to all areas of life.” In their book *Kingdom Through Covenant* they elaborate on this point and offer the following definition:

Systematic theology, then, inevitably involves theological construction and doctrinal formulation, grounded in biblical theology and done in light of historical theology, but which also involves interacting with all areas of life—history, science, psychology, ethics, and so on. In so doing, systematic theology leads to worldview formation as we seek to set the biblical-theological framework of Scripture over against all other worldviews and learn ‘to think God’s thoughts after him,’ even in areas that the Bible does not directly address. In this important way, systematic theology presents a well thought out worldview, over against all of its competitors, as it seeks to apply truth to every domain of our existence.

These definitions demonstrate that those who study the Bible cannot avoid theology. It is a joyful result of their labors, and one that enriches the way in which they love God and others. Systematic theol-

ogy, therefore, is crucial for the Christian life, for the lives of individual believers, for the life of the church, and for our witness to the world.

My journey into the world of systematic theology

My first exposure to systematic theology came in high school. During my junior and senior year, an interim pastor at our church took it upon himself not only to preach each week, but also to teach the high school Sunday School class. This pastor slowly and methodically worked through various doctrines. While I was not necessarily enthralled by this kind of teaching at this stage of my life, it was a first exposure and helped me understand the major themes in Scripture.

I went to a Christian college, and as a Pastoral Ministries major I actually took six different theology classes. It was here that I first began to develop a love for the discipline. I realized that I am a big picture person. I love seeing how things fit together. While I thoroughly enjoyed the details of exegesis and classes that focused on a particular book in Scripture, I derived greatest enjoyment from inter-disciplinary conversations that covered exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology. I loved thinking in worldview terms and recognizing how all of this truth affected every facet of life.

Upon graduation I entered seminary and my love for systematic theology continued to intensify. I was involved in church ministry while in seminary, and while all the classes were helpful in serving as an associate pastor, I continued to find that my classes in theology provided the go-to content for my teaching and preaching. I didn't want my congregation just to know a few of the key stories of the Bible; I wanted them to be conversant with the whole of Scripture, making the necessary textual and thematic connections, and then understanding how that affected their worldview, value system, home life, vocation, and everything else about them.

This was confirmed even more in my heart when I visited a school where I was considering doing a PhD in systematic theology. When I told the professor my intention, he smiled and then went on to describe systematic theology as "the great vacuum" discipline. What he meant by this statement is that systematic theology is a culminating discipline, one where you must take into account all the other facets of theological inquiry and bring them together into a cohesive understanding for the present day.

Why is systematic theology important for all Christians

The longer I have been in ministry, the more I have

IF A DOCTRINAL STATEMENT IS LOOSE AND BRIEF IN THE NAME OF SOMETHING LIKE TOLERANCE, THIS WILL NOT ULTIMATELY BRING ABOUT UNITY. CHURCHES MUST KNOW WHAT THEY BELIEVE AND LINK ARMS WITH OTHERS WHO HOLD TO THOSE CONVICTIONS, ALL BASED ON THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD. ROBUST THEOLOGY STATED OVERTLY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH WILL THUS HAVE GREAT EFFECT IN BRING ABOUT UNITY IN THE CHURCH.

realized the importance of all Christians studying to show themselves approved workmen of God (2 Tim. 2:15), and this includes a thoroughgoing knowledge of systematic theology. But, some readers may ask, why is systematic theology of such importance to all Christians? Isn't that stuff reserved for the likes of pastors and seminary professors? While in no way exhaustive, here are several reasons why systematic theology is of such importance to the life of a Christian.

First, sound doctrine will assist you in reading the Bible more effectively. As you understand the connection between the Bible and theology, you can think of feedback loops. In other words, reading the Bible will sharpen your theological acumen, and as you continue to engage in theological inquiry this will help you read the Bible more accurately. This is, as Grant Osborne has said, a “hermeneutical spiral” wherein we are better equipped to think God’s thoughts after him.

Second, good Bible reading and theological study should lead to increased love and holiness. One could call love and holiness the two great roots of a tree from which spring the other communicable attributes of God. We learn from theological inquiry that love and holiness are foundational to

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, THEREFORE, IS NOT INTENDED TO BE SOME ARID, DRAB ENTERPRISE RELEGATED TO THE IVORY TOWER OF THE ACADEMY. RATHER, IT IS INTENDED TO ENLIVEN OUR HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS FOR THE PERSON OF GOD AND THE WORK OF GOD TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

God’s character, and, therefore, he calls us to love him with all (Deut. 6:4-5; Matt. 22:37), to love our neighbors as ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:38), and to be holy as he is holy (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). Theology both instructs us in these matters and highlights the promise of God’s gracious empowerment to live out these realities, for “God is able to make all grace abound to [us] so that... [we] may abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8).

Third, while many people may think of theology as divisive in nature, in fact sound doctrine is a great and needful means to unity in the church. From the earliest history of the church, systematic theology has been key in outlining the beliefs of Christians and setting the parameters of orthodoxy. When a local church gathers and the members ascribe to a specific doctrinal statement, derived from sound exegesis and theological formulation, this garners confidence in beliefs and a rallying point for the people. If a doctrinal statement is loose and brief in the name of something like tolerance, this will not ultimately bring about unity. Churches must know what they believe and link arms with others who hold to those convictions, all based on the truth of God’s Word. Robust theology stated overtly in the life of the church will thus have great effect in bring about unity in the church.

Finally, systematic theology is a key discipline for the proper worship of God. This is true because, first, Scripture instructs us what proper worship of God should look like, both for the individual Christian and for the church. We are not to deviate from these norms, and therefore theology does us a great service in clarifying what proper worship looks like. Theology also aims at stoking the flame of our affections for God. As we understand the call to relate rightly to God, we understand that we

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are to fear God, love him, delight in him, rejoice in him, humble ourselves before him, repent before him, pray to him, depend on him, sing to him, and wait for him. Doctrine, rightly done, instructs us about these matters and also gives us a heart to relate to God in these various ways. Theology is not a cold, dead thing; it is meant to give life and produce in us a passion for God and his purposes.

Theology for the world

These points of importance focus mainly on the individual Christian and the church, but theology can also affect the world, and herein we find its relevance. Theology should shape our witness. Systematic theology leads to apologetics—that is, to forming and defending the Christian worldview. While we recognize that it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6), we are called to plant and water by sharing the gospel with those who do not know Christ.

Recognizing also that the Spirit must work in the heart of an individual for conversion, systematic theology is a helpful tool in this enterprise as it clarifies a Christian worldview and leads to cogent arguments for the plausibility of that worldview. As the majority of people in our churches work in environments where many of their co-workers are non-Christians, and as we interact with individuals at restaurants, the gym, and sporting events, the discipline of systematic theology becomes extremely relevant. It offers the framework needed to explain, defend, and exult in the glories of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians must be able to think well in areas such as biblical exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, worldview, ethics, philosophy, apologetics, and so on. Systematic theology is the single discipline that brings these diverse disciplines together in a coherent format. As such, it is a culminating discipline bringing together the various strands of data needed to love God rightly with our minds. It also expands the capacities of our hearts to see and savor the triune God and worship him rightly. Finally, it provides the basis and impetus for participating in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations.

Systematic theology, therefore, is not intended to be some arid, drab enterprise relegated to the ivory tower of the academy. Rather, it is intended to enliven our heads, hearts, and hands for the person of God and the work of God to the glory of God.

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