

- 1 There are many descriptions and definitions of systematic theology.
 - 1.1 Some see it as that part of the theological enterprise which strives to think clearly about theology and to define its terms with care.
 - 1.2 Some see it as that part of the theological enterprise which orders and arranges the different branches and discusses their relationships with each other.
 - 1.2.1 e.g. the relationship of sacramental theology to christology
 - 1.2.2 e.g. the relationship of ecclesiology to ministry
 - 1.2.3 e.g. the relationship of all of dogmatic theology to scripture
 - 1.2.4 e.g. the relationships of scripture, tradition, and magisterium (teaching of, or in, the church) to one another.
 - 1.3 Some see it as that part of the theological enterprise which strives to discover the center of all theological reflection, the fact or the teaching on which everything else depends.
- 2 These are all interesting and valuable definitions (particularly the last one), but they don't get to the heart of the matter, which is *the relationship of theology to faith*.
 - 2.1 Without a clear understanding of that relationship, theology is just a sophisticated form of game-playing.
 - 2.2 Theology's whole raison-d'être is the strengthening of faith.
- 3 How are we to understand the relationship of faith and theology?
Romans 10:17 puts it clearly: FAITH COMES FROM HEARING, AND WHAT WE HEAR COMES TO US THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD.
 - 3.1 But the word of God comes to us in human words, which are the bearers of God's presence and power.
 - 3.2 These words are part of language, and their meaning is conditioned by the whole complex reality of language.
 - 3.3 Words must be used with care; definitions are important.
 - 3.4 But we must know where words stop and God is revealed in silence.
 - 3.4.1 This is not a blank and empty silence, but one which is outlined by God's words of power.

- 4 Systematic theology is essentially a theology of the word – of God’s word to us in which he is really present as Spirit, and of our word of faith in which we respond
 - 4.1 The critical question for systematic theology: does our word of response take its inspiration and content from God’s own word, or does it take some form of human systematic thought and then impose this on God’s word?
 - 4.2 The Neo-Platonism of the Greek fathers of the church, and the Aristotelianism of the scholastics from the xiii to the xx centuries often fell into this trap,
 - 4.2.1 e.g. seeing grace as a quality or attribute of the soul which makes the person pleasing to God and capable of meritorious actions, whereas in the NT the word refers to God, and means God’s merciful love.
 - 4.2.2 another example: the Jesuit/Dominican dispute (which ran from the seventeenth century to the early twentieth) about human freedom and God’s omnipotence. Both sides operated with an Aristotelian understanding of freedom, and not from a Christian, biblical understanding.
- 5 The most important task of systematic theology is that of showing the critical role scripture plays in regard to faith as an act, and in regard to the content affirmed in that act (*fides qua and fides quae*).
 - 5.1 Faith is letting God be the one he wants to be, and scripture answers the question of who God wants to be. Systematic theology strives to determine the precise way in which scripture criticizes various understandings of the act of faith and the content of faith.
- 6 Because faith is a free act (and, joined with the love of which it is an expression, is really the freest act of which we are capable) one of systematic theology’s most important tasks is to reflect on human freedom and to distinguish true freedom from its counterfeits.