

## Theological Method

### I. What is theology?

Theology is the study of God. It is made up of two Greek words, *theos* which means God, and 'logy' from *logia* which means 'study of' or 'subject matter.' So for example biology is the study of life and sociology is the study of society.

Anything the Bible teaches is the proper subject of theology. To know God we study what He has revealed. In fact, the only way to truly know is to know what God says.

Even when we are studying the theology of man, it teaches us about God. Who did He make us to be? What does it mean that we are created in His image? When we study salvation, we better understand His mercy, grace, and justice. So ultimately, the whole Bible ultimately is about God.

### II. Why do theology?

Our ultimate purpose is to know and worship God. We can't adore a God we don't know. - Jeremiah 9:23-24

We have to know God to become like Him and represent Him. - Ephesians 4:13-15

True knowledge is necessary for genuine love and righteous action. - Philippians 1:9-11; Hebrews 5:11-14

Knowing God is the ultimate goal and surpassing value of our lives. - Philippians 3:8-10

### III. What types of theology are there?

So theology is the study of God. So how do we study God? As you can imagine, there are different ways to study Him. The key question in the different types of theology is: What organizing principle are you using in your study of theology? How do you organize your study of God? The answer to that question results in the different types of theology.

#### A. Biblical Theology

Biblical Theology is organized by a corpus (section) of Scripture.

- Theology of the Torah
- Theology of Isaiah
- Theology of the Old Testament
- Lukan Theology
- Pauline Theology
- Johannine Theology
- Whole Bible Theology

Biblical Theology focuses on the development of concepts within Scripture. It emphasizes what God emphasized in Scripture and how God revealed Himself progressively in time. Biblical Theology focusses on God's Story.

## B. Systematic Theology

Systematic Theology is organized by categories of theology.

- Bibliology - The study of the Bible
- Theology Proper - The study of the person of God
- Anthropology - The study of man
- Hamartiology - The study of sin
- Soteriology - The study of salvation
- Pneumatology - The study of the Spirit
- Christology - The study of Christ
- Ecclesiology - The study of the church
- Eschatology - The study of end times

Systematic Theology helps us to think through what Scripture teaches as a whole and how truths are held in tension with one another. It helps us think about the end result of our theology, not the process of how we got there.

## C. Historical Theology

Historical Theology is organized by what people thought at a certain time/place in history.

- Theology of the Greek/Latin Fathers
- Medieval Theology
- Theology of the Reformers
- Theology of the Anabaptists
- Theology of the Puritans
- Evangelical Theology of the 20th Century

Historical theology helps us to see how different theological concepts and ideas developed over time, in response to different situations. It reminds us that no one's theology is developed in a vacuum, it is built on the theology of those who came before and sometimes in response to various (perceived) errors.

## D. Practical Theology

Practical Theology is organized around our religious practices.

- Theology of Worship
- Theology of Preaching
- Theology of Prayer
- Theology of Evangelism

- Theology of Parenting
- Theology of Counseling
- Theology of Mission
- Theology of Pastoring

Practical Theology helps us to evaluate the reasons behind why we do what we do. We always want to evaluate if our practices are coming from the Bible. Another name for this is a philosophy of ministry.

E. What are the benefits of the different kinds of theology?

- Biblical Theology is the closest to exegesis and does the best at keeping truth in context and how the truth developed over time. It helps us see where everything is going in God's purpose and plan.
- Systematic Theology gives us a grid to think through and see Scripture. It helps provide guardrails for our interpretations and make sure we hold ideas in tension and not ignore certain aspects of Scripture.
- Historical Theology helps to see the strengths and weaknesses of those who went before us. Nothing is new under the sun, and so it's helpful to see good or bad things in the past to stand outside of ourselves and be able to critique our own time. Biblical concepts always arise in a context. It's easy to be reactionary.
- Practical Theology helps to connect our theology to our practice. All of our practice should be based on the Word and so Practical Theology helps ensure there is a robust theology behind what we do and not merely be pragmatic. Our philosophy of ministry is Practical Theology.

F. So Systematic Theology gives us Grids and Guardrails

A grid helps us to see the world and interpret Scripture from a Biblical perspective. Seeing how pieces fit together is extremely helpful to make sure you aren't just coming up with some fanciful interpretation. A wrong grid could be a bias that slants your interpretation of Scripture, but the right grid helps you see it correctly. Remember, **even the biblical authors had a theology and assumptions**, and the closer our assumptions about God and the world match theirs, the more **their writing will make sense**. Another way of thinking about a grid is the importance of a biblical worldview.

As to the importance of guardrails, I can give personal testimony from my time teaching at a Bible college. One of my former students named Andrew Rillera, has a Ph.D. and is one of the champions of the anti Penal Substitutionary Atonement movement. At the Bible college there was such an emphasis on Biblical Theology and not being tied to former ideas that being original was considered good.

G. Table Discussions

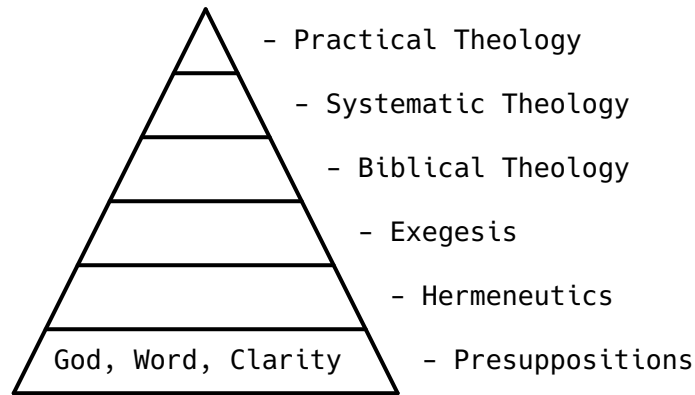
How could we interpret 1 Timothy 2:4 incorrectly if we come with a fixed and unnuanced view that 'God predestines who is saved?'

How could a right understanding of Jesus' deity, help guard us from a wrong interpretation of John 2:15?

#### IV. What is the source for theology?

##### A. Presuppositions, Hermeneutics, Exegesis, Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology

We believe all theology should be based upon the Word of God. God's Word, as His self-revelation, gives us everything we need to know to rightly understand Him and His ways.



The Word is the Foundation

##### i. God & Revelation

If you don't believe in God, you cannot interpret the Bible correctly. Illumination is needed for interpretation. -

*1 Corinthians 2:10-16*

*For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.*

If you aren't submitted to God, you won't interpret the Bible correctly. Our pride distorts our interpretation of the Word in ways that make us feel good about ourselves. - James 1:21-23; 1 Peter 2:1-2

##### Table Discussion

How could (will!) we interpret Exodus incorrectly if we don't believe God is real?

How could we interpret the book of Jonah incorrectly if we don't believe in miracles?

## ii. The Clarity of Scripture

It can be easy to think that objectivity is impossible because there are so many theological disagreements. But really, an over-emphasis on the subjectivity of the Word is an attack on the sufficiency of the Word. As long as the Word is claimed to be confusing, it can't make clear demands and have clear principles that should govern our lives.

### a. God intended to communicate, not confuse!

God gave language to us as part of the Imago Dei. God Himself is communicative and has chosen to reveal Himself. While God is transcendent, He is also immanent. Contrast the biblical foundation for knowledge as founded on revelation (epistemology) with postmodernism, where certainty or true knowledge are never attainable.

While God didn't reveal everything there is to know, He did reveal what we need to know to have a relationship and obey Him. The whole purpose of communicating to us is so that we would understand. - Deuteronomy 29:29

We can't claim that God's Word is out of our reach or too difficult for us to understand. Ultimately, that is insulting and blaming God who is the One who chose to communicate with us. - Deuteronomy 30:11-14

The purpose of God's Word is to illuminate and make things clear. - Psalm 119:105, 130

It is possible to investigate and study Scripture to determine whether what someone says is true. - Acts 17:11

We are held responsible for what has been revealed. This is even more the case since the coming of Christ and the greater clarity in knowing God that He brings. - Hebrews 2:1-3

Ultimately, God's prophetic Word is even more sure than the experience of seeing Christ being transfigured. So we need to pay very careful attention to it! - 2 Peter 1:19

### b. Yet sin means that we have pre-understanding, blind spots, and need to wrestle for clarity and objectivity

Our desires and deceitful hearts distort our vision. What we want confuses what we see. This is the nature of idolatry. - Jeremiah 17:9

It is our human nature to think that we are right. It takes real humility to even see, much less admit when we are wrong. - Proverbs 12:15; 21:2

We must be humble about the fact that we all come to Scripture with presuppositions that color the way we read the Bible. But the Bible is the mirror that constantly corrects those errors and helps us to see correctly! - Psalm 19:11-12

It is so easy to generalize our experience or understanding of our own language and impose it on Scripture, even against reams of contrary evidence. Thankfully, good exegesis, grammar, and systemic data accumulated by linguists, can overcome and correct our bias and impressions to large degree.

- c. God **expects** people to **listen** and **obey** and holds us responsible when we don't!

The Bible doesn't teach a skepticism that objectivity is impossible. The whole Bible (and all the commands in it) rests on the assumption that clear communication with understanding is possible! - Zechariah 7:11-13

Every time God holds someone responsible for not listening or obey Him, it is proof that clear communication is possible. - John 12:48

The whole process of church discipline presumes that the Bible is clear. - Matthew 18:15-16; 1 Corinthians 5:11-13

- d. Table Discussion

How will we approach Scripture wrongly if we don't believe it is clear? More specifically, how will we help people if we don't think that Scripture has anything to say about science? What areas will we abdicate to the world in?

## B. Hermeneutics & Exegetical Theology

- i. Hermeneutics and the Literal, Grammatical, Historical Method

In the first course of Lead School, we taught the Literal, Grammatical, Historical method of exegesis. This is a system for understanding the meaning of the words of Scripture through understanding their normal sense in ordinary language to the original hearers. The fact that the method is literal doesn't mean that there aren't metaphors in language, but that we should take words with their literal and normal sense unless there is a key in the language that indicates that a symbol or metaphor is being communicated (as opposed to the symbolic or allegorical interpretation of Scripture which finds an allegorical meaning where there is no indication in the text that an allegory is being communicated).

This is why we emphasized the importance of grammar and context to understand the original meaning of a text before we understand what Timeless Gospel Principles a text communicates and how we apply those today. This method emphasizes the importance of words and grammar which find their meaning in context. This method seeks to free us from our bias by looking to the objective rules of grammar and linguistics to understand the meaning of a text.

Careful theology is based on careful exegesis, knowing what is **clear** and what is **ambiguous** in the text

We must assume there was no ambiguity to the original audience, because communication works. There is only ambiguity because 1) We don't speak the original languages fluently, 2) We don't have all the original context. That's why grammar and historical background are so important to exegesis!

Our goal is always to understand what the clear point of the text is, and to base our theology off of that. Without grammar and context, you'll think things are ambiguous that aren't and you'll think things aren't ambiguous, that are. That's why it's best to seek to understand the main argument of a text based upon the Melodic Line of the book it is in. Keeping the principles derived from a text as close as possible to the main force and thrust of a passage in context helps us from missing the point and making something a big point that the author wasn't even trying to say.

### Examples of ambiguity

For example, the word will/testament in Hebrews 9:15-17 and maturity/perfection in Hebrews 5:9, 14 are ambiguous in one language but not the other. As another example of grammar is the famous *pistis christou* debate. Does it mean 'faith in Christ' or 'faithfulness of Christ' in Galatians 2:16; 3:26, and Philippians 3:9? Grammar actually answers this debate through careful linguistic analysis. It means 'faith in Christ' (Note there is no 'of' in Greek).

## ii. Theological interpretation vs grammatical interpretation

### a. Exegesis is what drives

Since our conviction is that the Word has the ultimate authority, exegesis should drive theology and not the other way around. Our theology should be based upon careful exegesis of the biblical text.

We should have a radical desire to go wherever Scripture takes us. We want to realize we all have bias, and humbly seek for Scripture to correct us. We need humility. How to be aware of our blind spots? Question every(thing) (interpretation). But realize that there are limits to what you should question. Be aware of your heart, when you are skeptical. When we don't understand we must cling to the character of God. We won't understand everything. If we are making ourselves to be the judge, we stand as judge over God.

We have to realize when a lack of faith is driving us and humble ourselves and submit to the Word. Asking questions of Scripture is good, questioning Scripture isn't. It's one thing to wrestle with God, or to wrestle with what He has revealed, something that confronts us or confronts our views. It's another thing to blame God, to question God, and to assume He is wrong. Ultimately, we must humble ourselves and admit God is right and we are not. Sometimes that means choosing to believe something that's clear in Scripture that we don't understand. Sometimes that means submitting to something we don't want to do or believe.

### b. How confident should we be in our theology?

Some topics are more exegetical in nature while some are more systematic by nature. For example, our understanding of the nature of God or the Trinity cannot derive from a single verse. Our theology in these areas must be based on careful theological reflection on how the truths of dozens of passages all fit together into a consistent system of thought. It would be foolish to throw out a classic view of theism because one verse appears on the surface to contradict what hundreds of theologians and exegetes have wrestled through over centuries. Therefore our theology about the Trinity, the nature of God, and the gospel should rarely if ever change from historic views.



But some theological topics are based on a careful reading of just one or a few texts. Usually these would be doctrines that aren't as central to the gospel or the nature of God. For these topics, we rely more on exegesis for their meaning than theology.

The better you understand the tools of exegesis, the more confidence you will have to reshape your theology. If you are clear that the grammar of a verse means something, you will change your view. The more you understand grammar and linguistics, the more objectivity you have in interpretation. The less you understand grammar and linguistics, the more you have to rely on your theology to help you interpret the Word.

So that begs the question: How much do we trust exegetical, linguistic, or theological experts verses trusting our own interpretation? How much Greek and Hebrew do you need to know before you correct Charles Spurgeon's theology? How much Hebrew and Greek do you need to know before we are confident that a given translation is incorrect of a verse? So let's all be aware of who we are trusting and why in our theology. The point is that we all want to grow in our theology, and so we hold views that are not central to the gospel lightly and be open to correction.

#### c. Confessionalism vs Biblicism

Therefore, we want to our theology to continually be shaped by Scripture. This means that we don't come to a passage of Scripture with a preconceived idea of what it is saying and seek to show that this is what it means. That is called *eisegesis*. This is why at RBC we consider ourselves biblicists. We don't believe any creed should predetermine how we interpret passages of Scripture.

We don't want to spend our time studying and exegeting creeds to tell us how to think. We want to focus on the Word and the emphases it is making and let it be shaping how we think and live.

On the other hand, we also want to be very careful against the danger of individualism. We should be very wary of thinking we have a correct interpretation of something when hundreds of theologians have studied the topic for hundreds or even thousands of years before us. We always want to consult theologians of the past and listen carefully to see if we are missing something that is actually clear in the Bible. We want to be very aware that our thinking is influenced by the time we are in and the people who have come before them, and most of what we understand correctly about the Bible is because we are standing on the shoulders of those who have come before us.

#### d. Individual Contribution

Because each passage of Scripture is inspired, we must give each passage the full weight and authority of God Himself. We cannot allow our system to override the interpretation of passages of Scripture, or to allow other passages of Scripture to override the meaning of another passage. Each passage in the Word is inspired by God and is there for a specific purpose. If we are studying that passage, our job is to figure out that purpose.



- e. So what does Scripture interpret Scripture mean and how does it work?

You may have heard of the phrase “Scripture interprets Scripture.” What does that mean? Are there passages that aren’t clear in their original context that ‘need help’ from other passages not in their context to interpret them correctly? The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture and our understanding of linguistics would suggest that each passage should be unambiguous in its original context.

- f. **Cross referencing** is not for interpretation

There is a huge danger of allowing less confrontative or easier to understand passages to override the message of more difficult passages. Thus we need to be very careful about allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.

We cross reference to understand how multiple passages fit together into a comprehensive and cohesive theme/thought/theology. We cross reference to synthesize, or even check ourselves, but not interpret *per se*. In other words, if we are interpreting a passage and it seems to contradict another passage, we should slow down and make sure we understand each passage properly, but one passage can’t control or overwrite what another passages says.

Cross referencing **to interpret** *flatlines* the Bible, instead of allowing it to say everything that it seeks to communicate. It basically brings Scripture down to the least common denominator and removes **mystery** and **tension** from Scripture.

Example:

Take the other side of the example we used earlier. We can’t take the fact that God desires all men to be saved to override the view that God elects or predestines people to salvation, which is clear in the Word.

- g. How do we not take verses out of context when we do systematics?

To truly do Systematic Theology well, we need to understand each passage in the context and book that it’s in that we are putting together and reconciling into a system. So doing Systematic Theology well takes an incredible amount of work. It’s easy when doing theology to ‘proof text’ various passages, meaning to take them out of context to prove our point. So we constantly want to ask ourselves, “Is that really the point of that verse/text?”

The greatest hindrance to changing our theology is emotional. We get tied to our views.

- h. A key question is: Do we need to ensure that different passages of Scripture don’t contradict each other?

The answer is ‘no’. When properly interpreted Scripture won’t contradict other Scripture. We don’t have to make it fit by making a passage say something that is foreign to the original meaning. If we believe in inspiration and inerrancy, we don’t have to worry if every passage will be true and how it fits into the theology of every other passage. Scripture won’t contradict itself when rightly understood. Each passage will fit in with every other passages into a coherent theology!

## V. How to do systematic theology?

### A. Systems

#### i. There is no inconsistency in God

There are no inconsistencies in God. God is the God of truth. In His mind there are no mysteries and every passage of Scripture, every event of history, every truth, all fit together in a clear and fully rational way. Therefore, since God is the ultimate author of Scripture, we can be sure that there are no inconsistencies in Scripture, and that all of the Word fits together in perfect unison. - John 16:13; 10:35

#### ii. Humans are finite

We however are finite human beings. So we cannot understand and logically figure out how everything fits together perfectly. For us there are mysteries, and logic can only take us so far because of our limited human comprehension. - Isaiah 40:28; 55:8-9; Job 26:14; Romans 11:33-34

Because we are made in the image of God, and God revealed Himself to us, there are things that we can truly know about God. We can have true knowledge and confidence in what God clearly revealed. God created us and communicated to us and He will not fail in His intention. - Deuteronomy 30:11-14

On the other hand, because God is infinite and beyond our comprehension, there will always be mysteries in Scripture and things that won't make sense to us and that we can't rationalize. There will always also be mystery to Scripture, and ultimately we will have to live by faith. - Deuteronomy 29:29; Romans 11:33

#### iii. Humans systematize

Everyone systematizes Scripture. Part of being made in the image of God means that we are logical beings, and our brains are always trying to make things fit together. We don't have a way to believe contradictions. Whether conscious of it or not, we are always trying to make sense of things, whether the world or Scripture, and so we are always putting things into categories to make sense of them. **In other words everyone does Systematic Theology.** The question is whether you do it well (biblically) or not.

So we want to systematize truth in a way that is logical, organized, and aware of how we are fitting Scripture together.

#### iv. Over systemization

No human system is perfect, and holds every truth in Scripture in perfect balance. So there's a danger in thinking we have a perfect system. It's easy to allow better understood or clear passages to drown out what a less known author/passage is saying. There is a tendency to 'even out' what Scripture says, and miss the profound and challenging portions of Scripture. It can be easy to think we already know what a passage means because we already have a system figured out. Sometimes students walk away from a systematic theology course and think they have all the 'answers.'

v. Under systemization

But Scripture is true and rational. It fits together even if we don't see how. I personally fell into the danger of minimizing the importance of Systematic Theology, in favor of Biblical Theology. But there is a place for both. Biblical Theology is closer to the text and exegesis and is better at making sure truths are in context. But Systematic Theology is better at guarding against heresy and making sure we are keeping within the rails of what the Bible teaches. Systematic Theology gives us a broader grid to think through life and the Word. We all have systems of thinking through things, it's better to be explicit about them and understand what those systems are.

vi. The goal

So we want to systematize Scripture and harmonize and understand how the whole Bible fits together into a consistent worldview. But we don't want to oversimplify things, and make things fit that don't fit, and remove mystery in our pride. Thus the goal is to be clear about what Scripture is clear about, and hesitant where Scripture is silent or unclear. We want to harmonize truth, but not oversimplify it.

Sometimes in our systems, we can build logical implications on top of implications. If x is true, then y is true, and if y is true, then z is true, and we can eventually become so far removed from what Scripture is clear about. So when we make our systems, we also want to be aware of how clear Scripture is on various subject, and how confident we should be in various aspects of our system. For example in eschatology, I have a system that all fits together in terms of a timeline of prophecy, how the various OT prophecies fit together. But various parts of that system are tentative (like the timing of the rapture), others are quite sure (that Jesus will return to reign on this earth), and others are absolutely certain (Jesus will return bodily to judge). If I just taught the whole system as if it was all equally sure, I wouldn't be doing justice to what Scripture gives weight and clarity to.

vii. Implications of systems

Having a system can give us confidence and objectivity. But they can also end up **resolving tensions too quickly** and miss the nuance. If we have a grid, we can think our grid answers all the questions and be proud and self-confident. Often students will come away from seminary with that kind of an attitude.

So for example, we should have a systematic understanding of Scripture so that if someone asks us, "Hey, I really like this girl and she is a Christian and she said it was ok if I slept with her." that you have a grid that says, "No, that isn't right. That's sexual immorality." There are things that are black and white. We shouldn't say, "It's complicated or it's nuanced" to everything. But there are other questions that we shouldn't just have a system to have black and white answers to. There are many times we need to hear more information, we need to think deeply about how the Scripture applies in different situations.

We must always be aware that we all have assumptions and blind spots. Sometimes our system can cover over those and make us feel like we have the correct answers, but really, our system is giving us overconfidence. We may not know all the Scriptures as well as we know our system. A system should be a help to our understanding of the Word, not a replacement for it. We want to depend on the Word, not our system. So a system is only as good as it helps us know and rely on the Word.

**B. How do you deal with seemingly contradictory ideas?**

1. Relate to Mystery
2. Wrestle to understand how both are true, but in different senses (nuance one or both passages)
3. Overrule a difficult or confusing passage with a more clear one

**Table Discussion Examples**

- “Once saved always saved” and warnings: Romans 8:30-35 & Hebrews 6:4-9
- Call: Matthew 22:14 & Romans 8:30
- Jesus is fully divine and human: Hebrews 1:1-4; & Hebrews 2:14-18

**C. Nuance**

1. Embrace complexity: Recognize that most biblical issues are nuanced and overly simplistic or black and white answers don’t suffice. Remember that God is infinite and He accommodated His perfect righteousness into language we can understand. Often an individual verse only gives one side of an issue and we need to study the whole counsel of God to see every side of it.
2. Pursue humility: Be willing to change your mind and adjust your opinions when interpretations challenge your view. Only God is right and often our pride gets in the way of us learning because we get attached to our views. Always seek to learn more. We need to work hard to think.
3. Understand all sides: Actively try to understand other perspectives even if you don’t agree with them. The best critiques really understand the opposing position. You should be able to articulate the opposing view faithfully without a straw man if you really want to be strong in your view. In other words, if you can’t defeat the strongest arguments of the opposing position, is your position really all that strong? If we really want the truth, we should want to hear the strongest arguments on both sides.
4. Beware of overgeneralizing and false dichotomies. It is easy to take something as a universal rule that is really only true in a more restricted sense or circumstance. Always beware of making statements involving ‘always’ and ‘never.’ A false dichotomy is when something appears to have only two options, when really there is a third or fourth valid option. Either you believe demons can repent and be saved or you don’t believe in God’s power to save. No, demons can’t believe but it’s not because God isn’t able to save.

**i. We should seek to understand what each passage means on its own**

However, very often when passages or truths seem contradictory, one of the principles is true in one sense, and another is also true, but in another sense. Thus we should often ask ourselves, “In what sense is this true?” Good exegetes and theologians are constantly defining terms and senses and understanding nuances.

We should never give up on trying to understand how passages fit together and constantly grow in our understanding of Scripture. Yet we also need to keep humble not give way to rationalization where we bring everything down to a human level and remove all mystery from Scripture (this will certainly lead to heresy!).

Knowing that the other author emphasizes a different side to things helps to check us and makes sure that we don't say something beyond what they were intending to communicate.

ii. Table Discussion

- Saved by faith alone: James 2:24 & Romans 3:28; Ephesians 2:8-9
- Limited and global atonement: John 17:9 & 1 John 2:2

VI. Discussions

What religious background do you have that affects your theology (books, podcasts, YouTube, denominations, churches, culture)?

What theological ideas do you react against because of your background?

How should an exegetically based Systematic Theology impact your Christian life?