

PERSPECTIVE

THE MONTHLY JOURNAL OF MOUNT VERNON RESEARCH





Welcome to Mount Vernon!

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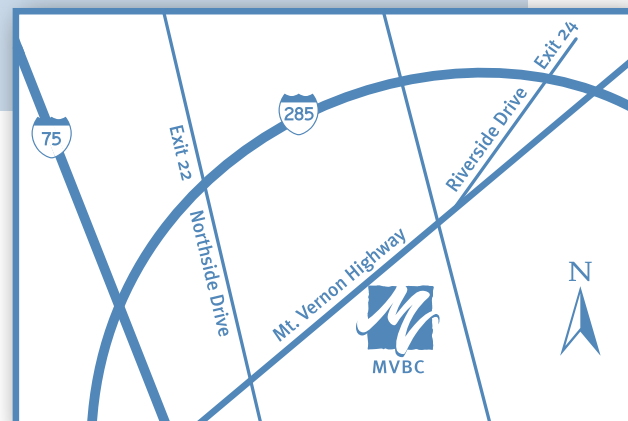
SERMON SCHEDULE

March 7 *What Are the Challenges to Preaching?*

March 14 *Why Should We Preach?*

March 21 *What Should We Preach?*

March 28 *How Should We Preach?*



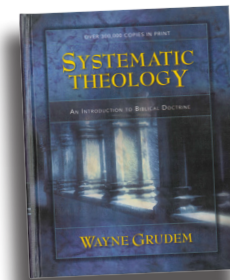
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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Wayne Grudem

Reviewed by Bryan Pillsbury

I was 19 and I was in the middle of my senior year at Gordon College in Massachusetts. I had been a Christian for five years and studying God's Word was my primary passion in life. I had a thirst for biblical knowledge and a strong desire to understand difficult verses and theological concepts so I could give an account for my faith. During my senior year I got to a point in my spiritual journey where I had a genuine crisis of faith. Some of the very difficult theological concepts that I could not understand at the time were creating doubt in my basic beliefs about God and the Bible. A significant shift took place. Instead of being concerned about giving an account of my faith to others, I was now having to give an account to myself. This was frightening territory for a Christian.

One day, I went to Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary and knocked on professors' doors until I caught a sympathetic ear. After explaining my dilemma, a professor recommended that I go to the seminary bookstore and purchase *Systematic Theology* by Louis Berkhof. He suggested this book would foster a big understanding of God by showing how doctrines are rooted on God's Word. So, put in simple terms, I was diligently studying the fragments of my faith in an attempt to piece together a cohesive picture whereas this book starts with a cohesive picture and explains the fragments based on the Bible. In other words, Berkhof's *Systematic* showed me the forest before examining the trees.

Well, I was excited about this advice until I bought the book. It was a weighty and difficult read replete with large words and small print. However, I was in a crisis of faith and desperate for answers, so I persevered from cover to cover and I found that through this study my crisis in understanding faded while my Christian faith grew enormously. I experienced a tremendous sense of peace when I better understood what God said about certain topics as opposed to what men have attempted to rationally or sometimes irrationally explain about certain topics. I tell you that story to illustrate that central to our faith is God's holy, inspired Word, and any systematic study or theology text is simply a tool to help organize what God says on certain topics.

As years passed, I grew in my understanding of Christian theology and learned that there are different types of theology. (Theology simply means the study of God.) Each type ask a different question as it approaches Scripture. For example, biblical theology looks at the text in light God's progressive revelation throughout history. So one may ask how does this particular verse fit into the story of redemption? How does the story of David relate to the life of Jesus? By contrast, systematic theology may ask what are all the verses that speak about

a particular topic, e.g. God, man, Christ, the church, prayer, angels, etc.?

In the mid 1990s, Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* was published. I bought one mostly out of curiosity but to my delight I found a treasure that greatly enhanced my understanding of over 50 different Christian doctrines. I was particularly intrigued because Grudem is a baptist, reformed in his understanding of God's Word and salvation, and believes that the gifts of the Spirit are active today. That is an unusual combination, especially for a Harvard graduate. After reading all 57 chapters, I appreciated the design of this particular systematic because it is very readable. Many of the Scripture references have the whole text embedded in the chapter as an aid in understanding the passage's context. There are many rich footnotes, outlines of additional references, Scripture memory verses, and even a hymn concluding each chapter.

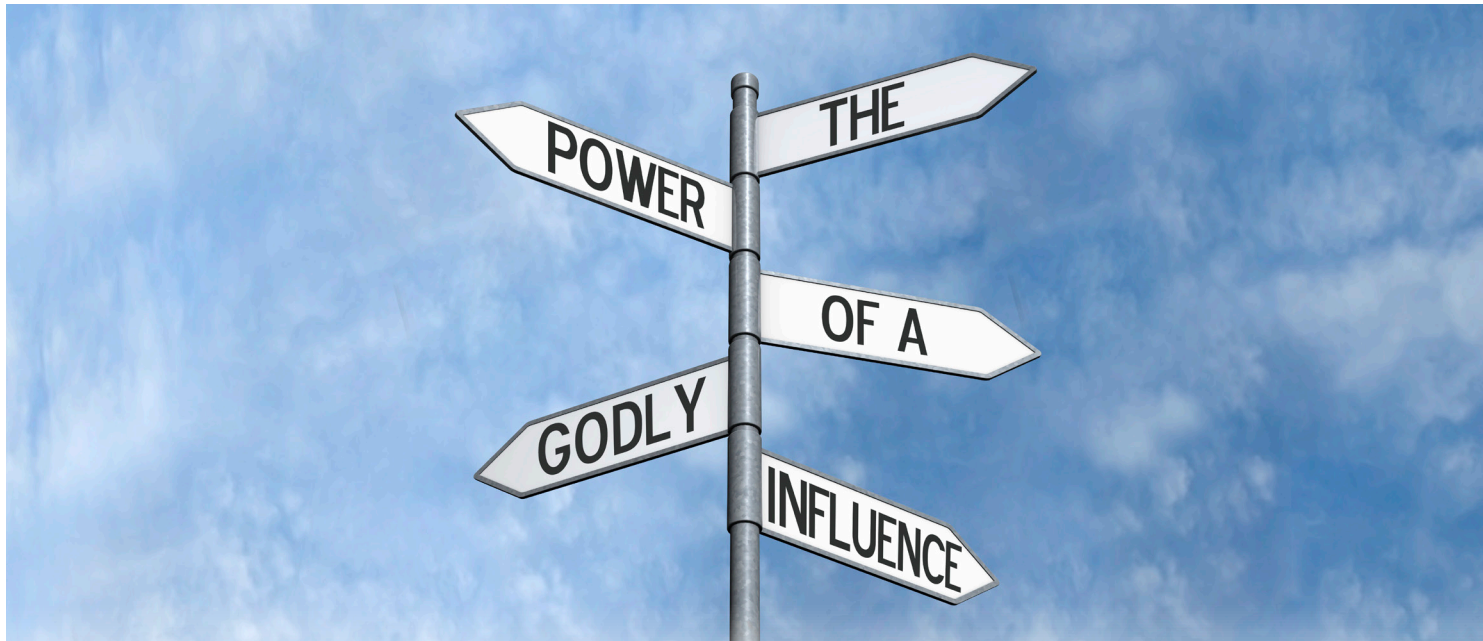
For the last 15 years, I have been sharing this particular systematic book with pastors, missionaries, and the church. Why? Because I have found it to be an incredible tool that seeks to root truth and doctrine in Scripture. It explores what God says about His Word, Himself, His Son, His Holy Spirit, man, redemption, the church and the things related to the future.

Practically speaking, this systematic theology helps counter the rampant nominalism that says doctrine is stodgy, lifeless, and unnecessary for the local church. Yet, I've discovered, after many years of teaching small groups through this book, that the complete opposite is true. Christians are better rooted in their faith with a deeper knowledge of God's Word. They've found that doctrine is for joy and delight. When rightly applied, this systematic study creates humility in the student as they learn the greatness of God. Furthermore, it unites the church as we apply this knowledge to our relationships with one another and aids us in our evangelism as we can articulate the truths we profess.

I would encourage each of you to take a look at this *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem and consider joining a study, which will take several years to complete but is guaranteed to enrich your spiritual journey with a greater understanding of God's word to his people.

Let me conclude with one word of caution. No matter what type of organized study you're involved in, the fundamental building block of mature Christian growth is a regular diet God's Word. Nothing replaces the richness of expository study from Genesis to Revelation. That is of primary importance.

Systematic theologies and other Christian books are tools based in God's Word for building a biblical foundation of what we believe. And though God regularly uses these tools in our lives, we do not want to use them as a substitute for the regular study of Scripture. Much of our precious time can be wasted feasting on the writings of men while we snack on the Word of God. This is a problem in popular Christian culture. God's Word has been diluted to sound bite commentaries on how to succeed in the Christian life leaving the church ignorant of God's ways and commands. I pray that Mount Vernon is where we are well-equipped with God's word to love one another and evangelize the world. 🙏



Dorothy Sayers once argued that people are far too easily influenced. She should know. She was hired by an advertising firm to sell soap. Slogans were her business. Eventually, Sayers became disillusioned with the whole process. Reflecting upon her experience, she asked:

Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that today, when the proportion of literacy throughout Western Europe is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass-propaganda to an extent hitherto unheard-of and unimagined?

Sayers penned these words in 1947. What she discovered holds true today. While trolling around the web I came across this claim made by a company that “sells” celebrity:

Now more than ever, celebrity images are essential to hold the attention of the modern consumer. Celebrity Endorsement Deals has established a service based on one simple fact that is undeniable and widely recognized: Celebrity Sells.

This is, as Sayers put it, both odd and unfortunate. How could we allow ourselves to buy a product simply because a famous person hocks it? Sayers was right. We are far too easily influenced.

The author of Psalm 1 understood how influential people can be. It begins, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.” Here the danger is implied. We can be led down unhelpful, spiritually dangerous paths.

Psalm 1 is about two types of people. There is the one who is blessed. He allows himself to be influenced by God’s Word and the result is wonderful. He yields fruit in season. The other one is condemned. He is a wicked man who does not allow himself to be influenced by God. Instead of a life yielding fruit, he is destined for disaster: “the wicked will not stand in the judgment.”

The man who is blessed refused to allow the wicked to influence him. This is wise. Consider Proverbs 11:7, “When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing.” Or Proverbs 11:31, “If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and

the sinner!” And Proverbs 9:12, “If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.”

It is so easy to look at verses like that and say, “Thank God I’m not like the wicked, the sinners, and the mockers!” But that would be to miss the point. If we are blessed, it is only because Christ bore the punishment we deserved for our wickedness! It’s what we sing in that old hymn: “For nothing good have I whereby Thy grace to claim; I’ll wash my garments white in the blood of Calv’ry’s Lamb.” In other words, if we are blessed it is because Christ’s atoning sacrifice has been applied to us.

In light of this, what are we supposed to do with Psalm 1:1? How are we supposed to take to heart this instruction: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers”? Let me offer six points of application:

1. Distinguish between the blessed and the condemned. The world is divided into two camps. Those who are blessed because of whom they know, Jesus Christ, and those who are condemned for what they do, acts of wickedness. This should not make those of us who count ourselves “blessed” arrogant. If we are blessed it is only because of Christ. Nor should the condemned consider themselves without hope. Jesus is ready to save. His instruction is clear: “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)

2. Recognize the influence of the wicked. The battle is lost even before it has begun if you think that you are immune to the influence of the wicked. There is a deep-seated tendency in each one of us to go with the flow. I did silly things as a kid. I dressed the way my peers dressed. For me, this meant donning Chuck Taylor’s and parachute pants—yes, parachute pants! Why did I do this? I didn’t particularly like the way they looked, but it was the popular thing to do. As an adult, I can fall into similar traps. We all face these temptations. Fearing to be thought overly-zealous we keep silent when Christianity is disparaged. Fearing to be thought holier-than-thou we give in when we should stand strong.

How can you recognize the influence of the wicked? Ask yourself the following questions: Who or what is robbing me of my desire for holiness? Who or what is keeping me from spending time alone with Christ? Who or what is dulling my joy in the gospel? Sincerely answer those questions and you will quickly discern the

“wicked” influences in your life. Sure, we will find deceitful desires lurking within us (see Mark 7). But what factors, outside of us, are spurring us away from God and his glory? Don’t be afraid to fast from television, movies, or the internet for the sake of your holiness.

3. Have compassion for the wicked. The Bible does not equivocate; there are individuals, people, who are wicked. They reject Christ, they live in rebellion against God, and if they do not repent and believe their future is certain. But we do not ultimately know who will be condemned. We are hopeful the light of the gospel will break into their hearts. And so we pray and evangelize and strategize to see their hearts change. It is easy to malign the wicked, but do we have compassion for them? Are we reaching out to them? Do we see ourselves as missionaries called to reach them with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Christians need to be trained, prepared, so that they can be in the world without being overtaken by the world.

4. Discern whether you are a trainee or a missionary. Let me be clear: if you are a Christian then you are a missionary. Period. You are called by God to speak the gospel to unbelievers. However, how do you walk that line between being a missionary to a wicked world and not standing in the way of sinners? In other words, we are easily tempted to fall into the sins we are telling others to stop. So we have to be careful and we have to be prepared.

It is amazing to watch the Olympics. After intense training these athletes are ready to compete. Consider a soldier who does not go out to battle overnight but prepares himself for months. Christians need to be trained, prepared, so that they can be in the world without being overtaken by the world.

Let me offer a personal example. When I first arrived in Washington, DC years ago, I was a relatively young Christian. I had been converted about three years before, but my Christian walk was not consistent. I had not grown significantly in my knowledge about God nor in my love for God. I moved to DC straight out of college. These were tame years for me. Though I went to the school where they filmed the movie *Animal House*, I never darkened the door of a frat party. I played basketball and foosball and studied. I look back and I see how God was protecting me from temptation during those years. But when I went to DC new opportunities presented themselves. I was now a young professional. I had a newfound confidence, a new group of friends, and new vistas of temptation.

One weekend I made my way to a typical party for hill rats (those young creatures who staff the offices in the Senate and the House). Revelry abounded. It was a typical party. But I was overwhelmed. On one hand I desperately wanted to be holy. On the other hand I was attracted to sin. It was as if Galatians 5:17 was being played out in front of me, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” I felt that conflict keenly, and I ran. I knew my heart, I knew my weakness, and I ran. You see, I was a young Christian, still in training. Because of my own weaknesses and immaturity I was not ready to influence. I was too easily influenced.

Where are you on this scale? Do you find yourself influencing others by turning conversations toward Christ or do you find yourself constantly being influenced by others? If you are the one who is always influenced, you may be a trainee.

5. Know what it means to be a godly influence. Paul wrote in Colossians 3:15, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God.” This is not a verse for pastors—it is for everyone. We are all supposed to be a godly influence. Paul Tripp, author of *Instruments in the Hands of the Redeemer*, wrote:

Paul calls us to activities we would normally assume are restricted to formal ministry. We are called to have Scripture so deeply engrained in our lives that we are wise and thankful, and thus always ready to teach and admonish (confront) one another. Paul is calling us to a state of biblical readiness for the ministry opportunities he will bring as he changes us through the ministry of others.

Are you ready for the ministry opportunities that will come your way? Devote yourself to growing in your knowledge and love for Christ. Prepare yourself for the day you will need to stand firm. It is closer than you think. I’ve recently come across a great book that helps build a foundation we need in order to be a godly influence: *Dug Down Deep* by Joshua Harris. If you feel like a trainee, read this book. Better yet, pick up the Gospel of Mark. Read it. Take notes. Pray through it. Apply God’s Word to your life so that you will grow and be ready to contend for the faith.

6. Be someone upon whom God will build a church. Every local church needs influential people. But who are these people? Certainly our standards of influence are not the world’s standards: degrees, income, and status. No, we are looking for men and women who are captivated by the Word of God and filled with a love for God’s people. God will build his church on men and women who are having a godly influence on others.

Such people are visible. They take the time to get known by others. It is so easy to become anonymous on a Sunday morning. Come to a shepherding group, a Sunday evening service, or a Wednesday evening service. Strike up a conversation with someone you might not normally talk to. Seek to be a godly influence in their lives by encouraging them in the gospel.

Such people are knowledgeable. A godly influence applies God’s Word to other’s lives. This can be done arrogantly and proudly. But it can also be done tenderly and gently. Aim for the latter! Know the Word well enough so that you can lovingly minister to others.

Such people are discipling. Jesus calls us to make disciples. This is a formal call from our Savior to be a godly influence. The wicked are deliberate: they conspire to see the blessed fall. But those of us who know Jesus Christ should be conspiring to see others grow. Find someone that you can meet with regularly. Take him or her out to coffee. Find out how they came to know Christ. Read a book of the Bible together. Meet regularly and be bold. Dig into their lives.

People are going to be influenced by someone. Let’s pray that God uses us to be a godly influence in the lives of others.✠

~ Aaron Menikoff

Events Key

	Churchwide		Elementary (1 st -6 th grade)		Women's Ministry
	New Members		Missions		Adults
	Preschool		Youth (7 th -12 th grade)		

1	Taylor King	16	Anne Goodgame
2	Diane Hughs	17	Ash Anderson
	Brandon Laney		Becky Luttrell
	Brad Thayer		Wanda McCleskey
3	Bethany Houser	18	Garrett Harris
	Samantha Long	21	Lisa Timmons
4	Joy Sullivan	22	Michael Clary
	Carol Thurman		Keith Cooper
5	Terry Earl		Charlotte Haigler
	Sid Miller		Tony Watson
6	Jamie Fulcher	23	Dianne Hoover
	Johnny Hall		John Pattillo
	Mary Turner		Mary Robinson
8	Kimberly Ferguson	25	Bob Linker
	Frank Louthan	26	Hal Barnes
	Ferrell Ryan		Everett Hodge
9	Scott Sullivan		Ann Nable
10	Erin Nable		Anita Shipley
12	Anna Matheny	27	Margaret Dolive
	Von Sheffield	28	Donna Reid
13	Alice Nelson		Lois Shank
14	Katherine Scheidt	30	Georgiana Branan
	Clay Speas	31	Reneé Moultrie

Galatians 5:22-24

The youth will be having their second annual Epic Lock-in. This will be a great time of fun and fellowship. For more information, contact Jacob Hall at jacobhall@mvbchurch.org or 404-255-3133 x228.



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