

Course Specification: Systematic Theology

A Self-Directed Study Program Using The Modern Autodidact System

Course Overview

Subject: Systematic Theology

Duration: 9-12 months (1.5-2 hours daily study)

Approach: Broad to narrow, following The Modern Autodidact System's seven-step framework, progressing from foundational concepts to deep engagement with canonical works and specialized topics.

Goal: To gain foundational knowledge in systematic theology, understand major theological traditions (Reformed, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Catholic), engage deeply with theological method, and develop the ability to articulate and defend theological positions across the major loci of systematic theology.

Personal Motivation Assessment

Before beginning, articulate your reasons for studying systematic theology:

- **Intellectual curiosity:** What theological questions keep you up at night?
- **Ministry preparation:** How will this strengthen your service?
- **Worldview development:** How does theology shape your understanding of reality?
- **Role models:** Which theologians inspire you? (Bavinck? Calvin? Edwards?)
- **Writing/teaching goals:** Will you create content based on this study?

Action: Write 1-2 paragraphs explaining why *you* want to invest 300+ hours in this subject. Return to this when motivation wanes.

Phase 1: Foundation (Weeks 1-6)

Step 1: Pick Your Focus & Check Your Curiosity

Objective: Confirm systematic theology genuinely interests you and understand its scope.

Initial Reading (2-3 beginner books):

1. **"Systematic Theology" by Wayne Grudem** (Chapters 1-6)
 - *Why:* Accessible introduction to theological method, Scripture, and how systematic theology works
 - *Time:* 2 weeks
2. **"Concise Theology" by J.I. Packer**
 - *Why:* Brief overview of major doctrines; helps identify areas of interest
 - *Time:* 1 week
3. **"Core Christianity" by Michael Horton OR "Pilgrim Theology" by Michael Horton**
 - *Why:* Contemporary Reformed introduction covering major loci
 - *Time:* 2 weeks

Supplementary Resources:

- YouTube: The Gospel Coalition's "Theological Primer" series
- Podcast: "Credo" by Matthew Barrett (episodes on systematic theology basics)

Checkpoint: After these readings, do you still want to continue? Which doctrines most intrigue you? Note these for later focus.

Phase 2: Survey the Field (Weeks 7-18)

Step 2: Introductory Online Course

Objective: Understand the structure of systematic theology, major theological traditions, key thinkers, and fundamental vocabulary.

Primary Course Option:

RTS Mobile Ed: "Introduction to Systematic Theology" (Dr. James Hamilton or similar)

- OR **BiblicalTraining.org**: "Systematic Theology I & II" (Dr. Bruce Ware or Dr. John Frame)
- OR **Yale Open Courses**: "Introduction to the Old Testament/New Testament" (for biblical foundation)

Course Structure (12 weeks):

- Watch lectures on walks or during commute
- Take notes afterward (retrieval practice) in dedicated notebook
- 2-3 lectures per week

Step 3: Explore Subdisciplines (3-4 Introductory Courses)

Create or find shorter courses on major theological loci:

Course A: Theology Proper (Doctrine of God) - 3 weeks

DIY Reading:

- Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, Chapters 11-17
- Frame's *Systematic Theology*, Part 3
- **Supplementary:** TGC videos on attributes of God

Course B: Christology & Soteriology - 3 weeks

DIY Reading:

- Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, Chapters 26-36
- Letham's *Systematic Theology*, Chapters 13-20
- **Primary Text Sample:** Calvin's *Institutes* Book II (selections)

Course C: Pneumatology & Ecclesiology - 3 weeks

DIY Reading:

- Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, sections on Holy Spirit & Church
- Letham's *Systematic Theology*, Chapters 22-27
- **Supplementary:** Lectures on church history related to ecclesiology

Course D: Eschatology & Theological Method - 3 weeks

DIY Reading:

- Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, Chapters 54-57
- Frame's *Systematic Theology*, Part 1 (Prolegomena)
- Compare theological methods: Bavinck vs. Frame vs. Barth (introductions)

Note-Taking Strategy:

- Create subject notebook: "Systematic Theology - Foundation"
- After each lecture/reading, write 1-page summary in your own words
- Note: Which tradition resonates? Where do you have questions?

Phase 3: Engaging the Canon (Weeks 19-40)

Step 5: Study 4+ Canonical Works

Objective: Deep engagement with theological giants, sharpening thinking through difficult texts.

You own exceptional works. Here's a strategic reading plan that balances breadth and depth:

Canonical Work #1: **Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*** - 8 weeks

Plan:

- Read all four books, but focus on: Book I (Knowledge of God), Book II (Christ), Book III (Holy Spirit's work), Book IV (Church & Sacraments)
- **Pace:** 20-25 pages per day, 5 days/week
- **Secondary Source:** "Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed" by Paul Helm OR YouTube lecture series by Dr. David Calhoun

Why First: Foundation for Reformed tradition; influences Turretin, Bavinck, and modern Reformed theology.

Canonical Work #2: **Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics (Volume 1: Prolegomena)*** - 6 weeks

Plan:

- Focus on Volume 1 to understand theological method and epistemology
- **Pace:** 30-40 pages per week
- **Secondary Source:** "Bavinck: A Critical Biography" by Ron Gleason; join online Bavinck reading groups

Why: Bridge between classical Reformed and modern theology; outstanding on theological method.

Canonical Work #3: Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (Selections) - 6 weeks

Plan:

- Read: Prima Pars (First Part), Questions 1-26 (God's existence, attributes, Trinity)
- Use **Mortimer Adler's "How to Read a Book"** method for philosophical theology
- **Secondary Source:** "Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide" by Edward Feser

Why: Understand Catholic systematic theology's method; trains philosophical thinking; influences all Western theology.

Canonical Work #4: Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (Selections from Volume I.1) - 6 weeks

Plan:

- Read: Prolegomena sections on Word of God and revelation
- **Pace:** 20-30 pages per week (dense!)
- **Secondary Source:** "Karl Barth: An Introductory Biography" by John Bowden; lectures by Dr. Bruce McCormack

Why: Most influential 20th-century theologian; challenges and sharpens Reformed convictions; trains you to engage neo-orthodox thought.

Canonical Work #5: Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Volume 1) - 6 weeks

Plan:

- Focus on First Topic (Theology), Second Topic (Scripture), and Tenth Topic (Predestination)
- **Pace:** 1 question per day
- **Secondary Source:** Compare with Bavinck and Frame on same topics

Why: Protestant scholastic precision; controversial theology; apologetic method.

Reading Techniques for Classics:

- Use **Mortimer Adler's inspectional and analytical reading** methods
- Create **commonplace book** for favorite quotes and reflections
- **Syntopical reading:** Compare how Calvin, Bavinck, Aquinas, and Barth treat same doctrines

Phase 4: Specialized Study (Weeks 41-52)

Step 7: Follow Your Curiosity & Narrow Focus

Based on your journey, choose 2-3 specialized topics for deep study:

Option A: Reformed Theology Deep Dive

Reading Plan:

- Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* Volumes 2-4 (Christ, Holy Spirit, Last Things)
- Petrus van Mastricht's *Theoretical-Practical Theology* (selections)
- Compare with Wellum's *Systematic Theology* (progressive covenantalism perspective)

Option B: Doctrine of God Focus

Reading Plan:

- Turretin's *Institutes*, Topics on Divine Attributes
- John Frame's *Doctrine of God*
- Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* Volume 2
- Compare Classical Theism (Aquinas, Turretin) vs. Covenantal (Frame) approaches

Option C: Comparative Systematic Theology

Reading Plan:

- Compare Reformed (Berkhof), Wesleyan-Arminian (Miley), and Neo-Orthodox (Barth) treatments of predestination, atonement, and ecclesiology
- Create chart showing differences
- Write position paper on where you land

Option D: Theological Method & Prolegomena

Reading Plan:

- Frame's *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*
- Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* Volume 1
- Compare Van Til, Frame, Bavinck, and Barth on theological epistemology

Phase 5: Synthesis & Production (Ongoing)

Step 6: Start Writing/Creating Content

Objective: Solidify learning through teaching others and synthesis.

Project Ideas:

1. **Book Review Blog/Substack**

- Review each systematic theology you read
- Compare treatments of specific doctrines
- Target audience: Educated laypeople or seminary students

2. **Systematic Theology Podcast**

- 20-minute episodes explaining major doctrines
- Interview pastor-theologians
- Discuss books you're reading

3. **YouTube Series: "Comparing the Systematicians"**

- 10-minute videos comparing Calvin, Turretin, Bavinck, and Barth on specific topics
- Use whiteboard or slides

4. **Personal Commonplace Book Project**

- Compile 100 best quotes from your reading
- Add your reflections on each
- Organize by theological loci

5. **Teach Adult Sunday School Class**

- 12-week series on Christian doctrine
- Forces you to simplify and apply what you've learned

6. **Write Theological Essays**

- "Bavinck vs. Frame on Theological Method"
- "Why Calvin's View of the Sacraments Still Matters"
- "Comparing Calvinist and Arminian Soteriology"

Writing to Learn:

- After reading major sections, write 500-word summaries **without looking back**
- Keep a "Theological Questions" journal - write out answers as you learn
- Monthly: Write 1,500-word essay synthesizing what you've learned

Learning Resources & Support

Books on How to Read Theology:

1. **"How to Read a Book" by Mortimer Adler** - Essential for reading Aquinas, Turretin, Barth
2. **"Reading Theology" by Darren Sarisky** - Specific to theological reading
3. **"Theological Interpretation of Scripture" by Daniel Treier** - Connects Bible and systematics

Online Communities:

- **Reddit:** r/Reformed, r/theology
- **Facebook Groups:** "Herman Bavinck Reading Group," "Systematic Theology Discussion"
- **Mere Orthodoxy** (blog/forum)
- **The Calvinist International**

Podcasts for Supplementary Learning:

- **Credo** (Matthew Barrett) - Systematic theology topics
- **Theology Gals** - Accessible theology discussions
- **Reformed Forum** - Academic-level Reformed theology
- **Mortification of Spin** - Applied theology with humor

Academic Tools:

- **Academic Influence** - Find most influential works in theology
- **Theological Journals:** *Westminster Theological Journal*, *Themelios* (free), *Pro Ecclesia*
- **Bible Study Tools:** Logos Bible Software (includes systematic theologies), BibleGateway, Blue Letter Bible

Note-Taking System

Notebook Organization:

1. Master Systematic Theology Notebook

- Section 1: Prolegomena & Theological Method
- Section 2: Theology Proper (Doctrine of God)
- Section 3: Anthropology & Hamartiology
- Section 4: Christology & Soteriology
- Section 5: Pneumatology
- Section 6: Ecclesiology & Sacraments
- Section 7: Eschatology
- Section 8: Book Reviews & Reflections

2. Commonplace Book

- Quotes from primary sources
- Your reflections
- Organized by theme

3. Question Journal

- Running list of unresolved questions
- Track how your thinking evolves

Note-Taking Method:

- **During reading:** Light underlining/marginal notes
- **After reading session:** 15-minute retrieval practice - summarize in your own words
- **Weekly:** 1-hour synthesis - connect themes across readings

Sample Weekly Schedule

Monday-Friday (1.5-2 hours/day):

- 60-90 min: Primary reading (systematic theology text)
- 15-20 min: Retrieval practice (write summary from memory)
- 10-15 min: Review notes from previous week

Saturday (2-3 hours):

- 90 min: Secondary source reading (journal article, book on how to read theology)
- 60 min: Writing project work (blog post, essay, video script)

Sunday:

- Rest or light reading
- Discuss what you're learning with study partner or spouse

Assessment & Milestones

Since you're self-teaching, create your own assessments:

Monthly Check-ins:

1. **Can I explain this month's doctrine to an educated layperson?**
2. **What surprised me most this month?**
3. **Where do I disagree with what I've read? Why?**
4. **What questions do I still have?**

Quarterly Exams (Self-Created):

- Write a 2,000-word essay comparing two theologians on a doctrine
- Create a chart showing different theological traditions' views on a topic
- Teach a 30-minute lesson on a doctrine to someone

Final Project (Month 12):

Choose one:

1. **Write a 10,000-word theological essay** on a topic you're passionate about
2. **Create a 12-week Sunday School curriculum** on Christian doctrine
3. **Produce 10 YouTube videos** explaining systematic theology topics
4. **Compile an annotated bibliography** of the 50 most important systematic theology works

Adaptation Notes

If you have less time (3-6 months):

- Focus on Steps 1-3 only
- Read Grudem + Calvin's *Institutes* + one modern systematic theology

- Skip Aquinas and Barth for now

If you want to go deeper (18-24 months):

- Add Bavinck's entire *Reformed Dogmatics* (all 4 volumes)
- Read all of Turretin's *Institutes*
- Study historical theology alongside (Pelikan's *Christian Tradition* series)
- Learn biblical languages for exegetical theology

If you're preparing for ministry:

- Prioritize practical theology sections
- Add Van Mastricht's *Theoretical-Practical Theology* (theory + application)
- Focus writing projects on sermon prep and teaching

Final Encouragement

Systematic theology is the "queen of sciences" - the attempt to think God's thoughts after Him systematically. You're embarking on a journey that will shape how you see everything: God, humanity, salvation, church, and the future.

The texts you own represent some of the finest theological minds in Christian history. Reading them is an act of worship, a form of loving God with your mind.

You'll emerge from this journey:

- Able to articulate and defend Christian doctrine clearly
- Equipped to read the Bible with theological categories
- Confident in theological conversations
- Grounded in your theological convictions
- Prepared to teach others

Remember Bavinck's words: "*The majesty of theology consists in the fact that throughout the centuries it leads so many men and women... to seek satisfaction for the deepest needs of their hearts.*"

Now begin. Ad fontes! (Back to the sources!)

Appendix: Reading Order Recommendation

Based on your library, here's an optimal reading sequence:

Phase 1 (Months 1-3): Grudem → Packer → Horton

Phase 2 (Months 4-6): Frame (intro) → Letham → Berkhof (selections)

Phase 3 (Months 7-12):

- Calvin's *Institutes* (full)
- Bavinck *Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. 1
- Aquinas *Summa* (selections)
- Barth *Church Dogmatics* (selections)
- Turretin *Institutes* Vol. 1

Phase 4 (Months 13-18):

- Bavinck Vols. 2-4 (topical reading)
- Van Mastricht (selections)
- Wellum (compare with Bavinck)
- Miley (understand Wesleyan perspective)
- Strong (Baptist perspective)

This order builds from accessible to challenging, Reformed to comparative, modern to classical.

Quick-Start Action Plan

This Week:

1. Order or borrow Packer's *Concise Theology* and Horton's *Core Christianity*
2. Create your "Systematic Theology - Foundation" notebook
3. Write your personal motivation statement (2 paragraphs)
4. Read first 50 pages of Grudem's *Systematic Theology*

This Month:

1. Finish all Phase 1 reading
2. Enroll in BiblicalTraining.org course
3. Set up weekly study schedule
4. Identify one person to discuss theology with regularly

This Year:

1. Complete Phases 1-3
2. Read Calvin's *Institutes* completely
3. Start writing project (blog, video series, or teaching)
4. Read at least 3 canonical works

Begin today. Choose your first book. Open it. Read 20 pages. Take notes. You've started your systematic theology education.