

Primary Doctrines

ORGANIZATION AND PURPOSE

This systematic theology is produced by the Intercontinental Church of God to reflect its doctrines, beliefs, practices and traditions.

Within the Church, the systematic theology establishes a coherent and consistent reference for the ministry and for the lay membership. As such, it promotes unity among the ministry and further understanding among the members. As a formal record of the Church's beliefs and teachings, the systematic theology provides an official source of public information about the doctrines of the Intercontinental Church of God.

The Bible alone is God's written revelation to man. This systematic theology is simply an attempt to explain our comprehension of God's Word as believed, taught, expounded and applied by the Church. It is written by men for men—and is consequently not to be put on a par with God's Holy Word. The systematic theology is not to replace the Bible nor to supersede or overshadow it. The point of view is that of looking up toward, and not down upon, God's Word. Although we are building a superstructure, the Bible will always remain the foundation. The readership of this theology is cautioned not to lose this perspective.

A specific approach is followed in order to make this systematic theology applicable and relevant to ourselves and to others. A document intended to fulfill the goals of being accurate, readable, unifying and informative must, of course, be written in a manner that can accomplish these goals. This Systematic Theology Project is therefore somewhat different from other systematic theologies whose goals are different from ours. While other projects may be aimed at scholars or theologians exclusively, this work is to be used as a practical working tool for the field ministry of the Intercontinental Church of God. As such, there will be material—for example, on Christian living and Church organization—that is not ordinarily found in academic systematic theologies. Some of these subjects could be classified as administrative practices or Church traditions rather than doctrines and beliefs. The point is that everything included is given as guidelines for the ministry. Therefore, we are under no illusion that this systematic theology is like any others. It is unique and intentionally so.

While the Worldwide Church of God traces its roots to 'the New Testament Church, our recent history dates from the calling of Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong in the late 1920s and to his commission by God in the early 1930s to preach the gospel to the world as a witness. As the Pastor General of the Church, he has set the example of approaching doctrine as a search for truth so that one might know and obey God. He also has long recognized that it is ultimately through God's Spirit that we can fully comprehend the Bible. For the years since Mr. Armstrong's calling until now, the written record of our beliefs has taken the form of booklets or articles on individual topics written as we grew in knowledge, understanding and insight. But as the Church developed into a substantial institution, Mr. Garner Ted Armstrong, Executive Vice-President of the Church, recognized the need for a more organized, thorough systematic presentation of the Church's doctrines and beliefs, and thus commissioned the present Project.

During the final months of preparation, Mr. Garner Ted Armstrong presented the STP to his father, Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong, in its rough draft form. On several visits to the elder Armstrong's home in Tucson, Garner Ted Armstrong and other ministers read through various segments of the STP which they knew might be of special interest to the elder Armstrong, particularly the sections on Healing and Tithing. Some minor edits were made, and Mr. Herbert Armstrong approved the project.

He was fully aware of the development of the STP through all its phases. Repeated mention of the project was made in the "Pastor's Report" to all the field ministry, and repeated solicitations for input from the entire ministry of the Church were made through that medium.

Later, after the rough draft was typewritten, printed, and placed in a loose-leaf binder with spacers and vinyl cover, Mr. Herbert Armstrong told the ministry he had "never seen" the document; said he had not authorized it, and repudiated the entire project. In letters and articles, he charged the document "did away with tithing." Others influenced Mr. Armstrong to come to such an outrageous conclusion—they shall bear their own responsibility. As will be clearly seen, there was no "watering down" of doctrine in the STP, and the document on tithing is particularly strong.

Since the leadership of the Worldwide Church of God repudiated the entire STP, required that all ministers turn in their copies, and presumably, destroyed them, taking the document out of circulation, it was understood the Worldwide Church of God had relinquished all claims to the material.

By unanimous decision of the Board of Trustees of the Church of God, International, and by unanimous approval of the Ministerial Council, the Systematic Theology Project was adopted as the official "statement of belief and practice" by the Church of God, International.

The Ministerial Council unanimously agreed the STP was the "starting point" for all future doctrinal discussions and papers. It remains in a loose-leaf form. It remains an 'incomplete document. It is an ongoing project. However, in its present form, it represents the most comprehensive statement of doctrines and practices of the Church of God, International, to be found outside Holy Writ. Although Garner Ted Armstrong separated from the Church of God, International in the winter of 1997/98, the STP remained a 'work-in-progress' and so followed him to the Intercontinental Church of God.

Now, with the initial establishment of the more formalized systematic theology, certain fundamental difficulties arise as by-products of the process. First is simply the "look" of apparent perfection and permanence. Only the Bible itself claim total inspiration, and any systematic theology must be at least somewhat arbitrary and artificial. The Bible is God's Word, presenting with great literary scope and historical sweep the record of God's instructions to man and man's relationship with God. As such, the reality of biblical truth is coherent and integrated. Biblical "doctrines" are not formally categorized into topics, subtopics and sub-subtopics. But this is what must be done in any systematic theology. We have obviously tried to formulate the overall organization to best represent the current teachings of the Intercontinental Church of God. Yet, since this doctrinal organization, as with any doctrinal organization, must divide the truth of God into independent subjects, the full impact of the tight interrelationships and interdependencies among all doctrines must of necessity be somewhat sacrificed. Furthermore, we fully recognize the numerous ways in which this systematic theology could have been organized. We have no illusion that what is hereby presented is perfect or cannot be improved, but we intend to accurately reflect the contemporary teachings of the Church.

The Church recognizes "doctrine" as simply being the basic tenets of teachings of the Bible and the Church. The importance of understanding true doctrine is as vital as understanding God's master plan itself—since doctrine in reality is only this same master plan broken down into its component parts. The challenge of any systematic theology is to take these various parts and organize them in a clear and logical fashion.

The paradox of any systematic theology (as discussed in the section on the Bible) is that no one doctrine can be understood apart from all the other doctrines, and it is impossible to comprehend all the doctrines without understanding each individual one. The interrelationships and interdependencies among all the biblical teachings are extremely strong. The structural associations and interactions among the numerous doctrines are not therefore limited to a simple two-dimensional linear progression. Rather, what we are confronted with is a multidimensional structure with the number of dimensions just about equaling the number of doctrines. This means that to explain fully almost any of the biblical doctrines, one would have to explain most of the others.

How then do we start? How can we best begin to systematize biblical theology? Our approach has been first to discern the appropriate subjects necessary to most efficiently include the full body of the Church's biblical teachings, and then proceed to organize them into a logical and consistent structure. We developed seven

general categories and over thirty major doctrinal topics for this preliminary draft. Categories and topics were chosen and organized to best reflect a logical pattern of biblical order and to emphasize them as taught and practiced by the Intercontinental Church of God.

1. Primary Doctrines: God, Bible, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, Mankind, Angelic Realm;
2. Salvation: Salvation, Faith, Repentance, Baptisms, Laying on of Hands;
3. Kingdom of God: Kingdom of God, Gospel, Prophecy, Resurrections, Judgment;
4. Law of God: Law of God, Biblical Covenants, Ten Commandments, Sabbath, Annual Holy Days, Tithing and Giving, Sin;
5. The Christian: The Christian, The Christian Relationship with God, The Christian Relationship with Fellow Man, The Christian Family, Healing;
6. The Church of God: The Church of God, Ministry of the Church, Fellowship of the Brethren;
7. Traditional Christian Doctrines: Statements on almost thirty traditional doctrines, such as immortal soul, heaven, hell, trinity, Sunday, Christmas, Easter, rapture etc., presenting the theological viewpoint of the Intercontinental Church of God.

Next, each doctrinal subject was thoroughly explored from both biblical and Church perspectives to determine the scope of subtopics and concepts that should be covered. These were then submitted to dozens of ministers for evaluation. The actual writing of the papers was developed from a carefully constructed outline of concept flow and was then directed to emphasize a practical product. Each paper was written to be readable and useful as well as biblically accurate and logical. The papers were then submitted to other ministers and scholars of the Church for critique, and each paper passed through many edits. As an explanation rather than as a defense, each doctrinal paper expresses our beliefs honestly (and hopefully clearly) in a straightforward manner. This systematic theology is thereby not intended as a challenge or rebuttal to others' beliefs.

Each particular doctrinal paper contains first a "Doctrinal Statement" (a succinct and direct declaration of the essence what we believe on the topic), followed by a "Doctrinal Overview" (an expanded statement summarizing the basic tenets of the doctrine), and finally a "Doctrinal Exposition" (a full, detailed explanation of the subject).

One objective this project strives to fulfill, is to project the right perspective by presenting each doctrine in its proper biblical context and appropriate relationship to other doctrines. We try to emphasize what is of clear biblical importance. It is all too easy to focus on a relatively minor point of doctrine to the apparent exclusion of more fundamental topics. This Usually happens because one has questions he feels need immediate resolution; at other times it is because one has a particular interest in the topic. Sometimes points of doctrine generate focus or interest in inverse proportion to how much the Bible discusses them; this is quite understandable, because the obscure points are, by their very nature, more intellectually stimulating and intriguing than the obvious and easily proved fundamentals of the faith. However, no matter what the reasons, the pitfall of doctrinal myopia is to lose the vision of the "big picture" of God's master plan. Once one has lost this overview, he has lost his spiritual way.

The best way to keep our doctrinal focus sharp and clear is to stay finely tuned to the central figure of the entire Bible: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is both the focal point and the "big picture" of the entire Bible—He is the overview of both testaments. The Old Testament is the story of His creation and government (Col. 1:16), His dealings with Israel (I Cor. 10:4) and His laws; it also records His ancestry and the detailed prophecies of His first and second comings. The New Testament is the story of His life and message, the magnification of His

laws, the beginning of His Church and the announcement of His coming Kingdom. If Christ did not exist, there would be no Bible—there would be no point to it. Jesus Christ is the Word of God; and since the Bible is God's written word, it is, in a very real sense, the embodiment of Jesus Christ in verbal representation on the printed page.

In accordance with the focal point and overview of the Bible, this systematic theology stresses Jesus Christ—past, present and future. It tells of His life, His works, His message, His "good news," His teachings, His instructions, His laws, His way of life, His admonitions, His corrections, His rebukes, His love, His mercy, His forgiveness, His people, His friends, His covenants, His Church, His Kingdom, His promises and His salvation. The focus is on Jesus Christ, as these statements represent His doctrines which we have attempted to present in an organized and systematic manner. No one keeping close to the trunk of this tree will ever get caught out on a limb. No one following the foundational doctrines of Jesus Christ will ever suffer doctrinal tunnel vision and the resultant spiritual blindness that such tunnel vision can cause.

God's purpose for mankind offers the most incredible possible potential that can be imagined. Indeed, it stretches the imagination beyond its limit, for God states that every human being can eventually be born into God's own family, with God Himself as his or her real Father. Man was created to actually become God, just as God Himself is God, with the same qualities of existence such as immortality and eternal life. Man was designed to become a full member of the God family, just as our elder brother, Jesus Christ is God and part of that family. This mankind's ineffably awesome potential—a spectacular destiny which will eventually include the entire universe as part of our inheritance.

God's plan for accomplishing this purpose for mankind is equally breathtaking. God will make His truth known to all human beings from all time and every place and give to each of them individually a full opportunity for salvation. God is not willing that any should perish and has structured a plan which will make available to all people the full knowledge of His purpose and way (though what they do with this knowledge will be a product of their independent minds to which God has given free moral agency).

This, then, is the essential foundation of biblical doctrine as believed and taught by the Intercontinental Church of God—that all mankind, every human being who has ever lived, will eventually have the opportunity to become born of God into the family of God, to literally become God. Around this fundamental concept every other biblical doctrine must revolve and relate.

Owing to the obvious interdependence of biblical doctrines, not everything to be said on any particular subject can often be presented in the same place or even in the same paper. The reader is requested to keep this in mind before making hasty evaluations or jumping to quick conclusions. For example, the complex discussion of "law and grace" must be woven through many of the doctrinal statements. This has been an especially confusing subject for those who have erroneously claimed that the Intercontinental Church of God teaches that salvation can be earned through obedience to the law. In order for the reader to grasp the full and proper biblical understanding of the many-faceted interrelationships between law and grace, several of the following doctrinal statements, overviews and expositions need to be read in parallel (beginning with Law of God and Salvation. Then including Biblical Covenants, Sabbath, Ten Commandments, "Law or Grace" in Traditional Christian Doctrines, and finally also involving particularly relevant aspects of other papers, such as the historical comparison between the Intercontinental Church of God and the early New Testament Church in the Church of God).

All doctrinal statements need to be read in their entirety. By searching through the systematic theology in general or any one statement in particular for the answer to an intriguing or needlesome problem one runs the risk of short circuiting himself. To accurately comprehend the specific subject of one's current interest, the reader is advised to at least read through that whole doctrinal statement to appreciate the full scope of the doctrine under consideration, as well as to skim through any related statements. (For example, many of the more general—but most powerful—reasons how we can know that the early New Testament Church observed God's

Feast days are not presented in the statement on Annual Holy Days, but are in Law of God, Biblical Covenants and especially Sabbath.)

The systematic theology project is the product of numerous ministers and scholars of the Church. It is only through this substantial resource of knowledge and experience that we can hope to attain a reflection of God's understanding and wisdom. Yet the systematic theology must not be cemented in stone. It will need continual revision as God guides the Church in further understanding of His word.

What is herein presented is therefore still in preliminary form. It must continue to grow in both scope and quality. But it cannot grow without constant constructive input from the ministry. Ministers should consider it their responsibility to help refine the Systematic Theology Project, contributing to it in the same spirit with which it was prepared. Hence, we accept, appreciate and welcome—indeed solicit—all information which serves to enhance and improve this effort.

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This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

The Garner Ted Armstrong Evangelistic Association

P.O. Box 747

Flint, TX 75762

Phone: (903) 561-7070 • Fax: (903) 561-4141

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