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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AND
THE SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF LAYPERSONS

By

YANCEY C. ARRINGTON

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

In twenty-first century America, the general layperson's knowledge of God, and associated biblical doctrines, is weak at best. This vacuum of theological education leaves the church vulnerable to a whole host of problems. For example, growing numbers of Christians make decisions, render worth, and interpret reality not based on a revelation outside of themselves but on feelings and senses inside themselves. This prevailing spirit has likely contributed to the increasing theological illiteracy in the church.

Theological literature suggests the study of systematic theology would provide a comprehensive, coherent, and contextual study of Christian teaching. Adult education literature centered on transformative learning argues genuine transformation is fostered through a process that includes a disorienting dilemma and accompanying critical reflection. The resulting changes, as literature on how churches measure spiritual growth would suggest, will be evidenced in a person's thinking, affections, and actions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to discover how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology.

Four research questions guided this study: (1) How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' thinking? (2) How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' actions? (3) How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' affects? (4) What about systematic theology uniquely contributed to their spiritual formation as opposed to other means employed for spiritual growth? This study employed a qualitative design of a case study using a semi-structured interview protocol with nine participants who completed a seven-month class in systematic theology. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method.

The findings of the study were that a layperson's spiritual formation uniquely enhanced by the study of systematic theology in one's thinking, affections, and actions. Indeed, a pattern emerged: knowing a truth that creates a feeling that produces an action. Systematic theology deepens the learner's doctrinal soundness, empowers the learner's discernment, and develops the learner's worldview. The data demonstrated systematic theology uniquely gave participants a confidence in things of faith, a love for God and the Bible, and a peace with the mystery of the Divine.

This study is significant for both the Christian layperson and the church leader responsible for the congregants' spiritual formation as it demonstrates the unique contribution of the study of systematic theology. Therefore, it should serve as a great encouragement to implement systematic theology not as something peripheral or optional in the educational life of the church but more central and integral in the spiritual formation process.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Problem Statement

A.W. Tozer once noted, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ These words are taken from his aptly titled first chapter, *Why We Must Think Rightly About God*, where the author calls his readers to recognize the gravity behind their theological dispositions. Among the many implications those theological understandings involve, the impact on practical Christian living is central. Tozer, writing fifty years ago, lamented the church’s conception of God, calling it “so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.”² Regrettably, at the opening decades of the twenty-first century, it appears the layperson’s knowledge of what is holy, and associated biblical doctrines, has not improved much.

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1961), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

A nationwide survey on religious knowledge conducted in 2010 by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that atheists, agnostics, and Mormons were among the highest-scoring groups in areas such as the core teachings of Christianity, surpassing Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelical Christians.³ Additionally, The Barna Group discovered that among individuals who identify themselves as Christians, close to half contend that Satan does not exist, one-third argue that Christ sinned while he lived on earth, and one-quarter reject the idea that the Bible is accurate in all of the principles it teaches.⁴ When asked about the implications of the study, George Barna , founder of The Barna Research Group, concluded that people are increasingly becoming their own “theologian-in-residence,” as they look less and less toward pastors, professors, or churches for their theological education.⁵ Indeed, the Barna data found by a three-to-one margin that adults are more likely to “develop their own set of religious beliefs than accept a comprehensive set of beliefs taught by a particular church.”⁶

This movement toward an individualistic approach to dogmatics reflects a postmodern shift in America’s national consciousness. David Wells, professor of

³ Pew Research Center, "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey," (2010): 17.

⁴ George Barna, "Christianity Is No Longer Americans’ Default Faith" <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/15-christianity-is-no-longer-americans-default-faith> (accessed January 14, 2012).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, notes that the worldviews which once made sense of the whole of existence have been replaced by privatized worldviews which are “valid for no one but the person whose world it is and whose view it is.”⁷ Growing numbers of people make decisions, render worth, and interpret reality not based on a revelation outside of themselves but on feelings and senses inside themselves. This prevailing spirit has likely contributed to the increasing theological illiteracy in the church.

Further evidence of this theological illiteracy came to light during a more recent survey by The Barna Group. This survey indicated that what used to be elementary, universally-known truths about Christianity are now unknown mysteries to a large and growing share of American Christians.⁸ For instance, a growing majority does not believe the Holy Spirit to be a living being. According to the study, as Buster (those born approximately between 1965 to 1983) and Mosaic (those born approximately between 1984 and 2002) generations ascend to numerical and positional supremacy in churches across the nation, biblical literacy is likely to decline significantly. George Barna concludes, “The theological free-for-all that is encroaching in Protestant churches nationwide

⁷ David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity, 2005), 74.

⁸ George Barna, "Six Megathemes Emerge from Barna Group Research in 2010 " <http://www.barna.org/culture-articles/462-six-megathemes-emerge-from-2010> (accessed January 14, 2012).

suggests the coming decade will be a time of unparalleled theological diversity and inconsistency.”⁹ If Tozer feared for the theological astuteness of the individual believer in his day and time, one can only imagine how troubled he might be today.

If these surveys and studies like them paint even a faintly accurate picture of the state of the Christian layperson in twenty-first century postmodern America, the church has a mandate on her hands – to theologically educate those within her fold. One of the ways church leaders can make headway into that calling is by teaching their laypeople systematic theology. Gabriel Fackre, Christian Theology Emeritus at Andover Newton Theological School, argues that the strengths of systematic theology are its comprehensive, coherent, and contextual study of Christian teaching.¹⁰ It is a powerful ally in the war of competing worldviews. How does this intersect in the life of the local church? Fackre answers,

How can clergy and church leaders help prepare their congregations for both the culture of disbelief and the wave of new religious passions and perspectives? One resource is the company of those asking the same questions in the systematics forums. Basic theological works of the kind surveyed need to be found, once again, on the shelves of pastors and teachers.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gabriel J. Fackre, "The Revival of Systematic Theology: An Overview," *Interpretation* 49, no. 3 (1995): 230.

Such serious work cannot today be done solo.¹¹

Fackre believes pastors should gather together in systematic theological “forums” in order to develop their theological mettle as they battle with the demands of ministry and the rigors of engaging an ever-increasing post-Christian culture. The church needs not only a greater engagement with systematic theology from her leaders, but also from her laypeople.

In fact the literature has uncovered little on why laypeople should embark on a systematic theological education. The majority of available literature views that branch of theology as the sole property of professional theologians, pastors, and seminarians.¹² This is greatly unfortunate. If theology at its base is simply the study of God, and systematic theology is the study of God in which one looks at what the entire scriptural witness is on any particular doctrine, then surely more people than professional ministers and educators may enter this realm. All those who claim Christ as Lord should develop a sound systematic theology, because they have been given the charge to obey everything their Master has commanded them to do.¹³ One would surmise that the spiritual growth and benefits of a systematic theological education would be incredibly significant to the

¹¹ Ibid., 237.

¹² E.g., Helmut Thielicke’s *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, John Frame’s *Studying Theology As a Servant of Christ*, Thomas Gillespie’s “Why a Theological Education?,” Rodney L. Petersen’s, *Theological Literacy in the 21st Century*

¹³ Matthew 28:20

layperson. Indeed, this is exactly what David Wells concludes when he stresses that a good theological understanding “holds the key to Christian identity, to Christian continuity, to genuine piety, to serious worship, and to the sort of Christian thought that seeks to bring the import of God's Word into our world.”¹⁴

The strengths of training in systematic theology come into play when a woman who bases her prayer life on the singular verse of John 14:13¹⁵ is angry at God when her prayer is not “answered.” This training could help the man who, after receiving some religious literature from a Mormon missionary who called at this door, now assumes they both are talking about the same faith. It speaks to the person who treats deep discussions with contempt, saying, “We should only talk about the essentials and not fight about the peripherals.” It would assist the earnest young high school student who wanders into the Christianity section of a large chain bookstore in order to find materials to help his spiritual growth and picks up a copy of Joel Osteen’s *Your Best Life Now*.

These are only glimpses into the punctiliar benefits of learning systematic theology. However, it is important to know whether there is a spiritual formation dynamic that happens in the learning of systematic theology that is catalytic to long-term spiritual formation? Is it possible that church leadership could see

¹⁴ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 292.

¹⁵ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

great benefits that systematic theology training would bring to the spiritual development of laypersons, such that pastors and directors of spiritual formation would implement similar strategies for their own congregants?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to discover how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research:

1. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' thinking?
2. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' actions?
3. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' affects?
4. How did the study of systematic theology uniquely contribute to the participants' spiritual formation?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for both Christian laypersons and for church leaders who are responsible for their congregants' spiritual formation. It is the desire of the researcher in that after reading the conclusions of the qualitative research protocol identifying the dynamics of spiritual formation in laypersons through systematic theology, the layperson would feel the urgency and necessity

of obtaining a systematic theological education. It is also hoped that the results of this study would encourage pastors and directors of spiritual formation to move this type of training from something peripheral (or even nonexistent) in the discipleship process to a more central, foundational role. The researcher hopes that this study will encourage those in the pulpit and those in the pews to integrate systematic theology into the educational life of the church. It is also hoped that this type of theological training will result in congregations whose members have a more fully integrated biblical worldview and doctrinal soundness which leads them into deeper and more coherent lives of devotion to Christ in their hearts, in their ministry in the church, and in their mission in the world.

Definition of Terms

Church – Unless noted otherwise, a local assembly of Christians overseen by affirmed or ordained leadership (e.g., pastors, elders) that observes as a congregation the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.

Doctrine – A “precise and accurate summary” of what the scripture says on a topic, enabling the differentiation between truth and error.¹⁶

Dogmatics – Another term for systematic theology.

¹⁶ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 101.

Small group – A collection of people meeting weekly for the purpose of growing spiritually. This is often an alternative to Sunday school in many churches.

Systematic theology – The branch of theology aiming to elaborate the whole and the parts of scripture, demonstrating their logical connections and taking full cognizance of the history of doctrine and the contemporary intellectual climate and categories and queries while finding its sole ultimate authority in the scriptures themselves, rightly interpreted.¹⁷

Spiritual formation – The process of spiritual growth in the individual Christian whereby a “progressive patterning of a person’s inner and outer life” increases according to the image of Christ through intentional means of spiritual growth.¹⁸

Transformative Learning Theory – An educational theory proposed by experts such as Jack Mezirow and Patricia Cranton that provides an understanding of learning as deep change.

Transformative Learning - The theory of adult learning developed by Mezirow describing the cognitive-emotional process adults undergo in order to experience permanent change in their most basic perspectives.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson and Andrew David Naselli, *Collected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 118.

¹⁸ Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 15.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to discover how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology. Unfortunately, there is little scholarly literature that addresses this explicit purpose. Therefore, in order to better understand the degrees, implications, and interplay of the study's purpose, the following areas of literature were considered: 1) works which highlighted the benefits of an education in systematic theology, 2) works demonstrating how local churches assess the spiritual formation of their members, and 3) literature which deepens the reader's understanding of adult transformative learning. The chapter will conclude with a brief biblical/theological section on the study.

BENEFITS OF AN EDUCATION IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Introduction to the Area

Most of the literature expounding the benefits of systematic theology was found in the introduction of textbooks in systematic theology, including such

notable works from Louis Berkhof,¹⁹ Wayne Grudem,²⁰ and Cornelius Van Til.²¹

However, some of the systematic theology textbooks that the researcher reviewed lacked any explicit remarks about the benefits of studying this branch of theology.²² Nevertheless, it is necessary for the purpose of this study that literature explaining the benefits of an education in systematic theology be evaluated. While many systematic theologians spoke of the need for systematic theological education, they framed their arguments using the shortened term “theology” instead of the full “systematic theology.”²³

It should also be noted that if “no single systematic theology can be held up as universally adequate for all Christians,” as Timothy Tennent, author of *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, asserts, then this literature review is limited to the systematic works and thoughts of Western theologians.²⁴ This study also presupposes the use of traditionally Western categories for systematic

¹⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

²⁰ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology : Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

²² E.g., Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology, grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church. Vol 1, The God who is: the Holy Trinity*

²³ E.g., Millard Erickson’s “What is Theology?” section of his systematic textbook, pp. 28-29

²⁴ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity : How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 258.

theology.²⁵ The remainder of this literature review will include the following topics: a brief definition of systematic theology, doctrinal soundness and Christian growth, the comprehensive nature of systematic theology, biblical worldview development, systematic theology and owning one's beliefs, and who should participate in the study of systematic theology.

A Brief Definition of Systematic Theology

All of the literature reviewed gave essentially a unified definition of systematic theology. D.A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, offered a more technical definition. He explained that systematic theology is the branch of theology aiming to elaborate the whole and the parts of scripture, "demonstrating their logical connections and taking full cognizance of the history of doctrine and the contemporary intellectual climate and categories and queries while finding its sole ultimate authority in the Scriptures themselves, rightly interpreted."²⁶ Carson sees systematic theology as trying to make coherent sense of the biblical data. Van Til gives a slightly less technical answer that agrees with Carson when he writes that systematic theology "seeks to expound the system of truth as given in the

²⁵ Andrew Wildsmith, "Contextualizing the Structure of Systematic Theology in Africa," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 35, no. 2 (2011): 123.

²⁶ Carson and Naselli, 118.

Scriptures.”²⁷ More simply, systematic theology answers the question: What does the Bible in its entirety teach about any given topic?²⁸ It is the gathering, interpretation, and assimilation of biblical data from the whole scriptural corpus into topical, organized bodies of teaching.

This characteristic of systematic theology led many authors in the literature reviewed for this study to stress the idea that every Christian, at some level, is a systematic theologian. They may be good, bad, or somewhere in between, but everyone does theology. Everyone is a theologian. Jonathan Wilson, author of *A Primer for Christian Doctrine*, simply says, “to be a Christian is to be a theologian.”²⁹ Thus, learning about the systems or doctrines of biblical truth is simply part and parcel of the Christian journey. As Michael Horton, the J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California, notes, “Learning God’s Word – including its doctrine – is a nonnegotiable responsibility of our new citizenship.”³⁰ He suggests that all disciples of Christ are students of theology, and “although the biblical concept of discipleship surely means more than study, it does not mean

²⁷ Van Til, 19.

²⁸ Grudem, 21.

²⁹ Jonathan R. Wilson, *A Primer for Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 2.

³⁰ Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith : A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 24.

less.”³¹ Robert Reymond, author of *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, takes Horton’s idea one step further by observing, “The church’s primary concern should be, not whether to engage in theology, but is its theology correct? Is it orthodox? Or perhaps better: Is it biblical?”³² Reymond stresses that the need for theological interaction is not the question those who lead the church should ask. Rather, they should ask whether the theology of the congregation is biblical, true, and sound. This leads to another important benefit of systematic theology.

Doctrinal Soundness and Christian Growth

Doctrinal Soundness as Elemental to Spiritual Formation

The majority of the literature stated that a major benefit of systematic theology is found in how it grows believers by teaching them correct doctrine and how those doctrines supply a foundational understanding of the God they profess to love and serve. Indeed, Horton believes that systematic theology is to the Christians as reading, writing, and arithmetic are to children beginning their academic education. Systematic theology is the “grammar” of the Christian faith.³³ The literature affirmed systematic theology as foundational for future growth.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xxxi.

³³ Horton, 22.

John Frame, professor of systematic theology and philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary, concurs with Horton's emphasis on systematic theology as fundamental for spiritual growth when he writes, "Theology is a part of our discipleship. It is a part of the Christian life that nurture all the rest of life."³⁴ Charles Wood, author of *An Invitation to Theology Study*, agrees when he writes, "Some aptitude for Christian theology is requisite to Christian life itself..."³⁵ It is that theological aptitude which will make us more mature Christians.³⁶

This maturing aspect of growing theologically also enhances one's ministry within the church. John Hannah believes that theology will productively impact the church's worship and service as greater depth of learning occurs in her people.³⁷ Referencing the Puritan notion of theology being "the art of living unto God," one's growth in systematic theology should ultimately bear fruit in life – both individually as a follower of Jesus and corporately as the church gathers together in service.³⁸

³⁴ John M. Frame, "Studying Theology as a Servant of Christ," *Reformation & Revival* 11, no. 1 (2002): 50.

³⁵ Charles M. Wood, *An Invitation to Theological Study* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 15.

³⁶ Grudem, 29.

³⁷ John D. Hannah, "The Place of Theology in the Postmodern World: Is the Study of Theology and History an Antiquated Discipline?," *Reformation & Revival* 11, no. 1 (2002): 16.

³⁸ Ibid.

Doctrinal Soundness and Exterior False Teaching

Systematic theology, by virtue of teaching sound doctrine, also helps when sound doctrine is challenged. Wolfhart Pannenberg demonstrates how this has been true since the second century, as a material systematic theology initially developed in response to the gnostic challenge.³⁹ Thus, another facet of to the spiritual growth benefits of systematic theology is in apologetics.

The late Cornelius Van Til, former professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary Philadelphia, articulated this benefit when describing how the church can empower its people to repel false teaching. He bemoaned how many pastors were “Bible-trained” but had no systematic theological training.⁴⁰ As such, what they did believe about areas such as soteriology had such meager biblical support textually that they were apt to allow false teaching into their congregations. Instead of letting systematic theology help pastors teach the whole counsel of God, they stood feebly upon a Bible verse or two. As a result, their ministries produced “one text” Christians which, in Van Til’s estimation, “simply have no weapons of defense” against false teachers.⁴¹ Conversely, “the best apologetic will invariably be made by him who knows the system of truth of

³⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 19.

⁴⁰ Van Til, 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

Scripture best.”⁴² Therefore, a person’s understanding of systematic theology should give great assistance in the fight against outside challenges to the faith.

Doctrinal Soundness and Interior False Teaching

Systematic theology’s help in forming doctrinal accuracy also has import for today’s believers, who may feel no exterior challenges to their faith. For example, there are Christians who believe certain things about God based primarily on their feelings. Millard Erickson warns against possessing an inadequate faith that only feels warmly about Jesus without a correct understanding and beliefs concerning Christology.⁴³ This can lead to erroneous, heretical views of Christ. If people are to embrace Christ as Christ, they must have an accurate, biblical view of Jesus. What is true for the doctrine of Christ holds true for every other Christian doctrine: there is a need to see the “total weight of teaching of Scripture” on the subject in order to repent of false ideas the believer has held.⁴⁴ The literature is clear on the idea that doctrinal soundness is a benefit of an education in systematic theology.

The Comprehensive Nature of Systematic Theology

Another reason Christians should undergo a systematic theological education is that, as mentioned earlier, this type of education focuses on what the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 28-29.

⁴⁴ Grudem, 28.

whole Bible says about any particular doctrine. Wayne Grudem, research professor of Bible and theology at Phoenix Seminary, says that because systematic theology collects and summarizes what the Bible says about different subjects, it “enables us to teach ourselves and others what the whole Bible says, thus fulfilling the second part of the Great Commission.”⁴⁵ John Frame adds to Grudem’s line of reasoning by defining systematic theology as “the application of the Word by person to the world and to all areas of human life.”⁴⁶ Systematic theology, according to both Grudem and Frame, assists the believer in addressing the entirety of life. Van Til adds his thoughts to the comprehensive nature of systematic theology, saying, “It is plain that we are required to know the revelation that God has given us. Yet we would not adequately know that revelation if we knew it only in its several parts without bringing these parts into relation to each other.”⁴⁷ According to Van Til, systematic theology is integral for understanding the fullness of God’s revelation. Thus, the strength of systematic theology for spiritual formation is its comprehensive nature.

Gabriel Fackre refers to systematic theology as “theology-in-the-round.”⁴⁸

Horton visualizes it as the box top of a jigsaw puzzle, where the unified whole

⁴⁵ Ibid., 27-28.

⁴⁶ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006), 79.

⁴⁷ Van Til, 21.

⁴⁸ Fackre: 230.

helps believers make “logical connections” with individual parts and biblical themes.⁴⁹ Van Til sees systematic theology as bringing “spiritual balance” and warns those who refuse to embrace truths as systems will produce doctrinally one-sided Christians and “doctrinal one-sidedness is bound to issue in spiritual one-sidedness.”⁵⁰ Horton warns even further:

To dismiss the importance of a systematic understanding of the faith is to deny, at least by implication, that the Bible is a canon – that is, a collection of varied texts that united by their divine source (the Father speaking), their content (the Son’s work of redemption), and their power to generate the world of which they speak (the Spirit’s work of inspiration, illumination, and regeneration.)⁵¹

Therefore, embracing the comprehensive nature of a systematic understanding of theology not only will benefit one deeply in a spiritual way, but it also reaffirms one’s belief in the integrity of God’s revelation to humanity.

Biblical Worldview Development

This comprehensive nature makes participation in systematic theology a worldview building (or reconstructing) practice. D.A. Carson says that systematic theology, “precisely by its efforts at systemic wholeness and by its engagement with the culture, openly attempts worldview formation, worldview

⁴⁹ Horton, 27.

⁵⁰ Van Til, 22.

⁵¹ Horton, 27.

transformation.”⁵² Van Til agrees with this sentiment by characterizing systematic theology as a “life-and-world view.”⁵³ Stanley Grenz calls systematic theology a “worldview-ish” theology.⁵⁴ It is a culminating discipline that builds upon itself in “its pursuit of large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis.”⁵⁵

Louis Berkhof, referring to doctrines as “dogmas,” agrees upon their centrality in constructing worldviews, saying, “Dogmas constitute the most important part of the materials which [the theologian] must use in the construction of his system, and will so enter into the structure of it as to form its nucleus and core, and also its unifying element.”⁵⁶ For Berkhof, systematic theology becomes invaluable in forming a biblical worldview because of the comprehensive doctrinal teaching it offers. Amos Yong, the Rodman Williams Professor of Theology at Regent University, concurs, explaining that systematic theology best understood as “a reflective enterprise that encompasses the three horizons of God, self, and world and attempts to comprehend their relationships,

⁵² D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 99.

⁵³ Van Til, 23.

⁵⁴ Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology?: An Invitation to the Study of God*, ed. Roger E. Olson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 12.

⁵⁵ Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 101.

⁵⁶ Berkhof, 38.

and that gets accurately at the realities that they claim to engage."⁵⁷ Yong later refers to the comprehensiveness of systematic theology, calling it "a coherent framework of belief and understanding."⁵⁸ The literature reviewed strongly reaffirmed that the comprehensive nature of systematic theology greatly assists learners in developing a biblical worldview.

Systematic theology's capacity for worldview-building seems critical in light of cultural researcher George Barna's findings. He believes that the problem in making disciples is not that churches give content which itself is weak, but that the content is not provided in a purposeful, systematic matter.⁵⁹ As a result, congregants are "exposed to good information without context and thus lose that information because they have no way of making sense of it within the bigger picture of faith and life."⁶⁰ Barna explains:

Think of the way we teach people about Christianity as a massive game of "Connect the Dots." In our version of the game, we do not put numbers next to the dots, which renders players incapable of connecting the dots in the fashion intended. All of the dots are provided and are pictured in exactly the right place, but if we don't provide players with a sense of direction or the big picture, failure is inevitable.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Amos Yong, "Whither Systematic Theology? A Systematician Chimes in on a Scandalous Conversation," *Pneuma* 20, no. 1 (1998): 93.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 1st ed., Barna Reports for Highly Effective Churches (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 91.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

He concludes that until the church assumes a more strategic approach to delivering insights and outcomes within a “viable mental and experiential framework, we will continue to be frustrated by the results of our well-intentioned but poorly conceptualized efforts to grow disciples.”⁶²

Systematic Theology and Owning One’s Beliefs

Since systematic theology helps in worldview development, students may find themselves being challenged concerning currently held beliefs. Indeed, the literature indicated that one benefit of learning systematic theology is growing into better, more biblical understandings of life, God, and other areas the Bible addresses.

Several authors highlighted the need for students of theology to be self-aware of any assumptions they bring to the study of theology. Horton writes, “We all have presuppositions when we come to a given biblical passage, doctrine, or practice. So we have a working systematic theology, whether we want to or not.”⁶³ This “working theology” can be less than biblically ideal for several reasons. There may be a temptation to believe only what matches one’s personal likes and preferences instead of what is revealed in the text of scripture. Carson says, “The systematic theologian may self-consciously attempt a

⁶² Ibid., 92.

⁶³ Horton, 27.

synthesis based on those parts of the Bible he or she is able to accept as valid.”⁶⁴

Van Til believes a good education in systematic theology “will help us to keep and develop our spiritual balance. It enables us to avoid paying attention only to that which, by virtue of our temperament, appeals to us.”⁶⁵

Therefore, systematic theology is best studied when one acknowledges that each person already possesses certain assumptions about biblical teaching. In doing so, “we are better able to evaluate and critique [those assumptions].”⁶⁶ These assumptions, or “partisan prejudices” as Frame labels to them, can stymie spiritual growth if not overcome by a deeper commitment to finding the truth.⁶⁷ Barna refers to this process as “dissonance learning” in that previous values, beliefs, and behaviors are challenged when confronted by systematic, biblical teaching to the contrary.⁶⁸ Horton believes that the best approach to study is when one is not only open to change but is actively working to see if change should happen. He exhorts the student, “Our goal at least must be to go back and forth between the whole and the parts. Just as the whole provides a context for

⁶⁴ Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 100.

⁶⁵ Van Til, 22.

⁶⁶ Horton, 28.

⁶⁷ Frame, "Studying Theology as a Servant of Christ," 65.

⁶⁸ Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 149-151.

understanding the parts, the parts can challenge our understanding of the whole.

In other words, the systems can change."⁶⁹

Horton and other authors believe growth through systematic theology occurs via challenge, critique, and reflection. He writes, "The data (in this case, scripture) can always overturn a theory or even an entire paradigm. In all disciplines, including theology, periods of discovery (or rediscovery) are usually followed by refinement and systematization."⁷⁰ Reymond argues that theologians must commit to truth wherever they find it, and if errors of belief are detected after serious reflection, the theologian "must seek to remedy them in the proper way."⁷¹

With pastoral care, Frame counsels beginning students not to assume that they know solid theology before undergoing reflection. He exhorts, "It is best not even to make up your mind on such matters until you have sympathetically considered all sides. Open yourself to the possibility of change."⁷² He goes on to contend that many are guilty of giving too easy answers to difficult questions.⁷³ In the end, they probably "have very little idea how complicated the questions

⁶⁹ Horton, 28.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁷¹ Reymond, xxxii.

⁷² Frame, "Studying Theology as a Servant of Christ," 56.

⁷³ Ibid.

are, how many facets of them need to be considered."⁷⁴ Reflection on new theological understandings is essential, and doing it with others is optimal.⁷⁵ Horton concurs, "Theology is done best in community and conversation rather than in lonely isolation."⁷⁶ Grudem adds that some of the most effective learning in systematic theology often occurs outside the classroom in informal conversations.⁷⁷

In the end, this process of learning systematic theology through dialogue, critical reflection, and commitment to the truth should help Christians to better own their beliefs. Thomas Gillespie, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, refers to this learning process as moving from merely being "informed" to being "trans-formed."⁷⁸ Horton, on the process of learning systematic theology, concludes:

Whether as new converts or as children raised in the church, we are introduced to words such as God, redemption, Trinity, image of God, means of grace, justification, and eschatology. Eventually, we are competent enough with this new language to ask good questions – even to challenge our teachers to give us reasons for this faith that we profess and to show us how the various doctrines are related to each other in a system of truth. By questioning and testing our interpretation of God's Word, we come to know what we believe and why we believe it, so that the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁵ Reymond, xxx.

⁷⁶ Horton, 27.

⁷⁷ Grudem, 35.

⁷⁸ Thomas W. Gillespie, "Why a Theological Education?," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 25, no. 1 (2004): 8.

grammar of faith becomes our own language of worship through which we interpret all of reality and live in the world.⁷⁹

In sum, Christians own their beliefs through the study of systematic theology by reaffirming what they already believe or by changing long-held beliefs for better, more biblically sound beliefs.

A Final Note: The Participants of Systematic Theology

Before concluding the literature on the benefits of systematic theology, it should be noted that the available literature showed very little intersection between the benefits of systematic theology as specifically evidenced in the life of laypersons. For example, Louis Berkhof refers to individuals who vest themselves in theology as dogmaticians who are mostly professionals. Other authors reaffirmed this perspective.⁸⁰ It must be said that the primary audience for these works are presumably academic theologians, pastors, and seminary students. Van Til affirms this idea, "It should not be forgotten in this connection [training in systematic theology] that the minister's duty is increasingly that of an apologist for Christianity."⁸¹ This is not to say that discussion of laypersons was totally absent. Horton, among others, believes that systematic theology "is

⁷⁹ Horton, 21-22.

⁸⁰ See examples such as Thomas W. Gillespie, "Why a Theological Education?," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 25, no. 1 (2004); David H. Kelsey, "Rethinking Theological Education," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 48, (1994). Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962).

⁸¹ Van Til, 24. Empasis mine

always done for and by the church.”⁸² Nicholas Healy, associate professor of theology and religious studies at St. John's University in New York, concurs with Horton, explaining, “Systematic theology should serve not just the bishops and official theology, but all churchpeople and their individual attempts to engage in systematic theological inquiry.”⁸³ However, the majority of literature reviewed spoke of systematic theology, and training thereof, within the realm of the seminary guild or the professional pastor.

HOW CHURCHES ASSESS SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Introduction to the Area

Works assessing spiritual formation in the congregants were useful for this study because they helped the researcher to better understand, identify, and categorize dynamics of spiritual growth in the interviewees as a result of systematic theological education. Mel Lawrenz defines spiritual formation as “the patterning of a person’s inner and outer life to the image of Christ through intentional means of spiritual growth.”⁸⁴ Consequently, spiritual formation (and the evaluation of it) should be evidenced both internally and externally in the individual under consideration. Lawrenz further notes that of all the tools Christians have used to grow spiritually, the first and foremost instrument is

⁸² Horton, 27.

⁸³ Nicholas M. Healy, "What Is Systematic Theology?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1 (2009): 38.

⁸⁴ Lawrenz, 15.

teaching because it “grant[s] us entry into people’s lives at the core of their being – where decisions are made, values are shaped, ideas are borne, passions are ignited, wounds are soothed, hardness is broken.”⁸⁵ Thus, while it would appear the catechesis of systematic theology holds much value for the growth of the believer, it will be the Christian’s thoughts and life which indicate whether real growth has occurred.

Literature on Assessment of Spiritual Formation

Research on assessing spiritual formation revealed a paucity of academic literature concerning the topic, which was to be expected because the aim was to give attention to how churches evaluate the spiritual growth of their membership. This implicitly involves pastors, not professors – clergy, not academicians. Additionally, experts, like researcher George Barna, conclude from survey information that truly effective churches use specific tools, mostly developed in-house, to provide a sense of what is happening spiritually in people’s lives.⁸⁶ Barna writes, “These tools include knowledge measurements, behavioral assessments, gift inventories, attitudinal and behavioral surveys, and goal statements and measurements.”⁸⁷ Therefore, most of the literature reviewed was not discovered in theological journals or academic monographs. Rather, it

⁸⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁶ Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 111.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

was more popular literature that pastors would be more apt to consult, such as mainstream Christian books, church surveys, and spiritual formation ministries. As such, they are the focus of the literature review in this study, which pertains to how churches assess the spiritual growth of their membership.

Denominational literature was also studied with the understanding that pastors within those denominations would be more likely to utilize the resources, and that those resources were shaped by the denominational offices' interaction with how pastors were actually assessing their congregations. For example, when it came to evaluating the spiritual growth of their congregants, several ministers ⁸⁸ within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) expressed their value for the survey data, analysis, and recommendations made by LifeWay Research, which is the arm of the SBC dedicated to "assisting and equipping church leaders with insight and advice that will lead to greater levels of church health and effectiveness."⁸⁹ Therefore, the following review employs similar literature in the hopes it gives insight on how pastors assess the spiritual growth of those in their churches. In reviewing the literature, three major areas of assessing spiritual growth in laypersons surfaced: beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. However, it should be noted that while these categories are created,

⁸⁸ Personal conversations with the researcher.

⁸⁹ Lifeway, "About Lifeway Research", LifeWay <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-about-us> (accessed February 12, 2012 2012).

they are often enmeshed to such a degree that assessing them separately is a practical impossibility.

Assessing Spiritual Growth: Beliefs

The literature reviewed focused on beliefs as a foundational category of spiritual growth to be assessed. Donald Whitney, associate professor of biblical spirituality at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *Ten Questions To Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, asserts that one way believers can know if they are growing spiritually is to assess whether they can point to “increasing numbers of beliefs...that have been changed,” and as a result have moved from doctrinal error to orthodoxy.⁹⁰ Randy Frazee, author of *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool* (CLP), promotes thirty core competencies, ten of which fall under the category of “core beliefs.” These core beliefs are:

1. Authority of the Bible – *I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.*
2. Church – *I believe the church is God’s primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.*
3. Compassion – *I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.*
4. Eternity – *I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.*
5. Humanity – *I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.*
6. Identity in Christ – *I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of*

⁹⁰ Donald S. Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 35.

God.

7. Personal God – *I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.*
8. Salvation by Grace – *I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.*
9. Stewardship – *I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.*
10. Trinity – *I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*⁹¹

Frazee believes these ten doctrinal propositions teach Christians who God is, how they come into relationship with him, what he wants them to know and do, how he relates to them and is involved in their lives, and who they become when they know and love God.⁹² According to Frazee, propositional truth is foundational for the Christian life and essential in the spiritual formation assessment process.

This focus on belief as a metric for spiritual growth was corroborated by other assessment tools. For example, while not as explicitly categorized and arguably given a lesser emphasis, *LifeWay's Spiritual Growth Assessment* offered statements about beliefs that individuals would affirm to one degree or another (e.g., I believe Christ provides the only way for a relationship with God.)⁹³ Brad Waggoner, in his book *The Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship*, promotes the Spiritual Formation Inventory (SFI), which he

⁹¹ Randy Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool Workbook*, Connecting Church Resource (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), GET PAGE.

⁹² Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 72.

⁹³ Lifeway, "Spiritual Growth Assessment Process," no. January 18, 2012 (2006): 3.

hopes “can quantify, measure, and benchmark the degree” of spiritual growth than occurs in an individual.⁹⁴ The SFI identifies twenty-one functional characteristics of a disciple, which can be observed and, to some degree, measured. These characteristics are categorized into seven domains, the first of which concerns belief – “Domain One: Learning Truth.”⁹⁵ Waggoner says that learning doctrine is essential for growth, and he argues that one cannot separate spiritual formation, or spirituality, from matter of worldview and beliefs. Much of the Bible is dedicated to teaching doctrine and confronting falsehoods.⁹⁶ He adds, “Christians often look in the wrong place to grow spiritually. They focus on changing behavior, but the real battle is in perspective or patterns of thinking.”⁹⁷ To Waggoner, beliefs are critical for worldview creation and, thus, for spiritual formation.

This emphasis on assessing belief is evidenced in Waggoner’s SFI. It asks respondents to describe perspectives to help provide a basis in the evaluation by using questions such as, “How much do you agree/disagree: I have made a serious attempt to discover God’s will for my life?” Waggoner then attempts to tie the specific perspective to a foundational belief the respondent holds to some

⁹⁴ Brad Waggoner, *The Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 15.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 77.

measure of degree.⁹⁸ He promotes the importance of the metric of belief in spiritual assessment, concluding, “We diminish our emphasis on doctrinal truth to our own harm. We are like the captain who is unconcerned about the leak in his ship. While it may not seem like a big deal at the time, eventually it will sink the ship.”⁹⁹

Assessing Spiritual Growth: Attitudes

Evaluating beliefs alone is insufficient if pastors are to assess the spiritual growth of their congregants.¹⁰⁰ The literature reviewed also focused on attitudes as a foundational category of spiritual growth assessment. The attitudes category also includes values, emotions, motivations, and stated morals. Indeed, Peter Scazzero, author of *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, confirms the necessity of this category when he asserts that “emotional and spiritual maturity are inseparable.”¹⁰¹ Dallas Willard comments on attitudinal importance as he critiques other popular attempts that solely focus on assessing “institutional measures of success:”

⁹⁸ Ibid., 63-64.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁰ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development : A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 27.

¹⁰¹ Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church : A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives*, Updated and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 19.

Many churches are measuring the wrong things. We measure things like attendance and giving,¹⁰² but we should be looking at more fundamental things like anger, contempt, honesty, and the degree to which people are under the thumb of their lusts. Those things can be counted, but not as easily as offerings.¹⁰³

Brad Waggoner confesses that these attitudinal aspects of spiritual growth “may be the most difficult to measure.”¹⁰⁴ His “Domain Five: Exercising Faith” attempts to measure growth attitudinally. In contrast to Frazee, Waggoner’s questions are broader (e.g., “To what level do you agree: I express praise and gratitude to God even in difficult circumstances?, To what level do you agree: My life is often filled with anxiety and worry.”)¹⁰⁵ The *LifeWay Spiritual Growth Process* followed a similar pattern of statements to affirm but increased their number. For example, respondents were asked to what degree these statements were true for them:

1. Peace, contentment, and joy characterize my life rather than worry.
2. I trust Christ to help me through any problem or crisis I face.
3. I remain confident of God’s love and provision during difficult times.

¹⁰² It is interesting to note that in contrast to Willard’s estimation of giving being a poor metric, NDR Research International concluded in a 2011 research project “that the percentage of church members who give 10% or more of their gross income in tithes and offerings highly correlates with the health and quality measured by the NCD Survey.” (Natural Church Development Research International, “Ncd Health and Financial Giving Correlate” http://ncdnet.blogs.com/ncd_research/2011/06/ncd-health-and-financial-giving-correlate.html (accessed March 2, 2012).

¹⁰³ Dallas Willard, “How Do We Assess Spiritual Growth? A Leadership Interview with Dallas Willard,” *Leadership* 31, no. 2 (2010): 21.

¹⁰⁴ Waggoner, 180.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

4. I seek to live in harmony with other members of my family.
5. I show patience in my relationships with family and friends.
6. I place the interest of others above my self-interest.¹⁰⁶

These attitudinal questions were not organized as such but spread throughout different categories such as "Fellowship with Believers," "Live in the Word," and "Abide in Christ."¹⁰⁷ Donald Whitney also supplies attitudinal assessment questions in his *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, such as:

1. Do you delight in the Bride of Christ?
2. Do you still grieve over sin?
3. Do you yearn for Heaven and to be with Jesus?
4. Do you have a growing concern for the spiritual and temporal needs of others?
5. Are you more loving?¹⁰⁸

While these questions do not ignore the importance of behavior, there is an attitudinal focus in them for Whitney.

In 2007, Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, released a study entitled *Reveal*, which utilized four segments on a continuum based on a person's self-reported relationship to Christ in order to assess the spiritual formation of their congregants. The segments were: 1) Exploring, 2) Growing, 3) Close to Christ, and 4) Christ-Centered.¹⁰⁹ Willow positioned its study as unique

¹⁰⁶ Lifeway, "Spiritual Growth Assessment Process," 3-4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Whitney, 9. It is also worth noting that *loving* could be categorized as behavior as well.

¹⁰⁹ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 37.

due to the fact that it also measured the emotional acceptance of current church programs by its members along with their approximation of how close they felt to Christ. This was done in contrast to the “church activity model” which, according to author Greg Hawkins, assumes that participation in church activities will produce a growing Christian.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, with its emphasis on emotions, motivations, and needs, the authors of *Reveal* positioned their study as a unique approach to assessing the spiritual formation of the church’s members. *Reveal* essentially left out beliefs and focused on “Spiritual Attitudes” and “Spiritual Behaviors” as metrics of spiritual growth.¹¹¹ The “Spiritual Attitudes” were discovered by asking questions ultimately framed around loving God and loving people.¹¹²

Frazee’s CLP was more explicit in that ten specific attitudinal competencies were identified. The assessment referred to these competencies as “Virtues,” modeling them from the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.¹¹³

These competencies were:

1. Gentleness – *I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.*
2. Faithfulness – *I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.*
3. Hope - *I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.*

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹¹² Ibid., 38.

¹¹³ Galatians 5:22-23, *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

4. Joy - *I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.*
5. Love - *I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.*
6. Peace – *I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself and others.*
7. Self-Control - *I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.*
8. Humility - *I choose to esteem others above myself.*
9. Patience - *I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.*
10. Kindness/Goodness – *I choose to do to the right things in my relationships.*¹¹⁴

In his book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Peter Scazzerro uses the same list from Galatians 5:22-23. He encourages his readers that if they “do the hard work of integrating emotional health and spirituality,” they will experience the spiritual growth that God desires for them.¹¹⁵ In *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Scazzerro confessed that his church failed to acknowledge attitudinal growth in the discipleship process, naively believing that if biblical steps were followed, growth would result.¹¹⁶ Consequently, he endorses an emotional/spiritual health inventory whereby participants rate themselves on emotional issues such as identifying what they feel inside, how the past affects decision-making, their ability to speak freely about their weaknesses, and other evaluations of their emotional character.¹¹⁷ The resulting assessment rates individuals as either

¹¹⁴ Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool Workbook*, 19.

¹¹⁵ Peter Scazzerro, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality : Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ* (Nashville, TN: Integrity, 2006), 19-20.

¹¹⁶ Scazzerro and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church : A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives*, 47.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61-64.

adults, adolescents, children, or infants emotionally.¹¹⁸ In conclusion, Scazzero believes that emotional health will evidence itself behaviorally. He says, “As emotionally mature Christian adults, we recognize that loving well is the essence of true spirituality.”¹¹⁹

In examining the different apparatuses of assessment, the literature reviewed confirmed that attitudes form a major category of how churches assess the spiritual formation of their congregants. Furthermore, the literature reviewed displayed a third category for assessing spiritual growth.

Assessing Spiritual Growth: Behavior

The literature reviewed focused on behaviors as a foundational category for assessing spiritual growth. George Barna believes this to be an essential element of spiritual formation, and he writes that real growth will evidence itself in “personal transformation” and “renewed lifestyles.”¹²⁰ He gives examples of how some congregations measure that transformation, such as the number of divorces among congregants, the number of serious friendships developing among the congregants, and the number of participants in short-term mission

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 66-67.

¹¹⁹ Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality : Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ*, 179.

¹²⁰ Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 167.

trips.¹²¹ Indeed, all of the literature reviewed had at least some element of behavior as a metric for assessing spiritual growth.

For example, the majority of *Reveal* assessed spiritual growth by measuring the increase in time spent in different “Spiritual Behaviors,” such as as tithing, serving, and evangelism.¹²² Additionally, *Reveal* saw spiritual disciplines like praying, reading the Bible, and confession of sin as examples of behavior which should be measured.¹²³ These activities were then charted on *Reveal’s* spiritual continuum (Exploring, Growing, Close to Christ, and Christ-Centered).¹²⁴

Randy Frazee’s *Christian Life Profile* emphasizes behavior as the last of his core competencies. These behaviors, which he calls “practices” include:

1. Bible Study – *I study the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.*
2. Biblical Community – *I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God’s purposes in my life, others’ lives, and in the world.*
3. Giving Away My Faith – *I give away my faith to fulfill God’s purposes.*
4. Giving Away My Life – *I give away my life to fulfill God’s purposes.*
5. Giving Away My Time – *I give away my time to fulfill God’s purposes.*
6. Prayer – *I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.*
7. Spiritual Gifts – *I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God’s purposes.*
8. Worship – *I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.*
9. Single-mindedness – *I focus on God and His priorities for my life.*

¹²¹ Ibid., 112.

¹²² Hawkins and Parkinson, 51.

¹²³ Ibid., 48.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 33.

10. Giving Away My Money – *I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.*¹²⁵

Brad Waggoner addresses these behavioral metrics in his SFI's seven domains. Domain Two is obeying God and denying self, Domain Three is serving God and others, Domain Four is sharing Christ, Domain Six is seeking God in worship, and Domain Seven is building relationships.¹²⁶ Furthermore, while Whitney's spiritual formation assessment questions have an attitudinal tone, many of them evidence themselves in behavior. For example, his question "Are you more loving?" may contain the virtue of love, but the author presses the individual for loving behavior (e.g., loving your family).¹²⁷ *LifeWay* took a similar approach to the disciplines in their Spiritual Growth Assessment.¹²⁸

The literature review also identified the focus on behavior as an element of spiritual formation assessment in seminary training. H. Frederick Reisz, president of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, believes that behavior is a critical marker of spiritual formation for students at the seminary level, saying, "Assessment must boldly confront an evaluation of whether patterns of behaviors have been changed and if their change follows students into their

¹²⁵ Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool Workbook*, GET PAGE.

¹²⁶ Waggoner, 276-277.

¹²⁷ Whitney, 49.

¹²⁸ Lifeway, "Spiritual Growth Assessment Process," 3-4.

ministries.”¹²⁹ In looking at all the literature reviewed, there was a unanimous agreement in the emphasis on behavior as a category for assessing spiritual growth in a congregation.

Assessing Spiritual Growth – Measure of Frequency or Degree

In the literature reviewed concerning how churches assess the spiritual growth of their membership, the overriding understanding of the best way to measure areas of belief, attitudes, and behavior was upon a continuum of frequency or degree. Essentially, spiritual growth was acknowledged if an individual demonstrated an increase in activity or depth of feeling: adhere to more Christian doctrines, possess more Christian attitudes, and demonstrate more Christian behaviors.

Waggoner’s SFI focuses on twenty-one statements, asking individuals to identify their degree of acceptance or rejection of those statements.¹³⁰ The only questions that are not based upon a spectrum of acceptance are the numeric ones, such as “How often do you read the Bible?” and, as such, are still measuring frequency.¹³¹ Lifeway’s SGA employs a similar format. It measures sixty statements upon a five-point continuum of “never,” “seldom,” “occasionally,”

¹²⁹ H. Frederick Reisz, "Assessing Spiritual Formation in Christian Seminary Communities," *Theological Education* 39, no. 2 (2003): 36.

¹³⁰ Waggoner, 59. A sample question: *How much do you agree/disagree: I am open to those who teach the Bible?*

¹³¹ Ibid.

“frequently,” or “always.”¹³² Once again, the measure is “more.” The same can be said for Frazee’s *Christian Life Profile*. It measures spiritual growth by frequency of practice or depth of belief. Like the others, the end result is still the measure of “more.” One difference with Frazee’s assessment is the fact that people are encouraged to undergo the assessment with peers (what Frazee calls the “one another” element of the assessment). Each individual would have friends verify the results of the attitudinal elements of the assessment.¹³³

While Don Whitney’s *Ten Questions* do not employ a technical continuum for individuals to chart their responses in degrees, it employs the same methodology of frequency. The questions, “Are you more loving?,” “Are the spiritual disciplines increasingly important to you?,” and “Do you have a growing concern for the spiritual and temporal needs for others?,” reveal Whitney’s focus on “more.”¹³⁴ Each area is given an anecdotal or brief illustration of what that frequency might look like. For example, Whitney calls believers to assess their growth in love concerning their family. He says, “Over time, those in your family – your spouse, your children, your parents, your siblings – should feel that you love them more than you used to.”¹³⁵ He continues to use frequency as how one measures growth in this area by considering whether the individual

¹³² Lifeway, “Spiritual Growth Assessment Process,” 3.

¹³³ Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool Workbook*, 35.

¹³⁴ Whitney, 9.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 49. Emphasis mine.

expresses more gratitude than previously, or less anger, or more frugality, or other such measures.¹³⁶ Scazzerro's "Emotional/Spiritual Health Inventory" also employs measurement by degree, using a continuum of "not very true," "sometimes true," "mostly true," and "very true" on statements intended to assess church members' attitudinal maturity.¹³⁷

The metric of frequency was seen even in seminary assessment of spiritual formation. For example, Reisz suggests that seminaries examine whether their graduates "give significantly more evidence" of the practices of spiritual formation.¹³⁸ Elaine Park, academic dean of Mount Angel Seminary, employs a continuum for degree by basing students' growth on how well they articulate ideas and employ activities.¹³⁹ Mary Kay Oosdyke, academic dean of Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Missouri, agrees with the spirit of Park's approach for her own institution's spiritual formation assessment in that students are to display a greater integration of ministerial practice over time.¹⁴⁰

Willow Creek's *Reveal* study, while unique in some elements of spiritual formation assessment, such as measuring how close one feels to Christ, still

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Scazzerro and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church : A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives*, 61-64.

¹³⁸ Reisz: 39.

¹³⁹ Elaine Park, "Preaching, Proclamation, and Pedagogy: An Experiment in Integrated Assessment," *Theological Education* 41, no. 2 (2006): 77.

¹⁴⁰ Mary Kay Oosdyke, "Vocation in a New Key: Spiritual Formation and the Assessment of Learning," *Theological Education* 41, no. 2 (2006): 6.

employed frequency as their methodology. In the section on methodology, Greg Hawkins writes that the study's aim concerned "frequency of Bible reading, prayer, journaling, solitude," and other practices.¹⁴¹ Like Waggoner's work, when an answer did not demand a response on a continuum, it was because the answer was a specific number, such as "I serve one time per week."¹⁴²

A question might be offered at this point. Is degree of frequency the best way to discover whether one is growing spiritually? Dr. Bradley Wright, associate professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, Connecticut, questions *Reveal's* exclusive use of frequency. In connecting frequency with Willow's idea of assessing a person's sense of closeness to Christ, Wright remarks, "This causal assumption, that closeness prompts growth, is reasonable, but so are other assumptions."¹⁴³ Wright believes it could be the reverse. It could be that doing "Christian things, like reading the Bible, makes us feel closer to Christ...Maybe relational closeness and spiritual growth are mutually interdependent such that increasing one increases the other."¹⁴⁴ Wright argues that there could be several different factors at play in spiritual growth which surveying for frequency might not answer or cannot answer adequately.

¹⁴¹ Hawkins and Parkinson, 93.

¹⁴² Ibid., 51.

¹⁴³ Bradley R. Entner Wright, "What We Can and Can't Learn from Willow Creek's *Reveal* Study," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 7, no. 1 (2008): 107.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

George Barna offers another critique against frequency, especially in light of evaluating oneself. Using Frazee's CLP as an example, Barna questions the comprehensive sufficiency of such a tool. He says, "One concern is the reality of limiting the evaluation of one's performance in a core competency to four measurement questions."¹⁴⁵ Barna also believes the peer review is admirable but suspect in its accuracy. He questions whether friends have enough knowledge of someone to make a sound judgment.¹⁴⁶ Also, as Christians mature, they may have a greater sense of their sinfulness and actually rate themselves worse than before. Thus, with the assessment tool's sole focus on degree or frequency, it might indicate that people are declining spiritually, when in reality they are growing.¹⁴⁷

The theme of frequency was also seen in other religious literature not specifically connected to local churches assessing spiritual formation. A more clinical study highlighted in *Pastoral Psychology* revolved spiritual health exclusively around four relational domains. The personal domain centered upon meaning and purpose, the communal domain was expressed by depth of interpersonal relationships, the environmental domain tied to a care for the physical and biological surrounding, and the transcendental domain which spoke of an

¹⁴⁵ Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 138.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 139.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

individual's relationship with God.¹⁴⁸ Even with categories different from those used by congregations, frequency was still the critical criteria. Respondents used a five-point scale of very little, little, medium, much, and very much.¹⁴⁹ This kind of scaling-in-degree was evidenced in other more clinical scientific literature.¹⁵⁰

Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, in their book *How People Grow*, also speak to frequency, "You should see better relationships, emotional experiences, and connectedness to God. These aren't signs that one is done growing, but they are certainly signs that things are moving in the right direction."¹⁵¹ While Cloud and Townsend do not specifically elucidate what "better" is, the reader likely will conclude that it is a result of a changed life with a greater frequency of obedience to God's word.¹⁵² Dallas Willard agrees when he writes, "Obedience is an essential outcome of Christian spiritual formation."¹⁵³ Willard believes growth is seen through inner transformations in essential aspects of human personality (thought, feeling, choice, body, social action, soul) with the end being an increasing depth and frequency of love for God and

¹⁴⁸ Hawkins and Parkinson, 51.

¹⁴⁹ John W. Fisher, Leslie J. Francis, and Peter Johnson, "Assessing Spiritual Health Via Four Domains of Spiritual Wellbeing: The Sh4di," *Pastoral Psychology* 49, no. 2 (2000): 140.

¹⁵⁰ Todd W. Hall and Keith J. Edwards, "The Spiritual Assessment Inventory: A Theistic Model and Measure for Assessing Spiritual Development," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 2 (2002): 354.

¹⁵¹ Fisher, Francis, and Johnson: 135.

¹⁵² Henry Cloud and John Sims Townsend, *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals About Personal Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 360.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 346.

neighbor.¹⁵⁴ However, while Willard takes great pains to share how people grow spiritually, he offers no real concrete path to assess that change outside of greater Christlikeness.¹⁵⁵ This absence of content dealing with spiritual assessment was also noted by Cloud and Townsend. They stated that spiritual growth “should bring forth fruit of one kind or another,” but did not give a clear template for assessing growth. Instead they offered brief anecdotes of change, such as a story about a woman who now can connect deeply with others when before she could not.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, it appears that even in literature not specifically geared for assessing the spiritual health of congregations, the metric of frequency remains.

Conclusions on Assessing Spiritual Growth

Works addressing how churches assess the spiritual formation of their congregants were reviewed for the study to help the researcher better understand, identify, and categorize any dynamics of spiritual growth in the interviewees as a result of a systematic theological education. The body of research indicated that churches assess the spiritual growth of their congregants

¹⁵⁴ Dallas Willard, *Renovaton of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 23.

¹⁵⁵ Interestingly, Willard in an interview suggests spiritual growth assessments by Randy Frazee and John Ortberg but confesses, in general, assessments are difficult. Ibid., 30-31.

¹⁵⁶ Leadership Journal, "Dallas Willard on How We Assess Spiritual Growth", Leadership Journal http://www.outofur.com/archives/2010/05/dallas_williard.html (accessed January 28, 2012).

by observing three different areas: beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. The literature for churches on assessing the spiritual formation of their congregants also demonstrated that frequency and depth of degree are ways to measure growth in those areas.

UNDERSTANDING ADULT TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

The third area of literature was employed to equip the researcher in better analyzing his interview data – specifically, to understand what kind of learning process and depth is occurring in the adults interviewed. Therefore, he adopted the subject of transformative learning theory. During the research process, he found the primary proponents of this theory to be Drs. Jack Mezirow and Patricia Cranton. Therefore, most of the literature concerning adult transformative learning greatly intersected with their writings.

Background of Adult Education

Implicit to understanding any specific philosophy or theory of learning is a foundational orientation to adult education. Adult education (andragogy) was first introduced in the United States in the early 1970's by Malcolm Knowles, and over the years has been described as a set of guidelines, a philosophy, a set of assumptions or theory.¹⁵⁷ It stresses that adult learning has unique characteristics to child education (pedagogy), such as its voluntary, self-directed, and

¹⁵⁷Cloud and Townsend, 349.

experiential nature.¹⁵⁸ While this view has received critique,¹⁵⁹ Raymond Wlodkowski views these singular characteristics flowing from the self-motivation of the adult learner to “make sense of the information available, relate this information to prior knowledge, and attempt to gain the knowledge and skills the activity develops.”¹⁶⁰

Generally speaking, adults learn because they desire to do so. That desire takes on a direction put forth by the adult, and the learning is used to address immediate issues or problems the individual is facing. Throughout the years, many philosophies have sought to classify adult education, including liberalism, progressivism, behavioralism, humanism, and radicalism.¹⁶¹ These perspectives brought with them different definitions of what constituted learning outcomes: moral citizenry, knowledge of science and rationality, change in behavior from external stimuli, personal relationships through interpersonal relationships, or social change, respectively.¹⁶² Knowles posits that these perspectives develop theories of learning that ultimately fall into one of two categories:

¹⁵⁸ Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton, and Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner*, 5th ed. (Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing, 1998), 1.

¹⁵⁹ Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 2nd ed. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 3-4.

¹⁶⁰ Sharan B. Merriam, "Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning: Pillars of Adult Learning Theory," *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, no. 89 (2001): 5-7.

¹⁶¹ Raymond J. Wlodkowski, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching All Adults*, Rev. ed. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 5.

¹⁶² Cranton, 9.

“behavioralist/connectionist” or “cognitive/gestalt.”¹⁶³ Cranton articulates a similar summary in adult learning theories but nuances the two perspectives as the “individual-to-social continuum” and “different types of knowledge” (e.g., technical, emancipatory, practical). While these different perspectives can be helpful, Cranton posits a learning theory she believes sufficiently addresses both – Transformative Learning Theory.¹⁶⁴ Cranton points out how this theory intersects with the unique distinctives of adult learners.

As mentioned earlier, one distinctive of adult learning is its voluntary nature. Men and women seek to learn something because they want to grow as individuals. This motivation may be expressed through goals such as personal edification, employment advancement, or spiritual maturity. Transformative learning works well within this voluntary element in the sense that regardless of what has caused a learner to critically question long-held beliefs, the individual has the choice to be self-reflective or not. One cannot mandate transformational learning.¹⁶⁵

Adult learning is self-directed. Generally speaking, adults set their own goals, identify needs, find resources, and take other steps within the learning

¹⁶³ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁶⁴ Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 22.

¹⁶⁵ Cranton, 10-14.

process.¹⁶⁶ These actions have garnered a widely accepted generalization within the adult education: adults are highly pragmatic learners.¹⁶⁷ Malcolm Knowles says adults become ready to learn in order “to cope effectively with their real-life situations.”¹⁶⁸ However, Cranton argues that while transformational learning implicitly retains an element of self-direction due to its voluntary nature, it does not necessarily flow from immediate pragmatic reasons. She writes, “The process itself may be driven...with no further reference to the world outside the self.”¹⁶⁹

A third element unique to adult learning is its collaborative nature.

Cranton notes that sitting in a circle, working in groups, and dialoguing through issues are the “hallmarks of adult education practice.”¹⁷⁰ Adults want to learn in safe communal atmospheres. Transformative learning often shares this collaborative element, but it is not critical for deep change to take place. Although less frequent, learners can experience transformation without working with others.¹⁷¹

Another distinctive element of the adult learning process is the rich background of life experiences that adults bring with them. Adults carry life stories which have built frameworks from which they view and analyze

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶⁸ Wlodkowski, 97.

¹⁶⁹ Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 84.

¹⁷⁰ Cranton, 7.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 4.

experiences. They are not only foundational to learning but are the ground in which new knowledge can be created.¹⁷² It is this unique adult element of life experience that transformative learning harnesses. Mezirow believes these to be the brick and mortar from which transformative learning is built, explaining, “Formulating more dependable beliefs about our experience, assessing their contexts, seeking informed agreement on their meaning and justification, and making decisions on the result insights are central to the adult learning process.”¹⁷³ Learning, then, becomes the process of using a prior understanding of one’s experience to construe a new or revised interpretation of that experience as a guide for future living.¹⁷⁴ Cranton concurs with Mezirow, viewing transformative learning as ultimately being about “making meaning out of experiences and questioning assumptions based on prior experience.”¹⁷⁵

Introduction to Transformative Learning Theory

Dr. Jack Mezirow, currently emeritus professor of adult and continuing education at Teachers College, Columbia University,¹⁷⁶ was the originator of the Transformative (or Transformational) Learning Theory, which stipulates, “our understanding and beliefs are more dependable when they produce

¹⁷² Ibid., 8.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁷⁴ Jack Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 1st ed. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁷⁶ Cranton, 8.

interpretations and opinions that are more justifiable or true than would be predicated upon other understandings or beliefs."¹⁷⁷ Adults retain perspectives that best make sense of their world. Mezirow posits that the formulation of more dependable, coherent beliefs follows from a process of assessing the context in which those beliefs are embedded, seeking agreement on their meaning, and making decisions on the resultant insights. These steps are critical to the adult process of learning.¹⁷⁸ Thus, transformative learning is the process by which we "transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference...to make them more inclusive."¹⁷⁹ This demonstrates maturity of thought leading to reflection with others that challenges uncritical assumptions and gives way to possible new understandings.¹⁸⁰ Mezirow believes the challenge to an individual's paradigmatic assumption becomes the fertile ground for growth.

Emancipatory Knowledge

What kind of learning takes place with transformative learning? In adult theory, there are many different categories of knowledge (such as technical and communicative). These are not completely separate from one another, but lie on

¹⁷⁷ Jack Mezirow, "Biographical Web Page"

<http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/resources/JackMezirow.cfm> (accessed January 19, 2012).

¹⁷⁸ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 4.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

a continuum.¹⁸¹ However, transformational learning primarily deals with what Jürgen Habermas called “emancipatory knowledge.” Emancipatory knowledge is defined as knowing gained through a process of critically questioning oneself and the social systems within which one lives.¹⁸² Cranton refers to it as “the self-awareness that frees us from constraints,” and it is a product of critical reflection.¹⁸³ Everyone is taught from within a culture, and, as such, may be limited or incorrect in certain truth claims or assumptions. Without critically questioning those assumptions, individuals may never rise above the truth (or error) of their upbringing. Thus, emancipatory knowledge is gained when one embraces better alternatives to the preconceived assumptions of the learner. Transformative learning’s original developer, Jack Mezirow, believes transformative learning is Habermas’ emancipatory learning redefined. He notes that emancipatory learning “is the transformational process.”¹⁸⁴

The Process of Transformative Learning

Mezirow initially introduced transformative learning theory as having phases building upon each other, moving the learner to a deeper, more profound change (or transformation). The phases are as follows:

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Cranton, 10.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸⁴ Patricia Cranton, "Teaching for Transformation," *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, no. 93 (2002): 64.

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective¹⁸⁵

Cranton notes that the last six revolve around utilizing new, revised perspectives, and that the emphasis on transformative learning has focused more on the disorienting dilemma and the critical response to the assumptions and expectations that make it disorienting.¹⁸⁶ The following literature review will highlight transformative learning theory's perspective on those elements.

Habits of Mind and Meaning Structures

Discussion about understanding and interpreting life through an individual's experience as it relates to transformational learning brings the reader to the discussion of meaning structures. Meaning structures are the

¹⁸⁵ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 10.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

“assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions.”¹⁸⁷

These are also known as frames of reference, which are the results of ways of interpreting experience.¹⁸⁸ They produce what is known in learning theory as a habit of mind. Mezirow defines them as “a set of assumptions – broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as filters for interpreting the meaning of experience.”¹⁸⁹ This is how people view the world and their role in it. Therefore, not only are habits of mind produced by frames of reference, but also by points of view. Cranton defines them as “a cluster of meaning schemes, and meaning schemes are habitual, implicit rules for interpreting experiences.”¹⁹⁰ When taken together, points of view and habits of mind make up a person’s frame of reference from which personal meaning from experiences are constructed.

The literature points to the idea that these habits of mind usually remain in a person’s life untouched from examination. As such, they limit individuals in a manner unbeknownst to them. These are beliefs retained with no need for justification. They are part of an individual’s experiences. They may have been received from family, community, or culture, and for whatever reason were

¹⁸⁷ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 20.

¹⁸⁸ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 16.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

uncritically assimilated. Transformative learning theory is based on these constructivist assumptions in that it is a process of “examining, questioning, validating, and revising our perspectives.”¹⁹¹ It takes nascent assumptions and expectations and makes them more open to change. Mezirow sees transformative learning as “transforming a problematic frame of reference to make it more dependable in our adult life by generating opinion and interpretations that are more justified.”¹⁹² Beliefs move from being only inferential to being tested, reflected upon, and assimilated.

Disorienting Dilemma

The process of exchanging a less stable belief or perspective with one more stable often includes a timely disorienting dilemma for the adult learner. However, disorientation does not have to be so punctiliar. Disorientation can happen gradually over time. Cranton explains, “The transformative process can be provided by a single dramatic event, a series of almost unnoticed cumulative events, a deliberate conscious effort to make change in one’s life, or by the natural developmental progression of becoming more mature.”¹⁹³ Mezirow helpfully categorizes these transformations as being either “epochal” or

¹⁹¹ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 22.

¹⁹² Ibid., 23.

¹⁹³ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 20.

“incremental.” Simply put, one changes one’s view “by trying on another’s point of view” which may happen over a period of time or, because one is so deeply tied to a habit of mind, it may take a more immediate disorienting dilemma.¹⁹⁴

Cranton posits that the research favors gradual, incremental transformation as more normative than the sudden shift in a person. Either way, the literature reaffirms that it is the process of working through a disorientation about what one currently holds as true with a better, more valid position as the transformational aspect of learning. In the end, dilemmas can happen suddenly or over the course of time, and the changes they potentially bring to a person’s meaning structure can occur in a similar fashion.

While not a concrete or homogenous process, Judi Apte, author of *Facilitating Transformative Learning: A Framework for Practice*, believes that disorienting dilemmas can possess certain hallmarks. For example, her 2009 research concluded that the phenomenon of surprise enabled participants to move beyond their taken-for-granted frames of reference.¹⁹⁵ Disorienting dilemmas can also move the learner through responses such as defensiveness, anger, anxiety, or confusion, prompting a “retreat” whereby the learner further

¹⁹⁴ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 57.

¹⁹⁵ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 21.

processes new ideas against currently held ideas.¹⁹⁶ There may even come a point of “dormancy,” which Apte defines as an empty “not-knowing” time where students leave prior habits of mind for new, more stable positions.¹⁹⁷ Apte believes that since the learning process at this stage is “quite tentative and exploratory,” a final step in the disorienting dilemma is when participants begin “experimenting with options for action at first.”¹⁹⁸ If these experimentations are productive, the participant is more likely to continue to develop and test the transformed frame of reference.¹⁹⁹ Apte sees these trial applications of new ideas as a part of the learning process in a disorienting dilemma.

Critical Reflection and Discourse

In reviewing the literature, the reader will discover that another hallmark of transformative learning is critically reflecting on one’s own perspective juxtaposed against a newer, contrasting perspective. Mezirow suggests that all people have uncritically assimilated beliefs given to them by their culture, which shape preferences and limit focus, and if transformational learning is to take place, people must “become critically reflective of their assumptions and

¹⁹⁶ Judi Apte, “Facilitating Transformative Learning: A Framework for Practice,” *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 49, no. 1 (2009): 181.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

consequences."²⁰⁰ Fernanda Duarte, researcher at the University of Western Sydney, defines critical reflection as primarily involving the questioning of assumptions underlying established belief systems.²⁰¹ When that happens, Cranton believes individuals open themselves to alternatives, change their viewpoints, and transform some part of how meaning is made out of the world.²⁰² Once again, the literature arrives at what appears to be a core conviction of adult transformative learning: critical reflection.

Duarte sees critical reflection as the culmination of the process whereby learners attempt to arrive at a deep and thorough exploration of their belief systems, and also of the extent to which these belief systems influence problem-solving in ever-changing contexts. Her more recent research further concurs with the prior literature in stating that this reflection is mandatory for challenging and creating different meaning perspectives.²⁰³ The transformational results are not only new insights but the process of acting on those insights.²⁰⁴

This reflection manifests itself in adult learners primarily through reflective discourse. It is the use of dialogue to probe current justifications of held

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 24.

²⁰² Fernanda Duarte, "Addressing Student Cynicism through Transformative Learning," *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 7, no. 1 (2010): 5.

²⁰³ Cranton, "Teaching for Transformation," 64.

²⁰⁴ Duarte: 4.

beliefs, assess the legitimacy of new ideas, and working out what adoption of those ideas may mean for future behavior. Good reflection encourages a deeper understanding of complex issues.²⁰⁵ Once again, this is where learning becomes transformative – the discourse and reflection leads the adult to revise prior belief systems.²⁰⁶ Cranton affirms this idea when she writes, “Engaging in critical reflection and participating in rational discourse do not guarantee transformative learning. It is the revision of a habit of mind that make the experience transformative.”²⁰⁷ Discourse validates not only what one believes, but also how one arrives at those beliefs. Therefore, those who seek to lead adults in this type of learning must help their students to become aware and critical of their own and others’ assumptions.²⁰⁸ This does not mean that reflection will not take other avenues outside discourse. Reflection can happen via journaling, dialoguing, and storytelling, as well as through other ways.²⁰⁹ However, based on the literature reviewed, discourse appeared to be a primary means to critical reflection and transformative learning.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 5.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁰⁷ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 24.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 96.

²⁰⁹ Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, no. 74 (1997): 10.

Summary of Literature on Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning, then, refers to the transformation of a less sound or problematic frame of understanding to a more dependable one or, as Patricia Cranton refers to it, a more “open, permeable, and better justified” position.²¹⁰ The result is a deeper, more lasting learning in adults. However, this process does not have to be complicated, as Cranton notes:

Through some event, which could be as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world.²¹¹

Cranton agrees with Mezirow by highlighting the fact that transformative learning happens because of critical reflection when one’s assumptions and beliefs are shaken, assessing their validity in light of new information, considering their sources, and examining their underlying premises.²¹² Far from using criteria of merely growing a knowledge base or behavioral change due to reward or punishment, Transformative Learning Theory centers learning effected by the questioning of assumptions based on prior understanding and leaving with better, more validated perspectives.

²¹⁰ Duarte: 10.

²¹¹ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, vi.

²¹² Cranton, "Teaching for Transformation," 64.

Sharan Merriam, in summarizing the heart of this theory, believes it is ultimately about change – a “dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live.”²¹³ Kathleen King refers to this transformative process as “growing out of” past worldviews like a child outgrows last year’s clothes.²¹⁴ In light of the purpose of the study, which seeks to understand the spiritual dynamics behind a layperson learning systematic theology, and the fact that the field of this specific kind of theology engages a person’s worldview,²¹⁵ Transformation Learning Theory will better assist the researcher in understanding what depth and degree of learning, if any, has taken place within adults trained in systematic theology.

Connections between Literature on Transformative Learning and the Benefits of Systematic Theology

As the literature review demonstrated, Transformative learning and systematic theology are interconnected. For example, Transformation Learning Theory’s meaning structures, or frames of reference, whereby one develops a habit of mind,²¹⁶ parallel with theological assumptions that believers bring to the

²¹³ Ibid., 65.

²¹⁴ Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 318.

²¹⁵ Kathleen P. King, *Brining Transformative Learning to Life* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2005), xiv.

²¹⁶ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 6.

Bible.²¹⁷ There are further similarities between both areas of literature: students are called to be critically reflective in the learning process, teachings may bring disequilibrium,²¹⁸ the necessity dialogue with others,²¹⁹ and the need to possess the commitment to ultimately embrace the more sound, more stable understanding of reality. As noted earlier, in both sections of literature, the result of learning should be transformation.²²⁰ It appears that the literature reveals several areas of overlap between concepts in Transformative Learning Theory and the process of studying systematic theology.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

Before concluding this literature review, it is important to note that there is also ample biblical evidence for an individual's need to grow theologically. Indeed, to enter into the scriptures is to be made keenly aware that theology and spiritual growth are inseparable. While many of the points made in this section parallel those articulated in the literature dealing with the benefits of systematic theology, it is helpful to see an array of specific biblical texts which point to those benefits.

²¹⁷ Horton, 27.

²¹⁸ E.g., Barna's "dissonance learning"

²¹⁹ Reymond, xxx.

²²⁰ Gillespie: 8.

Theology and the Great Commission

As referenced earlier, Jesus Christ, in giving the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20, says:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.²²¹

Jesus' instruction to make disciples of all nations by teaching them to obey all of his commands goes beyond just his oral teaching to the entire corpus of biblical literature. Dr. Wayne Grudem, research professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary, agrees, saying that Christians must see this broader understanding of the content believers must learn extended to the book of Acts, the epistles, and the rest of the New Testament, as they are the outworking of the Holy Spirit's teaching. Additionally, with the New Testament's endorsement behind it, the Old Testament must be included in the scope of teaching mentioned in Matthew 28:18-20.²²² Therefore, learning what the Bible teaches through the summary and collection of different passages to shed light upon its doctrines (i.e., systematic theology) only serves to help Christians better fulfill the Great Commission.

²²¹ Matthew 28:18-20. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 99.

²²² *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

A Pattern of Teaching

This importance of learning what the Bible says about its doctrines is demonstrated in the Apostle Paul's description of his teaching ministry to the Ephesian elders. Paul says in Acts 20 that he "did not shrink from declaring to [them] the whole counsel of God."²²³ While Paul is likely referring primarily to God's redemptive plan for the Ephesians, the stress on the totality of his teaching is unmistakable.²²⁴ Furthermore, readers of scripture will notice other texts extolling a biblical pattern of doctrine. Acts 2:42 depicts the nascent church as gathering around some kind of developed catechesis as they were "devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching."²²⁵ Paul thanks the Roman church for becoming "obedient from the heart to the *pattern* of teaching to which you were committed"²²⁶ and encourages the younger Timothy to "follow the pattern of sound words which you heard from me."²²⁷ Additionally, Paul exhorts the church at Thessalonica to cherish the collection of teachings he and others handed down to them: "Stand firm and hold to the traditions you were taught by us."²²⁸ It appears there was a kind of instruction on life and doctrine critical to the

²²³ Acts 20:27, Grudem, 27.

²²⁴ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

²²⁵ Acts 2:42, F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, ed. F. F. Bruce, Rev. ed. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 392.

²²⁶ Romans 6:17, *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

²²⁷ 2 Timothy 1:13, *ibid*.

²²⁸ 2 Thessalonians 2:15, *ibid*.

spiritual health of the early church. This reinforces the findings in the literature which maintain belief as a critical category of spiritual formation assessment.

The Refutation of False Teaching

The Bible also speaks to the ability of sound doctrine to withstand and refute false teachings which seek to undermine the faith.²²⁹ This is critically important since a regular admonition to the New Testament church concerns the destructive work of false teachers.²³⁰ Christians are not to be “led away by diverse and strange teachings.”²³¹ On the contrary, they are to be keenly aware of false teachers and the teachings they bring with them. This spirit of awareness is seen in the Apostle Peter’s warning to followers of Jesus in 2 Peter 2:1, “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”²³² Implicit in the ability to recognize false teaching is the understanding of sound teaching. Therefore, the comprehensive nature of the doctrines highlighted in systematic theology (e.g., Christology) make it the *sine qua non* of developing an apologetic for the faith.

²²⁹ E.g., Matthew 24:4-5, 1 John 2:26, 2 Peter 3:16, et al.

²³⁰ E.g., Matthew 7:15-16, Acts 20:29-31, 2 Peter 2:21, et al.

²³¹ Hebrews 13:9, *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

²³² 2 Peter 2:1, *ibid*.

Sound Doctrine and Spiritual Maturity

Indeed, depth of doctrinal soundness is a mark of Christian maturity. In Colossians 1:23, Paul reminds fellow believers to “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast” by being rooted in the truths they have heard from him.²³³ Believers are further called to “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...so that so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”²³⁴ Systematic theology assists believers in this process by helping Christians gain a comprehensive understanding of biblical teaching that would equip them to expose unsound teaching. Once again, the biblical teaching on unity, maturity, and obedience reinforces the findings in the literature that maintain attitudes and behaviors as categories of spiritual formation assessment.

In summary, if doctrine means “teaching,” and Christians are to grow in the faith through the teaching of God’s word, it seems systematic theology would be indispensable in moving toward doctrinal soundness.²³⁵ Learning about the doctrine of God, the Holy Spirit, the church, last things, and other biblical dogmas would help believers to not only honor the Great Commission

²³³ Colossians 1:23. Ibid.

²³⁴ Ephesians 4:13-14. Ibid.

²³⁵ Cf., Titus 2:1, 1 Tim. 6:3. Ibid.

but also the Great Commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”²³⁶ The biblically comprehensive nature and worldview-building properties of systematic theology were theologically reaffirmed in the literature.²³⁷

²³⁶ Matthew 22:37 (emphasis added). *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

²³⁷ See prior literature review on the benefits of systematic theology

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to discover how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology.

Therefore, a qualitative study was conducted in order to learn about those experiences. This study specifically focused on the experiences of certain individuals who finished a seven-month class in systematic theology. Therefore, a qualitative study was designed to understand the point of view of the class participants from their experiences. The reasons a qualitative approach was the preferred design for this project are many.

Qualitative research has several characteristics which make it the preferred choice for understanding how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation. Chief among these characteristics is the focus on meaning and understanding. Sharan Merriam in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, writes, “The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making,

and describe how people interpret what they experience.”²³⁸ This understanding is rooted in the phenomenon of interests from the participant’s perspective, rather than the perspective of the researcher. However, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection. This is true because rather than trying to eliminate the biases and subjectivity of those being studied, the researcher aims to observe, record, and reflect on how those biases and subjectivities impact the subjects of the study.

This project was a case study in that it is “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system.”²³⁹ This type of qualitative research was selected due to its strength of illuminating specific phenomenon.²⁴⁰ For the purposes of this study, the researcher sought to understand any spiritual formation benefits of adults undergoing a systematic theological education. The bounded system of a specific class at a local church gives opportunity to a fuller understanding of the phenomena of training in systematic theology from a layperson’s perspective.²⁴¹ An additional strength of this particular type of qualitative research is that it leads the researcher into insights, discoveries, and

²³⁸ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version.*

²³⁹ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 14.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

interpretations rather than the testing of a hypothesis.²⁴² Thus, this study anticipates a deep understanding of the spiritual formation dynamics occurring within laypersons receiving a systematic theological education.

PARTICIPANT SAMPLE SELECTION

The participant sample selection is composed of the interviews of two men and seven women who completed a seven-month class in systematic theology at community church in a large city in Texas. The individuals are professed Christians and lay-leaders within various ministries in this local church. The researcher sought to analyze their experiences in learning systematic theology in light of spiritual formation dynamics.

As mentioned earlier, the study was conducted within a bounded system. There are a limited number of participants who completed the class, a solitary facilitator led it, and the participants received content through a specific text of systematic theology. It is furthermore bounded by the material studied, namely Dr. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.²⁴³

Each of the participants selected had no previous training in systematic theology. The intent of the study was to see the unique spiritual formation dynamics tied to an exposure to a systematic theological education. Any prior training in formal dogmatics would compromise that intent. The participants

²⁴² Ibid., 42.

²⁴³ Ibid.

chosen also had some ministry involvement in their local church. The rationale for this was to discover if and how an education in systematic theology impacts the execution of ministry (e.g., the shepherding of people) since service is a mark of spiritual formation.²⁴⁴ Thus, any insights or discoveries concerning the intersection of systematic theological training and ministry execution would serve the purpose of the study.

DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected using interviews based on the general qualitative method. This method is effective in gathering data because it helps the researcher to understand issues, concepts, and practices through those who directly deal with the subject under study. Therefore, the researcher contacted the interviewees and asked them to prepare for their interviews by taking time to reflect upon presuppositions, beliefs, biblical doctrines, and even incidents in the systematic theology class whereby any dynamics of spiritual growth were identified and examined. The interviews were conducted in person, with digital recording devices, and later be transcribed for future analysis.

This study used a semi-structured interview protocol. Merriam defines semi-structured interviews as the middle ground between highly structured or standardized interviews, where the wording and order of questions is

²⁴⁴ Grudem, n.p.

predetermined, and unstructured or informal interviews, where questions are open-ended when the researcher “does not know enough about phenomenon to ask relevant questions.”²⁴⁵

The semi-structured interview was the preferred protocol because it allowed consistency, with general pre-defined questions framing and ultimately guiding the subject at hand. Yet this structure allowed the interviewee to answer spontaneous questions that arose in natural response to answers given. This created an open atmosphere between interviewer and interviewee, giving a greater sense of freedom and transparency to the entire experience. Interviewees followed up their own responses without any prompting.

The Interview Protocol questions for interviews were structured as follows:

1. Tell me about a time where you learned something new in class?
2. Were there any moments in class that shocked, angered, or deeply moved you? How did you work through those emotions and moments?
3. Was there a specific doctrine or issue you studied that forced you to think differently about things than before?

²⁴⁵ Jim Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 149-156.

4. How did systematic theology influence the way you live out your faith?
5. In what ways did the study of systematic theology influence your ministry?
6. What has completing systematic theology done to your heart?
7. Tell me about a time where you felt differently about something/someone because of systematic theology?
8. If you could offer systematic for everyone at church, what would you say to motivate them to sign up?
9. How did studying systematic theology contribute uniquely to your spiritual growth?

DATA ANALYSIS

The data underwent the constant comparative method of analysis.

Merriam describes this method as comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are then grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall aim of this analysis is to identify patterns and themes in the data. Finally, these patterns and themes are arranged in a relationship to each other in the building of a grounded theory.²⁴⁶ This inherently inductive and

²⁴⁶ Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 89.

comparative process allowed the study to become more refined in scope.

Different units of data were collected from the interviews. Data was open-coded and then categorized for further study in the hopes that specific categories of spiritual dynamics in learning systematic theology would be discovered.

RESEARCHER POSITION

Merriam notes, "Qualitative case studies are limited, too, by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator. The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis."²⁴⁷ The researcher is aware that his bias, backgrounds, and worldview are just a few of the many factors contributing to the filter with which he values and interprets the research data. For example, the researcher has been exposed to systematic theological studies in both undergraduate and graduate studies and found them to be beneficial to spiritual formation. Thus, he possesses optimism that laypersons studying systematic theology will be greatly benefited.

Another potential limitation for the researcher is he was the facilitator of the systematic theology class. Additionally, he also is one of the interviewees' pastors. The researcher understands that this combination of relational factors has the potential to influence the data received because of the interviewees' possible desire to please their pastor and teacher with their answers. However,

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 30-31.

the researcher believes it is exactly because of his sound relationship with the interviewees that the data were received with confidence of its fidelity. Patricia Cranton, on the value of people learning from someone they know and trust, writes,

Students receiving information from an authority figure whom they do not know as a person can easily accept or disregard that information. But when a person is engaged in serious dialogue with someone he or she knows, likes, and trusts, the potential for the examination of previously uncritically absorbed values and assumptions, is, I suggest, much greater.²⁴⁸

This close relational proximity gave the researcher an advantage in the interview process in that he was able to extract good data from his interviewees. He is familiar with the ways they communicate and was apt to pick up in his interviewees any hesitancy, frustration, excitement, or other emotional cues that had the potential to bring with them rich data if handled responsibly. The researcher, being their pastor, also had a better understanding of the interviewees' spiritual journeys and, as such, was better equipped to use follow-up questions to discover any additional data concerning their spiritual growth that might not have immediately been evident based upon their responses to initial, foundational questions.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 52.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Due to limited resources and time, only nine individuals from the systematic theology class were interviewed for this study. The interview analysis is not necessarily universally applicable to all times and situations. This study did not attempt an exhaustive review of the literature. The researcher went into as much depth as possible considering the time available.

Another limitation, addressed earlier in the study, is that the research concerns a specific cultural context of systematic theology. If Timothy Tennent's assertion that systematic theology is not universal, but culturally defined,²⁴⁹ it should be noted this study concerns traditional Western systematic theology and the categories associated within it.²⁵⁰ The exact systematic theological textbook used in the course was Dr. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.²⁵¹ Therefore, this study did not look at the spiritual formation dynamics of laypersons studying non-Western systematic theology.

SUMMARY OF STUDY METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the qualitative research approach used to study how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology. The research is a case study involving a bounded system

²⁴⁹ Tennent, 258.

²⁵⁰ Wildsmith: 123.

²⁵¹ Grudem.

of a specific class at a local church that dictated the choice of participant-selection criteria. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview method. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method in an attempt to discern themes, pattern, and areas of agreement or contrast. Data was open-coded and then categorized for further study in the hopes that specific categories of spiritual dynamics in learning systematic theology would be discovered.

The next chapter is given to the data and analysis of participants on the subject of how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology, and is structured around the three research questions posed in chapter one.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to discover how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology. In order to research the subject, it was important for the researcher to understand how laypersons experience changes in their thinking, feeling, and acting as a result of learning systematic theology. Furthermore, the study was benefitted by understanding whether any contributions toward an individual's spiritual formation can be uniquely attributed to a study of systematic theology.

Accordingly, the four research questions guided this study:

1. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' thinking?
5. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' affects?
6. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' actions?
7. How did the study of systematic theology uniquely contribute to the participants' spiritual formation?

In order to answer these questions, nine laypersons who completed a weekly, seven-month class that studied systematic theology at a local church

were interviewed. In this chapter, the participants of the study will be introduced and their insights concerning the study questions will be presented.

Introductions to Individuals Interviewed During This Study

The names of the participants have been changed in order to protect their identities. These introductions will allow comparisons and contrasts to be made concerning the spiritual backgrounds of the individual participants and how those backgrounds might affect the spiritual formation process of studying systematic theology. While all the individuals are laypeople, it will also be noted if and where they serve in a ministry at their local church. This may assist in giving a better context for statements made about how systematic theology has impacted an individual's actions. The researcher interviewed both men and women, and all participants are members of the same church that conducted the systematic theology class.

Gregg was raised in a Christian home and, in his own words, had been “pretty faithful” to Christ and his church since he was a young child. He has read the Bible through several times and, as a youth, took notes on “every chapter of every book of the Bible.” Gregg currently serves as a small group leader.

Andrea was raised in a Christian home and church. However, she viewed her upbringing as one of suffocating legalism and spiritual oppression. Andrea has attended her current church for the last five years and leads a ministry team.

Liv grew up in a home of unbelievers. In fact, it was only a decade ago that she understood that the Bible actually contains history and that Jesus walked the earth as a man. In her words, before becoming a Christian six years ago, she “literally had zero theological background.” Liv is a leader in the church’s children’s ministry.

Jackie is a small group leader and has served in various ministry roles in the church. She grew up with a “very orthodox background.” She was raised in a Baptist church, attended Christian schools, and believes she, like Gregg, was a faithful disciple in her youth.

Hank grew up in a non-Christian home but became a Christian in the seventh grade. He was very involved in the Baptist Student Union in college, but after leaving school, he fell away from both the church and from regularly pursuing his faith. After getting married and having kids, Hank reengaged both Christ and his church. Currently, Hank is a small group leader and serves in the children’s ministry.

Maddie was raised in the Catholic Church for seventeen years but, reflecting on how those years formed her spiritually, says, “I don’t count that.” Although becoming a Christian thirteen years ago through the work of a regional Protestant church, Maddie confesses that until recently in her life, “I had a very weak theological background. I didn’t know the Bible. I didn’t read the Bible.”

Maddie leads a small group with her spouse and is involved in various other ministries at the church.

Betty had parents who became believers later in life and embraced a very charismatic flavor of Christianity. In an attempt to grow spiritually, Betty's parents sought "any and every teaching they could consume." As a result, Betty believes she grew up with "very bad theology." She characterized her theological disposition before attending class as being "a lot of confusion." Although growing up with well-meaning, Christian parents, Betty believes she "crossed the line of faith" and became a Christian within the past several years. Betty sings in the worship team and helps lead a small group with her spouse.

Sofia grew up with parents who were "Easter and Christmas" Hindus in that they only observed a few Hindu holidays but could not articulate the meaning of those holidays or even the Hindu faith in general. Sofia had no concrete understanding of Christianity until she and her spouse became Christians in 2002 after attending their current church. Sofia currently leads a small group with her husband and serves in the children's ministry.

Jane also serves on a ministry team at the church. She grew up in a nominally Methodist home but had little knowledge of Christianity. She confesses, "I could tell you who Jesus was, but that was about it. Essentially, my background is theologically light." It was not until she began attending her

current church that Jane became a Christian. She was baptized in the summer of 2011.

Each of these individuals comes from a different point on the theological spectrum, ranging from a fairly theologically-grounded background to having little to no theological foundation at all. It is hoped that these profiles will better serve the reader in understanding the impact of systematic theology in the lives of these individuals. It should also be noted that all interviewees attended the same seven month-long class in systematic theology. With this orientation to the research participants complete, the interview data which answers the four guiding research questions will now be presented.

The Impact of Systematic Theology on Thinking

The question of systematic theology's impact to one's thinking received the largest and most extensive answers of the four research questions. Participants ranged in their responses to the impact of studying systematic theology. While the distinction between one's thinking, feelings, and actions may overlap, the following section will identify themes within category of thinking. One of the biggest responses to the impact of systematic theology on the participants' thinking revolved around its systematized, logical organization.

Organizational Strengths

File Cabinet: The Structure of Systematic Theology

Every person interviewed, when asked about how systematic theology impacted their thinking, noted how the logical structure of systematic theology assisted their cognitive process. For example, Liv shared:

I think of systematic theology like a filing cabinet. It helped organized my beliefs about God in a way that makes sense. Before, I just believed a bunch of stuff, and by studying systematic theology, I have a place for it now in my thought process. And I [also] think of all the associated truths and thoughts that go with that. So, systematic theology puts things in their proper location instead of just floating around in my brain.

This ability to assist learners by giving them categories with which to gather their theological thoughts was affirmed by other interviewees. Andrea, referring to herself as an “analytical person,” agreed that the logical structure of systematic theology helped arrange her thoughts. She noted, “It was encouraging to learn about the faith in a logical, orderly way.”

Instead of using “file cabinet” language, Maddie believed systematic theology gave her an understandable construct for her thoughts. Concurring with Liv and Andrea’s sentiments, Maddie stated:

I tell you a big thing was how systematic was put together. It was logical and orderly. It gave me a logical picture. It started with the Bible, then God and so on. So for me, that organization was incredibly helpful in forming a better biblical picture of God and everything else.

Hank agreed:

They way [systematic theology] was laid out was extremely helpful because I didn't have any training like this before. Even the concordance of your Bible is not going to point it out like that. It's not going to follow your thought process like systematic theology does. Systematic theology is arranged in a way I think: it's logical and ordered. It's presented in a way I can follow along with all of it. Nothing I've ever been through has done that for me...even study Bibles. They don't do that. Systematic theology organizes the truths or ideas for me in a way that makes sense.

Almost all the interviewees used similar language when referring to the benefits of the logical, linear arrangement of systematic theology. Betty simply concluded, "It cleared up my confusion by showing how things fit." Sofia characterized it by saying, "Systematic theology helped organize thoughts I already had. It helped me put terms to my belief system, to my abstract thoughts. It organized my heart – the things I believed about God and the things I don't believe."

As a result, the participants' comments about the logical arrangement of systematic theology often turned to another perceived strength of its organization: the ability to tie different thoughts together and make them understandable as such.

Putting the Pieces Together: The Coherence of Systematic Theology

Often what was uncovered in the interview process were individuals who had collected bits and pieces of biblical truths and ideas from their religious upbringing, whether it originated from their parents or church, but had little

sense of how those seemingly disparate ideas fit together. An overwhelming response to the question of how systematic theology impacted a person's thinking was that it, as Gregg phrased, "put the smaller pieces together....like a puzzle." It took his scattered thoughts and ideas and arranged them in a coherent fashion. Jackie, looking back on her upbringing, agreed when she remarked, "Having a story here, a verse there, or a passage here that you've learned – I think that's good. But I think there something different when you see the big picture but when you can see how those things intersect." She added that systematic theology gave her a way to put her prior learning into the proper framework. "Big picture" appeared to be the term of choice in that others adopted it as well when describing the coherent nature of systematic theology.

Andrea, another participant who spent her childhood learning about the faith, also highlighted what she believed to be systematic theology's strength of fitting her different beliefs about God together in an overall, coherent picture. She said, "Systematic theology pulled all the pieces together. It took all these things I knew about and put them together in the bigger picture." Maddie, who had only been a Christian for the last thirteen years, agreed by adding, "Everyone should realize how helpful it is to see the big picture from start to finish." She went into greater depth about how seeing the big picture helped her learn when she stated, "Before then there were things I believed but wondered

about since I didn't see how they matched up with other things I believed. So, I guess I'm saying that one of the reasons I easily believed those new truths is because how they gave understanding to the bigger picture I was getting."

Even Jane, who had only recently been baptized as a Christian, noted that while she knew of "Paul and all these other names and ideas in the Bible, I didn't know their relationship to each other. Systematic theology gave that to me." She also noted that while systematic theology brought her beliefs about God into a clearer, coherent picture, there was another important quality systematic theology's organization displayed in light of her beliefs. Jane noticed systematic theology not only helped her see where her beliefs fit but how those beliefs were connected to each other.

Stacked Upon Each Other: The Connectedness of Systematic Theology

When asked about what new things she had learned, Jane remarked that she did not realize how deeply interconnected biblical ideas and truths were to each other. She said, "Sometimes the new truths I was learning this week would answer questions about doctrines I had learned in weeks prior." Jane's revelation that theological truths were connected was not lost on others. Betty also highlighted the connectedness of theology:

Systematic theology was very helpful in how it was put together. It was intentional. The doctrines were stacked upon each other. For example, the doctrine of the application of redemption: you've got the gospel call, regeneration, then conversion, then perseverance of the saints. As each

chapter built on the previous one, just more and more. It kept building on itself and help me better think through it. It helps lead to conclusions than just something to think about.

Betty concluded by saying that she realized that if she changed one thing she believed about one doctrine, it would affect other doctrines. Reflecting on how surprised she was at the connectedness of the doctrines of salvation, she offered, “If I change one thing here, then it’s got a trickle down into all this other stuff. That was eye-opening to me. I’d go from conversion to perseverance to some other doctrine. It was big for me.”

Seeing these connections between doctrines also encouraged Hank. Reflecting on his time studying the doctrine of the will of God in systematic theology, he said, “I did notice that when it would talk about God’s will that would lead me to election which would lead me somewhere else. Instead of bothering me, seeing those connections was reaffirming to me.” These doctrines were not only seen as connected, but as building upon each other. Once again, Jane spoke to how valuable this aspect was to her learning:

For someone who didn’t really know anything, the structure of systematic theology was incredibly beneficial because we started with the basics like, “What is the Bible?” Then once we got that it was like, “Okay, now let’s talk about God.” So the natural path of systematic theology was very important to me because we couldn’t be talking about election if I didn’t know where it came from or where God put it in. Systematic theology gave me the right context for doctrines like that. It kept building upon itself. It was “systematic.” And that’s what I needed. Every week we layered something on top, then something on top, then something on top.

Jane understood that to study a doctrine addressed later in the class may imply that one must know the doctrines which come before. However, she believed that it was the building block connectedness of systematic theology that allowed her to understand as well as she did. Betty explained that when a person understands one concept, it helps them understand others which go with it. She said that when some idea or discussion arises over any specific issue, she now knows “what doctrines are at play.”

Thus, when interviewees were asked about how the study of systematic theology impacted how they think, at least three different organizational strengths were mentioned: the structure, coherence, and connectedness of systematic theology. These themes arose from remarks about how systematic theology makes sense in its organization, how it ties scripture and doctrine together, and how those doctrines not only build upon one another, but help the learner to see the “bigger picture.” Another perceived strength concerning systematic theology and its impact on an individual’s thinking was found in changing perspectives.

Perspective Changes

As participants spoke about how learning systematic theology impacted their perspectives, it was not too uncommon to hear summations such as “life

changing,” “mind blowing,” or as Gregg said in reference to systematic theology’s impact: “It will open your eyes like nothing else.” Perspective changes were evidenced in three general areas: how individuals viewed their lives, how they viewed God, and how they viewed the world around them.

It Made Better Sense of My World: Reinterpreting One’s Life

Hank shared that walking through the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, namely the fruit of the Spirit, combined with studying about regeneration and true repentance in class, caused him to reevaluate his spiritual condition. He confessed that there were times where it was “daunting, scary, and exciting” as he learned about what the Bible said systematically about true change. He said it forced him to ask whether he had experienced a true transformation. Hank concluded, “So I had to work through that. Yet it was good. It was a good thing. Ultimately, it led me back to grace and the goodness of Jesus. But I did have to process those ideas.”

Others similarly reflected on their life. Andrea, who grew up in a legalist home and church, used her new perspective to reinterpret her past. She shared with great emotion how she came from a broken home. Her parents were emotionally abusive and neglectful, leading her to confess, “I felt like I was less than a person.” She was told never to question her beliefs and that those who were in authority over her were above error. She summarized her role growing

up saying, “I pretty much ran the house since I was nine years old. So, I was big on performance. So that’s where a lot of my belief system was formed. It has been strong and overpowering.” Andrea concluded saying, “I’ve been through a lot of suffering and believed it was my fault.”

That was until she began to learn about the doctrines of sin, man, and most importantly in Andrea’s perspective, the doctrine of grace. Each week in class, as she started to read the different scriptures in support of these doctrines, Andrea proclaimed, “That’s what changed my life.” Through a great amount of tears, Andrea continued:

For example, my understanding of grace. [Learning truths such as] “Who I am in Christ” or “Just how much God loves me.” I mean, with my church and family history, I thought God was a God who was looking at me waiting to punish me. But it was so amazing to find out how much God loved me. So I started to learn about grace and it started to make sense. I began to realize that God loved me so much in Christ that I couldn’t let him down.

Andrea utilized those doctrines to reinterpret her past and, in doing so, was able to reframe biblical teaching she received as a child. She concluded:

I had memorized a lot of scripture in high school but now they started to make sense. For example, I memorized Romans 6 but now Romans 6 became more real. The Bible, those passages, came alive. So learning about this doctrine, this new truth, helped make better sense of all those other things I learned growing up...all the other information in my head. This new truth helped make better sense of all the old truth I had. It brought greater clarity. It made better sense of my world than what I used to believe. That’s when it all came alive. Like fireworks!

It should be noted that Andrea ended these words with laughter and a smile. She added that throughout the term of the class, she discovered other doctrines that enabled her to reexamine her hurtful past. The doctrine of God's sovereignty has provided great comfort for her, and the temptation to think everything rests on her shoulders has abated.

Jane and Betty also shared how the doctrine of God's sovereignty, specifically God's sovereign choice of election, caused them to reinterpret their experiences. Jane related how she never truly understood what being born again meant. In her words, "I didn't understand the order of it all, salvation just happened to me." However, once she learned in class about the *ordo salutis*, she shared, "I had to rethink my whole process. It was very eye-opening." In the end, she related how she came away with a greater awareness of God's love for her and his hand in her life. Betty shared a similar story. She had never heard about election before but, once convinced it was biblical, she began to attribute the different movements toward saving faith in her life as the result of a loving God who desired to "make [her] a part of his family before the foundation of the earth!"

Sofia related the story of how studying the doctrine of regeneration and effectual calling made her more aware of her own conversion. Being from a marginally Hindu home, she had no desire for anything remotely Christian. That

was until some Christian neighbors came over for dinner. Sofia said that evening she invited herself and her family to their friends' church. She confessed that for the longest time she looked back on that event and wondered (in her words), "What the heck possessed me to do that?" Today, as a result of studying systematic theology, she is confident that was the work of the Holy Spirit. She commented:

So I guess one of the reasons I came to believe something new I was being taught is because it interpreted my experience better than how I had thought of it before. After reading about and learning in systematic theology about what God does in us before faith I realized that's totally what happened because my heart was changing before becoming a Christian. But it wasn't due to me.

Sofia, with a newfound perspective on her past, concluded with voice quivering, "To be where we are and to know where we came from is humbling, but it's God and his grace."

Betty added a final story in her interview about losing her four year-old daughter to cancer years earlier. She then shared how, in learning about the doctrine of man and angels, systematic theology helped her see how well-meaning but ultimately wrong people's responses were to her life's tragedy. She then concluded:

That's why understanding the whole picture: understanding sin, understanding creation, understanding death, understanding heaven, understanding the difference between humans and angels...all of it collectively makes the difference. That's what systematic theology does

that nothing else I've found does. And it's made a profound difference in me. It gave me a way to see my life for what it is.

Jackie concurred, "You start seeing [systematic theology] intersect your life everywhere and impacting everything." Systematic theology brought many interviewees a new personal perspective both of their present and past – allowing them to see life, as Betty noted, "for what it is." Additionally, it also influenced the way the interviewees saw God for who he is.

There's So Much I Didn't Know I Didn't Know: The Bigness of God

Hank, with much laughter, confessed that at the end of the systematic theology class, he realized "There's so much you didn't know that you didn't know." He said he thought he knew a lot about God, but systematic theology exposed that myth. For example, he related how studying God's providence helped him gain a greater understanding of God's great power. He said, "It's one thing to look out at the sky and the trees and say 'God created this.' It's another thing to sit back and say he is actively involved with it and is holding it together. That's a whole different ballgame. Wow!" Maddie added to the spirit of Hank's amazement about God holding all things together and how it enlarges a person's view of the Almighty when she said, "For God to put that all together just blew me away! Before we existed, before anything on earth existed, God did it all. I left with a much bigger picture of God."

Liv agreed with their assessment of God's bigness. However, for her, it was reflecting on "little things" about God that others tend to miss or neglect which actually enlarged her perspective on God. Liv said:

I came away from systematic theology thinking God is a lot bigger than I used to think of him. I didn't know the "nitty gritty"...all the little things about God I never thought about. It was humbling. With all the little details I'm learning about God, he's actually becoming bigger in my view.

This sentiment of possessing an enlarged view of God by observing the smaller details of what he does was shared by others. Jackie explained about valuing the little things of God and his work:

Then I realized it wasn't so little because that doctrine impacts how I see God (which is another doctrine) which affects how I see salvation (which is another doctrine), and so on. So to misunderstand this doctrine means you misunderstand the nature of God, the nature of man, and the work that he does. ... It really enlarges your vision of God. Makes him bigger.

Another aspect discovered in the interviews was the role mystery played in enlarging the individual's perspective on God. Sofia said:

I think one of the reasons systematic theology expands my view of God is because there is mystery. We can't know everything. We'll read a ton of pages in systematic and wind up with, "Well we don't really know. It's a mystery." ...If anything the mysteries have increased my faith. In the end, this should leave you in deeper awe of God.

Seeing God's bigness via the mystery of not knowing or being able to know about him was profound for many in shaping their perspective of God. Jane shared how the class helped her "become okay" with the mystery of God and

how that mystery has “actually blown my concept of God out of the water, it’s expanded my concept of God.” Liv too, was “okay with mystery” noting that it brought her comfort because “I believe we need something that big because we can’t encapsulate that. We need a God that big. He needs to be big for us to do the mission of sharing the gospel and going out to the world.”

Gregg sums it up simply: “[Systematic theology] took my little view of God and blew it up! Made it much bigger where God is more than I’ll ever imagine.” While systematic theology has, for the interviewees, expanded their perspectives of God, it has also impacted their view of the world.

My Drive is Different: The World has Changed

Gregg shared that systematic theology helped him to appreciate not only the “little things” about God, but about the world as well. Relating how the doctrine of common grace among other doctrines has begun to change his view of the world, he said, “I’m driving to work in my car and think it’s God’s common grace people made these cars and we can live far away, and travel, and go to work...or my job [itself], that I can work for God’s glory. That’s a good thing. Those little things matter now.”

Maddie also highlighted the impact of leaning systematic theology on her view of the world around her. Like Gregg, she more deeply appreciated what she beheld on her drive to work, noting:

Now I drive around and think how much more precious this planet is and how I need to treat it better. The world is more beautiful. It's more precious. That's the word, "precious." The flowers are more precious. The sky is more precious. I think the world is more precious to me now because of systematic theology.

Maddie then turned her gaze from the world to those who dwell upon it. She stated she now saw people differently. She explained, "Realizing, for example, that we're born broken because of Adam has helped me have more compassion for people. I'm just like them too." Jane also believed systematic theology changed the way she viewed others. She reported that studying the doctrine of salvation made her "more aware" of people's true spiritual condition, and that it is her mission to help them find God. Jane finished with, like the other participants, reflecting on how she saw her entire world differently because of systematic theology. She remarked with great joy, "Man, this just didn't happen! I mean the beauty of it all...to every detail...it's all just too much!"

Liv summarized the impact of studying systematic theology by highlighting its permeating quality on the way a person views life. She stated:

All the stuff in systematic theology envelops you pretty gradually. Things pop up in your life that understand differently but you don't say, "Oh, I learned that in systematic theology," but you did. It just does it in subtle way. It's just the way you think now. It permeates you in a way you don't really think about, but it changes the way you see everything.

She concluded that systematic theology has "given me different lenses to see my world through. It applies to everything that I do." Andrea agreed with Liv's

statement, sharing that “[Systematic theology] made better sense of my world than what I used to believe,” and that it “impacted my entire worldview.” Jackie said she started to see systematic theology “intersect [her] life everywhere and impact everything,” which caused her to look at her world differently.

In summary, participants reported that systematic theology changed their perspective on how they saw themselves, God, and the world around them. In addition to changing or enhancing their perspectives, interviewees also reported that the study of systematic theology impacted their ability to think biblically about things.

Thinking Biblically

When asked about how systematic theology impacted their thinking, many of the participants responded that it has caused them to think more biblically than in the past. Three themes emerged from this reasoning: the increased importance of the Bible, the growing ability to discern truth from error, and the owning of beliefs. The following section will explore those themes via the participants’ responses.

It Became More Real: The Importance of the Bible

Liv commented that when she thought of systematic theology, she automatically thought of the Bible. She added, “In fact, systematic theology only makes sense because I believe the Bible is true. I realized that I’m really just

studying an organized view of the Bible.” She said this awareness increased her appreciation and dependency upon the scriptures. She explained, “Slowly the Bible became more true, more visible, more lively in my life,” and she continued, “[systematic] theology so tied me to the scriptures” that it profoundly impacted her on their importance in her life.

Hank also was struck about how “incredibly Bible-based” systematic theology was and said it helped him to realize Christians “must get to what the Bible says. That’s so important!” He shared how the class helped him see how deeply he needed to both understand and assimilate the truths of the Bible. As noted earlier, Andrea’s appreciation of the Bible deepened because of systematic theology’s ability to make doctrinal sense of the passages she studied growing up. Those passages became “more real” and “alive” because systematic theology made better sense of those passages and created a passion in Andrea to read God’s word. Betty, Jackie, Sofia, and Gregg all shared how their awareness of the importance of the Bible was only heightened as a result of studying systematic theology. As Sofia noted, “I believed scripture was true but, after systematic theology, I believe even more that scripture is true.” Moreover, participants not only saw a greater importance for the Bible in their lives but became more aware of the truth claims of others.

I'm On Guard Now: The Filter of Discernment

In the interview, Hank was excited to share about how systematic theology changed the way he thought, especially how he engaged other truth claims. He shared the story of attending a worship service where he came away wondering whether the pastor had been correct in his doctrinal understanding of a certain idea. He shared that as the pastor preached, he began to think, "That's not true." Hank spoke of the change in his mental disposition: "I listen more intently to everything – to the what's on the radio, to shows on TV, to when people say things – and I think, 'Is that true? Is that biblical?' I'm on guard now."

He concluded:

I realize now more than ever that there are so many different views and so many false beliefs out there. And just because it sounds good it's reassuring. There's so much false stuff out there, but I don't want to fall into that. And I don't want to spread a false truth. My personality wants to call that stuff out. Systematic theology gave me the background knowledge to recognize false teachings.

He then proceeded to share another story of a more recent encounter with a pastor and the content of his message:

So I went to Lake Charles for Easter and we attended my brother-in-law's church. It's big now and they had church in the local civic center. I felt awful at the end of the service because his sermon missed it completely. I never saw any real teaching in his message. It talked about how things were wrong in the world but not really about Jesus and who he is or how we go about finding him.

I tell you that story because now with systematic theology, I don't hear stuff and let it immediately soak in, I have to hear it, then filter it. I'm

testing it to see if it's true. I'm trying to see if I'm going to believe this. I'm testing it with the Bible and these doctrines I've come to believe. I test it with the knowledge systematic theology has brought.

This propensity to view teachings with greater discernment as a result of learning systematic theology was shared by other participants. Liv shared the story of how her well-meaning mother-in-law said something that in the past would have gone unnoticed. However, because of systematic theology, Liv said she recognizes those false beliefs. She now has a different perspective thanks to systematic theology:

When people say unbiblical things now I think to myself, "That's not true." Even people I look up to. It's nice to know that I [do not have to] just receive what everyone says, but can see if their beliefs hold water, and if something sounds wrong, I want to know what they mean by it.

Gregg phrased the impact of systematic theology on his ability to discern by stating:

Systematic theology has shaped my reactions to situations to think biblically first: "What does God say about this subject?," "What else does God say about this subject?" "How should I view this situation in light of what God says entirely regarding this subject?" "How can I communicate this truth to myself (i.e. feelings/beliefs) and to others with God-honoring humbleness, grace, love, and respect?" I realize how I need to first get the whole picture in mind.

Andrea agreed with Gregg's new thought process by relating that she too is starting to ask the questions: "Where did they get that?" "Where does the Bible

say that?" Betty, who like Hank saw systematic theology as creating a biblical filter for her, shared how that filter intersected her life as a musician:

As a musician, even the stuff on my iPad for years, now I listen to it in a different way. Like some praise music, I'm like, "Do I even like this anymore? Is it right about God or does it make him out to be some feel-good kind of person? Essentially, is it theologically true?"

It's like a compass or filter. So when a situation comes up and statements are made, I don't have to go, "Hmm. I wonder if that's true?" I can know if it's true or not. I know generally what doctrine it falls under. And I can find the scriptures it talks about.

Jane summed up how systematic theology impacted her perception of truth and error, saying that systematic theology made her both a little close-minded and open-minded. She was close-minded to "essential beliefs like the atonement" but more open-minded to "non-essential views like speaking in tongues." She humorously told the story of a conversation with one of her more charismatic friends:

So she'll start talking about healing and instead of just saying forget it, I am more open-minded to talk with her about it. Ask her why she believes that and so on. In the past I wouldn't even discuss it with her.

Systematic theology gave me the confidence to actually have those conversations. Now I want to say, "Where do you see that in the Bible?"

But also, with my friend, I'd ask her about the essentials such as what she believes about Jesus on the cross. Do you believe he accomplished our salvation there completely or do we bring something to the table? She would say, "I believe he accomplished it completely." And I'd say, "Okay. We agree on what's most important. We have the same belief." So I can be more tolerant of her more "hocus pocus" beliefs that I disagree with. But even with that, I'd say, "Where does the scripture speak to this?"

Sofia also praised the effect of systematic theology to raise the awareness of how biblical her thoughts were. She elaborated:

Systematic theology has led me to be more wary of my thoughts or opinions but to go to scripture. What does the Bible say about this? Systematic theology has more deepened my appreciation for having scripture to backup what I believe. And it gives me the scripture to backup what I believe. That's the awesome thing!

Sofia's comments not only highlight the perceived benefit of systematic theology to heightens one's ability to discern truth from error with a biblical filter, but also allow the individual to own the beliefs they do possess.

I Can Articulate What I Believe: The Owning of Beliefs

Many interviewees reflected that systematic theology enabled them to further own their beliefs that were often initially given to them via pastors, parents, and parochial schools. Betty noted that her belief system was something "my parents just gave to me." With those who came to faith later in life, systematic theology simply reaffirmed newfound beliefs. Liv, who had little theological background before encountering systematic theology, said the class helped give a "great deal of confidence knowing what I believe." She described her context by stating:

I think I did have beliefs. For six years since I became a Christian I had developed beliefs but couldn't articulate those beliefs. For example, I knew "Trinity" but couldn't tell you what I thought of the Trinity. I had beliefs, but I didn't know them well enough to articulate them.

She further said that systematic theology provided an “elementary way for me to explain the facts I believed. [It] spelled things out for my beliefs.” She concluded that before she studied systematic theology, she did not have the sense of “I know this is the right way,” and that her understanding of theology had completely changed things in her mind. Andrea agreed with Liv that as a result of studying systematic theology, “My beliefs have become more mine.” Jackie put it this way: “Systematic theology helped me sit down and explain [my beliefs] to me.”

In the owning of one’s beliefs, three subthemes emerged: the freedom to critically examine prior beliefs, the affirmation of beliefs, and systematic theology’s capacity to help students understand why they held their beliefs.

Freedom To Challenge Prior Beliefs

Andrea, who came from a harsh legalistic upbringing, spoke about how the class encouraged her to rethink her prior beliefs, which up to this point in her life she “felt like she couldn’t question”:

Going through systematic theology helped me see not only that I could question how I was taught on gender roles, but on other things. It taught me that you don’t have to believe what your parents told you just because they said it. Now, my beliefs have become more mine. I’ll say it again, I took the beliefs I was taught growing up, and I thought they were mine. But now I’ve come to question those beliefs, and that’s okay.

Betty said she also had deep-seated beliefs given to her by her parents. As she continued through the class, she wondered, “If I believe this new stuff, what does that mean about how I was raised?” Nevertheless, Betty said that while it might upset her parents, the biblical weight behind the truths she learned was what “I’ve got to go with.”

Affirmation of Prior Beliefs

Others reported that systematic theology affirmed the many things they were raised to believe about God. For example, Gregg noted that much of the class helped him “know better what I already knew.” Sofia, who had become a Christian in the same church where she learned systematic theology, also agreed, “Systematic theology didn’t so much challenge my beliefs but...confirmed what I believed.” Jane, who also recently became a Christian at the same church, shared how systematic theology “clarified” the fairly new beliefs she brought into class.

Maddie also believed systematic theology helped affirm her beliefs. She shared, “What I already believed before systematic theology, those beliefs only got stronger. It deepened me in those beliefs. I knew more about them, the why, and how they fit in the bigger picture.” Maddie’s comments also lead into a final subtheme concerning how the participants believed systematic theology strengthened their faith: it gave them “the why” to their beliefs.

It Gave Me the Why!

Jackie, who grew up with what she believed was a sound understanding of doctrine, spoke to the importance of knowing the reasons behind one's beliefs:

I wasn't as critical of my beginning beliefs because I didn't grow up knowing the "why's." So, when someone actually showed me the "why's" of new beliefs, I was like, "Yeah, that makes sense," and I believed. The reason systematic theology was so important is because most people in church have uncritical beliefs. They don't know why. It's so easy to get swayed by false beliefs. Systematic theology helped sit me down and explain it to me.

Liv, who, like others in class, became a Christian in the same church she learned systematic theology, concurred, "For me, spiritual growth was pretty straightforward: I came to church, became a Christian, got baptized, got into a small group, etc. But this has enhanced [my spiritual growth] because I feel like I got the stuff to back it all up. I feel like I know the why now."

Participants reported that knowing the reasons for their beliefs not only helped them to own what they already believed, but actually allowed them to stop believing some prior ideas. Gregg said:

Part of it for me was being raised with beliefs and simply taking them for what they were. I didn't necessarily explore them or ask why, but once you get into the why and see the background like we did in systematic theology, it's just much easier to accept it because you have those questions you should've been asking all along getting answered up front.

As a result, Gregg stated that getting to the why has helped him "trade in weaker thoughts [he] had about God's purposes, principles, and passions, for stronger

ones.” Maddie agreed, saying the more she knew about the reasons behind different beliefs, the more she believed them. Andrea concurred, saying it gave her a better way to “name and explain” what she believed. Betty also agreed, concluding, “I now have a foundation of what I know I believe is true. I can tell you why I believe it.”

The interviews pointed to the owning of one’s beliefs as a way that systematic theology has impacted the thinking of laypersons. It also revealed that for some individuals, part of systematic theology’s contribution to owning their beliefs may evidence itself in giving freedom to challenge prior beliefs, or affirm those beliefs, which may be due in some part to understanding the reasons behind those beliefs.

Process of Accepting

As participants spoke about how learning systematic theology impacted their perspectives, a common process emerged in how a truth or doctrine came to be accepted. It appeared from interviews that individuals would attempt to answer two questions in a specific order to consider if a belief should be accepted as true: 1) Is it scriptural? 2) Is this a better fit with the other doctrines I know?

Is it Scriptural?

When asked what process he went through in order to believe a truth, Hank immediately remarked, “Systematic theology always pointed us to

scripture. We're trying to follow the Bible. So when it's clear biblically, I'm going to try to believe it." He later said he did not accept someone "just telling me something," but that it had to be proved to him. He said, "You have to show me in the Bible." Liv responded in a similar fashion. She said in order to consider a new truth claim, she had to "consider how in-line [the new claim] was with what the Bible says." She continued, "I mean, it has to match up with the scripture."

Jane shared a story of how studying the doctrine of election helped her match up proposed ideas to what she read in the scripture. She related:

That's why when we talked about a topic in systematic theology I'd go home and see scripturally where it is, and typically you could see that truth throughout the Bible. It's here, here, and here. It's like election. At first I thought, "Are you kidding me?" Then when you start reading the Bible you see it everywhere – it's here, here, here, and here. Not only is it repetitive, I felt like God was hitting me upside the head with this book, literally! It's as if God was going, "Are you not hearing what I'm saying?"

Jane's story reaffirmed the experience of other participants' value for understanding first what the Bible says concerning a truth claim. Betty's sentiments echoed the same spirit when she said, "First of all, I have to believe what the Bible says." Sofia also reaffirmed her commitment to being scriptural, saying, "Listen, I believe the Bible is true. So when systematic theology would refer to scripture to back up any one of these doctrines, when [the author] defends it with scripture, I can't argue." Jackie agreed, explaining how she

evaluates new truth claims, “It first has to be supported by scripture. That’s the starting point. Does it line up with the Bible?”

This commitment to the Bible in accepting a truth claim was so strong in the interviewees that when scriptural evidence left certain doctrinal questions unanswered, respondents reported they were satisfied with the mystery of it.

Jackie summarized the feeling of the interviews saying:

There are many good positions, but systematic theology helped me see that there are multiple possible conclusions, and that it’s okay to not be dogmatic and remain in somewhat a mystery to all the details. Systematic theology helped me become very comfortable with that. If it’s not explicit in scripture, that’s okay. That’s how God apparently wants it. So we must be good with that too. If we don’t see it that way, we make God too small. The mystery actually makes God bigger.

The sense of “being okay with mystery” was affirmed by all the other interviewees. Hank said he learned it is “okay to say not to know all the answers.” Liv agreed, saying she too was “okay with mystery,” and that we cannot “encapsulate...a God that big.” Sofia summarized her thoughts on accepting mystery when walking through the scriptural support of a doctrine:

Systematic theology puts all the stuff of the Bible together and says, “This is who God is.” I think one of the reasons it expands my view of God is because there is mystery. We can’t know everything. We’ll read a ton of pages in systematic and wind up with, “Well we don’t really know. It’s a mystery.” But because the Bible says this or that, we can’t really say for sure here or there, it’s a mystery to our minds. I need to know the why, but if the why isn’t there, then I’m great with that. And frankly, I love that systematic theology says we don’t know everything.

For Sofia, mystery was simply a necessary conclusion to pursuing the biblical support for any new truth claim and only served the greater question: “Is this biblical?”

Is This a Better Fit with Other Doctrines I Believe?

However, Jackie also raised another question to consider if a certain claim merits believing. She added, “Also, is it logical? Does it make sense? It also fit better with the doctrines I already knew to be true. I already had good, biblical beliefs about God, but systematic theology helped fit better with the things I know that are true. But this makes better sense. This is clearer.” She continued by giving an illustration about learning of the different eschatological views:

In addition to the biblical strength behind the beliefs [I came to accept], they were also more logical too. For example, take the end times, I don’t know if there’s a better biblical argument for amilennialism than premilennialism, but both have solid biblical undergirding. But to me, the whole amilennialism thing just made more sense. It seemed clearer. It better fit with other doctrines.

Betty had a similar experience with the scope of the atonement:

I think one of the reasons I choose to accept one belief over another when both sides have good arguments is how one fits better with the other things I’ve learned. Take limited atonement. Now, I’m not going to fight someone over limited or general. But limited made more sense with the doctrine of election.

She concluded that she used this rationale with other conflicting perspectives systematic theology brought before her. For example, on the issue of speaking in tongues, she remarked, “Both sides have their scriptural arguments, but I hold to

my position because it makes more sense with all the other things I know about what God says in his word.”

For Gregg, asking the question how a truth claim better fit already existing beliefs surfaced when he studied the doctrine of election. He said:

Election is good here because I didn’t believe that. I thought it was stupid. But when I went through systematic theology and we learned about it in depth, I saw how it fit with everything else. ...In the end, I came to conclusion that election was beautiful and that it was a better way in how it works with God’s character, his grace, and the mystery of it all.

Maddie also sought to embrace beliefs that better fit the other doctrines she believed:

When I would hear a statement about a certain belief then would see how it match up with other truths I believed, I’d think that was something I needed to believe now. Before then there were things I believed but wondered about since I didn’t see how they matched up with other things I believed.

This theme of accepting new claims because they better fit with a person’s understanding of other doctrines was the second question many asked in order to embrace a new belief. However, the first question that interviewees always asked was, “Is this scriptural?” Andrea, when asked why she chose one truth over another, responded in summary, “The scripture. There was more scriptural basis. Also, it made more sense. It better explained how things were.” The interviews clearly evidenced this two-question process of accepting beliefs.

A Final Observation on Systematic Theology's Impact on Thinking

It is worth noting that in discussing the process of learning truth, every person interviewed stated that in order for them to best process what they were learning, they needed to reflect with others. Liv did so “because of how [other people] think about things and the different perspectives they bring.” Hank said he talked through different ideas with his small group. He shared, “Sometimes they’ll say something that reinforces the way I think. It’ll tell me what my thoughts are, the way I land on things better when I hear it from someone else’s perspective...even if they don’t agree with me.”

Gregg concurred with Hank’s experience of benefitting from dialoguing with others:

I wanted to talk about this with others because you get to see real people with real thoughts and ideas different than yours. They see things from different angles and have different life sjanees and experiences. And to hear from them helped me better understand those doctrines because they bring the same doctrine from a different light it just gives me more support for how I see it.

Andrea phrased it this way: “The more I dialogue with others, the clearer it becomes to me.” She noted how talking with others helps her “buy into a truth more because someone else thought about it differently than I did.” Others remarked how seeing things from different angles, perspectives, and ways helped bring greater clarity and depth to the participants’ thoughts. This appeared to be a critical step in the participants’ learning process. Jane bluntly

addressed the need for dialogue as a necessary component of learning systematic theology:

I would've quit systematic theology if I didn't get to talk this out with others. I thought I wanted [the class leader] to lecture me. Now I realize without the conversations with others, I wouldn't have learned nearly as much. I wouldn't have processed it in the way I needed to learn.

For Jane and every other participant in the study, reflection with others appeared to be a critical element in the process of absorbing the truths of systematic theology into their thinking.

Summary of Systematic Theology's Impact on Thinking

This section attempted to detail the impact of systematic theology on the thinking of the study participants. Many themes, with accompanying subthemes, were discovered during the interviews: organizational strengths, perspective changes, biblical thinking, and the process of accepting new truth claims. The next section will discuss how participants' actions were impacted by the study of systematic theology.

The Impact of Systematic Theology on Affects

The impact of learning systematic theology on the participants' affections or feelings was evidenced in the interviews and, as such, different themes revealed themselves. These themes were in the areas of confidence, humility, peace, and love.

Confidence

The greatest response to systematic theology's impact on the affects of the participants was in the area of confidence. Interview after interview supported this analysis. When asked at the beginning of their interviews what the study of systematic theology did for participants overall, the overwhelming response was that this study gave them confidence. Often participants noted the equipping nature of what they were learning. Hank said, "Overall, systematic theology was extremely rich, informative. I feel equipped. I feel armed with knowledge. It has given me confidence." Gregg remarked, "Systematic theology has given me a better confidence in what we have and what I know and understand." Liv agreed with Gregg's perspective:

I didn't have enough of a belief system to go up against this. I wasn't passionate about the stuff I had coming in, but after systematic theology, it feels really good to come away with a great deal of confidence knowing what I believe. I feel like I could have conversation with people that I would be terrified of talking to in the past.

Liv's confidence went beyond the desire to engage people, giving her the ability to stay true to her beliefs when those engagements might possibly go awry. She explained, "[Systematic theology] also gives me confidence in that I've got my answer – here's what I believe the Bible to say – but if they don't like that or disagree, I'm okay with that. So there's that type of confidence there too."

Maddie characterized the confidence-building aspect of learning systematic theology as making her “feel stronger.” She later describing that confidence surfacing in the ways she engaged others (like leading a small group). Jane agreed that systematic theology gave her confidence in not only knowing what she believed but in sharing those beliefs with others. Andrea concurred that the class “definitely built up my confidence.” Participants continually tied these reports of confidence to feeling equipped and prepared by the knowledge they gained when studying systematic theology. It appeared from the responses that systematic theology impacted the confidence of the participants in that it showed them what truths to believe, why those beliefs matter, and where those beliefs fit with other doctrines.

Humility

Maddie confessed to the humbling nature of systematic theology as it helped her realize “how awesome and precious God really is.” Sofia used similar language when she declared, “All of it together is awesome! It’s been humbling. Again, I had some here and some there but systematic theology put it together for me and it’s been powerful for me.” She concluded by saying that it has overwhelmed her to know all that Christ had done, is doing, and will do for her. Jane agreed, saying learning about God, his grace, and her standing before him

“was a very humbling thing.” For Liv, it was learning about the “nitty gritty” details of God that humbled her.

Peace

Participants also reported peace as a product of studying systematic theology. Sometimes individuals used other words for peace, like being “okay,” “having comfort,” “finding freedom,” or as Hank phrased it, “having a load lifted.” Liv said, “[Learning systematic theology] has brought a sense of peace and comfort. I’m just not anxious....I didn’t realize that all the stuff I learned in systematic theology is such a huge part of our existence.” Gregg said that the whole study was “very comforting” to him as he learned about the greatness of God.

Peace surfaced in three other ways during the interviews: peace to ask questions, peace to not get answers, and peace in the answers one does receive. Andrea felt like she could not question her beliefs when she was growing up, but that systematic theology helped her feel that it was “okay to question stuff.” Others, like Hank, remarked that systematic theology helped them to understand that it was “okay [to] not know all the answers.” Finally, Betty believed that systematic theology helped her not only to embrace the answers she found as true but to know that the “truth [of that answer] is what brings such peace and freedom.”

Love

Participants noted that the study of systematic theology increased their love for God and the Bible. Betty, reflecting on the doctrine of atonement, exclaimed, "Wow! I do not deserve this, and my heart is overflowing with love and gratitude for God!" Sofia said she hadn't realize how much she loved God, concluding, "Systematic theology is for your heart. This changed my heart." She said her desire "to love God instead of my own sin has grown" and that "my love for God is bigger than before because I know more about him." All in all, Sofia believed systematic theology caused her to grow "deeper in love with God."

Sofia also grew in her love for God's word. She explained:

Systematic theology reignited my desire to read the Bible because it took all the stuff I knew and put it in an organized, systematic way. It was like here's all the stuff I believed from the Bible finally put into the bigger picture. And that got me wanting to really dig into my Bible again!

Gregg, like Sofia, found his love for God's word increasing. He told the story about his interactions with the Bible growing up:

I would do my devotional, read my Bible, to pray, everyday – that became very routine, very monotonous, very checking the box - got to read the Bible every day, read the Bible in a year, then went back and read every chapter and took notes on every chapter. It burned me out.

I mean I would just glaze over some of the chapters. It was very hard to get through all of it. It was more about "let's just get it done and say I did it." After that it was very dead, not very engaging and loving as far as toward your Bible.

The clearer picture and the why of systematic theology has come into play has helped me see how God has really orchestrated the Bible and universe to make everything fit and kind of blown up my perspective as how – this is the word this is God – but now it’s way out here [arms spread apart], much larger. God is like so much more awesome and everything is done and orchestrated so much cooler.

To see that in the Bible with the help of systematic theology has given me such a greater love for his word.

Betty agreed that systematic theology has “given [her] a greater love for reading Gods word.”

Summary of Systematic Theology’s Impact on Affects

This section detailed the impact of systematic theology on the affects or feelings of the study participants. While confidence was the primary theme evidenced in the participants’ responses, other themes surfaced, such as humility, peace, and love. The next section will discover from the interviews how participants’ actions were impacted by the study of systematic theology.

The Impact of Systematic Theology on Actions

The impact of learning systematic theology on the participants’ actions was revealed in various and sundry ways. In the interview responses, much of the impact focused on helping participants engage with other believers, with God, and with the world. As Liv observed, “Systematic theology has changed me as a believer, server, worshipper, and in all aspects of my growth.”

It's Changed How I Serve: Engaging with Believers

Liv highlighted her service in ministry as an example. She said:

It's changed how I serve. I feel my ministry is more important, and I've wanted to become more involved. Systematic theology provided a greater depth, context, and meaning to what I do. You go through the motions so many times, but now it's more that I'm doing it for myself and for God, which is pretty heavy. It's a good weightiness.

Systematic theology has made me want to listen to people more. I want to figure out really what do people believe and why do they believe it. The only way to do that is by listening to them and seeing how they think about things.

Gregg echoed Liv's sentiments, saying that systematic theology "impacted me in my ministry because it's helped me key in on why people are saying what they are saying." He hoped doing this would provide a better opportunity to lead those under his care to more biblical answers and conclusions.

Likewise, Jackie shared how, over the course of the class, "It's been amazing...how many times systematic theology comes up in [her] life." She mentioned how it changed the way she led her small group. She noted, "I just feel more equipped to explain and answer questions more than I was before."

Maddie agreed that she now has "more confidence in leading my Bible study."

Betty also thought that systematic theology has been an invaluable resource for leading her small group Bible study.

My Worship is Deeper: Engaging with God

While Sofia also agreed that systematic theology impacts how she serves others in ministry, she also sees its benefits in other things she does. “There is a difference in worship,” she said. She reflected that knowing God better has resulted in praising him more both in corporate and in private worship. She said, “My worship is deeper because I know him more. I even pray differently...I read the Bible differently.” Liv also reported that systematic theology made her a “better worshipper.” Jackie simply said, “It made me want to worship [God] more.”

I’m a Better Missionary: Engaging with the World

Jane spoke about how learning systematic theology helped her engage nonbelievers. She said, “[Systematic theology] made me a better missionary to the world.” She then detailed two incidents where, in the past, she would have been hesitant to share the gospel. However, since attending the class, she actually began gospel conversations with the parties involved. She noted that she now felt like she knew enough to help others “understand the importance of salvation and what Jesus had done for them.” Thus, for Jane, an increased evangelistic effort was the product of learning systematic theology.

Summary of Systematic Theology's Impact on Actions

This section detailed the impact of systematic theology on the actions of the participants. The respondents noted how different areas in their lives had been changed for the better: ministry in the church, ministry to God, and ministry to the world. While the interviewees recalled specific actions, many responded that systematic theology had influenced every aspect of what they do. As Betty said, "I see the fruit of systematic theology everywhere, all the time." The next section will show from the interviews how systematic theology made a unique contribution to the spiritual formation of the participants.

The Unique Contribution of Systematic Theology to Spiritual Formation

When asked about how systematic theology uniquely contributed to their spiritual formation, the participants' answers often resembled a recapitulation of the strengths systematic theology brought to bear on their thinking. More specifically, the comprehensive, logical, and orderly arrangement of both the doctrines and the scriptures that support those doctrines uniquely contributed to the spiritual growth of the participants. Sofia remarked that she had never seen anything before that showed all the scriptural support for "what we believe." She continued, "[Systematic theology] is different. It shows you everywhere in scriptures these truths are found. You'll realize scripture is true all throughout. It

truly is systematic. It's comprehensive when it comes to explaining each of these major truths."

Systematic theology's uniquely comprehensive nature was impressed upon Betty as well. Using "big picture" language, she stated:

That's why understanding the whole picture: understanding sin, understanding creation, understanding death, understanding heaven, understanding the difference between humans and angels...all of it collectively makes the difference. That's what systematic theology does that nothing else I've found does.

She said that for the first time in her life, she was given categories for her ideas and beliefs, and that nothing else she had ever studied had done that for her. She concluded by saying that systematic theology's ability to "connect the dots" and give her "the why" behind what she believes was a singular product of the class. Jackie stated that systematic theology was "about getting the whole picture" instead of just one aspect about this or that teaching. She expanded on her thoughts:

The benefit is the way systematic theology is laid out in that you take a doctrine and you examine the whole of scripture so that you understand it completely instead of getting it in bits and pieces. You're getting that framework for the knowledge that you have. That's beneficial in and of itself.

This framework proved invaluable and something, in Jackie's perspective, that nothing could give her outside of learning systematic theology. Gregg agreed that systematic theology "...will open your eyes like nothing else. It will give you

the what and the why to what you believe.” As referenced earlier in this chapter, Hank appreciated how the logical flow and order of systematic theology helped him to grasp those beliefs. He realized that this layout was specifically unique to systematic theology, and that “even the concordance of your Bible is not going to point [doctrines] out like that.” He stated that, as such, he had never received any type of training in the same vein as systematic theology.

Summary of the Unique Contribution of Systematic Theology to Spiritual Formation

This section has shared how systematic theology uniquely contributed to the participants’ spiritual growth. The answers revisited many of the same strengths that systematic theology brought to the participants’ thinking, such as systematic theology’s comprehensive, logical, and orderly arrangement of both the doctrines and the scriptures that support those doctrines. Interviewees discussed how systematic theology has been the only instrument in their lives to show what their beliefs mean, why they exist, and where they fit in the broader scope both theologically and biblically. Each of the interviewees noted that they had never been exposed to anything else that had done that for them. As a result, they retained a confidence which they believed was unique to learning systematic theology.

A Final Thought from the Findings

It should also be noted that while the attempt was made to delineate how systematic theology impacted a person's thoughts, affects, and actions, most of the responses were a combination of all three. However, a pattern did emerge from the participants' responses. The change would begin with someone's thinking, then it would translate to their emotions, and then it would ultimately be seen in their actions. Often participants would say something like, "Now that I know 'this truth,' it has given me 'this feeling' to do 'this action.'" For example, Liv stated that learning more about the Lord's Supper helped her to feel a greater "weightiness" about the ordinance, which ultimately led her to being more proactive in attending services where the supper was being observed. This pattern of "knowing a truth that creates a feeling that produces an action" was observed throughout the interviews.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The aim of this chapter is to summarize the study of how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology, discuss and summarize the findings of the study, and conclude with recommendations for church practice and further research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology. Four research questions guided the study:

1. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' thinking?
2. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' affects?
3. How did the study of systematic theology impact the participants' actions?
4. How did the study of systematic theology uniquely contribute to the participants' spiritual formation?

In chapter two, the review of literature focused on three major areas of study: literature highlighting the benefits of an education in systematic theology,

literature highlighting how local churches assess the spiritual formation of their members, and literature which deepens the readers' understanding of adult transformative learning. In chapter three, research methodology was identified, describing how participants were selected, data collected, interviews conducted, and data analyzed. Additionally, researcher position and study limitations were noted. Chapter four presented the findings from the interviews. This chapter draws conclusions and makes recommendations based on the combination of data from the literature review of chapter two and the interviews of chapter four.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the data from the literature reviewed and participants' interviews will interact in order to identify findings that encourage pastors, directors of spiritual formation, and others to employ the study of systematic theology in their spiritual formation process. As noted earlier in the study, while some attempt will be made to categorize findings distinctly within the areas of thinking, affects, and actions, reality reveals an overlap.

Findings in Areas of Thinking

Systematic Theology Deepens The Learner's Doctrinal Soundness

Donald Whitney asserts that one way believers can know if they are growing spiritually is if they can point to "increasing numbers of beliefs...that have been changed" and as a result have moved from doctrinal error to

orthodoxy.²⁵² Michael Horton believes that learning the truth of the Bible is the call on all Christians. He says, “Learning God’s Word – including its doctrine – is a nonnegotiable responsibility of our new citizenship.”²⁵³ This is why he calls systematic theology the “grammar” of the Christian faith²⁵⁴ because of its foundational nature in introducing readers to orthodox or biblical beliefs. The strength of systematic theology is found in its name. It is a systematic or orderly arrangement of the truths of the Bible. According to Wayne Grudem, systematic theology simply answers the question: What does the Bible in its entirety teach about any given topic?²⁵⁵

Exposure to this type of systematic presentation of scripture in explaining Christian doctrines drove the interview participants to become more orthodox in their beliefs or, at the least, to be better equipped to articulate any orthodox truth they already believed. Sofia said, “[Systematic theology] helped me put terms to my belief system, to my abstract thoughts. It organized my heart – the things I believed about God and the things I don’t believe.” Liv shared that while, before class, she knew about the Trinity, she nonetheless “could not tell you what I thought of the Trinity.” Studying systematic theology gave her the ability to articulate what she believed about God’s “Three-in-Oneness.” Others spoke of

²⁵² Whitney, 35.

²⁵³ Horton, 24.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵⁵ Grudem, 21.

how studying systematic theology affirmed correct beliefs they already possessed. For example, Maddie said, “What I already believed before I studied systematic theology, those beliefs only got stronger. It deepened me in those beliefs.”

Others noted that systematic theology confronted certain beliefs they already held. At this point, interconnection was found with transformative learning, namely in that systematic theology creates disorienting dilemmas by confronting long held ideas, or as the literature calls them, habits of mind. The literature noted that the initial phases of transformative learning are a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, and a critical assessment of assumptions.²⁵⁶ While subsequent phases are essentially concerned with the utilization of revised perspectives, the emphasis of transformative learning has focused more upon the disorienting dilemma and critical response to those assumptions that make it disorienting.²⁵⁷ While all the phases were witnessed to one degree or another in the participants, the initial phases of disorientation and self-examination were most clearly evidenced.

For example Gregg, when introduced to the doctrine of election, said he initially did not believe it. Indeed, he “thought it was stupid.” However, once he

²⁵⁶ Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, 10.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

began to learn about “[election] in depth” through systematic theology, he faced a dilemma with his prior beliefs. As a result, Gregg began to critically evaluate his own assumptions. He eventually “saw how [election] fit with everything else” and “came to the conclusion that election was beautiful, and that it was a better way in how it works with God’s character, his grace, and the mystery of it all.” Both Gregg’s disorienting dilemma and critical reflection of his long-held beliefs were initiated by his engagement with the study of systematic theology. In the end, because of the class, he embraced and assimilated a more stable, biblical view for his life.

Gregg acknowledged in his interview that much of his original perspective came from “being raised with beliefs and simply taking them for what they were.” He said that systematic theology helped him “trade in weaker thoughts [he] had about God’s purposes, principles, and passions, for stronger ones.” Gregg’s story highlights Fernanda Duarte’s definition of critical reflection as primarily involving the questioning of assumptions underlying established belief systems.²⁵⁸ This is exactly what was evidenced in the participants. Andrea relates her story:

Going through systematic theology helped me see not only could I question how I was taught on gender roles but on other things. It taught me that you don’t have to believe what your parents said growing up just because they said it. Now, beliefs have become more mine.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 24.

I'll say it again, I took the beliefs I was taught growing up, and I thought they were mine. But now I've come to question those beliefs, and that's okay.

Andrea's words reflect the end-game of transformative learning in which adults, through a critical and reflective process, find themselves moving from a less sound frame of understanding to a more "open, permeable, and better justified" position.²⁵⁹ Transformative learning's emphasis on these more sound positions parallels with the theological literature's stressing of doctrinal soundness.

Therefore, systematic theology was demonstrated to be a wonderful instrument for transformative learning in that it encourages students to critically reflect on what they believe in order to arrive at more biblically tenable positions. As Gregg and Andrea both shared, systematic theology gave students permission to question their nascent ideas and turn to newer, more biblically sound answers.

In addition to the theological and educational literature, the importance of growing doctrinally was also evidenced by the literature discussing how churches assess spiritual growth. Randy Frazee's *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool* promotes thirty core competencies, ten of which fall under the category of "Core Beliefs." These are foundational, doctrinal beliefs such as the authority of the Bible or salvation by grace.²⁶⁰ Brad Waggoner agreed that

²⁵⁹ Duarte: 10.

²⁶⁰ Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool Workbook*, GET PAGE.

doctrinal soundness was a mark of spiritual growth, making the first of his seven “domains of growth” the domain of “Learning Truth.”²⁶¹ Almost every spiritual formation assessment tool highlighted progressing in doctrinal soundness as critical for spiritual growth. These instruments also demonstrate that while spiritual health definitely involves more than possessing sound doctrinal beliefs; it certainly cannot be anything less.

Furthermore, if doctrinal soundness is not an option as a follower of Jesus, as the biblical witness indicates, then one of the most strategic steps pastors and directors of spiritual formation can take for their congregants is to teach them systematic theology. It will encourage, refine, or even rebuke what laypersons understand as orthodox. Additionally, this doctrinal realignment not only happens for one area of belief but over the total, systematic span of truth in the Bible. This is one of the unique gifts of systematic theology. Therefore, it would appear there are fewer prudent ways to honor the words of Colossians 1:23, where Paul reminds fellow believers to “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast,”²⁶² than by letting systematic theology root congregants in sound doctrine.

²⁶¹ Waggoner, 15.

²⁶² Colossians 1:23. *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

Systematic Theology Empowers the Learner's Discernment

Wayne Grudem stressed the need to see the “total weight of teaching of Scripture” on the subject in order to repent of any false ideas believers held.²⁶³ However, beyond evaluating the individual’s beliefs, systematic theology empowers the learner to better discern the beliefs and truth claims of others. Cornelius Van Til noted that in his day, too many pastors were “Bible-trained” but had no systematic theological training, and, as a result, their ministries produced “one text” Christians who could not defend themselves against false teachers.²⁶⁴ Conversely, he remarked that “the best apologetic will invariably be made by him who knows the system of truth of Scripture best.”²⁶⁵ Therefore, the study of systematic theology should greatly assist in the fight against outside challenges to the faith due to the fact it uniquely presents the scripture as a comprehensive, coherent system of truth.

Indeed, a growing sense of biblical discernment is exactly what was evidenced in the interviews. Hank said that as a result of systematic theology, he finds himself thinking differently when he hears someone make a truth claim. He said, “I listen more intently to everything – to the what’s on the radio, to shows

²⁶³ Grudem, 28.

²⁶⁴ Van Til, 23.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

on TV, to when people say things – and I think, ‘Is that true? Is that biblical?’ I’m on guard now.” He concluded:

I realize now more than ever that there are so many different views and so many false beliefs out there. And just because it sounds good it’s reassuring. There’s so much false stuff out there, but I don’t want to fall into that. And I don’t want to spread a false truth. My personality wants to call that stuff out. Systematic theology gave me the background knowledge to recognize false teachings.

Others, like Liv, saw their level of discernment rise as well. She stated:

When people say unbiblical things now I think to myself, “That’s not true.” Even people I look up to. It’s nice to know that I [do not have to] just receive what everyone says, but can see if their beliefs hold water and if something sounds wrong, I want to know what they mean by it.

Gregg detailed the impact of systematic theology on his ability to discern saying, “Systematic theology has shaped my reactions to situations to think biblically first: What does God say about this subject?” The desire for discerning truth was clearly evidenced in the interviews.

As noted in the first chapter of this study, it is no secret that most Americans who claim the name of Christ generally do not know what they believe. Conversely, Western Christians tragically welcome what would be deemed as poor – or even heretical – teaching in their lives on a daily basis. It only takes a glance at the bestsellers in the religion section of a local bookstore to see how dire the situation has become. Instead of merely replying in an ad hoc fashion with single-issue books to counter these opponents of truth, the church

would be better served by teaching their congregants the complete, biblical doctrinal picture. So, for example, when a newly released book teaches something doctrinally unsound about hell, those who have training in systematic theology will be more apt to discern and reject the biblical waywardness of the author's reasoning instead of emailing their pastor for an answer, or waiting for an expert to write a book to the contrary, or, even worse, believing the original unsound words to be true. As noted in the Biblical/Theological section of chapter two, systematic theology better prepares its learners to "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...so that so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."²⁶⁶

Systematic Theology Develops the Learner's Worldview

John Frame describes systematic theology as "the application of the Word by person to the world and to all areas of human life."²⁶⁷ In a word, systematic theology is comprehensive in nature. Van Til adds, "It is plain that we are required to know the revelation that God has given us. Yet we would not adequately know that revelation if we knew it only in its several parts without bringing these parts into relation to each other."²⁶⁸ Gabriel Fackre calls systematic

²⁶⁶ Ephesians 4:13-14. *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

²⁶⁷ Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 79.

²⁶⁸ Van Til, 21.

theology the “theology-in-the-round.”²⁶⁹ Horton visualizes it as the box top of a jigsaw puzzle, where the unified whole helps believers make “logical connections” with individual parts and biblical themes.²⁷⁰

This “connecting” aspect of systematic theology’s comprehensive big picture was seen in the interviews. Gregg used Horton’s imagery, saying that systematic theology “put the smaller pieces together....like a puzzle.” The interviews revealed how systematic theology took the bits and pieces of biblical truths people collected from their religious upbringing and fit them into a broader, coherent framework. Jackie, reflecting on her upbringing, said, “Having a story here, a verse there, or a passage here that you’ve learned – I think that’s good. But I think there something different when you see the big picture...when you can see how those things intersect.” Andrea concurred, “Systematic theology pulled all the pieces together. It took all these things I knew about and put them together in the bigger picture.” Jane, who was the newest Christian of the group, said that while she knew of “Paul and all these other names and ideas in the Bible, I didn’t know their relationship to each other. Systematic theology gave that to me.”

It should also be noted that the logical arrangement of systematic theology helped students connect truths to the bigger picture. Hank remarked how the

²⁶⁹ Fackre: 230.

²⁷⁰ Horton, 27.

logical flow and order of systematic theology helped him to see the wider view of things. Jackie also believed that systematic theology's order proved invaluable to her understanding the larger story.

These connections, which flow from the comprehensive nature and logical arrangement of systematic theology, make participating in it, as D.A. Carson suggests, a worldview-building practice. He says, "[Systematic theology] precisely by its efforts at systemic wholeness and by its engagement with the culture, openly attempts worldview formation, worldview transformation."²⁷¹ Stanley Grenz believes systematic theology is a culminating discipline that builds upon itself in "its pursuit of large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis."²⁷² Amos Yong concurs, believing systematic theology is best understood as "a reflective enterprise that encompasses the three horizons of God, self, and world and attempts to comprehend their relationships, and that gets accurately at the realities that they claim to engage."²⁷³ Yong later refers to the comprehensiveness of systematic theology, calling it "a coherent framework of belief and understanding."²⁷⁴ The literature reviewed strongly reaffirmed that the comprehensive nature of systematic theology offers its learners great assistance in developing a biblical worldview.

²⁷¹ Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 99.

²⁷² Ibid., 101.

²⁷³ Yong: 93.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

It should be noted that transformative learning literature also spoke into this finding. Indeed, it was incredibly surprising to see how the literature on transformational learning dovetailed with theological literature on worldview-building. For example, Patricia Cranton believes adults carry life schemes that have built frameworks (i.e., worldviews) from which they view and analyze experiences, and that those experiences are the ones transformative learning harnesses.²⁷⁵

This was evidenced in many different participants. For example, Andrea recounted how her rigid and oppressive upbringing created a framework of thinking which left her feeling “like [she] was less than a person.” It also led her to believe that affection and love must be something you earn. She confessed that “a lot of [her] belief system was formed” by her childhood experiences, and as a result, she concluded, “I was big on performance.”

Jack Mezirow and others in the literature of transformative learning would characterize Andrea’s perspective as a habit of mind or meaning structure (or, to a certain extent, a worldview). They are the “assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions,”²⁷⁶ and the literature noted they usually remain untouched from critical examination. This may be due

²⁷⁵ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, 8.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

to the fact that they have been formed by family, community, or culture.

However, learning systematic theology became a catalyst for, as Mezirow put it, “examining, questioning, validating, and revising our perspectives.”²⁷⁷ This is the heart of transformative learning and should leave the learner with beliefs that have been better tested, reflected, and assimilated.

This was most surely the case with the participants. Once again, consider Andrea. She stated that when she began to learn about the doctrine of grace in systematic theology, “That’s what changed my life.” She spoke of her worldview prior to studying systematic theology: “I mean, with my church and family history, I thought God was a God who was looking at me waiting to punish me. But it was so amazing to find out how much God loved me.” However, it was through learning specific doctrines in systematic theology that Andrea was able to reinterpret the thoughts, feelings, and actions of her past. In essence, she began to develop a new worldview. This type of reinterpretation or revised perspective was evidenced in others as well, like Jane, Sofia, and Hank.

Betty, who lost her four year-old daughter to cancer years ago, shared how learning systematic theology changed the way she viewed those who attempted to comfort her. She now sees how well-meaning but ultimately wrong many people’s responses were to her life’s tragedy. She concluded:

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 22.

That's why understanding the whole picture: understanding sin, understanding creation, understanding death, understanding heaven, understanding the difference between humans and angels...all of it collectively makes the difference. That's what systematic theology does that nothing else I've found does. And it's made a profound difference in me. It gave me a way to see my life for what it is.

Jackie agreed with systematic theology's worldview-changing properties saying, "You start seeing [systematic theology] intersect your life everywhere and impacting everything."

When one combines what the theological literature and the educational literature say about perspective changes with what happens in systematic theology, the result is quite remarkable. It demonstrates that systematic theology is an instrument that has the potential to bring about deep change whereby participants gain new worldviews, allowing them to reinterpret their life, God, and surroundings according to God's word. Gregg summarized the impact of systematic theology on his worldview by saying, "It will open your eyes like nothing else."

What else in the church can give an individual a biblical worldview as effectively as systematic theology? I would argue the answer is nothing. Systematic theology, because of its comprehensiveness in using scripture to support any one doctrine combined with its ability to tie those doctrines together in a larger, coherent picture, makes it uniquely positioned to assist Western

Christians living in a post-Christian culture to be grounded in a biblical worldview.

George Barna's words are an indicting reason the church should consider employing systematic theology in her spiritual formation. Barna says the problem in spiritual formation is not that churches give content which itself is weak, but that the content is not provided in a purposeful, systematic matter.²⁷⁸ As a result, congregants are "exposed to good information without context and thus lose that information because they have no way of making sense of it within the bigger picture of faith and life."²⁷⁹ Barna illustrates:

Think of the way we teach people about Christianity as a massive game of "Connect the Dots." In our version of the game, we do not put numbers next to the dots, which renders players incapable of connecting the dots in the fashion intended. All of the dots are provided and are pictured in exactly the right place, but if we don't provide players with a sense of direction or the big picture, failure is inevitable.²⁸⁰

I would posit that, based on the literature and interviews, there is nothing more effective in helping Christians connect the dots of their faith into an integrated, biblical worldview than the study of systematic theology. It gives them "the numbers" unlike anything else. Ultimately, congregants will experience different types of joys and sorrows in life, and they will either interpret those experiences

²⁷⁸ Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 91.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

correctly for God's glory or incorrectly for their disadvantage, if not demise. Let systematic theology help give them the bigger picture and their place in it.

Systematic Theology Helps Learners Own Their Beliefs

One of the biggest blessings the study of systematic theology will bring to laypeople in their spiritual formation is helping them own their beliefs. It encourages learners to re-examine their prior understandings of things. Once again, the literature on transformative learning's idea of critical reflection was insightful. As mentioned earlier, Duarte views critical reflection as the culmination of the process whereby learners attempt to arrive at a deep and thorough exploration of one's own belief systems.²⁸¹ This critical reflection was seen throughout the study in almost every participant.

I believe one of the reasons systematic theology encourages critical reflection is that, unlike any other instrument I have seen, it both exposes and educates students on the "why" behind their beliefs. In my experience, most believers are like Betty, who said her belief system was something "my parents just gave to me." These belief systems are often uncritically assimilated due to how young we are when we receive them. However, as Christians grow older, many never examine the reasons behind their beliefs. Systematic theology forces individuals to come to grips with what they believe, or even what they do not

²⁸¹ Duarte: 5.

know that they believe. As Hank noted about studying systematic theology, “There so much you didn’t know that you didn’t know.”

George Barna referred to this process as “dissonance learning” whereby previous values, beliefs, and behaviors are challenged when confronted by systematic, biblical teaching to the contrary.²⁸² Systematic theology’s ability to show the learner the why behind a doctrine or belief automatically places the person in a position of being critically reflective: “Is this what the learner believes? If not, why does the learner believe differently?” These are the kind of critically reflective questions innate in the study of systematic theology. As Michael Horton notes, “In all disciplines, including theology, periods of discovery (or rediscovery) are usually followed by refinement and systematization.”²⁸³ Critical reflection is part of the theological learning process.

Systematic theology fostered this process by giving adults permission to challenge their prior beliefs. Andrea said, “Going through systematic theology...taught me that you don’t have to believe what your parents said...just because they said it. Now, beliefs have become more mine.” Jackie addressed the importance of systematic theology and how it helped her with the why behind her beliefs:

²⁸² Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 149-151.

²⁸³ Horton, 30.

I wasn't as critical of my beginning beliefs because I didn't grow up knowing the "why's." So, when someone actually showed me the "why's" of new beliefs I was like, "Yeah, that makes sense," and I believed.

The reason systematic theology was so important is because most people in church have uncritical beliefs. They don't know why. It's so easy to get swayed by false beliefs. Systematic theology helped sit me down and explain it to me.

Liv concurred, "For me, my spiritual growth was pretty straightforward: I came to church, became a Christian, got baptized, got into a small group, etc., but this has enhanced [my spiritual growth] because I feel like I got the stuff to back it all up. I feel like I know the why now." Andrea likewise said that systematic theology gave her a better way to "name and explain" what she believed. Betty agreed, concluding, "I now have a foundation of what I know I believe is true. I can tell you why I believe it."

In the end, knowing the why behind their beliefs was huge for the participants. In congregations around the nation, countless numbers of Christians enter the sanctuary on Sunday holding a set of beliefs they are unable to articulate. Systematic theology can help them articulate their beliefs by giving them the why. Systematic theology is uniquely positioned to bring change to an area of congregational life that is far too often overlooked.

It should be noted that this important aspect of spiritual growth (i.e., knowing the why) was virtually absent in the spiritual formation assessment literature. Assessment tools like *The Christian Life Profile* and others only measure

the number of statements people can affirm. This is woefully inadequate. It reveals nothing of why Christians understand those beliefs or how those beliefs are integrated into their lives, which is ironically something that secular transformative learning would attempt to discover. Even Willow Creek's *Reveal*, with its self-proclaimed unique approach to spiritual growth, is primarily based on how closely someone feels proximity to Christ. Unfortunately, this feelings-based approach has the potential to give high marks to those who have no idea what they believe, or worse, hold a belief system in opposition orthodox Christianity.

Systematic theology is critical because it gives adults the why behind their beliefs. It gives them permission to challenge what they were taught, maybe by parents who did not know any better, or by ministries with a theological axe to grind, or by pastors who skipped passages they simply did not like. This does not mean that systematic theologies are absent of specific doctrinal perspectives and theological dispositions. However, those texts usually acknowledge those suppositions to some degree. When pastors or staff members responsible for spiritual formation find a systematic theology they and their church can generally endorse, they will be one step toward fighting against the biblical and theological illiteracy of the bride of Christ by helping their people own their beliefs!

Systematic Theology Promotes Learning in Community

Many theologians emphasize the dialogical nature of studying theology. John Frame believes reflection with others about new theological understandings is the optimal way to study theology.²⁸⁴ Horton concurs, "Theology is done best in community and conversation rather than in lonely isolation."²⁸⁵ Wayne Grudem adds that some of the most effective learning in systematic theology often occurs outside class in informal conversations.²⁸⁶ The literature on transformational learning calls this process "reflective discourse." It is the use of dialogue to probe current justifications of held beliefs, assess the legitimacy of new ideas, and consider what the adoption of those ideas may mean for future behavior. Good reflection encourages a deeper understanding of complex issues.²⁸⁷

The interviews reinforced this assertion. Liv sought to dialogue with others about what she was learning "because of how [other people] think about things and the different perspectives they bring." Hank believed that talking with others helped reinforce the way he thinks. He said, "It'll tell me what my thoughts are, the way I land on things better when I hear it from someone else's perspective...even if they don't agree with me." Andrea phrased it this way:

²⁸⁴ Reymond, xxx.

²⁸⁵ Horton, 27.

²⁸⁶ Grudem, 35.

²⁸⁷ Duarte: 5.

“The more I dialogue with others, the clearer it becomes to me.” Jane said she simply would have quit studying systematic theology if not afforded the opportunity to dialogue with others about what she was learning. She said, “I thought I wanted [the class leader] to lecture me. Now I realize without the conversations with others, I wouldn’t have learned nearly as much. I wouldn’t have processed it in the way I needed to learn.”

Based on readings and interviews, it appears that one of the reasons the study of systematic theology can be so transformational is that it encourages its students to learn in community. This should not be surprising to those familiar with the content of systematic theology. With its collection of broad concepts, complex issues, and abstract ideas, systematic theology provides fertile ground for reflective discourse with others. Simply put, systematic theology necessitates dialogue with others in order to be studied well, and this, at least from the secular literature on transformational learning, helps facilitate the process of deep change.

Combined with other elements of transformative learning, systematic theology’s capacity to create disorienting dilemmas, foster the questioning of habits of mind, promote critical reflection, and encourage dialogue – all with the aim of moving an individual from a less stable frame of understanding to a more stable position – shows that the study of systematic theology is an exercise

where, according to secular experts, true transformation can take place for adults. This is important for those responsible for adult education in a local church. The study of systematic theology can create an atmosphere of true, lasting learning. Often ministers of education or directors of spiritual formation struggle to find discipleship materials that will engage their adults or actually promote learning. It is my conclusion based on the literature and interviews that a class on systematic theology can accomplish both.

Summary of Findings in Areas of Thinking

When you consider how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology as it concerns the mind, one finds it gives adults the “what” they believe, “why” they should believe it, and “where” those beliefs fit within others. Therefore, it should be no surprise to see the study of systematic theology deepen doctrinal soundness, empower the ability to discern, and ultimately, help its learners to own their beliefs.

Findings in Areas of Affects & Actions

The reason affects and actions are paired together is because they are so closely tied in reality that it befits this study to mention them together. While the same could also be said about the belief category, it was separated from affects and actions due to the primary information-learning nature of systematic theology. It is hoped that in combining affects and actions, one will see not only

how studying systematic theology impacts the hearts of those who learn it but what, if any, behaviors are born by those changes of heart.

In the literature, Brad Waggoner confesses that attitudinal aspects of spiritual growth “may be the most difficult to measure.”²⁸⁸ Yet, as Peter Scazzero argues, “Emotional and spiritual maturity are inseparable.”²⁸⁹ The literature on assessing spiritual formation, as it concerned the affects, highlighted a wide array of emotions to observe: gratitude, anxiety, worry, peace, confidence, and so on. Furthermore, like the other areas of beliefs and action, the assessments focused on the frequency or degree to which an emotion was felt. They did not usually seek to discover why that emotion was felt or from where that emotion was derived. For example, the *LifeWay Spiritual Growth Process* asked individuals to assess to what degree peace, contentment, and joy characterized their life rather than worry.²⁹⁰ While this identifies the feeling of an emotion, it does not tell why an individual feels that way. The person could feel a great degree of peace for many reasons that are not necessarily Spirit-given. However, in studying systematic theology, students not only identified specific emotions, but their source as well. The interviews demonstrated that among the different

²⁸⁸ Waggoner, 180.

²⁸⁹ Scazzero and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church : A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives*, 19.

²⁹⁰ Lifeway, “Spiritual Growth Assessment Process,” 3-4.

emotions systematic theology created, confidence, humility, peace, and love stood out from the rest.

The literature also demonstrated that spiritual growth could be seen in specific behaviors like reading the Bible, engaging in biblical community, or prayer.²⁹¹ However, most of the literature spoke in generalities when it came to behaviorally assessing spiritual growth. For example, Barna writes that spiritual growth will be evidenced in “personal transformation” and “renewed lifestyles.”²⁹² These generalities are somewhat understandable, since the Holy Spirit works to change the entirety of a person’s life. Thus, in a sense, singling out specific actions over others as markers of spiritual growth limits the assessment. This is where H. Frederick Reisz’s statement on behaviorally assessing spiritual growth is insightful. He said, “Assessment must boldly confront an evaluation of whether patterns of behavior have been changed.”²⁹³ Reisz echoes the sentiments of those in the transformative learning movement by suggesting that real growth evidences itself in changed behaviors. Therefore, instead of listing statistics of selected behaviors, churches can measure spiritual growth by asking open-endedly, “What behaviors have changed in life?” In the

²⁹¹ Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool Workbook*, GET PAGE.

²⁹² Barna, *Growing True Disciples : New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ*, 167.

²⁹³ Reisz: 36.

interview process, several different behavioral changes were evidenced as a result of studying systematic theology.

Systematic Theology Gives the Learners a Unique Confidence to Engage

The interviews indicated that confidence was the primary way systematic theology impacted the laypersons' affects. This held true for those who had recently come to faith in Christ as well as those who had been believers for quite some time. The confidence-building aspect of systematic theology is found, as mentioned earlier, in its unique ability to share with the learner what truths to believe, why those beliefs matter, and how those beliefs fit into the broader doctrinal framework. Again, the comprehensive nature of systematic theology evidences itself not only in the realm of the learner's beliefs, but in the emotional sphere as well. As Hank noted, "Overall, systematic theology was extremely rich, informative. I feel equipped. I feel armed with knowledge. It has given me confidence." Gregg agreed, saying, "Systematic theology has given me a better confidence in what we have and what I know and understand."

This confidence moved learners to engage those around them in conversations about God, his word, and the mission of Christ in the world. Liv remarked, "After systematic theology, it feels really good to come away with a great deal of confidence knowing what I believe. I feel like I could have conversation with people that I would be terrified of talking to in the past."

Maddie shared how it impacted her ministry. She said that, because of systematic theology, she now has “more confidence in leading [her] Bible study.” Jane believed that learning systematic theology gave her confidence to be a “better missionary to the world.” Other interviewees also noted the profound sense of confidence learning systematic theology gave them and how that confidence impacted their ability to engage others.

Additionally, the confidence systematic theology creates also impacted how learners engaged God in worship. Liv shared how systematic theology changed her as a worshipper. Sofia noticed the impact as well. She said, “My worship is deeper because I know him more.” Jackie simply remarked, “[Studying systematic theology] made me want to worship [God] more.” This desire to engage God in worship pointed not only to systematic theology’s ability to give learners confidence to engage God but to grow their love for him as well.

Systematic Theology Grows in Learners a Love for God and His Word

Many interviewees would score well with Don Whitney’s spiritual assessment question, “Are you more loving?”²⁹⁴ Willow Creek’s *Reveal* also framed questions around loving God.²⁹⁵ Indeed, the interview responses indicated that systematic theology grew in its learners a love for God and the Bible. Betty reflected on her time studying systematic theology by saying,

²⁹⁴ Whitney, 9.

²⁹⁵ Hawkins and Parkinson, 38.

“Wow... my heart is overflowing with love and gratitude for God!” Sofia agreed, saying her desire “to love God instead of my own sin has grown” and that “my love for God is bigger than before because I know more about him.”

She also saw her love for God’s word growing. She noted:

Systematic theology reignited my desire to read the Bible because it took all the stuff I knew and put it in an organized, systematic way. It was like here’s all the stuff I believed from the Bible finally put into the bigger picture. And that got me wanting to really dig into my Bible again!

Gregg agreed, sharing his story of growing up reading the Bible:

I would do my devotional, read my Bible, to pray, everyday – that became very routine, very monotonous, very checking the box – got to read the Bible every day, read the Bible in a year, then went back and read every chapter and took notes on every chapter. It burned me out.

I mean I would just glaze over some of the chapters. It was very hard to get through all of it. It was more about “let’s just get it done and say I did it.” After that it was very dead, not very engaging and loving toward your Bible.

The clearer picture and the why of systematic theology has come into play has helped me see how God has really orchestrated the Bible and universe to make everything fit and kind of blown up my perspective as how – this is the Word this is God – but now it’s way out here [arms spread apart], much larger. God is like so much more awesome and everything is done and orchestrated so much cooler.

To see that in the Bible with the help of systematic theology has given me such a greater love for his Word.

It is systematic theology’s impact on affects that led Sofia to conclude,

“Systematic theology is for your heart. This changed my heart.” I believe

systematic theology’s ability to grow in its learners a love for God and his word

is directly tied to its unique way of putting biblical truth together in a systematic fashion.

I also believe the study of systematic theology can reenergize those who may be burned out on reading the Bible because it organizes the scriptures in such a way as to show the learner the bigger doctrinal themes of the Bible. While biblical theology shares with the learner the unity of the redemptive themes of the Bible, systematic theology places scripture's doctrinal details in a larger, coherent frame. As such, it engenders a greater love for God's word. If systematic theology is the comprehensive gathering of what the Bible says on any subject, then participants are not so much impacted by "systematic theology" as the Bible itself. Systematic theology is only as good as the scripture it presents. However, if it is a good systematic theology, it should display for the learner the beauty and assistance of God's word. Furthermore, if it is true that to know God is to love him, then systematic theology, with its focus on doctrines like God's attributes, his will, and other key truths about his work, should be required study in any and every local church's spiritual formation process.

Systematic Theology Fosters a Peace with Mystery in its Learners

While the literature on assessing spiritual growth highlighted the feeling of peace, it often did not tie it to the origin or rationale for that peace.²⁹⁶ In the

²⁹⁶ E.g., *Lifeway*

interviews, participants related that one of the chief feelings produced by systematic theology was peace, specifically peace with the mystery of God. Using phrases like “being okay,” “having comfort,” or “load lifted,” students found great relief knowing that when the scriptures are the final say, there are many answers that cannot be currently known. For example, Hank said systematic theology helped him to be at peace with not knowing all the answers.

The freeing disposition is caused by systematic theology’s attempt to share with the learner all the germane scriptures on an issue. For most, it does not matter if every question gets answered, but that every angle and every side is understood. It is one thing to be ignorant of God, it is another thing to learn as much as you can about God and still not understand things about him. Systematic theology gave people permission not only to ask questions about God, but also to be okay with not getting an answer outside of the mystery of God. Ironically, it was being repeatedly confronted with the mystery of God that deepened and broadened the perspectives of the learners. This is exactly what the interviews demonstrated. Sofia stated:

I think one of the reasons systematic theology expands my view of God is because there is mystery. We can’t know everything. We’ll read a ton of pages in systematic and wind up with, “Well we don’t really know. It’s a mystery.” ...If anything the mysteries have increased my faith. In the end, this should leave you in deeper awe of God.

Therefore systematic theology gives students a much bigger view of God by sharing with them both what can and cannot be known about God's person, thoughts, and work. This mystery creates not only a sense of God's bigness but also a greater awe for who he is and what he does.

How necessary is this type of view of God for your congregants? Far too often, laypersons live little lives because they possess little views of God. They need a bigger, more biblical understanding of the God of the universe. They need a view that enraptures them, stirs their love, and rearranges their priorities. Systematic theology can do for others what it did for Gregg, as he said it "took my little view of God and blew it up! Made it much bigger where God is more than I'll ever imagine."

Summary of Findings in Areas of Affects and Actions

When you consider how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology as it concerns their affects and actions, you find it uniquely gives a confidence to engage God in worship and others in ministry. It also encourages a love for God and his word, giving a coherent framework for understand biblical content. Systematic theology fosters peace by revealing mystery and, with that very mystery, brings weightiness to worship and expands the worshipper's view of God. Certainly more affects and actions can be noted, but the themes presented are chief among them.

It is also hoped that the uniqueness of systematic theology's contribution to the spiritual formation process of laypersons has been evident in summarizing these findings on the areas of thinking, affects, and actions. For example, the impact of the composition of systematic theology – its comprehensive, logical, and orderly arrangement of both the doctrines and the scriptures that support those doctrines – was evidenced throughout this section. This section has attempted to show systematic theology's uniqueness throughout the other findings as well. Therefore, systematic theology's characteristics, such as its logical structure, scriptural comprehensiveness, and doctrinal coherence, enable it to make unique contributions to the spiritual formation of laypersons.

Summary of Areas of Findings

In attempting to discover how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology, a pattern emerged. The spiritual growth in learners generally followed a pathway that would begin with someone's thinking, then translate to their emotions, and then ultimately be seen in their actions. The effect and benefit of systematic theology might be expressed in this fashion:

Now that I know THIS TRUTH

....it has given me THIS FEELING

....to do THIS ACTION.

This pattern of “knowing a truth that creates a feeling that produces an action” was observed throughout the interviews. The unique importance of systematic theology lies in the first step. It gives the layperson not only a truth that ultimately leads to action, but a whole host of truths, interconnected and layered within a broader, coherent framework, that should produce a plethora of actions. In a sense, systematic theology provides the first domino for a new path of spiritual formation.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings described above, the church is well advised to encourage her pastors and directors of spiritual formation to implement a study of systematic theology within the spiritual formation process. While spiritual formation leaders will likely know how to most effectively implement such a study for their particular congregations, the following considerations are humbly recommended:

First, it is best to study as a group. Based on the literature and interviews, the communal aspect of learning this type of content is incredibly valuable and possibly essential for true assimilation of thought. However, understand that too many or too few members in the group can adversely impact community learning.

Second, facilitate more, teach less. Encourage the leader to be as much a facilitator of discussion as an imparter of information. Lecture-driven classrooms are not as effective for adult learning as environments where laypersons are free to challenge statements, follow up on thoughts, or pursue greater clarity.

Third, push to practice. The class leader should frequently ask students how they would apply the doctrines they are learning. Moving the abstract to the concrete will only serve participants better in their home, work, and ministry.

Finally, make it reproducible. Construct the study in such a way that it would be quite easy for its “graduates” to lead a group of their own. The only way the church will ever recover her people’s theological moorings is by putting together effective, viral strategies for training in systematic theology. Imagine the impact on a church’s theological health if scattered throughout her numbers there were scores of systematic theology groups reproducing every few months.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on how laypersons experience the dynamics of spiritual formation through training in systematic theology. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the focus can be within it. Therefore, the following area of study is recommended.

It would be beneficial to understand why the study of systematic theology has largely been the property of the seminarian or academician. It is astounding

that the majority of literature on the benefits of systematic theology (outside the textbooks themselves) focused solely on the professional. Granted, those books and periodicals had professionals as their target readership. Nevertheless, the void of literature concerning the intersection of systematic theology and the layperson is nothing short of amazing, if not appalling. It would help the church, if even in a prophetic way, to understand why this has been the current reality.

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