Building Systematic Theology

LESSON ONE

WHAT IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

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Lesson One

What is Systematic Theology?

INTRODUCTION

Do you know someone who just can't stand to be in a messy room? I once had a college roommate who was like that. I'd often leave a mess on my desk when I'd go to class, but he would always clean up behind me. I'd leave things in disarray again the next day and he'd clean up again. One day he stopped me as I walked out of our dorm room and he said to me, "What's wrong with you? Don't you know how to put things where they belong?"

"Yeah," I admitted to him, "I know how to put things where they belong but I just have so many other things to do that I don't have time to do it."

I can still remember his reply: "If you'll just take a few minutes to put things where they belong, you'll be surprised at how many more things you'll get done."

Well, in many ways my friend's idea also applies to Christian theology. There are lots of Christians who think that there is just too much to be done for the cause of Christ to take time out to get their theology straight. Winning the lost, planting churches, teaching the Scriptures… There are so many things to be done. But the reality is that if we take the time to arrange our theology in a systematic way, we'll actually be able to get much *more* done in service to Christ and his kingdom.

This is the first lesson in our series *Building Systematic Theology*. In this series we'll explore systematic theology or "systematics." Systematic theology is one of the main ways the Holy Spirit has led the Christian church to put its theology in order. We've entitled this lesson, "What is Systematic Theology?" In this introductory lesson, we'll explore a number of foundational issues related to the study of systematic theology.

Our lesson will touch on three main topics: first, we'll compare New Testament theology with systematic theology. How are they similar and different? Second, we'll look into the historical developments that led to systematic theology. Where did it come from? And third, we'll look into the values and dangers of systematic theology. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this discipline? Let's begin by exploring the relationship between the theology of the New Testament and systematic theology.

NEW TESTAMENT

Beginning with the relationship between systematics and the New Testament is important because as followers of Christ we're committed to the unquestionable authority of Scripture, not to any other system of theology, however good it may be. All systems of theology other than the Bible reflect the imperfections of sinful human beings. So, from the outset we should be very interested in how systematic theology compares to the Bible. In what ways is it like Scripture? In what ways is it different?

To see the relationship between New Testament Theology and systematics, we'll touch on two issues, first the contours of systematic theology and second, the contours of New Testament theology. Let's look first at the contours of systematic theology.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Historically speaking, systematic theology has been one of the most influential ways Christians have built theology. In fact, it would be difficult to find a follower of Christ anywhere in the world who has not been touched by systematics. When we speak of God as Trinity, that God exists in three persons who share the same one essence, we're depending on the work of systematic theologians; when we speak of Christ as one person who is fully divine and fully human, we are working with doctrines explained in systematic theology. When we use words like regeneration, faith, repentance, sanctification, and glorification, we're using terms that have been defined for us by Systematic theologians. Yet, as influential as systematic theology has been, most Christians today have only vague ideas of what it is.

As you can imagine, theologians have defined this approach to theology in different ways. But we can grasp the central concerns of traditional protestant systematic theology by looking at a definition that comes from Louis Berkhof's well-known *Systematic Theology*, which he wrote in the middle of the twentieth century.

In the fourth chapter of this work, Berkhof defined his discipline in this way:

> **Systematic theology seeks to give a systematic presentation of all the doctrinal truths of the Christian religion.**

This straightforward definition highlights three aspects of systematic theology: First, it concerns itself with "truth." Second, it attempts to present truth in a "systematic" fashion, according to the logical relationships between the different truths. And third, systematic theology is constructed within the context of the "Christian religion."

These elements of Berkhof's definition will lead our discussion in three directions: In the first place, we'll look at the fact that systematic theology strives to be biblical by adhering to the truths presented in Scripture. In the second place, we'll see that systematic theology attempts to be logically coherent by constructing a system in which every biblical truth can be understood in relation to others. And in the third place, we'll consider the ways in which systematic theology follows traditional theological emphases and priorities. Consider first the fact that systematic theology must be biblical.

Biblical

Berkhof speaks of systematic theology's reliance on the Bible when he says that systematics is concerned with "doctrinal *truths*." For protestant theologians committed to *Sola Scriptura,* to say that we focus on doctrinal *truths* is to say that all of our theology

must accord with the Bible. And in fact, we derive most of our systematic doctrines directly from the Bible itself. Berkhof made this point explicitly in his *Systematic Theology*, with this comment:

> **The systematician must show that every part of systematic theology strikes its roots deep down into the subsoil of Scripture.**

Unfortunately, Christians have not always thought this way about systematic theology. In the place of anchoring systematics in biblical teachings, theologians have gone in at least three basic directions. Some theologians have seen systematics simply as rooted in church tradition or dogma. They see it merely as careful analysis of the teachings of the church throughout history. Other theologians have seen systematics primarily as rooted in religious experience; these theologians seek to bring systematic order to the religious imaginations and intuitions of human beings. Still other theologians have looked to philosophies that are foreign to the Christian faith as the soil out of which systematic theology grows. In effect, these theologians turn systematic theology into philosophy of religion.

Now, everyone involved in systematic theology engages church tradition, religious experience, and philosophical considerations, to some degree. But in our lessons we'll define sound systematic theology as a discipline that is rooted ultimately in the teachings of Scripture. We're not seeking to ground our systematic theology in church tradition, religious experience, or philosophy. Like Christ himself we understand that all good theology, including systematics, must be biblical.

Now that we have seen that systematic theology strives to be biblical, we should consider systematic theology's attempt to be logically coherent, organizing the teachings of Scripture into a systematic arrangement.

Logical

As Berkhof's definition points out, this discipline seeks to make "a *systematic* presentation of all doctrinal truths." Or, as he elaborated elsewhere:

> **The systematician … seeks to combine doctrinal truths into a systematic whole.**

In this view, the job of a systematic theologian is to summarize Christian beliefs so that they form a comprehensive, orderly, even logical, system. Systematicians seek to make clear how the teachings of Scripture reveal a unified logical system of beliefs.

In every age, many Christians have been satisfied to leave their beliefs relatively disconnected. We believe certain things about God. We believe other things about faith and salvation. We have other beliefs about ethics and morality. Although most Christians believe a large number of things, we often allow our beliefs to remain isolated from each other.

By contrast, systematic theology places a high premium on displaying the coherence of Christian beliefs. Systematicians seek to take the bits and pieces of what the

Scriptures teach and explain their logical relations to each other as consistently and comprehensively as possible. In fact, this is precisely why this discipline is called *systematic* theology. The goal is to display the *system* of theology taught by the Bible.

In the third place, systematic theology tries not only to be biblical and logically coherent, but also to maintain continuity with *traditional* Christian concerns, focusing on doctrines that history has shown to be important for the church.

Traditional

Berkhof's definition addressed this matter by saying that systematics deals with doctrinal truths in terms of "the Christian religion."

He elaborated on this aspect of his definition in this way:

> **"[The systematician] may not … proceed on the assumption that the doctrinal development of the past was one gigantic error, and that he must therefore begin his work *de novo,"* or brand new.**

In systematic theology, we seek to view doctrines in terms of the Christian religion, in terms of traditional theological emphases and priorities. So, systematics interacts not only with the Bible, but also with the main ways the Bible's teachings have been expressed by theologians throughout church history.

This concern with traditional emphases explains why nearly every reliable protestant systematic theology follows the same basic structure. Following the central concerns of theological reflection that have developed through the centuries, systematicians usually organize the doctrines of Scripture in this way: They begin either with bibliology, the doctrine of Scripture, or with theology proper, the doctrine of God. Then they turn to anthropology, the doctrine of humanity, and focus especially on humanity's need for salvation. Then soteriology follows, the doctrine of salvation. Next, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, and finally, eschatology, the doctrine of last things. This basic order is characteristic of systematic theologies because systematicians get these priorities from the contours of traditional Christian theology.

So, we can see at least three basic characteristics of systematic theology. Sound protestant systematic theologians seek to create theology that is biblical, logically coherent, and traditional in its emphases and priorities.

Now that we have sketched the contours of systematic theology, we should turn to our next concern: the patterns of New Testament theology.

New Testament Theology

Of course, good systematicians will give attention to the whole Bible, including the Old Testament, but in this lesson we'll limit ourselves to a comparison of systematic theology and the theology of the New Testament.

In many respects, it's appropriate, as Berkhof suggested, to think of systematic theology as a tree rooted in the New Testament. This analogy is helpful in the first place because it reminds us that systematic theology draws its life from Scripture. Sound systematicians seek to make their assertions correspond as much as possible to the assertions of the New Testament. In this sense, good systematic theology is very much like the theology of the New Testament.

But in the second place, much like a tree, systematics also extends *out of and away from* the soil of Scripture. That is to say, although systematics grew out of the New Testament, it grew into something very different from the New Testament.

To see these differences we'll touch on four features of New Testament theology that distinguish it from systematics: first, the relative diversity of New Testament theology; second, the New Testament's pastoral character; third, the genres used to express New Testament theology; and fourth, the basic framework of New Testament theology. Let's begin by looking at the diverse vocabulary and categories we find in the New Testament.

Diversity

As we have seen, systematic theology is built around topics that have been discussed time and again in the history of the church. This long history has created a relatively uniform set of terms and categories that all systematicians tend to follow rather consistently. To be sure, different systematic theologians express themselves in different ways; they are not rigidly uniform. But systematics as a whole is highly standardized so that terms and categories are used in much the same way.

The New Testament does not reflect such extensive homogeneity. There is much more diversity of terms and categories in the New Testament than in systematic theology. Now, we have to be careful not to overstate the case here. On many central and basic Christian issues, New Testament writers shared a common stock of vocabulary, concepts and structures of thought. It's not as if New Testament theology was so fluid that there was no uniformity at all.

For instance, they all described God in very similar ways drawing from the teachings of the Old Testament. They all taught that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah and shared many complex beliefs about what this meant. They agreed on the basic meaning of terms like sin and salvation. The list of such basic commonalities is quite extensive.

Yet, along with these commonalities, it's evident that New Testament theology was quite diverse. Different New Testament writers expressed their theology in different ways.

One reason for their differences can be found in the doctrine of organic inspiration. The Holy Spirit guarded biblical writers from error and from contradicting each other, but he did not flatten the vocabulary and categories of New Testament writers so that they were uniform. Each biblical writer wrote from the perspective of his own background, his personality, and experiences. As a result, New Testament writers expressed the Christian faith in complementary, but different ways.

This is why Paul's way of describing the Christian faith is not exactly the same as Luke's. John is different from Matthew. Mark is different from Peter. By comparison

with the standard ways of putting things in systematic theology, New Testament theology is quite diverse.

In addition to being more diverse, the theology of the New Testament is also much more pastoral than systematic theology.

Pastoral Character

Systematic theology is constructed to be a logically coherent, comprehensive expression of the teachings of the Christian faith. It focuses especially on permanent, universal truths. And as a result, it often acquires an abstract, theoretical quality, focusing on things like God in himself and theories of the atonement, the sacraments and a host of other abstract issues.

By contrast, the theology of the New Testament is much more pastoral. The writers of the New Testament expressed their theology in ways that addressed relatively specific needs in specific ways. Once again, we have to be careful not to overstate the case. New Testament writers also touched on timeless, abstract truths. But by and large their writings were much more concerned with addressing specific challenges that various believers faced in their day.

For example, this pastoral focus explains why Paul's epistles are so different from each other. Had Paul intended to write a systematic theology he could have written just one letter. But the content and emphasis of his letters varied dramatically because each one addresses different needs in different churches.

Without a doubt, the New Testament authors all possessed deep understandings of theology. But when it came to expressing their theology in the writings of the New Testament, they did not set out to explain these kinds of lofty notions. Instead, their goal was to pastor people by applying theology to real life situations. So, rather than focusing on logical explanations of doctrines, the writers of the New Testament focused on the real, practical needs of people, and on the ways that theology met those needs. And as a result, their theological writings looked very different from standard systematic theology.

In the third place, New Testament theology is distinct from systematics because the New Testament expresses its theology in a variety of genres. The writers of the New Testament used many different literary forms and styles.

Genres

Systematic theology is written in one basic genre: what we might call an extended essay or treatise. Nearly everything that appears in systematic theology is of this type of prose.

By contrast, the theology of the New Testament is expressed in a variety of genres. Many different kinds of literature appear in the New Testament. Broadly speaking, it contains two main genres of literature: narratives and letters. The Gospels and Acts are primarily narrative, and of course the rest of the New Testament is Epistles or letters. And within New Testament narratives and epistles, we also find hymns,

prayers, commands, accusations; personal appeals, visions, exhortations and many other kinds of literature as well. Yet, these genres appear rarely, if ever, in systematic theology.

Many differences between the New Testament and systematic theology also appear when we compare their basic theological frameworks or structures, that is, the way they organize theology by relating doctrines to each other.

Basic Framework

Systematic theology typically follows a basic framework developed over centuries of church history. As we have already seen, almost all protestant systematic theologies are structured along these lines: The doctrine of Scripture, or the doctrine of God, comes first—anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology.

Now, it should be plain to everyone familiar with the New Testament that New Testament writers touched on all of these topics. The New Testament teaches about Scripture, God, humanity, salvation, the church and the last days. But at the same time, it's very important to realize that unlike systematic theology, the New Testament is not organized or structured along these lines. Instead, like most Jewish theologians of the first century, New Testament writers largely structured their theology around the theme of the messianic kingdom of God.

Centuries before Christ, Old Testament prophets revealed that God would punish the sinful nation of Israel with a long period of exile and Gentile tyranny. But the prophets also proclaimed that in the last days God would bring an end to Israel's exile and bring a new day of victory and blessing. And he would accomplish this through his Messiah, who would establish the final stage of God's kingdom on earth, bringing ultimate judgment against God's enemies and ultimate blessings to faithful Jews and Gentiles. By the time of the New Testament, the Jews had suffered the hardships of exile for generations, and as a result, the coming of the Messiah, and with him, the last stage of the kingdom of God, had become one of the most central concerns, if not the central concern, integrating all of Jewish theology. Jewish theologians were heavily preoccupied with questions like these: "When will the Messiah come?" "How will the Messiah bring the great Day of Judgment and blessing?" And, "How should God's faithful people live in anticipation of the Messiah?"

These themes were also the central concerns of New Testament writers. New Testament writers built their theology around the final stage of God's kingdom and the Messiah. But they did this in a distinctively Christian way.

Jesus and his apostles explained that the end of the exile and the arrival of God's messianic kingdom would not occur in the simple, straightforward way that most Jewish theologians expected. One of the primary goals of New Testament writers was to explain that the transition from this age of exile and sin to the messianic kingdom of God was going to involve a complex and extended process. According to the New Testament, Jesus inaugurated the end of the exile and the beginning of the messianic kingdom while he was here on earth. One day Christ will return and bring the kingdom to its glorious consummation of final judgment and blessing. But in the meantime, the age of exile and the age of the messianic kingdom of God exist side by side.

New Testament writers structured everything they believed according to this basic framework. For instance, they did not explain God in abstractions, they were primarily concerned with explaining how God acted in the age of sin, how he acts now during the overlapping of the ages and how he will act in the age to come. They did not offer theoretical discussions of the doctrine of Christ. Instead, they explained who he was in terms of the beginning of the kingdom, the time of continuation and the consummation.

The Holy Spirit was also described in these three stages as "the one who had come," "the one who now empowers the church," and "the one who will one day fill all in all." Even the doctrine of salvation was framed by this conceptual model. Salvation was something that had already been accomplished, but it was also being accomplished during the continuation of the kingdom and it would be fully accomplished when Christ returns in glory. In this sense, the basic framework of New Testament theology is very different from the basic framework of systematic theology.

So we can see that a comparison of systematic theology and New Testament theology reveals similarities and contrasts. Systematic theology is rooted in the Scriptures; all its assertions or theological claims must be true to the Bible, affirming the same doctrines and facts. In this sense, the two are very similar. But at the same time, there are also important differences between systematics and the theology of the New Testament.

Now that we have explored the relationship between the New Testament and systematics, we're ready to discuss our second topic: the development of systematic theology throughout the history of the Christian church.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

As we have seen, systematic theology is different from New Testament theology in many significant ways. But, these differences raise some serious questions: "Why have Protestants, who are so committed to the Scriptures, endorsed a theological system that is so different from the New Testament?" "How did systematics become one of the most highly respected ways faithful Christians construct theology?"

We can summarize the matter in this way. Systematic theology came about through a long process of the church responding to and ministering in a changing world. As Christianity spread from Jerusalem to other parts of the world, Christian theologians had to respond to a variety of changes and challenges. And they did this in part by finding new ways to explain and apply the Bible's teachings. Eventually, the strategies they employed grew into systematic theology.

At first, many Christians recoil at the idea of shaping theology in response to cultural changes. But the New Testament makes it clear that it is our responsibility as followers of Christ to hold firmly to the truth revealed in Scripture and to communicate that truth so that others may understand. In fact, Christ himself taught us to do this in the Great Commission. Listen to his words in Matthew 28:19-20:

> **Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).**

Notice something here: Jesus did not say, "Go therefore and read the Bible to all nations." Now, the public reading of Scripture is an important part of the church's mission, but this is not what Jesus commanded us to do in the Great Commission. To fulfill his commission, we are to "teach" his word, to *teach* the Scriptures.

In other words, we are to find ways to communicate the truth of Scripture, and this always involves some measure of shaping and explaining what we find in the Bible so that others around us will be able to understand. It's out of a desire to teach, to communicate effectively, and to fulfill the Great Commission that systematic theology came into being and continues today.

We'll briefly describe three major historical developments that led to systematic theology as we know it today: first, patristic theology, which ran roughly from AD 150 to AD 600, and began the move toward systematics; second, medieval theology from roughly AD 600 to AD 1500, when approaches to theology were developed that were immediate precursors to systematics. And third, protestant theology, the ways Protestants from AD 1500 to our day have constructed systematic theology. Let's begin with some of the earliest movements toward systematics after the time of Christ and his apostles during the patristic period.

PATRISTIC THEOLOGY

To understand this first major step toward systematics, we'll touch on two issues: First, the cultural changes experienced by the church during the patristic period; and second, the theological changes that resulted from these shifts in culture. Let's consider first the cultural changes that took place in the patristic period.

Cultural Changes

One of the greatest changes that the early church faced after the time of the apostles was a movement of the center of Christianity from its home in Palestine to a new home in the Gentile world. This change was so decisive that Gentiles, rather than Jews, became the leading theologians of the church.

This transition of leadership led to very significant changes in the ways Christians constructed theology. As Gentile theologians sought to minister the gospel in their Gentile world, they began to explain and defend their faith in ways that were relevant for the Greco-Roman culture at that time. They began to describe Christianity in terms of the Hellenistic philosophies of their day.

Interestingly enough, Christians weren't the first ones to bring Scripture into meaningful contact with Hellenistic culture. Centuries before Christ, countless Jews had been scattered throughout the Gentile world. As they lived their Old Testament faith in

that world, Jewish missionaries or proselytizers attempted to reach across the gap between Judaism and the Gentile world.

Now as these Jews reached out to Gentiles, they took two paths that Christians after them followed. On the one hand, many Jews Hellenized their faith so much that they fell into syncretism. They inappropriately mixed true Old Testament faith with pagan beliefs and practices. One of the best known examples of such syncretism appears in the writings of Philo of Alexandria who lived from 30 BC to AD 50. Philo sought to minimize the differences between Old Testament faith and Gentile intellectual culture by treating the books of Moses as allegory and by arguing that his Jewish faith was respectable because it was harmonious with classical Greek philosophy.

At the same time, however, many Jews during these centuries found ways to minister legitimately in their Hellenistic cultures without seriously compromising their biblical faith. One great example of this kind of ministry was the creation of the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament. Greek versions of the Old Testament were translated in synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world so that Jews and Gentiles unable to understand Hebrew would have access to the Scriptures.

During the patristic period Christian theologians went in these two directions as well. On the one side, many church leaders fell into Christian syncretism because they went too far in their attempts to Hellenize New Testament faith. They mixed true Christianity with pagan beliefs and practices. Some forms of syncretism had already risen in the New Testament church, but during the patristic period a number of well-known unorthodox sects such as Ebionism, Basilidism, and Gnosticism developed in Christianity. On the other hand, while orthodox Christian theologians resisted syncretism they nevertheless found legitimate ways to minister in their pagan world by interacting with Hellenistic worldviews around them. As these true believers carried out Christ's commission to reach all nations, they expressed their theology in terms of contemporary philosophical and religious outlooks without compromising biblical truth.

With these cultural shifts in mind, we should take a look at some of the ways authentic Christian theology changed to meet the challenge of ministry in the gentile world during the patristic period. What were the general theological tendencies that emerged at this stage of Christian theology?

Theological Changes

During the patristic period, the dominant philosophical and religious stream in the Mediterranean world was an outlook commonly known as Neo-Platonism. The term "Neo-Platonism" covers a great variety of outlooks, and represents a broad religious philosophy. It is called Neo-Platonism because it was rooted in the teachings of Plato, but also included new ideas introduced by philosophers such as Plotinus, who lived from AD 203 to 279.

Although this religious philosophy was complex, we can summarize its central themes in terms of three issues: dualism, rationalism and mysticism.

In the first place, Neo-Platonism was dualistic. It taught a fundamental antithesis between the spiritual and material realms. In Neo-Platonic dualism pure spirit was considered good and pure matter was considered utterly evil. Although God himself was

thought to be above both the spiritual and material realms, in his goodness God spread his divine Intellect, his Light or Logos into the spiritual and material worlds. This divine force emanated from God and flowed throughout reality, bringing degrees of order and form, beginning first in the spiritual realm and then moving downward into the material world.

This dualistic outlook had certain implications for the ways human beings were to live. People were said to be born in the material world, even imprisoned in the physical realm. But Neo-Platonism taught that the highest good for human life was to seek God by eliminating all attachments to the material world.

This notion of breaking with the material world in pursuit of God brings us to rationalism as the second emphasis of Neo-Platonism.

As people sought to overcome their imprisonment in the material world they were to begin by focusing on human reason, the spiritual and intellectual capacity within each of us. Through careful reasoning and reflection, people could make great strides in lifting themselves beyond the evil matter that entangled them.

As important as rational reflection was, it was just the beginning for the truly virtuous person. Neo-Platonism called people to go beyond human reason and into mysticism. To reach full separation from matter and complete union with God, people had to move beyond their own human intellectual powers and to reach the heights of God himself.

Because Neo-Platonists believed that God is beyond all, transcendent even over human reasoning, in the end human beings could have union with God only as they received mystical revelation that went far beyond mere human reflection. This spiritual ecstasy was supposed to come about by the inspiration of the divine light and word emanating throughout creation. And it was said to result in utter union with God, supreme happiness, the grand fulfillment of human destiny.

These philosophical and religious concepts were so prevalent in the Mediterranean world during the patristic period that faithful Christian theologians could not avoid interacting with them. In fact, many of their theological discussions were framed in terms of Neo-Platonic beliefs.

Many of these efforts were quite legitimate. For example, the great ecumenical councils of the early church such as Constantinople and Chalcedon expressed biblical beliefs with Neo-Platonic perspectives. Well-known leading Christian theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and even Augustine, also expressed themselves in terms that were familiar to Neo-Platonists.

Faithful Christian theologians in the Patristic period did not allow their attention to Neo-Platonism to supplant their basic commitments to the true gospel. They held strongly to biblical truth. But their awareness of Neo-Platonism did help them explain the Scriptures in ways that they and their contemporaries could understand. And by interacting with their cultures in these ways, they promoted the gospel, built the church, and brought many unbelievers to a saving knowledge of Christ.

There are many ways we could summarize the influence of Neo-Platonism on patristic theology. But for our purposes, we will point to three characteristics of patristic theology that parallel our summary of Neo-Platonism: the spiritual priorities of patristic theology, the importance of reason, and the importance of mysticism. Let's consider first the priorities of patristic theology as they were influenced by Neo-Platonism.

Priorities. You will recall that one characteristic of Neo-Platonism was dualism between the spiritual and physical realms. Patristic theology responded to this dualism by organizing and presenting the Bible's teachings in a way that gave priority to spiritual rather than mundane concerns, an approach to theology that we will call "theology from above." In a word, theology from above is theology that gives first place to higher spiritual reflection over reflection on lower, more earthly matters—reflections on God and his ways: "What is the essence of God?" "What are his attributes?" "What is the unity of God?" "What is the Trinity?" These concerns were much more prominent in patristic theology than reflection on the human condition and life in the physical world. These priorities became a hallmark of patristic theology.

In the second place, Christian theologians gained a heightened appreciation of the importance of reason in theology, focusing on logical reflection as a primary tool for theology.

Reason. As we have seen, one of the chief values in Neo-Platonism was the belief that human beings have a duty to employ human reasoning to rise above the material world. In response to Neo-Platonism's emphasis on intellectual reflection, early fathers of the church also began to emphasize intellectual reflection in Christian theology. Leading Christian theologians focused more than ever on the careful rational exploration and explanation of Christian beliefs, so that many doctrines that the New Testament left unspecified and unexplored became the objects of rational reflection.

For instance, New Testament theology allowed doctrines like the Trinity to remain largely unexplained; New Testament writers did not address the details of the relationships between the persons of the trinity. But, in the patristic period, theologians used logical analysis to explain what New Testament writers believed about the Trinity, even though the biblical writers had not stated their views explicitly.

In response to false teachings about God the father, the son and the Holy Spirit, early church fathers devoted themselves to careful distinctions through rational reflection, working out as many details left untouched in the New Testament as they possibly could. In this way, applying reason to theology became an important value for theologians as they ministered in their Neo-Platonic world.

In the third place, patristic theology also focused on mysticism, or transcendent spiritual enlightenment, in response to Neo-Platonism's emphasis on mysticism.

Mysticism. As we have seen, in Neo-Platonism careful reasoning through attention to the human mind was merely a stepping stone to higher, mystical levels of union with God. Reason was limited and could not grasp higher spiritual realties and reaching these higher levels required special illumination.

In a similar way, when early Christian fathers expounded doctrines such as the Trinity, or the divinity and humanity of Christ, or the sacraments and the church, they often confessed that some elements of these doctrines were beyond human reason. Frequently, their rational discussions were coupled with acknowledgments that the higher truths of the Christian faith simply could not be explained or defended rationally. Instead, they could only be apprehended through mystical enlightenment, through supernatural experiences that exceeded the reaches of human rationality. Patristic theology employed

reason in service to God's revelation, but it leaned more heavily on spiritual intuition than on logical proof.

So it is that as theologians of the patristic period faced the challenges of teaching, exploring and defending Christian theology in their Gentile world, their strategies and emphases shifted. These shifts toward the priority of the spiritual over the physical, or theology from above, the use of rational analysis and reliance on mysticism set a course for the church that would eventually lead to what we know today as systematic theology.

Now that we have seen how theologians began to explain Christian theology to their Hellenistic culture during the patristic period, we should turn to medieval theology, when Christians more consistently applied Hellenistic views of human rationality and logic to Christian theology. We'll be concerned with a theological movement, often called "scholasticism," that developed roughly from AD 600 to AD 1500.

MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

Our exploration of scholasticism will resemble the way we looked at patristic theology. On the one hand, we will look at the cultural changes that gave rise to scholasticism. And on the other hand, we'll explore some of the theological changes that resulted. Let's think first about the cultural shifts that took place during these centuries.

Cultural Changes

To begin with, we should point out that the term "scholasticism" derives from schools of higher learning in early medieval Europe. In those schools lecturers in dialectic, normally called "logic" in the modern age, were known by the Latin term *scholasticus.* Largely, these lecturers taught Aristotle's logic. Consequently, the term "scholastic" came to be applied to philosophy and theology that depended heavily on the principles of logic in Aristotle's philosophy.

Scholasticism resulted from one of the most important cultural shifts that took place in the medieval period. This shift occurred when the intellectual communities of the Mediterranean world turned away from Neo-Platonism and toward the philosophy of Aristotle. And as a result of this shift, leading Christians had to adapt the ways they explained and defended Christian doctrines to Aristotelian philosophy.

Of course, this shift toward scholasticism took place over hundreds of years, and there was much resistance to it, especially from Christian mystics. But by the time of Albertus Magnus, or "Albert the Great," who lived from around 1206 to 1280, and his well-known disciple Thomas Aquinas, who lived from around 1225 to 1274, scholasticism represented the dominant form of Christian theology. Just before the reformation, the mainstream of Christian theology was deeply attuned to the philosophical viewpoints of Aristotle.

Now that we have looked at some of the cultural changes that gave rise to Scholasticism, we should turn to some of its basic characteristics. What marked scholasticism as a major approach to Christian theology?

Theological Changes

Although there are many similarities between patristic and scholastic theology, there is at least one crucial difference. On the whole, patristic theology maintained that the greatest theological insights come through mystical inspiration. But scholasticism was highly rationalistic, stressing the value of *logic* in exploring, explaining and defending *all* of theology. The physical and spiritual worlds, and even God himself, were to be analyzed through the careful application of logic.

Scholastics were well-schooled in Aristotle's writings on logic, physics, and metaphysics, and sought to accommodate the presentation of Christian theology to this rational worldview. And for this reason, to understand medieval scholastic theology, we need to have some understanding of Aristotle's views on logic.

Time will only allow us to mention four aspects of Aristotle's views on logic that influenced scholastic theology: first, the importance of precise terminology; second, the necessity of propositional reasoning; third, the value of logical syllogisms; and finally, the priorities of rational analysis.

Terminology. In the first place, Aristotle understood that the success of rational, logical reflection depended on the terms we use and how carefully we define them.

Now, definitions were important to Neo-Platonists and patristic theologians as well. But Aristotle was much more concrete in the way he handled these matters. Based on his views of physics and metaphysics, he described logical, even early scientific ways of classifying items by defining the essence or substance of a thing and its accidents or non-essential features to distinguish anything under consideration from all other things.

Correspondingly, in order to communicate clearly with their Aristotelian culture, scholastic theologians also defined theological terms as precisely as possible.

To illustrate just how scholastics accommodated their theology to Aristotle's emphasis on precise terminology, let's look at a passage from Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. In the chapter entitled "Is God Infinite?" Aquinas reported and responded to the following objection:

> **Objection 1. It seems that God is not infinite. For everything infinite is imperfect … because it has parts and matter … But God is most perfect; therefore He is not infinite.**

To answer this objection, Aquinas focused on issues of definition. Listen to how he responded.

> **Now matter is perfected by the form by which it is made finite; therefore infinite as attributed to matter, has the nature of something imperfect; for it is as it were formless matter.**

Notice how Aquinas used several technical terms in this brief passage. He used terms such as "matter," "form," "formless," "finite," "infinite," "perfected" and "imperfect." And he used these terms in ways that were understood in his day because they corresponded to Aristotle's use of such terms. Consequently, Aquinas was able to make

fine distinctions between his views and the views of others. This focus on precise definitions of terminology was characteristic of scholastic theology.

As a result of this focus, scholastic theology was rife with technical terms. Scholastics developed extensive specialized vocabulary for Christian theology. And this is important to us because many of their terms have continued to be used in Christian theology throughout the centuries.

Besides inspiring scholastic theologians to emphasize precise terminology, Aristotle's work on logic also motivated them to give a central role to propositions in communicating theological truth.

Propositions. In their simplest forms, propositions are assertions of fact formed by a subject and a predicate. We use propositions all the time in daily speech. Consider the sentence, "I am a man." In this proposition, "I" is the subject and "am a man" is the predicate. And we're all familiar with propositions in theology, such as "Jesus is the son of God." Propositional assertions of fact like these were essential to scholastic theology as it was shaped by Aristotle's analysis of logic.

Aristotle focused much attention on how logical reasoning operates with propositions. In his view, logic does not operate with expressions of intuitions or emotions, poetry or symbolism, riddles or prayers. Logic is concerned primarily with statements of fact. Only with properly formed propositions can we use logic to analyze a topic.

In line with Aristotle's emphasis, scholasticism worked hard to express its formal theology in propositions. Now, on a less formal, less academic level, scholastic theologians understood that the Christian faith had to involve other kinds of expressions. Many scholastics were very pious and expressed their religious convictions in poetry, hymns, prayers, and the like. But in sophisticated, academic contexts, theological beliefs were presented in carefully constructed propositions, assertions of facts.

To illustrate the centrality of propositions in scholastic theology, we'll turn again to Aquinas' *Summa Theologica.* Listen to his discussion in the chapter entitled "Whether the Knowledge of God is Self-Evident?"

> **Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God is self-evident. Now those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which is naturally implanted in us, as we can see in regard to first principles. But as Damascene says (a reference to John Damascene of the eighth century) "the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all." Therefore the existence of God is self-evident.**

Aquinas responded to this objection in this way.

> **No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident; as the Philosopher (a reference to Aristotle) states concerning the first principles of demonstration. But the opposite of the proposition "God is" can be mentally admitted: "The fool said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"(Psalm 53:1). Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.**

As we would expect, this passage refers to Aristotle's technical meaning of what is self-evident as an idea that "no one can mentally admit the opposite of." But beyond this, we see that Aquinas responded to his objector with propositions. He did not break forth in praise or lament. He did not scold or threaten his opponent. Instead, he consistently responded with propositions.

What we see here in Aquinas was characteristic of scholastic theology in general. Scholastics restricted their formal theological discussions almost entirely to propositions. They reasoned through theological issues by setting carefully defined terms in well-formed statements of fact. This feature became so central to formal Christian theology that even in our own day propositions remain the crucial to systematic theology.

A third way that scholasticism interacted with Aristotle's reflections on logic can be summarized under the category of syllogism.

Syllogisms. In a word, a syllogism is a logical argument in which propositions are arranged to form premises and conclusions.

By way of illustration, one well-known syllogism often taught in elementary logic textbooks goes something like this: Premise One: Socrates is a man. Premise Two: All men are mortal. Conclusion: Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Aristotle spent much time identifying how propositions can be ordered into arguments that lead to certain kinds of conclusions. He explored the so-called "laws of logic" like the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction and the law of excluded middle, as well as a variety of valid rules of inference, the ways we can rightly or logically infer different kinds of conclusions from different kinds of premises.

Of course, real theological arguments are often quite complex, but Scholastic theologians were intent on forming theological arguments that conformed to Aristotle's canons of argumentation

Consider once again Aquinas' discussion in *Summa Theologica*, of "Whether the Knowledge of God is Self-Evident?" There he responded to the proposal that the knowledge of God is self-evident with a straightforward syllogism. He wrote these words:

> **No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident … But the opposite of the proposition "God is" can be mentally admitted: "The fool said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.**

The syllogism presented here can be expressed in this way. Premise One: No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident. Premise Two: The opposite of "God is" can be mentally admitted. Conclusion: Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.

This passage is just one example of how Aquinas explored and defended his theological positions with carefully constructed syllogisms. And his treatment of this topic was typical of medieval scholasticism. In fact, this kind of focus on syllogism remains a central feature even of systematic theology in our day.

In addition to a focus on technical terms, reliance on propositions and logical syllogisms, scholastics also demonstrated the influence of Aristotle by the priorities of their theology.

Priorities. Aristotle applied reason to the task of analyzing reality in terms of a static, rational, hierarchy. He looked at everything as having a place in a vertical rational order. In his view, all things belonged somewhere on a scale between manifold and imperfect matter at the low end, and pure unified and perfect form at the high end. And he believed one of the tasks of philosophy was to identify where every bit of reality fits within this rational order.

In very simple terms, God himself was at the top of the scale. He is the first principle, the uncaused cause of all things. God is pure unity, pure form, pure being. Angels stand one step beneath God. Human beings are placed beneath angels because they are spiritual and physical. Various forms of animal life take their place below humans; plants are next; inorganic materials follow; the four basic elements of air, fire, earth and water underlie inorganic materials; and prime matter is at the bottom of the scale.

In order to communicate with their Aristotelian cultures, scholastics tried to explain their theology in terms of this Aristotelian model. They rigorously structured their doctrinal summaries in the order of theology from above. That is to say, they tended to begin with and emphasize Christian teachings that paralleled the higher levels of Aristotle's hierarchy and then they worked their way down to the teachings that paralleled the lower levels of Aristotle's scale. All the time, they sought to make clear the intricate rational order that permeated their theology from above, explaining how each part fit with every other part.

This tendency toward theology from above can be seen rather plainly in the structure of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. Part One of his *Summa* begins with an introduction and then moves directly to the topic of highest priority in scholastic theology: The One God. Then Aquinas moved to The Blessed Trinity. Next, he focused on Creation, a chapter that still concentrated on God as the first cause of all things. Then Aquinas moved to the greatest of creatures: The Angels. Next, he discussed The Six Days of creation which dealt with the physical creation below angels. Then there is a chapter on Humanity, the spiritual and physical creature. And finally, Aquinas closed part one of his *Summa* with God's Government of Creatures including those things that are merely physical.

The Aristotelian priorities reflected in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* characterize the general strategy of scholasticism. And this tendency has characterized formal Christian theology for centuries, even in modern protestant systematic theology.

Now that we have seen some of the ways Christian theology shifted from the patterns of the New Testament toward Hellenistic ways of thinking — first toward Neo-Platonic dualism in the patristic period, and then toward Aristotelian rationalism in the medieval period — we should turn our attention to the ways protestant theology compares with these developments.

PROTESTANT THEOLOGY

There are so many ways to look at protestant theology that we must limit ourselves to a small sampling. We'll look at three stages in protestant theology: first, the

theology of the early reformers of the 16th century; second, the classical protestant confessions; and third, modern protestant systematic theology. Let's begin with the theology of the early reformers.

Early Reformers

The goal of early protestant theology was to reconstruct Christian theology according to the content of Scripture. Martin Luther and John Calvin, for instance, were deeply committed to reasserting the Bible's authority in theology. They countered the challenges of Roman Catholicism and radical Anabaptists primarily by delving directly into the Scriptures.

And as a result, neither Luther nor Calvin wrote anything that directly corresponds to modern systematic theology. Instead, it fell largely to Luther's protégé Philipp Melanchthon and Calvin's follower Theodore Beza to systematize early protestant theology. Even so, many of the characteristics of patristic and scholastic theology do appear in the writings of the early reformers.

By way of example, consider Calvin's well-known *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* The *Institutes* were written in the first place to defend Protestants against the charge of heresy. But in defending the views of Protestants, Calvin reflected significant affinities for building theology in ways that had developed during the centuries prior to the reformation. Now, it would be unfair to say that Calvin simply followed the patterns of patristic or scholastic theology. Nevertheless, in the *Institutes* he displayed a significant concern with Aristotelian logic in the ways he employed technical terms; expressed his theology largely in propositions; constructed syllogisms to reason through issues; and patterned his theology according to the priorities of theology from above.

Time will not allow us to demonstrate each element in Calvin's work, but we can easily see his endorsement of reason as a central tool in theology and how he followed the priorities of theology from above. On the one hand, listen to the way Calvin affirmed the advantages of studying dialectic or logic, even as it was developed by unbelievers.

In Book Two, chapter two of the *Institutes*, he wrote these words.

> **But if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it, lest, by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth.**

In line with this endorsement of dialectics or logic, Calvin's writings frequently displayed not only a concern for what the Scriptures teach but also for expressing those biblical teachings in ways that corresponded to the standards of Aristotelian logic.

On the other hand, on a large scale Calvin's *Institutes* also reflect the priorities of theology from above in ways that closely reflected the structures of medieval theology. The *Institutes* divide into four books: the first book deals with the Knowledge of God as Creator. In this book Calvin described God in himself and God as the sovereign creator and controller of the universe. Book Two focuses on the Knowledge of God as

Redeemer; it treats more earthly matters related to God's intervention in the world as Christ accomplished salvation for his people. Book Three describes The Reception of Grace, and Its Benefits and Effects. Here Calvin explained how the salvation that was accomplished in Christ is applied to individual people and what blessings and effects the reception of salvation brings to the lives of individual people. And Book Four focuses on even lower, more practical matters: the church, its sacraments, and its relation to civil government.

So we can see then, that Calvin moved from higher celestial concepts to lower, more mundane ones. God as the great Sovereign over creation is dealt with first. Then God's intervention into history in Christ is second. The salvation of individual people is next. And finally, we find attention to practical, everyday Christian concerns.

So, in terms of his endorsement of logic and theology from above, Calvin continued to follow the theological methods and priorities that had developed in church history prior to the reformation.

In addition to recognizing the dependence of early protestant theology on earlier developments in theology, we should also point out that the same is true of the confessional heritage of Protestants. Protestants in different regions of the world produced a number of classical catechisms and confessions that summarized their faith.

Classical Confessions

By way of example, consider the theology of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* written around 1647. As with earlier Protestants, it would be unfair to call Westminster theology strictly scholastic because of the importance placed on the teaching of Scripture. Still, it is true that the *Confession* was influenced by outlooks that characterized theology of the medieval period. The *Confession* embraces Aristotelian logic in the ways it relies heavily on technical terms, how propositions are the central form of expression, the ways careful syllogisms undergird the presentation of theology, and how it orders the topics of theology according to the priorities of theology from above.

We can see a very important role for logic in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. This is especially clear in chapter I, paragraph 6. Listen to the way it puts the matter.

> **The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.**

Notice here that everything necessary for God's glory and our salvation, faith, and life may be found in two ways. On the one hand, these truths may be expressly set down in Scripture. That is to say, the Bible teaches certain essential truths explicitly. But on the other hand, other important Christian doctrines may "by good and necessary consequence … be deduced from Scripture." This statement gives an enormously important role to reason or logic in protestant theology. As these protestant theologians did their work, they employed reason and logic to draw out the implications of Scripture. In this way, the

Westminster Confession reveals a definite tendency toward the methods of earlier periods.

Beyond this, the overarching structure of the Confession of Faith also reveals the priorities of theology from above. The chapters of the *Confession* follow this order: after an initial chapter entitled "Of Scripture," chapters two and three focus on the highest spiritual reality — God himself. Next, chapters four and five deal with the Creation. Then moving even further toward mundane or earthly subjects, chapters six through seventeen handle humanity's fall into sin and subsequent redemption. Next, chapters eighteen through thirty-one explain more practical issues of the Church and Christian life. Finally, chapters thirty-two and thirty-three address the end of world history.

The theological priorities exhibited in this structure characterize many of the classical protestant confessions and catechisms.

With these general tendencies of early protestant theology and classical protestant confessions in mind, we can see that modern systematic theology continues the same tendencies.

Modern Systematics

By way of example, consider the systematic theology of Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary who lived from 1797 to 1878. Throughout his systematic theology, Hodge gave reason and logic a central role as he employed traditional technical terms, relied on propositions, built his case with careful syllogisms and followed the priorities of theology from above.

On the one hand, Hodge endorsed a role for reason in theology that moved beyond the canons of medieval scholasticism and early Protestants. Listen to the ways he explained how theologians must practice their discipline in ways that are analogous to modern scientists. In book one, chapter one, section five of his *Systematic Theology* he wrote these words:

> **The man of science comes to the study of nature with certain assumptions.**
> **He assumes the trustworthiness of his sense perceptions. …**
> **He must also assume the trustworthiness of his mental operations….**
> **He must also rely on the certainty of those truths which are not learned from experience… every effect must have a cause; that the same cause under like circumstances, will produce like effects.**

Having described how the natural sciences were understood in his day, Hodge then added a word about systematic theologians.

> **….The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.**

So we see that although Hodge modified his understanding of reason and logic along the lines of modern science in his day, as a systematic theologian he stood in a long tradition of seeing reason and logic as vital tools for constructing theology.

On the other hand, Hodge's *Systematic Theology* also followed the priorities of theology from above. A glance at his systematic theology reveals the overarching structure of his summary of Christian theology.

His *Systematic Theology* begins with an Introduction followed by Part One which is entitled: "Theology Proper." There he dealt with the doctrine of God himself. Part Two is entitled "Anthropology" which moves down the scale of priorities to humanity. Next comes Part Three, "Soteriology," starting with the highest concept of God's work in Christ and moving down to the application of salvation to the lives of people, and then to the practical means of grace. And following the traditional order he completed his theology with Part Four, "Eschatology"— the last days.

So we see that in every age, while faithful Christians continued to be submissive to Scripture, they also expressed the teachings of Scripture in ways that were appropriate for the changing Gentile cultures in which they lived.

Now that we have traced how Systematic Theology developed as a major way of expressing Christian theology, we should turn to our third main topic, the values and dangers of systematic theology. In future lessons we'll look into these issues in much detail. So, at this point, we will limit ourselves to just a handful of broad concerns.

VALUES AND DANGERS

To see some of the positive and negative features of systematic theology, we need to remember how we have described building theology in other lessons. You'll recall how we spoke of the fact that God has provided three main resources upon which we must draw as we build Christian theology: the exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community and Christian living. The exegesis of Scripture is our way of concentrating on special revelation and the other two resources focus more on God's general revelation in all things. Community interaction gives us access to a very important dimension of general revelation: the testimony of other people, especially other Christians. And Christian living draws our attention to other vital dimensions of general revelation — those things we learn through experiences of living for Christ, struggling with sin and walking in the Spirit. These three theological resources are the ordinary ways the Holy Spirit leads God's people to understand his revelation and to build Christian theology.

You'll also recall that these major theological resources help us evaluate the levels of confidence we should grant to particular beliefs we have. As the witnesses of Exegesis, interaction in community and Christian living are harmonious and weighty on a particular matter our level of conviction and confidence about that issue should normally grow. But, as these witnesses are disharmonious and of less weight our levels of conviction and confidence should normally be lessened on a given subject. Because the resources of exegesis, community interaction and Christian living play such important roles in building Christian theology, we can make some significant evaluations of the

values and dangers of systematic theology by asking how systematics engages each of these resources. How does systematic theology enable and hinder our ability to use the three resources God has provided?

We'll touch first on systematics in connection with Christian living; second, on systematics and interaction in community; and third, on systematics and exegesis. Let's consider first how systematics has both positive and negative effects on Christian living.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

The resource of Christian living can be described in many different ways and we'll explore how it works more thoroughly in future lessons. At this point, we'll give a brief snapshot of the resource of Christian living. In our study, we'll speak of Christian living as involving our sanctification, our growth in holiness, in three interrelated areas. We must be sanctified on a conceptual level, on a behavioral level and on an emotional level. In other words, our thoughts must conform to the will of God. Our actions must conform to the will of God. And our feelings must conform to the will of God as well. We've spoken of these three dimensions of Christian living as orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos.

There are critical ways in which systematic theology enhances and hinders our ability to benefit from these three dimensions of Christian living. Let's look first at the more positive side, how systematics enhances Christian living as a resource for theology.

Enhancement

On the positive side, systematic theology is particularly strong in the area of orthodoxy. It provides us with a systematic way of thinking, a conceptual framework for considering rightly the issues we face in our daily lives. As we seek to live for Christ day by day, we often face situations where we need to be able to draw from a logically coherent point of view, a consistent, stable view of God, the world around us and ourselves. Systematic theology is one of the most important ways we can find such outlooks. When we only have disconnected beliefs, we're not well-prepared to assess our circumstances, to answer questions about our lives, or to make choices that honor God.

I remember once visiting a friend in the hospital. He was very sick and in need of much prayer. But when I asked him if he was praying for God's help, he said, "No." I was shocked at his answer and asked him to explain why. So he told me. "I believe in the sovereignty of God. So, I know prayer can't make any difference."

What had happened to my friend? Well, in many respects he had grasped a bit of Christian theology but treated it as the whole of Christian teaching. He understood rightly that God is in control of history; that God is utterly sovereign. But my friend did not know how to relate that fact to other truths of the Christian faith, like the instrumentality of prayer, the ways God uses prayer to carry out his sovereign purposes.

God's sovereignty does not diminish the need for prayer, it's actually the logical basis for prayer. It is *because* God is sovereign that we pray. It is *because* he is in control

that we turn to *him* for help. If God were not in control, we should turn to someone else for help. Had my friend understood these things, had he been better trained in systematic theology, had he understood the relationship between prayer and God's sovereignty he would have been much better equipped to live his Christian life during that trying experience.

At the same time, as positive as systematic theology can be for orthodoxy, it can hinder Christian living when we expect too much from it.

Hindrance

Systematic theology turns our attention to careful rational reflection on the Christian faith and this is very important. But we can become so preoccupied with putting our beliefs into a logical system that we ignore other dimensions of Christian living, especially orthopraxis, conforming our behaviors to the will of God and orthopathos, conforming our emotions to the will of God.

For example, Christians who become heavily involved in systematics often lessen their attention to the practice and feelings of the Christian faith. They marginalize things like worship, involvement in the means of grace, service to others, and the intuitive and emotional leading of the Holy Spirit. They reduce Christian living to conceptual matters, orthodoxy, and eliminate more practical and personal dimensions of Christian living. Rational systematic theology is important, but our faith is not merely a system of doctrines. It is a practical faith that must be practiced and a personal relationship that must be nurtured.

I can't tell you how many times I have dealt with this problem in the lives of theological students. I remember one student who had received calls to become the pastor of several churches. He was so frustrated because he didn't know how to make a choice. He told me, "I have studied systematic theology so much. But it does not help me in this practical matter of making one of the most important choices I will face all of my life."

> So I asked him, "How do you feel the Holy Spirit is leading you? Have you spent much time fasting about this choice?"
>
> "Why should I do that?" he replied. "I want to figure this thing out logically and systematically."

Well, Christians who embrace the goals of systematic theology with a lot of enthusiasm often begin to ignore the practice of the faith and the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit. And this can severely hinder fruitful Christian living.

In addition to enhancing and diminishing our ability to live the Christian life, systematics also has many positive and negative effects on interaction in community. In future lessons we will look more carefully into interaction in community, but at this point we will simply mention the major dynamics of this theological resource.

Interaction in Community

It helps to think of interaction in community as involving three concerns: our Christian heritage, the arena of the Holy Spirit's work in the past, our present community,

the arena of the Holy Spirit's leading in our contemporary Christian community, and our private judgment, the arena of the Holy Spirit's work in us as individuals within community. Christians interact with each other because we know that the church is the central arena within which the Holy Spirit ministers in the world. And Christ expects us to build our theology in concert with others who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Keeping these three areas of interaction in mind: heritage, present community and private judgment, helps us see how systematic theology enhances and hinders community interaction.

Enhancement

On the one hand, one of the greatest values of systematic theology for community is the way it enables us to focus on Christian heritage, how Christians have understood and lived their faith in the past. Systematics constructs theology with an eye to the things the Holy Spirit has already taught the Church of Christ, paying attention to how great men and women in the past built theology. And because of this, it can greatly enhance our ability to interact with the Christian community of the past.

In our day, most Christians view theology as something very personal. It appears that the highest theological goal for many Christians is to form theology that is true to themselves with very little regard for what other Christians have believed. Well, Christ does call us to be genuinely personal in our approach to theology in the sense that it must be authentic, and he wants us to engage it with our whole hearts. But approaching theology exclusively as a personal matter leaves us bereft of some of the richest resources God has given us for theology: the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the ages.

Now, when believers today occasionally interact with others it's normally on the level of present community. We read books and listen to sermons and lectures given by people who are our contemporaries. Systematic theology, however, helps us turn our attention to the wonderful ways the Holy Spirit has led the church in the past.

While it is true that systematics enhances our interaction in community in this way, at the same time, systematic theology is limited in the ways it opens us to interaction.

Hindrance

When we take the traditional focus of systematic theology too far, it can lead us to irrelevance, ignoring what the Holy Spirit teaches the present community and how he informs our private judgment today. As important as the theology of the past may be, the church today faces new challenges and the Holy Spirit still teaches the church how to meet those challenges.

I can remember seeing a friend of mine at church one Sunday morning. He was a member of another church across town, but he was visiting my church that day. So, I asked him, "Why are you here today? Don't you belong to another church?"

His response was revealing. He said, "I use to love my church because the pastor taught us systematic theology. I have learned a lot about what Christians use to believe, but the longer I stay at my church, the more I feel like I am losing touch with life today."

This is the kind of problem that often comes up when Christians become too enthusiastic about systematic theology. They give so much attention to heritage that they don't know how to address contemporary issues. Systematic theology often hinders us from paying attention to present community and private judgment.

As important as it is to consider how systematic theology equips us for Christian living and community interaction, it also has significant influence on our exegesis of Scripture.

EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE

In future lessons, we'll look into exegesis in more detail, but at this point we should point to the main ways the Holy Spirit has taught the church to interpret the Bible. It's helpful to summarize them in three basic categories: literary analysis, historical analysis and thematic analysis. Each of these approaches makes unique contributions, but each is also dependent on the others. So, as we assess the value and limitations of systematic theology for exegesis, we should touch on how it relates to all three of these approaches to the interpretation of Scripture.

Literary Analysis. Literary analysis is an approach to exegesis that looks at the Bible primarily as if it were a picture, or a painting; we look at it as a literary work of art. This kind of exegesis has been emphasized a great deal in recent decades.

Broadly speaking, literary analysis seeks to understand the Bible as a document designed by human writers to influence their audiences through conventional literary means. In literary analysis much attention is given to questions like: "What were the concerns of the human writers?" "How do the literary features of a passage convey the writer's message?" And "How should the Scriptures have impacted their original audiences?"

Historical Analysis. Historical analysis is an approach to the Bible that has been characteristic of the modern period, beginning with the enlightenment and ending only in recent decades. During this period, understanding the history to which the Bible refers has been the central concern for biblical exegesis.

Historical analysis approaches the Bible not so much as a literary painting or portrait, but as a window to history. Now, sound historical analysis never ignores other approaches, but its primary purpose is to look *through* the Scriptures to learn about the history that lies behind the text.

In certain forms of historical analysis, Christians ask exegetical questions like these: "What acts of God are reported in the Scriptures?" "What was their ancient significance?" "How were these acts of God connected to other acts of God before and after?" By and large, the primary focus of historical analysis has been to reconstruct what

happened in biblical history and to understand the significance of those events for people living in those times.

Thematic Analysis. A third major strategy that the church has taken toward exegesis, may be called "thematic analysis." Thematic analysis has always been one of the ways Christians derive theology from the Bible, but thematic analysis was strongly emphasized in the early centuries of the church before the shift toward historical analysis during the modern period.

In thematic analysis we look at the Scriptures not so much as a literary portrait or a window to history, but as a mirror, a way of addressing questions, topics, or themes that are important to us, even if they are not prominent in the Bible itself. We ask questions like, "What does the Bible say about our interests?" "How does it meet our needs?" "What does it say about themes that we value?" These themes may come from personal concerns; they may come from issues raised by the cultures around us, or they may come from our church communities. Whatever the case, faithful Christians have always wanted to know what the Scriptures teach about the themes or questions that are important to them.

With these three exegetical strategies in mind, we're in a position to see how systematics enhances and hinders exegesis.

Enhancement

In the first place, systematic theology is well equipped to enhance thematic analysis. Systematic theologians give us a set of traditional questions to ask, a well ordered set of themes.

Systematic theology represents a very helpful form of thematic analysis. Systematicians explore what the whole Bible says about traditional theological themes. They collate verses from all over the Bible and draw out the interconnections between these verses as they relate to traditional topics. This process of collating and combining different verses into a whole helps us avoid treating one thing the Scriptures say about a topic as all that they say on that topic. We want to know not just what one verse says about God but what all the Scriptures say about God. What do they *all* say about humanity? What do they *all* say about salvation? Systematic theology is of great value because it helps us find biblical perspectives on these and many other crucial themes.

Hindrance

On the other hand, systematic theology often hinders exegesis because it does not focus on literary and historical analysis of the Scriptures. Of course, systematicians who are good interpreters of the bible will always look at the Bible as literature and history to some degree. Yet this is not the main way they approach the scriptures. For this reason, when systematic theology dominates our approach to interpreting the Scriptures, it places limitations on what we derive from the Bible. And as we will see in future lessons, the

discoveries of literary and historical analysis often compel us to adjust the conclusions of systematic theology.

So we see that in general terms, systematic theology has both values and dangers for building a Christian theology. It contributes to Christian living, interaction in community and exegesis in some remarkably positive ways. But it also draws our attention away from important dimensions of each theological resource as well. It's crucial that we keep both the values and dangers of systematic theology in mind.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored the question, "What is Systematic Theology?" We've seen how systematic theology compares to the New Testament. We've seen how it developed through the history of the church. And we've seen some of the values and dangers of systematic theology.

Learning how to put our beliefs in order by building a systematic theology is one of the most important things followers of Christ can do. Taking the teachings of Scripture and putting them in a logical systematic arrangement according to the longstanding traditions of the church will enable us to build a fuller Christian theology that honors God and equips us to be more effective servants of the church of Christ.

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Building Systematic Theology

LESSON ONE

What is Systematic Theology?

Faculty Forum

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Contents

Building Systematic Theology

Lesson One: What is Systematic Theology?

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Michael Briggs
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
Is Christian theology rooted in Scripture alone?

Student: Richard, the question lesson says that Christian theology is rooted in Scripture and not in tradition or experience or philosophy, but isn't Scripture a part of these things, or aren't these things a part of Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, they all are. I guess the best way to summarize what we're trying to say there in that lesson at that point is these are not the main concerns that we should have when we are doing systematic theology. We shouldn't be primarily looking to tradition or primarily looking to religious experience, or primarily looking at philosophy, because people do that. In some ways, what we're trying to do at that point is distinguish traditional systematic theology from contemporary forms of it. And some people have reduced systematic theology to church tradition, or the history of dogmatics. In many ways, traditional Roman Catholics have done that, but even some modern more liberal Protestants have done that. They say systematic theology is just sort of a history lesson of how it has been done, not how it ought to be done. But then you get other groups, and I think sometimes this would tend to be seen among charismatic s and others, that their system of theology grows primarily out of their experience of Christ. And then you have the sort of secularists, or the university theologians who have turned theology, or systematic theology into philosophy of religion. That basically began with Paul Tillich making religion your ultimate concern which gets it out of the Jesus thing and the God thing, and now you've got just whatever your particular concern is that can become your sort of philosophical approach.

Well, it's true that every time you read the Bible, you're reading it in light of your tradition. You can't avoid it. You're reading it in light of your religious experience as you can't avoid it. And you're also reading it in terms of whatever philosophical approach you have to life, whether you realize it or not, everybody's got one, and so you can't avoid it completely. But the goal, I think, of traditional Protestant theology is to root it in the Bible. That's sola scriptura. It's our only ultimate authority — the Bible is — and so rather than just wholesale buying into these other approaches, we always want to ask, well, is it true to the Bible or not? And that's all that's really

being said. We're not trying to say you can do this purely from the Bible without any of these other influences.

Student: Richard, could you give me an example of how that would play out, let's say in a modern day theological example, where you think maybe somebody's going too far in one direction over another.

Dr. Pratt: Well, let me pick on my own kind of people. I have a lot of people in my branch of the church that are very traditional, and they allow tradition to answer their theological questions for them. And so they don't maybe even care whether the Bible says it or not, or where the Bible might say it, or what the biblical justification is for something? They just want to know, is it in our confession, or is it in our catechism? That would be a traditionalist. And if you root your theology in that, then you're rooting it in something that is already weak, meaning a tradition, meaning human summaries of the Bible. And I have other friends that relate their Christianity, their thoughts, the way they organize their faith, in terms of what they're experiencing at the moment or what grand experience, especially heightened religious experiences they're had. And I believe in heightened religious experiences. I don't think there is anything wrong with them, and in fact, I think they're necessary to have because people in the Bible do. But the problem with orienting yourself towards that and using that as your only criterion is that it leads you to the ups and downs and tossed to and fro by every experience that you have. And then when you get to the philosophical things, then that just becomes ridiculously heady and nobody care anyway. But knowing about the philosophical orientations that people have does help because all of us do have them whether we admitted them or not.

Student: Well, Richard, considering the fact that none of us are going to get this right, some of us are going to focus on tradition, some on philosophy, some on religious experience. How profitable is it for us to legitimately examine these other groups and see what we can draw from?

Dr. Pratt: It's not only legitimate, it's absolutely necessary, because everybody has a propensity. Everybody tends to do one or two of these. A lot of people feel very safe if they can quote a document that's 300 years old, 400 years old, and say, you see, that's what you're supposed to believe. Other people feel very safe if they can confirm what they believe based upon some heightened experience, some spiritual experience that they've had. Other people think that it's heightened if they can prove it philosophically. And we all do this automatically. It's a part of human nature. But whatever your propensity is, it's always good to force yourself to the others, to make yourself go to the others, because if you go to the others, then you get more insights into yourself and you get more insights into brothers and sisters in Christ whom we need. And that's why I think, in some respects, denominationalism is probably one of the worst things that has happened to the church. Even though there are some positives to it because it gets things done, there are some negatives, because what happens in denominations is birds of a feather flock together. So… I mean, you've seen it. You get a group… let's form a denomination. Well, they're all like each

other. That's why they like to be with each other, and so then what's a propensity becomes a monster because you don't have any of the other witnesses around you, people who are more experientially oriented or more traditionally oriented or more philosophically oriented. You don't ever have them around you. Why? Because they go to the other denomination. So we all think we're right and we're all just focusing on one aspect of this.

Question 2:
Should we use general revelation in systematic theology?

Student: Richard, let's talk a minute about general revelation. The Bible talks about how we see God through general revelation and we learn more about him. Shouldn't we be using that same idea in using general revelation in systematic?

Dr. Pratt: Yup, we should. We always do, and we always should. Let me clarify something, though. Because I think that a lot of people, when they hear that term general revelation, they just think about going out in the woods and looking at trees or hearing the birds sing or looking at the mountains. Isn't the mountain big? Well, God must be big. And that's about the furthest extent they going thinking about general revelation. But when you look at Romans chapter 1, he doesn't just talk about nature. Paul talks about the fact that people who are doing even evil things in society, look at things in society and they know that's wrong. So it's not just raw nature that teaches us about God. Everything, even human creations as it were, cultural things, teach us about this. And so the reality is that not of us can escape it. None of us can so systematic theology free from things we know from general revelation. One of the easiest examples of this — and you can think of some — is most of us don't learn how to read by reading the Bible. Most of us learn how to read through general revelation. You can't do systematic theology very far, you can go very far with it, unless you are a reader. And so here you are just at the basic level having to use general revelation to help you do systematic theology. In fact, the more competent you are in understanding different areas of systematic theology, the more competent you are at understanding different areas of general revelation. These things fit back and forth with each other. It's not as if systematic theology, or for that matter, any kind of theology, is just quoting the Bible. Can you think of other things you need to have, Rob? Can you? Things that you have to have to be able to do systematic theology other than the Bible?

Student: Light to see the Bible.

Dr. Pratt: Light. You need to know your culture. You need to know all those kinds of things. And those are not all evil things. Those are things that God gives us as gifts. That's the important thing. There is a lot of evil that you have to get rid of that's not general revelation. But the good things that are out there that teach us the grace of

God that's shown to us in all areas is the kind of thing that we need to have when we do systematic theology. You can't avoid it.

Student: Richard, can you give us an example of maybe some errors that we might make if we exclude general revelation from our systematic theology?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great issue because… The first thing I want to say is that people, when they exclude general revelation, they do it selectively. Okay? They can't do it all. They can't get rid of it all because you can't even do theology without general revelation, can't even read the Bible without it. So we sort of said that. So what they'll do is they'll say, I don't want to consider that, or I don't want to consider that, rather than, I don't want to consider any of it. But the reality is that if you don't do this, if you don't consider general revelation around you, what you're going to end up doing is simply pouring yourself into systematic theology. I mean, for example, how do we know that people in different parts of the world, or even our next door neighbors for that matter, have different needs that need to be met by theology? How do we know that people who live in Africa have a different set of questions than people who live in North America, for example? Or China, or India, or Latin America? How do we know that? You don't get that from the Bible. You might find some principles that sort of say that, but what you're going to do is you're going to have to get in touch with those people. You'll have to know who they are. And the same is true even in a local church. I mean, we might be up there teaching a system of theology that has nothing to do with their lives. It just may not even be touching things that they need to know and that need to meet. And as Christians, our goal is not to do theology the way that it helps us, but rather to do it in ways that help other people. Because doing systematic theology or being a theologian is a spiritual gift, and as we know, Paul tells us that spiritual gifts are for the edification of the church. And so we're not supposed to be thinking our own thoughts so we can be happy that we feel good about our theology. We're supposed to be systematizing theology in ways that meets the needs of people other than ourselves — perhaps ourselves at times, too, but others in particular — so that we can do theology as it ought to be done. And that involves general revelation all the time. So if you want to ignore general revelation around you, then what you're going to end up doing is just doing theology the way you like to do it and ignoring the needs of others.

Question 3:
Why is logical coherence important?

Student: Richard, you say that we have to be logically coherent. But what's wrong with just taking each topic as it comes and deal with them scripturally?

Dr. Pratt: Well, nothing would be wrong with that. In fact, that's what you want to do, is you want to deal with them scripturally. But I think probably the best response is to say the Bible doesn't leave topics separated from each other. The Bible itself

deals with the logical coherence between this subject and that subject. You know, the classic example, of course, if Romans, how Romans builds a case chapter by chapter, section by section, connecting the sinfulness of Jews and Gentiles with their need for justification by faith, Jews and Gentiles, and so on and so and so on through the whole book. But it's not just Romans. Every other book of the Bible does the same thing. None of them deal with just one topic. That's the first thing we need to say. And none of them deal with these issues separately from each other. They all have a way of relating them to each other, which we would want to call logical, I hope, in some sense, but we do need to remember that there are different kinds of logic. Logic of a narrative is different from the logic of an epistle, or the logic of a poem is different from the logic of a wisdom saying or something like that. I suppose the most scattered or the most "a-logical" part of the Bible would probably be Proverbs because sometimes you get proverbs that are just sort of stuck in there with no apparent connection to the things that come after it and before it. But certain interpreters recently have argued very strongly that even the proverbs are connected to each other logically. I wasn't fully convinced by the commentary, but it's all right. I think it's true, though. So I guess my response is, so long as you don't narrow your idea of what logical coherence is to a very strict criterion of what that is, and you allow yourself some flexibility as to what you mean by connecting the logic of this to the logic of that like the Bible does, then the whole Bible is logically oriented. Have you ever known people that just say one thing and say another thing, and they don't seem to have any coherence at all?

Student: Not necessarily.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly. That's the problem. Usually people do not live their lives totally illogically. If they do, we tend to diagnose them and put them away. We consider them somehow out of sorts or unable to function responsibly in society. But the problem is that lots of times theologians and philosophers have a very narrow idea of what it means to be logical. And that's the problem I think people face with systematic theology as we'll see in this very lesson we're talking about. The theology of Christianity, traditional systematic theology, was governed by a particular kind of logic that had a particular flavor to it, a particular style to it. And it is very rigid in some respects. It is very meticulous and not the sort of thing that you do in a normal daily life. And that is what people tend to resist. They tend to want to say, you know, why do we need to get into all those logical implications of this, that and the other, and work all these details out and things? Now sometimes we may be wondering to ourselves whether we should or not, because what we're facing there is a particularly narrow definition of what it means to be logical, and the Bible doesn't just have that definition; though, in some places it even has that.

Question 4:
How can we focus on multiple themes in Scripture?

Student: Well, Richard, how do we get from the perspective of… For example, when I grew up, I had a pastor every Sunday, he had a theme, he had his three points, and he would preach just on that. How do we get away from that tendency to want to just really focus it? You know, you talked a little bit ago about how we really have to look at the Bible as really always addressing multiple issues at one time. So in our daily preaching, or when we're talking to folks in our congregation, how do we move away from that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I guess the only way I can respond to that is just to say, try to help people remember how what you're talking about fits into the bigger picture. And you don't have to elaborate on that. You don't have to sit down every time you have a Sunday school lesson and go through the whole systematic theology again. But when something comes up in a lesson that sounds as if it may be contradicting something that is in the system of theology, then usually people need to be at least receiving an aside saying that's not so. For example, I tend when I preach to emphasize the humanity of Jesus a lot. I do. I know I do it. I do it consciously. Because in my circles, people don't emphasize that very much. They usually think of Jesus as just divine and that his humanity was just sort of a nice thing, but who cares… okay, I'm glad to know he was that, but, whatever. And so I tend even in preaching to talk about Jesus the man, but I can only do that so far or to a certain extent before I see eyes looking strangely at me. And when I see those eyes start looking strangely at me, then I back up and I'll say something just quick like, now we all do believe that Jesus is fully God, but we also believe he is fully man, and then take off again. And what that does, it helps them… it helps with the distance they feel between the focus of a particular lesson and the bigger picture of their theology. It sort of gives them resolution for a moment, gives them a little peace so they can step with you a little further into that particular theme. And I think that those kinds of things are just the sort of thing you do when you are teaching or preaching and you're watching people's eyes; you're thinking about what they're thinking rather than just looking at your manuscript and thinking about what you're thinking. Because you're not teaching or preaching to yourself. You're preaching and teaching others. And that's another example of how general revelation is there. You see, because my looking at their eyes is general revelation, and it's actually leading me in how I'm going to teach the Bible to them.

Question 5:
Does systematic theology impose Aristotelian thinking onto the Bible?

Student: Richard, I guess the only dissonance that I may have is that as we're looking through the New Testament, actually, all of Scripture, you see various genres, and typically you see either narration or, in the case of the New Testament,

all these epistles. And they're dealing with specific issues. What would you say to the person who would argue that what we're doing is simply imposing some sort of Aristotelian framework on Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I would say people do tend to do that. Traditional theology does tend to do that. It tends to flatten the Bible down so that it all is saying the same thing. There are no mountain peaks, no valleys, no rivers, no trees. The fact is, one of the reasons we have systematic theology is because the Bible itself does have the mountain peaks and the valleys and the trees and the rivers and the lakes and the rocks and the animals. So, and the Bible itself does not always help people connect that one little piece that it's talking about with the bigger system. It doesn't. Occasionally it does, but usually it doesn't. And that is the reason why we have systematic theology. It's to help people do something that the Bible itself does not do. Now that raises the question, of course, of whether we should do it or not. Why not just leave a topic the way Jesus did? Well, sometimes it is effective to do that, and to realize that Jesus does that occasionally, means it's okay for us to do. For example, when Jesus says if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Well, he does not relate that to the larger system and explain what that might mean. He just says it and walks away. And sometimes teaching needs to be like that, to create dissonance, which is what he was doing there, create the crack in the system that people have where they would say to themselves things like, well, you know, what my eyes do really isn't that important, what my eyes do really doesn't have that much effect on me. And so Jesus comes with this punch that does not smooth out into the great system of theology and walks away from them. Well, preaching sometimes is to be that way. Teaching is sometimes to be that way. But if you do that all the time, you're going to have trouble. And that's why Jesus will sit down with his disciples and explain things.

Question 6:
Does systematic theology incline us toward speculation?

Student: Do you think that systematic theology would give us the propensity to try to answer some of the mysteries that are in Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, it certainly will do that. And we'll talk about that. I'm sure, more and more, because there are lots of mysteries in the Bible, and when we push the issue of logical coherence, we sometimes push it into speculation, and that's really very important to avoid.

Question 7:
Why is a traditional emphasis important in systematic theology?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you put a big focus on why we should go systematic theology from a traditional emphasis. What's the most important thing about that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, in some ways, it's not so much why we ought to. That's really not the focus at least of this lesson. It's more trying to give a sense to the people who are viewing this as to what we are going to do. In other words, there are other ways to do what people call theology, even systematic theology, that do not depend much on the ways it has been done before. Now this series is concerned with the ways it's been done before, and so I'm just sort of highlighting that to let people know that's the case. But let's just make the point that people today, even in my own circles and in many other circles, they do theology in ways that are different from traditional systematic theology. The biblical theology movement that's in a different series focuses on that and how we would try to do theology in a slightly different way, though, actually it's very dependent on traditional ways. But the reality is that that there is value in looking at the ways Christians have done theology in the past, and the value is this: they had the Holy Spirit, too. And any time you look at the past, you're going to find positives and you're going to find negatives, and in some respects, the positives you want to build on are the negatives you want to avoid. But if you don't know anything about the way theology has been done in the past, then you're not going to be able to build on what they did that was good, and you're going to repeat the mistakes they made. I mean, one great example of that is sometimes in past Christians have done their systematic theology in ways that actually compromised the Bible's teaching for the sake of being relevant to their day. And from our vantage point, we can look back those times when they did this, and we can see it. Sometimes we can't see it in our own day. We can't see how we're compromising because we're the ones doing it. It's sort of a blind spot. But we can see the blind spots the people in the past had, and just becoming aware of that and learning about those kinds of things can help us in our day. But then there's the positive as well. You get the successes of the church in the past and how it has defined certain things and helped understanding of the Bible in certain ways, and we can build on those successes, not just learn from their mistakes, but their successes, because, yes, they were sinful, therefore they made mistakes, but yes, they had the Holy Spirit, and therefore they had successes in theology. So that's what we're trying to do, just give that kind of orientation.

Question 8:
Why do some Christians prefer modern thinking over traditional thinking?

Student: Richard, it seems like there is a segment in the American church today that has rejected the teachings of the past, and for some reason, they embrace the modern, and whatever is modern is good, whatever is traditional is bad. What is the motivation behind that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think it's what C.S. Lewis called a chronological bigotry. How's that? If you think about liberalism, just sort of classic liberalism that is in many of the

mainline churches, they have this sort of chronological bigotry that from the enlightenment and afterward, we do things better than human beings did before that time. So modern people are better at this thing, whatever it may be. Sending people to the moon? Yes, we are better at that. Doing theology? I'm not so sure. But they think anything modern would be a better way to approach things. And so you get people doing things like ignoring what the early church said about the Bible, for example, and coming up with their own approach to the Bible. They ignore what the early church said about the person of God, and they stick their own things in there. Why? Simply because modern people do it better. Now, we have in recent decades in the emerging church, in the so-called postmodern church, a sort of chronological bigotry against the modern period. Okay? Everything modern you sort of feel like we're beyond that now, we are better at things than they were. And so you get a de-emphasis on certain kinds of rational thought and certain kinds of theological approaches simply because they were done either by the liberals in recent history or by the ancient church in the past, and so you end up with another form of chronological bigotry. The reality is that I don't think there is a whole lot of justification for having a bigotry about your own day, and we're not that much better off than people were in the past. And so I think it's just important for us to realize that, that there is value in learning from the past as well as from the present.

Question 9:
Are we held accountable to the past?

Student: In what ways do you think we are held accountable by the past?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think that, you know, the Apostle Paul said, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ, and he also said that things like the experiences of Israel in the Old Testament were for us today, in, 1 Corinthians 10; they were not to forget those experiences of the past. I think we are called by the Bible, we're to be responsible in theology by remembering the past and what's been done, and to ignore the past is to repeat it. And many times, we don't want to do that.

Question 10:
What role does the Old Testament play in systematic theology?

Student: Richard, the lesson talks about how systematic theology is kind of born out of the New Testament. What role does the Old Testament play in all of this?

Dr. Pratt: Honestly, not much. Occasionally it does, but usually not. Systematic theology is focused on things that are true and remain true and never change. Now that's just the nature of traditional systematic theology. And so when they go to the Bible, these systematic theologians of the past and even the present, if they are in the traditional mold, then what they tend to do is look for the final analysis, the last

answer that the Bible gives, because that is the permanent answer. That's the one you can count on. That's the one that is really of major importance to them. That comes from the history of systematic theology, but the idea is this. Let me give you this example. Rather than talking about the Old Testament sacrificial system in systematic theology, which they do a little bit on occasion, but rather than focusing on that, what they zero in on is the death of Christ. Why? Because Christ is the completion or the fulfillment of all that had come before him in the sacrificial systems of the Old Testament. So if you're looking for the permanent way to think about sacrifice and atonement, you're not going to go back to bowls and lambs and things like that and talk about what they did in their rituals. That's sort of, as it were, irrelevant. Now they wouldn't say it's utterly irrelevant because that teaches us some things about Jesus, but you're really concerned with is Jesus, and his death, and his resurrection. And the same is true for the other teachings of the New Testament. It is, unfortunately, something that's built largely out of what the church perceives to be the teachings of the New Testament and only appeals to the Old Testament when you are pressed to do so by some need of some sort.

So when you think about what part of the Bible's history does systematic theology normally talk about? Well, it talks about the "*historia salutis*", or the history of salvation. But what is that history of salvation piece that they talk about? It's the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. It's not what happened in the exodus, or what happened in Abraham's day, or what happened in the exile. That's not really of interest, because all those were preliminary to the finale in Jesus. And so that's why you get the focus on the New Testament.

Student: Well Richard, I would be thinking, especially as an Old Testament scholar like you, I would be wondering if don't we sometimes leave something out, something historical. Can you even give us an example of when Old Testament actually does filter in?

Dr. Pratt: I think the reality is that when we have theology that's built on the New Testament, you're building on what I would humorously say is the end notes of the Bible. Now I say that as a joke, but at the same time, let's face it, the New Testament is very small, it doesn't say a whole lot a whole lot. And the reason it doesn't is because it was never designed to replace the Old. It was designed to be, as it were, a filter or a lens for understanding the Old. And so when you're theology is built out of, as most systematic theology is, primarily the epistles of the Apostle Paul, then you're leaving out a lot of Revelation. And so your picture of Jesus and what he did, your picture of what the church is, your picture of what life is from systematic theology is sometimes like a black-and-white sketch without much color, without much life, without much blood pumping through it, because the New Testament wasn't designed to give you the blood and the pictures and the colors and the flavors and the sounds. That comes more from the Old Testament. And the New Testament writers were thinking that way: I don't really need to talk much about this because the people already know this from the Old Testament. The sad thing of course today is that people today don't know the Old Testament. Again, that's why biblical theology is

impressive to many people and is interesting to many people, because it does reach back into the Old and brings theology all the way through the development.

Student: Okay, now you're not saying, though, that things like, let's just say Genesis 1 and 2 don't speak to theology proper, or Isaiah 53 doesn't speak to Christology. You're not saying that?

Dr. Pratt: Not at all. In fact, they do. And those are the kinds of passages that systematicians will draw upon. They tend to draw upon the Old Testament when they are talking about the character of God, the attributes of God. Why do they do that? Because the New Testament doesn't talk about it much. Right? In how many places in the New Testament can you think of them talking about the aseity of God, the self-containedness of God, or the eternality of God, and things like that? It's really not an issue talked about in the New Testament. So when you have to, you go back. But if you're talking about things like what is salvation, how does a person come to salvation, the *ordo salutis*, and things like that. That's primarily a New Testament issue to the systematician's mind, and they don't even want to go back to the Old Testament to even look, because what you find in Paul's epistles on that is fairly stable and fairly secure, even the terminology. But when you start looking for that terminology in the past, in the earlier parts of the Bible, you find that they use the terminology differently. And so this would just cause confusion. So you sort of leave that part out. But when it comes to things like the personality of God, his attributes, those kinds of things? Yes. Trinity? No. And as you know, systematic theology is dedicated under theology proper to Trinity, and you don't find that in the Old Testament. You find a few hints here and there, but that's a New Testament teaching and not an Old Testament teaching. So it is based, unfortunately, primarily on New Testament teaching.

Question 11:
Should we do theology pastorally instead of systematically?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you talk about how the New Testament really has a focus on pastoral epistles, and we see that focus. Why don't we really focus on the pastoral versus focusing on systematics?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question, because a lot of people would argue that we need to do theology the way that the Bible does it, and the issue here becomes one of the Bible being our authority not just for the content of theology, but for the manner of theology, or the organization of theology. And I personally believe that yes, that is true, that we ought to have theology being done in the various genres that the New Testament and Old Testament have, in the various styles, the various focal points that they have including pastoral. It's really not an either/or choice in my mind, because in some respects, what we inherit as systematic theology was pastoral in the past. It was pastoral to certain kinds of needs, certain kinds of issues. When Jesus gave us the

great commission, he commissioned us to teach all nations, and I think that that's where systematic theology comes in. It's designed to communicate the teachings of the Bible to a particular kind of world. Now that world is not the world in which most Christians live. And that's what we've got to become convinced of. It's the world of academics. It's the world of people in certain kinds of academic settings and, as we'll talk about in a few moments, in the Mediterranean world with the philosophical issues that that faced. So it's not as if it's totally wrong or totally irrelevant, but you're right to say that the Bible doesn't have very many examples of things that come close to systematic theology. Some people would point to Romans as being like that. People would disagree with that, especially these days. I sometimes point to things like Ecclesiastes as a sort of philosophical treatise, that kind of thing. It is more philosophical, or logical, or systematic in the sense than what you find in the New Testament pastoral epistles. But it is important for us to say that just because this is the way it has been done, it doesn't mean it's the only way to do it. And I think that the pastoral emphasis of the New Testament helps us do that. I think one of the biggest differences between systematic theology and pastoral theology in the Bible is the technical language that they use. Systematic theology is very keen on making sure you use terminology in the same way every time you use it. The Bible doesn't do that. And the reason it doesn't do that is because while it wasn't illogical, it's not systematic in that sense. It's not meticulous in the definitions of terms and things like that. So you get variety in the Bible, and it's because they were more pastoral. They were just less formal I guess is one way to put it.

Question 12:
Should we use systematic theology in preaching and pastoring?

Student: Richard, as an aspiring pastor myself, I look at systematic theology, and I see great benefits in it. But it also seems like it is an academic exercise pretty much meant for theologians. And yet, then I have this responsibility of stepping into the pulpit, and it seems to me there may be a disconnect. How can I take this rich foundation of systematic theology and step into the pulpit and pastor my people?

Dr. Pratt: Well, not by repeating systematic theology, unless you want to make them as irrelevant as you are. How's that? Because the reality is people by and large don't live in that kind of world, and they don't need to live in that kind of world. Systematic theology grew up within the church and within circles within the church where the more academic or intellectual issues were the need. But that was not the need even of the average person even in those days. It was just the need of the leaders or the theologians of the world at that time as they discussed very high and lofty ideas. And so I think that we have to be very careful how we indoctrinate people into the system of theology that any particular denomination might represent, because they all have it. Sometimes it's not spoken, sometimes it's not written down, but they all have a system of theology. But if you're always in those kinds of levels, or those kinds of big picture, abstract sorts of things, you are going to ignore the needs of real

people. And that is one of the great dangers especially of students is that they make a confusion between what they may need as students, as academic people at this time in their lives, which would be more of a systematic theology, and thinking that because it helped them where they are, it's going to help everyone else. And it actually can hurt people, because it will remove their Christianity from their real lives. All preaching is autobiographical. All teaching is autobiographical to some extent. You can't avoid it. You always talk about the things that have meant something to you. But you can push yourself as a teacher and as a preacher to concern yourself and to concentrate on what they need. And of course, the only way you do that is by knowing them, and that's a big issue. For people that like systematic theology, they tend to not like people. Sorry, but it's true. And there is a correlation there. They don't want to be involved in people's lives. But providing them with enough framework to help them live their lives is what we want to do with systematic theology.

Question 13:
Does the focus of systematic theology differ from the focus of the Bible?

Student: It seems that the traditional categories of systematic theology differ from the kingdom focus of the New Testament. Is it possible that by spending our time in systematic theology and building these systems that we're actually detracting from the focus of the New Testament itself?

Dr. Pratt: It's not only possible, it is reality. How's that? You know, I think the reality is that systematicians have always understood the Bible in terms of the questions that they bring to the Bible. And a lot of those questions were not in themselves rooted in the Bible. They were rooted in more philosophical issues that they faced in their days, and we'll talk about that in terms of Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, and things like that. It's not that it was evil. It's just that it's a different sort of set of questions. When the New Testament writers were writing, they were writing out of their Palestinian-Jewish context, and within that context, there was one dominant issue, and that is, when is the Messiah going to come, and what is Messiah going to do. Period. You can put a period at the end of that sentence. That was the dominant concern, because for hundreds of years they had been in exile, and they had been under the tyranny of foreign nations, and they wanted that to be over. They wanted the promise of the Prophets for the new world, the new age, the kingdom of God to come. And that was what was dominant in their thinking, and it was also dominant in the thinking of Jesus, and it was also dominant in the thinking of the apostles and the other writers of the New Testament. That is, without a doubt, in my mind anyways, these days the centerpiece of the New Testament's teaching is what we call eschatology, or the kingdom of God, or the hope in Messiah that Jesus fulfills.

Now biblical theology has emphasized that. Once again, this is why people are often very interested in biblical theology as opposed to systematics, but I believe personally that the emphases that systematics have had in the past are valuable so long as we don't replace the Bible's emphasis with that. It's not as if the Bible is perfectly balanced. The Bible has also got an angle to it. It's dealing with the truth, it never tells us a lie. But it has an angle, and the angle is what about these Jewish hopes for the kingdom of God. Well, when systematic theology was growing, the angle shifted. The questions were shifting away from eschatology, kingdom of God, Messiah, to questions like, what's the nature of God? Is Jesus human or divine? What's the nature of the church? All those kinds of things that the New Testament addresses indirectly. It doesn't address them directly. And that's why I think systematic theology is different. But you're right. It can distract us from what the emphases of the New Testament are.

Question 14:
What modern questions is systematic theology answering?

Student: Richard, in the video you talk about how the church fathers had to really deal with the Trinity and basically breaking down the different parts, because those questions never really came up for the New Testament believers. What are some of the more modern questions now that systematic theology is answering that we bring to the table versus folks who lived a thousand years ago would have never asked?

Dr. Pratt: I think one of the issues that people have to face today that they didn't have to face a thousand, fifteen hundred years ago is multiculturalism. We cannot escape anymore the fact that we aren't the only people in the world. You know, it used to be very easy. Even as child whenever I heard about China, it was always those starving Chinese children, or clean you plate because of the starving Chinese children. Things like that. China was a far-off place that I didn't even have photographs of. All I had were sketches in a book at school, the Chinese people with their funny hats. Now, of course, people go to China all the time, and Chinese are here all the time. And that's the way the world is now. We face the reality that people of different races and different ethnic orientations and different countries and different cultures, even the Christians, look at life differently. Well, when you're dealing with the Mediterranean world, there was some difference — yes, the early church had to deal with that, the medieval church had to deal with that as it moved more toward Europe — there were differences, no doubt. But at the same time, that culture was very unified in large part because of the remnants of the Roman Empire. It was still very singular in its approach to life, and so traditional systematic theology did not have to deal with the issue of what's normative, what's cultural.

And that's a big difference for us today, a big difference. Especially in our day when the vast majority of Christians now do not live in Western Europe or North America, the United States. They live now in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and that's going to

continue to go that way, unless God changes the course of history, that the majority of Christians are not going to be people who have inherited this non-Hispanic Western European culture. There are going to be people of various cultures, and they're going to do their Christian theology in different ways, and they're going to have different emphases and that sort of thing. And we have to wrestle with that today in ways that Christians have never had to wrestle with it before.

Question 15:
What happens when culture influences systematic theology?

Student: What are the potential benefits but also potential hindrances of having these new cultural influences impact our systematic theology?

Dr. Pratt: Well, Philip Jenkins says that as the majority of people in Christianity are in other parts of the world, they're going to start leading theology. That it's not just going to be that you've got more people, but actually, the leaders of Christianity are going to be there, too, and that different parts of the world are going to have to start paying attention to what they're saying. That's going to be a difficult time, especially for North Americans, because we tend to think that we're the best at everything, and Christians tend to think in this country that we're the best at theology, too. Well, we're not. We may do some things well, and we may even be the best at certain things, but we're not the best at everything. And as their agenda starts to dominate Christian theology, which it will do, presumably in the near future — we're talking 25 to 50 years before this happens — we're going to find ourselves challenged I think in some ways that are good, because we have certain emphases in North American and Western European Christianity that have probably gone way off track, very far off track, and they will have different emphases that will help us align ourselves more with the Bible. But then again, China, Asia at large, Africa, Latin America, they don't do theology perfectly either. But you can imagine that they're going to be very different.

Think about it this way. How many North American theologians, I mean leading theologians that sort of set the pace for everybody for the last 300 years, how many of them do you think wrote their theology and thought through theology under great persecution and suffering? Not many. They had personal illnesses, they had family problems, things like that. They experienced wars, things like that, but not a lot of persecution in North America for Christians. It hasn't always been convenient, but it hasn't been a hardship for us. Well, Christians in Asia and in Africa and in parts of Latin America have suffered persecution, and they're going to be writing their theology out of persecution and suffering and deprivation. The question might be put this way, what would be the difference if you're talking about the omniscience of God, that God knows everything, how would you talk about that differently if you are a North American who has never suffered much persecution, never gone to prison for your faith and things like that? How would that be emphasized and talked about

differently by someone who spent 25 years in prison because of their faith? So it's that kind of reality that we have to face. We're facing it already in most churches in North America by the changes in music. It's already happening. But what's changing in music in the church of Western Europe and North America is going to start changing in systematic theology, too. And it's going to challenge us with good things, and we're going to have to figure out what's good about it and what's not so good about it.

Question 16:
Is it right to use systematic theology to discipline and teach the nations?

Student: Richard, you mentioned in the video how the Bible doesn't say to go and read to all nations, read the Bible to all nations. We're supposed to teach. So what makes systematic theology the right way to go about teaching?

Dr. Pratt: Well, it doesn't. It makes it right, the traditional systematic theology, makes it right — we're giving them the benefit of the doubt here — it makes it right for their time. The idea here is just simply that if you're going to do theology responsibly as a Christian before God, if you're going to teach the Bible responsibly as a Christian before God, you don't just repeat what the Bible says over and over and over again. We love the Bible. We always want to make sure that what we teach is true to the Bible, but the Bible was written for a particular time also, and its emphases and its organization and things like that are particularized by the form in which it's given. It's not given to us as a timeless book. Now it does have timeless importance and it has timeless value, but it was written for particular kinds of people at a particular time in history. That's why, for example, it's written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. You know, if we were to really study the Bible the way perhaps we ought to, we'd be studying it in those languages. And then we'd realize very quickly how different it is from where we are today. Just take the New Testament. The questions that people were asking in the first century Palestine are different from the kinds of questions that we are asking today. Now they're similar in some ways, but also then very different. And systematic theology was the attempt to answer different sorts of questions that were being asked during the period of the New Testament. Now it's not as if the New Testament has nothing to say about them. They do. The New Testament writers do have things to say about those questions, but they are indirect, and that's the emphasis here, that to do theology doesn't mean that we should just read the Bible to people. We've got to find out how to communicate those indirect teachings of the Bible to people today more directly, depending on what their questions are. Can you imagine a question that comes up today in the church of Jesus Christ that would not have come up in first century Christianity?

Student: How would a believer deal with the pornography that's prevalent on TV today?

Dr. Pratt: Well, actually that might be a whole lot more like the first century than you can imagine. It's sort of funny, because if you go to the site of Ephesus today, you can go to where the wealthy people of Ephesus lived, and you can actually walk above the rooms of their houses that have been excavated, and the walls are just covered with pornography of all sorts. So you have when the Apostle Paul, if he were to visit someone's home, or if a Christian were to visit someone's home that had any money at all, they had pornography on the walls. It's very interesting how we deal with it differently today, but of course, at this point it has come into our homes which is a little bit different than going to someone else's home. And yes, there are differences along those lines. And the sorts of things that we have to concern ourselves with, things like modern warfare, the issues between nations today that are different than in those days. When we consider things like technologies that are different today than they were back then, education different than it is today, various art forms that we express today are different than they were back then. There are big differences, and so we have to learn how to follow the example of the church early and the church medieval to bring contemporary theological questions to the foreground today, but to address them by the authoritative Word of God in the Old and New Testaments. That's the key, that we keep taking ourselves back to sola scriptura, keep going back to it and saying this is where we find our answers, even as difficult as that may be at times.

Question 17:
How can we relate ancient cultural situations to modern situations?

Student: Richard, I understand that we need to translate the scriptural text, the Greek and Hebrew, into modern language when we communicate, but how do we take the cultural situation and translate it into a modern culture and ensure that we're not losing anything?

Dr. Pratt: You can't. You can't ensure that you're not losing something. In fact, you can be guaranteed you are losing something. But that's okay, because the people who first read the Bible in the original languages and in the original cultural setting were always missing things. This is just part of the reality. That's why you have theology. You have theology because you want to acknowledge that there's a process to this by which you're always going to be missing something, and so the next guy comes along and tries to do a little bit better. So it's a good thing that we know this and we realize that every time we study the Bible, we're going to miss some things, we're going to get other things. But there's also a great advantage to theology, and that is that sometimes the theologians bring out things in Scripture that are implicit in the Bible that perhaps even the original people that received it didn't even put together. And that happens, too. I always ask people, you know, they say, why do we need theology? And the answer is because if you don't have theology, then you're going to be left with something as confusing as the Bible is. The point of theology is to make things clearer than even the Bible does sometimes, by connecting this to this and that

to that in ways that the Bible doesn't do it explicitly. Now you always want to be true to the Bible, but you at the same time want to see how various pieces fit together that the New Testament, for example, or other parts of the Bible, don't particularly put together in particular ways. The cultural setting, however, is very important to remember, that as you look at the Bible and you look at theology in the past, always to evaluate what they've done in terms of their own cultural biases and their own cultural tendencies is extremely important, and then to look at your own cultural biases and tendencies and put them on the table as well to try to be self-reflective is very important, too.

Question 18:
Are some modern cultures more similar than others to ancient culture?

Student: Richard, would you say that there are certain cultures that are more close to how they lived in the Bible than today? For example, I've been to Africa and I've seen things that appear to be quite similar to what I read in the Bible.

Dr. Pratt: Of course. If you're a more agrarian society, you're going to have a lot more connections with things that are in the Bible because they were basically agrarian. If you have limited access to electricity and things like that, you're going to be closer to the way things were in the Bible. If you can't travel much, the same thing. It's true that there are places in the Bible that will be in certain ways closer to the culture of the Bible, and I would suppose we could even find correlations to later on after the Bible in the history of the church as well, where people are sort of stuck, as it were, at a particular stage that you could find correlations. And that's why it is so important for us especially in the contemporary world to start thinking about how systematic theology needs to be done in different ways today to meet the needs of people, to communicate the gospel to people in an extended way, as they live in different cultures.

If you were in Africa, was that on a mission trip of some sort? Yes, well, then you know who sometimes your way of thinking about Christianity probably didn't make much sense to them. Is that fair? Okay, well I would hope not. Because your Christianity is for you, and so as somebody going to them with the message of Christ, you had to be careful to try your best to contextualize It for them so that they would understand what the gospel is. And this is of course one of the biggest challenges that we have faced in the past especially, but now it's going to be interesting, as we said earlier, when the dominant forces of Christianity are coming from other parts of the world, they're going to have to start contextualizing their theology for us. And that's going to be very interesting to see how that works out, because now, if they become the leaders of the Christian world, which I think they will for all practical purposes, they're going to have their emphases, and their emphases are not going to work in your culture or my culture. And so now Africans or Asians will have to be contextualizing the gospel back for North Americans and Western Europeans.

Imagine that. Which will be a glorious day because then maybe we can learn something after all.

Question 19:
Do the differences between modern and ancient culture make the Bible irrelevant?

Student: Well you're talking in this context about contextualizing the gospel in our modern day. But I also think about trying to read Scripture in the context of its cultural setting, and I see the possibility of us looking at something that maybe we disagree with in Scripture and way, well, that was cultural and it doesn't apply today. How do we avoid that pitfall?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think that a lot of people do approach the Bible that way. They approach it and say, what parts are cultural and what parts are normative? Now that's just true. And usually the answer to that comes from their prejudices, as you said, what they are willing to do. If they're willing to submit to that part of the Bible, then they'll say that's normative. If they're not so comfortable submitting, they'll say that's just cultural. I don't like that approach where you pick and choose which parts are cultural and which parts are normative. I believe that the better way to look at it is to say it's all cultural, it's all normative, because it is all incarnated. The whole Bible is incarnated into the culture of the people who first received it, and there are varieties of those. And while it's practical and useful for them in their cultural setting, it also is normative for the people of God from that point forward.

Now, the difference comes in how you express it's normativity in one culture and another and another and another. The classic example of course is when Paul says greet on another with a holy kiss. Well, there are Christian churches today that still have holy kisses between men and women to women and men to men. And I've had some interesting experiences, in Siberia for example, seeing that happen and being a part of that, that weren't so pleasant for me as a Westerner, because we sort of think of the greeting style being a handshake. I don't know why we avoid the holy kiss, but we do. But in some respects, what we're trying to do in western culture, we're trying to do something like the holy kiss that would be true for our day. So, for example, if I'm meeting a stranger, I might shake his hand. But if I'm meeting a brother whom I love, I'll hug him. And that would be the comparable sort of thing that would be true to the normativity of greet on another with a holy kiss, but acknowledging that in that day that's the way it was done, and in fact, it was for the most part common among all people in the Mediterranean world to do that kind of kissing of the cheeks and that sort of thing. So it was enculturated for them, but now we need to re-enculturate it for us, too, in ways that correspond.

Question 20:
How did the early church use Neo-Platonic language?

Student: Richard, can you give me an example of how the early church used neo-platonic language?

Dr. Pratt: I can do that. It's important to get this, because we still have remnants of this in our own theology, and we don't even realize it because it's just so much of the tradition that we just sort of repeat these things. But for the first at least five centuries of Christianity, there was a strong emphasis on what generally speaking people called Neo-Platonism, influence of Plotinus and other expressions of Platonic philosophy in the Mediterranean world. It was the intellectual language of the day. And even when you find words that are so important in the early creeds like person, or nature, or essence, or substance, you're dealing with either the Greek words or the Latin equivalents of those. And they were all being defined in terms of this neo-platonic philosophy. But what I think is probably most obvious to many of us would be things like the emphasis that the early church had on the sacraments. You see, in our day we don't have much emphasis on the sacraments except in this particular tradition or that particular tradition which are in many respects sort of leftovers from way back when. And we don't even usually know why we would even use the word sacrament. Most of us think of baptism, for example, and the Lord's Supper as ordinances rather than sacraments. So why do we use the word sacrament? Well, the word sacrament, *sacramentum*, is the word mystery in Latin. Okay? And you remember in the video that Neo-Platonism was very much concerned with a person going from normal existence up into becoming divine, becoming one with the divine. And that's extremely important. It was platonic in some respects, but then neo-platonic especially, that human beings find salvation by becoming divine, by becoming one with the divine. And so there was a process for getting that, and the process was leaving your fleshly passions behind, don't just be somebody who is driven by hunger and by sexual desire and violence and those kinds of things, but first become a rational person and be thoughtful and reflective and be logical about things. But even that's not enough, because you're still down here in sort of the human realm. What you have to do is reach religious ecstasy, or philosophical ecstasy, which was the mystic's experience.

And that's why you find so much in the early church and emphasis on mysticism and a lot of people going out into the desert and having mystical experiences, visions and the like. It's also why you find in the early church fathers, a lot of emphasis on the sacraments, because the sacraments of the Lords' Supper and baptism were not just ordinances, they were mysteries, they were mystical experiences that have been ordained for the church. Some of that's true, I think, but at the same time, you can see the emphasis there of the truly pious, the truly spiritual person, leaves the earthly world behind and moves into the spiritual realm. Well, that is contrary to the Bible, to be perfectly frank. The Bible doesn't define a human being as the soul encased in a physical body. A human being is an inner person and an outer person, but the person

is both of these together. So a human being is both body and soul, body and spirit. And that's why orthodox Christianity believes in the resurrection of the body.

In some respects, the Neo-Platonists were a lot like the Sadducees in Jesus' day in that they believed that spiritual experience continued in eternity but not physical experience. And of course the Apostles Creed makes it very clear that we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting, so we believe in bodily resurrection before we can get to the point that we spend eternity with Jesus after he returns. He was raised bodily, we are raised bodily. So we don't have this antagonism and this hatred of the flesh like the Neo-Platonists did. They saw physical existence as the problem, and the Bible doesn't see it as the problem. So it's everywhere in the early fathers.

Question 21:
Does modern theology emphasize the spiritual over the material?

Student: Well, you just mentioned a second ago that there is some of that language in modern theology, but it seems like modern theology if rife with this distinction between the material and the spiritual and how all we want to do is get done with this life here on earth and go to heaven and be with our God in heaven.

Dr. Pratt: I think that popular theology is like that a lot. It's amazing, actually, how oriented it is toward this sort of thinking. Now it fits a lot with today's philosophies, especially New Age philosophies and after New Age, but it even fits in with modern Western philosophy with its emphasis on the mind, on the superiority and that somehow the rationality of the human being is what makes them different from other animals, as they would say — this is what makes us above them, and that's what will continue is your rational mind as you go away because in the modern world we know now that the body is corrupted and disintegrates and goes back into the earth, and all that kind of thing, but your mind or your consciousness continues. So there are analogies even in the modern world with that, and unfortunately, lots of Christians are poorly taught about the resurrection of the dead.

It's quite fascinating to realize that we are part of the body of Christ, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, even in our physical body, that the members of our physical bodies are the body of Christ also. This is how he argued against Christians exercising freedom that they had, in the Corinthian situation at least, of going with prostitutes, because the ethic in Greek society was basically you can go to prostitutes so long as you don't become emotionally involved with them, so long as it's just a physical relationship. And the Apostle Paul argued against that by saying, no, no, no, your physical body, the members of your physical body, that's the body of Christ, too. So it doesn't matter whether you mind gets connected or not, or whether you fall in love with the prostitute, it also matters if you have physical relations as far as Christianity is concerned. Why? Because our bodies are now in Christ. And interestingly enough,

the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says that even when our spirits are in heaven after we die and we wait for our bodies to be resurrected, that our bodies are still the body of Christ even here. There is still a union with Christ when we're separated from them temporarily.

So this is a very important teaching of Christianity that needs to be emphasized. And happily, lots of people are getting back into it. But you're right, it has been missed, and it's that influence of Neo-Platonism. And you'll find spiritual Christians today that emphasize the mystical, emphasize the ecstatic, and sometimes that's very much along the lines of the neo-platonic as well. I believe in ecstatic experience. I believe if you don't have ecstasy, religious ecstasy as a Christian, your life is dull to begin with, but even if you don't have it, it's going to get worse than that. You're going to be discouraged, you're going to be forlorn; the things of this world are going to bring you down. I think there are moments when we need to transcend the normal experience, but this is not union with God in some metaphysical sense. This is simply a human being reaching up to the higher levels of mysterious experience. So we've talked about the sacraments, for example. While many Christians think that the Lord's Supper and baptism are just sort of physical signs that don't mean anything, well, we can do it, we cannot do it, the reality is that Christianity has always believed that when a person is baptized and when the person receives the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in faith, now not automatically but in faith, that there is something that happens that's mysterious, that grace is given if the person is exercising faith in Christ. But it has to always be done in the context of faith. So the neo-platonic emphases are there all over, but sometimes we miss them because we're so comfortable with them.

Student: How would we combat that tendency?

Dr. Pratt: I think the only way to do it really is to call ourselves back to the beliefs of the Bible itself. It's always sola scriptura and the realization that the early church, the early Christian church, the Old Testament Jesus and the New Testament, did not believe in this separation of body and soul and the hatred of the physical and that sort of thing. God made the world, he liked the world, it fell into sin, he's going to remake the world, and eternal life is going to be physical not just spiritual.

Question 22:
What is the difference between Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism?

Student: Richard, you begin the lesson by talking about Neo-Platonism and its effect on systematic theology, and then you move into the Aristotelian logical framework. Can you tell us the difference between the two?

Dr. Pratt: It's good to get a picture of what's going on here, because if we don't, we're going to be confused by thinking what systematic theology does with the Bible

is just straight-up reading the Bible. And many people have the impression that what systematic theologians have done is simply to take the Bible and teach it in a straightforward manner, and that's not exactly what's happened. We did mention earlier… Michael raised the issue of Neo-Platonism and what effect it had on Christian theology, and that was the dominant force certainly in the first five centuries all the way up at least to Augustine. He was sort of the champion of Neo-Platonism. But there was a definite shift that took place after the time of Augustine and it sort of culminates in Thomas Aquinas. He was considered the sort of contemporary out there on the forefront of all this. He is the one that finally settled the issue. And the struggle between Augustine and Aquinas was between basically Christian mystics and Christian scholastics.

Now if we can just sort of focus on that for a moment, you need to realize that during that period of time, Christian scholars were having a lot of interaction with Muslim scholars, and they were interacting with each other, not in war but intellectually. Islam at this point… this is after the fifth century forward… they were very concerned with Aristotle. Aristotle was the philosopher of Islam. It's one reason why Islamic culture was more advanced than Christian culture in some respects. While Europe was sort of dipping culturally, Islam was rising, because Christianity had so bought into the neo-platonic view of life, mystery and those sorts of things, that it had not really moved more toward the scientific realm, which Aristotle did move people toward. But, by the time you come to the ninth century, tenth century A.D., you're having a lot more influence from Aristotelianism in Christianity, and that is the form of Christian theology that we call scholastic. Scholastic doesn't mean academic, it means Aristotelian, okay?

So what were the characteristics of that? Well, if you want to contrast it with Neo-Platonism, it's basically the elimination of mystery. If we were to say that the epitome of neo-platonic Christianity was reaching the upper levels of ecstasy and mystery, becoming one with God, Aristotelianism saw logic and empirical data related to the logic as the epitome of all knowledge. And as far as Aristotle was concerned, you ought to be able to categorize everything in your experience in a rational way, and you ought to be able to figure out how every piece of experience and every piece of creation in life fit into different logical categories, and you ought to be able to connect them logically to each other and build this gigantic pyramid of reason that eliminates the mysterious as being the force or the compelling goal of all theology. Instead, the compelling goal of all theology was to organize; your database, as it were, was the Bible. And so what you wanted to do now is organize this and show all the logical connections among all the different things that the Bible and church tradition had said. And Aristotelianism was a very important move.

But that's why usually scholasticism is identified or characterized by people in the modern world as being highly logical, highly rational, and sometimes even speculative, because they felt no fear about drawing out logical inferences and more and more and more and more. I mean, the Bible may be over here and what it said, and you can have one or two inferences from that, but you end up with 25 away from

that. But they had no problem with that. You know, the sort of myth that scholastics argued about was how angels can you get on the head of a pin? Well, we look at that and we go, what are you even talking about? But the reality is that they talked about those kinds of things because they felt like that truth had to be logically connected. And so there was emphasis on coherence of theology. There was emphasis on it being rational because God's mind is rational, our minds are rational, so it must fit rationally, and to be comprehensive as well. And this is what Aristotelianism did for Christian theology, it made it that way.

Question 23:
Does traditional systematic theology overemphasize rationality?

Student: Well, Richard, it seems kind of awfully dangerous to limit it in such a way to pure logic and also pulling out the emotional aspects of so many of these things.

Dr. Pratt: Well it does. It does pull out the emotional, because you can think of mysticism as highly emotional. I wouldn't want to reduce it to that, but I think a modern person might tend to do that. You know, that mystical experiences are not rational, they are super-rational and therefore highly emotional, we would say, perhaps. And it does discount that. It does discount the emotional side of Christianity. Now that's not to say that Thomas Aquinas himself, or any other that endorsed this, were unemotional or that they were somehow disconnected in their religious life, they wouldn't sing hymns because they were emotional, or things like that. They were poets. They understood poetry. Aristotle himself loved poetry. He wrote about poetry all the time, wrote poetry. So they understood that way of thinking and they lived on that kind of life on a personal level, but when it came to academic theology, there is the crunch. When it came to doing the academy and living theology there, it was very much a rigorously defined exercise.

And that's what you find in many people that endorse traditional systemic theology today, because contemporary traditional systematic theology is much more influenced by Aristotelianism than it is by Neo-Platonism. And so what do you find? You find that when you go to a class on systematic theology, it's usually highly rational, highly deductive, brings in the inductive, and then starts to do some things from it over and over and over and over, trying to relate this truth way over here to that truth way over there by some kind of logical means, and you don't find in the classroom theology being discussed on the level of hymnody or poetry or personal relationship with God, things like that. Instead, you're discussing one substance of God, three persons of God, how the who and the what relate to each other in the Trinity and all those kinds of things, and *ay yi yi*, you know, you're head blows up as you think about it, but you're supposed to be rational about it all. And when you take that same systematic theologian, the professor who is teaching it that way in class, and you go into his life, you'll find when he goes to church, or she goes to church, they're singing hymns. They're doing the more human thing.

The problem comes is that when you think for a moment that doing theology in that Aristotelian or scholastic way is the best way, that's when it becomes dangerous, because you feel like you're doing something that's sub-par if you are following your intuitions, or if you are feeling your way into certain subject matters, or if you're praying about them. Remember that many of the early church fathers wrote their theology, including Augustine, in prayer, in the genre of prayer. They prayed to God as they did their theology. That you don't find very much in Aristotelianism, and you don't find it much in contemporary, traditional systematic theology. That would be considered sub-par. And that attitude is what we've got to break with, it seems to me.

There is great value in being rigorous. There is great value in meticulously relating subjects to each other. There is great value in trying to be comprehensive as Aristotelianism did, as scholasticism tried to be. But there's a great danger to that if you think that's God's way of doing it. It is *a* way of doing Christian theology, not *the* way to do Christian theology. If there is *the* way, and I don't think there really is, but if there is *the* way, it would have to be the way the Bible does it, and everything else including scholasticism is derivative from that. And so when you think about how does the New Testament, just take the New Testament, how does it do theology? Well, the Apostle Paul wrote letters. He prayed. You have prayers in the New Testament. You have songs in the New Testament. You have arguments in the New Testament. You have all those kinds of things, and that reaches a much fuller orbed human existence than a strict sort of scholastic approach to theology.

Question 24:
What is the role of the Holy Spirit in systematic theology?

Student: So Richard, where does the Holy Spirit fit into all of this?

Dr. Pratt: Everywhere. How's that? But I think that's really the answer. There is a tendency, and there's no doubt I think that this is true, that when you follow systematic theology and you see the influence this has come under, Neo-Platonism, and then how certain parts of that continued on into the scholastic period, what was left behind was largely the emphasis on mysticism or on Holy Spirit, on the experience of God and the relationship with God. And it's very easy as you move forward from the period of scholasticism into the modern period, which was even further removed from the mystical, much more rational, much more an attempt to be superior to the subject and to master the subject, and that kind of thing. What we find is that traditional systematic theologians do not emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit very much. And when you look at local churches and denominations that emphasize systematic theology, there is a sort of natural tendency, a correlation, to deemphasize the Holy Spirit. And why is that? Well, it's my own personal opinion that it's absolutely wrong to do this, but it does open you up to things that really don't fit into the system of neo-platonic, scholastic, modern, traditional systematic theology. It just

doesn't fit. When you think of theology as a science, and like Charles Hodge did, and you're going to take the data of the Bible and use it in the scientific model to do the inductivity and then do the deductions, and all those sorts of things… now you've got theology. Well, there was no need for the Holy Spirit there. There was no real need for the conscious dependence and prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit through that process. Though I'm sure Charles Hodge did pray and did depend on the Holy Spirit, there's no need for it. It's easy for you to forget about that because it's all very logical, it's all very much human oriented. It's just making the right deductions and inferences from the Bible.

So that's why you find, I think, the churches that emphasize that kind of theology losing touch with, if they ever had it, the more intuitive, the more emotional, and the more imperceptible or indecipherable ministry of the Holy Spirit. The problem with Holy Spirit is the problem that Nicodemus learned from Jesus, and that is that the Holy Spirit is like the wind, he comes and goes as he wants, and you can't really put him in a box and you can't say, you know, this is the way it is, and he always acts this way.

Student: You can't systematize him.

Dr. Pratt: You can't systematize the wind; you can't systematize the Holy Spirit. And so when we learn to depend on the Holy Spirit more in theology, what we're doing is something that is quite out of sorts, even counterintuitive, for people that naturally tend towards systematic theology. They're not the kinds of people that sort of naturally find themselves in step with the Spirit. In fact, if you were to say, Is your theology in step with the Spirit? if they were willing to answer that question, most of them would say, well is it true to the Bible? And if you said, yes, I guess so. Well, then, I'm walking in the Spirit. In other words, they reduce it all down to, can you deduce my theology from the Bible? Now you say, what difference would that possibly make? Well, the Holy Spirit is very important to give us insights that go beyond what we can do in our own natural abilities. And in fact, sometimes Holy Spirit actually works against out natural abilities. I mean, think about it this way. Is there anything in the Bible that you believe is true but you can't put it together and make it make logical sense with other things in the Bible?

Student: God's sovereignty and man's choice.

Dr. Pratt: Alright, there's a good example. There are tons of them, right? Really, when you start thinking about it, there are lots of things that you say, you know, I believe in this — I got that from the Bible. I believe in this — I got that from the Bible. But putting them together is very hard and in some kind of logical package. Well, upon whom, then, do we depend to find assurance that these understandings are right and are true? It's not our ability to make them coherent. It's our ability to depend on and to be sensitive to the witness of Holy Spirit. And Holy Spirit normally works through our rational abilities, but he's not limited to that. He can work without them and above them and against them at his will. He's free to do this. And he does.

So that sometimes you may not have a good argument for a position that you hold, but you're absolutely convinced that it's true, and you're absolutely convinced that the conviction has come from the Holy Spirit, and so you better stand for it even though you may not be able to argue your way through. Now the fact that you can't argue for it might put up a yellow light and say, be careful here. But it should not put up a red light. Just because you can't figure it out, doesn't mean it's not true. You must be sensitive to the way Holy Spirit works in your heart and your life. I mean, think about it this way: When people are called to the ministry and they're asked why should we accept you as a minister? What are the answers usually? What are we supposed to them?

Student: I believe in proper theology… I was called by God.

Dr. Pratt: I was called by God and have an inward call from the Holy Spirit. There's usually two things: an inward call from the Holy Spirit and an outward call from the church that they recognize the gifts in you. But the first one is that inward calling. Well, what is an inward calling except the ministry of the Holy Spirit that goes far beyond what you might be able to logically deduce from the Bible. I mean, if you used your rational abilities only, you could probably decide 15 different things you could do with your life and never violate the Bible. But you need the Holy Spirit to do the interpolation between the options. Holy Spirit brings us between the barriers or the parameters that the scriptures give us and leads us in certain directions. And that's what it means to be walking by the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit, being filled with the Holy Spirit. The Bible doesn't just tell us obey God and think right. It tells us that we must be filled with Holy Spirit, we must lean on him and depend on him and walk in his path, and those kinds of things. Without it, we can't do good theology.

Question 25:
Do systematic theologians sometimes avoid the Holy Spirit's ministry?

Student: Richard, you mentioned a second ago that systematic theology didn't have a need for the Holy Spirit, but is it possible that there is also the motivation of maybe they kind of fear what they don't understand or what they can't control?

Dr. Pratt: Of course. You know I do believe that they do have a need for the Holy Spirit's ministry. Sometimes they don't feel like they do. Or like you say, sometimes they may even be afraid of it. It's just something that's sort of out there that's indefinable in some respects, a lot like love, a lot like poetry. But there are people in this world that don't like love and don't like poetry who want to reduce everything down to some kind of scientific formula. I know that in seminary we get a lot of people that were business school graduates or they were engineers… that's you? okay… business school? Alright. Well, you know that you don't like people that aren't like you. And you know, if somebody walks around quoting poetry all the time, you go, "What's wrong with this person?"

Unfortunately, when a person gets into systematic theology very heavily, even if they have inclinations more toward the intuitive and more toward the emotional and that sort of thing, they will sometimes lose that when they do theology because they've been told by their teachers or by their churches that real theology is manly theology, and manly theology is done in a rational way. And that's a really sad situation, because the fact is that every time we make any decision in life, we may be thinking that we're doing it just purely rationally, but we're not. What we're doing is bringing in a lot of other elements that we don't even recognize, from past experience, from contemporary experience, from our feelings, from our moral conscience, from our intuitions. They're all coming in and they're helping us define decisions we make about what we believe is true, what we believe is false, what we believe we ought to do, what we ought not to do. And when you don't realize how powerful those forces are on the decisions that you make, then they don't disappear, they run roughshod over your decisions. And you can't even put words to it, and sometimes can't even acknowledge that it's happening, that your prejudices are what's making you make this choice.

So what I think is important here in this regard is that we give concerted effort to prayerfully considering, prayerfully devoting ourselves to the person of Holy Spirit himself, asking him to work in us on those levels that I just mentioned, like the intuitive, the prejudicial, the emotional, the conscience, all those kinds of things. And when we do that, then at least we have the chance that maybe some of those things can be sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Being filled with Holy Spirit is not the same as just obeying the Bible or doing the right thing. That's evident because Pharisees obeyed the Bible a lot, but they weren't filled with Holy Spirit. Being filled with Holy Spirit is likened to being drunk with wine for a reason; it goes beyond the normal rational processes. And so it's the kind of thing where we need to go to God as Trinity and not just at two persons but three, remembering that Holy Spirit is active and involved in all aspects of theological decision-making, and sometimes that is lost when people emphasize traditional forms of especially scholastic theology too much in their lives.

Question 26:
Should we focus on the past or present when we do theology?

Student: Richard, I appreciate the thought that if we focus too much on a Christian heritage, we might lose sight on our modern Christian living. Are there practical ways that we can engage our Christian heritage but still speak to modern theological issues?

Dr. Pratt: I think so. When I think about the tension between focusing on the past and focusing on the present, I think that probably one of the things that I have learned through the years anyway is that you have to stay away from people in the church a

little bit, especially ministers, because ministers almost always focus on the past, and they think that the answers of all of life are found in what was done 200, 300, maybe even a thousand years ago in Christianity, and it's not. So you have to get out of the ghetto, and you have to get out where people are. And that's a hard thing for ministers to do because we're devoted to the Bible — that's in the past, we're devoted to our traditions — that's in the past, but people don't live back there. They live here and now. And so we have to get connected some way to what's going on in our world. And I'm surprised many times, especially as a teacher in seminary I'm surprised, at how many students don't read the newspaper, don't watch the news on television, don't know what's on at the movies, don't know what's even happening around the corner. It usually shocks me to no end that that's the case. And I don't know how a person can be relevant in their preaching if they don't know what's going on in the lives of the people that are out there, because the average Christian person is not spending 6 days a week reading the Bible and studying old theology and things like that. They are living their lives at the office or at the workplace or in the neighborhood. And so we have to know what's going on at the office, the workplace and the neighborhood.

Question 27:
How do we guard our hearts when we interact with modern culture?

Student: Richard, I was wondering about that and thinking, how can I guard my heart in the midst of all that if I'm going to be so involved in the culture of the day? How do I make sure I'm careful? Because I really want to make sure I'm reading my Bible and reading Scripture. How does that look?

Dr. Pratt: Well, there's no way to guard your heart. How about that? "A man sits as many risks as he runs." That's what Emerson said, and I believe that. In other words, it's just as risky for you to be out of touch as it is for you to be in touch. And I think sometimes we think that — especially leaders of the church — we think that if we can isolate ourselves from the evil temptations of the world around us, all the contemporary things that are going on and just stay in the past, that somehow that will keep us safe. It doesn't keep us safe at all. What it does is it just opens up a whole new world of mistakes for church leaders, and errors, and even sins for church leaders. Because if you're not willing to risk a little bit by knowing what's going on out there in the world, then you are actually sinning against your people, your congregation, by not being able to meet their needs. I mean, the Apostle Paul was able to quote Greek philosophers, he was able to quote slogans that were being thrown on the street in his day; he does it all the time in his letters, and we've got to be able to do that, too. We have to know what's going on in our day in order to make Christian theology relevant for people. That doesn't mean falling into the sins, but it does mean knowing what's going on.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles and Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.

Building Systematic Theology

LESSON TWO

TECHNICAL TERMS IN SYSTEMATICS

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Building Systematic Theology

Lesson Two

Technical Terms in Systematics

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed that people in nearly every profession, workers in nearly every type of job, create their own ways of talking to each other? They develop words and phrases that mean special things to them, even if nobody else understands what they mean. Doctors, lawyers, car mechanics, farmers, builders – it doesn't matter what job; we develop special, sometimes even technical ways of speaking to each other.

In many respects, this is the way it is in systematic theology. Systematic theologians build their theology with special vocabulary. They create their own ways of communicating with each other through technical terms.

This is the second lesson in our series, *Building Systematic Theology*, a series in which we're exploring how Protestants construct systematic theology. We have entitled this lesson, "Technical Terms in Systematics" and in this lesson we'll see some of the ways special words and phrases enable systematic theologians to fulfill their job.

Our lesson will divide into three main parts. First, we'll gain a general *orientation* toward technical terms in systematic theology; what are they and what place do they hold in systematics. Second, we'll explore the *formation* of technical terms; how systematicians have developed their special ways of saying things. And third, we'll look at the *values and dangers* of technical terms in systematics, the ways they enhance and hinder our efforts to build systematic theology. Let's begin with a basic orientation toward technical terms.

ORIENTATION

To gain a broad outlook on this subject, we'll touch on four issues. First, we'll define what we mean by technical terms. Second, we'll explain the relationship between theological terms and theological concepts. Third, we'll focus on the need for using technical terms in systematics. And fourth, we will describe the place of technical terms in the process of building systematic theology. Let's look first at what we mean by technical terms.

DEFINITION

When we first begin to study systematic theology, it quickly becomes apparent that we must learn the language of systematic theologians. Systematicians frequently use words and phrases that we don't normally use. And even when they employ words from

daily life, they often use them in unusual ways. These special ways of saying things are often called "theological technical terms." For our purposes, we may define theological technical terms as "words and phrases with specialized meanings in theology."

Sometimes, systematic theologians use technical terms to distinguish one thing from another. For instance, the phrase "theology proper" denotes the study of God in and of himself. It focuses on God's self-existence, his transcendence and the like. By contrast, the term "theology" by itself denotes the more general category of anything discussed in relation to God, including things like the doctrines of humanity, sin, and salvation.

Sometimes technical terms also represent convenient ways of abbreviating complex subjects in a word or phrase. For instance, the technical term "Trinity" is just one word that quickly sums up very elaborate teachings about the Godhead. It's much easier in a theological discussion simply to refer to "the Trinity" than it is to take the time to explain all the intricacies of the doctrine every time we refer to it. In all events, theological technical terms are words and phrases that have specialized meaning in theology.

Now that we have a basic idea of what technical terms are, we should look at another issue: the relationship between terms and concepts. What are the connections between the words we use and the ideas or concepts that these words express? How do they correspond to each other?

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

We'll look at this topic from two angles: first, the connections between terms and concepts in language in general; and second, the connections between terms and concepts in the language of Scripture. Let's look first at the ways words and concepts relate to each other in general.

Language in General

If you ask most people how words relate to the concepts they have in their minds, they'll probably say that every word they use has a corresponding idea. Most people tend to think that there is a straightforward one-to-one correspondence between terms and concepts.

It isn't difficult to see why people think this way. When we watch young children learn the language of their parents, they often begin by learning the names of people, objects and simple actions. A mother will point to herself and say "mommy," or hold up a piece of bread and say "bread." As time goes by, children learn more and more words, and they associate those words with more and more ideas. Adults learning a second language often begin with a similar process as they learn a language word by word. On these elementary levels, it's true that we often associate one term with one concept.

But when we stop to think about it, the relationship between words and ideas is actually much more complex. We can summarize some of these complexities in two simple statements. On the one hand, many terms can signify one concept. And on the

other hand, one term can signify many concepts. Let's take a look at both sides of this issue, beginning with the fact that many terms can signify one concept.

It really isn't difficult to see that we often use many terms to express one idea. For example, I have a daughter whose name is Becky. And, in a conversation with someone, I can refer to her as "Becky," "my daughter," "Warren's wife," "Maggie's mother," "Lily's mother," "my progeny," "my only child." The list goes on and on. In each case, the terms have slightly different nuances but they all signify the same complex concept of that special person in my life.

The same kind of thing happens time and again in ordinary language. Think of all the ways you can refer to the ocean. Consider the terms you can use to signify a country. In every language of the world, it's frequently the case that many terms express the same concept.

On the other hand, it's also true that one term can signify many concepts. To see this, simply look at a dictionary of your own language. Many entries in a dictionary indicate that one term has many meanings. And these multiple definitions indicate that one term signifies many different concepts.

Let's take just one example from every day speech. Consider the English word "bar." This one word can mean many different things. It can mean a pole, a reef, a prohibition, a professional organization of lawyers, a counter where food or drinks are served, and many other things. Depending on how it is used, this and many other words can express many different concepts.

So, in language in general, there's not always a one-to-one correspondence between terms and concepts. Instead, many terms can signify one concept, and one term can signify many concepts.

Now that we've seen the complex ways terms and concepts relate to each other in language in general, we should turn to the ways they connect in the language of Scripture. How do words and concepts relate to each other when we're dealing with the Bible? Is the situation different? Or is it the same?

Language of Scripture

The reality is that most of the Bible was written in ordinary language. So, just as many terms can signify the same concept in normal language, many terms can also signify the same concept in biblical language. And just as one term can signify many concepts in ordinary language, one term can signify many concepts in the bible as well. Let's turn first to the fact that in Scripture many terms can signify one concept.

One easy way to see this use of language is to look at all the biblical terms signifying the concept of Christian living. Consider for a moment the many ways that just one writer, the apostle Paul, referred to the Christian life. He called it "sanctification" in 1 Thessalonians 4:3. He spoke of it as "faithfulness" in 1 Corinthians 4:17. He also referred to Christian living as "obedience" in Romans 16:19. He signified it by the phrase "walking in the Spirit" in Galatians 5:25. And he described it as "conformity to Christ" in Romans 8:29 as well as "transformation" in 2 Corinthians 3:18. In all these instances, Paul was talking about essentially the same thing: what we might call "Christian living."

There are many other concepts in Scripture that are also referred to in manifold ways. For example, think of all the names for Jesus in Scripture. Besides being simply called "Jesus" or "Jesus of Nazareth," he's commonly called Christ or *Christos* in Greek, which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew term *meshiach,* meaning "the anointed one." He is also commonly called "Lord," as in Acts 1:21, and "Savior" as in 2 Peter 1:11. Besides this, the Bible calls him "God" in Titus 2:13, "the Word" in John 1:1, "the last Adam" in 1 Corinthians 15:45, "The Son of God" in Luke 1:35, "The Son of David" in Matthew 21:9, "the king" in Luke 19:38, "the firstborn over all creation" in Colossians 1:15, and the "mediator" in 1 Timothy 2:5. Of course, all these terms have different nuances, but they hold together as a group of words that point to the same person, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the second person of the trinity. So we see that like ordinary language, the Scriptures often use many words to refer to one concept.

On the other hand, the Scriptures also use one term to refer to many concepts. Sometimes these are ordinary words and concepts that have little importance in systematic theology. But often the Scriptures use a single term to refer to a variety of concepts even when these concepts are very important in theology. Let's consider two terms in Scripture that play a central role in systematic theology. First, we'll look at the term "justification," and second, we'll look at the term "sanctification."

Let's begin by turning to the family of words related to the New Testament Greek verb *dikaioō* (δικαιόω): the words that we usually translate "justify," "justified" and "justification." The New Testament says many things about justification, but for our purposes we'll consider just two verses.

First, in Romans 3:28 Paul wrote these words:

> **For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law (Romans 3:28, NASB).**

The word translated "justified" in this verse derives from *dikaioō*. Here and in many other passages, Paul spoke clearly of *dikaioō* as something that happens "by faith alone," entirely apart from human merit. In this sense, justification is the declaration of righteousness that takes place when Christians first believe in Christ and his righteousness is imputed to them.

A second use of the term *dikaioō* appears in James 2:24. There we read:

> **You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24, NASB).**

Here James uses *dikaioō*, translated "justified," quite differently from the way Paul used it in Romans 3:28. Paul said that justification is "by faith alone apart from works," but James said that justification is "by works and not by faith alone."

Interestingly, both James and Paul appealed to the example of Abraham to prove their points. When we look at Paul's discussion of Abraham in Romans 4:1-5, it's clear that he referred to the events of Genesis 15, when Abraham believed God, and when this belief was credited to him as righteousness. This was Abraham's initial justification, when God first declared him to be righteous by means of his faith alone.

But James referred to the events of Genesis 22, which occurred about 30 years after the events of Genesis 15. In Genesis 22, God tested Abraham in order to prove his faith by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. James 2:23 says that in this way Abraham's prior faith was "fulfilled." In this case, James was not speaking about Abraham's initial declaration of righteousness, but about the "proof" or "vindication" of his righteousness.

So, it's clear that the authors of the New Testament used the Greek term *dikaioō* in at least two distinctively different ways.

Now what we've seen about justification is not unusual. Consider, for instance, the family of words related to the Greek verb *hagiazō* (ἁγιάζω), often translated "sanctify," "sanctification," "saint" and even "holy." This one family of terms also signifies many different concepts in the New Testament. By way of illustration, we'll see three different concepts that one writer, the apostle Paul, signified by this one term.

First, in 1 Corinthians 6:11 we read these words:

> **You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).**

In this passage, Paul used the term "sanctified," or *hagiazō* (ἁγιάζω), to refer to something that God does when a person first comes to Christ, whereby that person is made acceptable to God and separated from sin. Sometimes this is called definitive holiness. We can tell that this is what he meant by the other terms that he uses in the immediate context. He spoke of the Corinthians as having being "washed" cleansed from their sins, "sanctified" made sacred and acceptable to God and "justified" declared righteous by faith. Here, "sanctified" refers to the initial sanctification new believers receive at justification when they are made righteous and definitively joined to Christ.

Second, another use of the term "sanctified" (or *hagiazō*) appears in 1 Thessalonians 4:3. There Paul wrote these words:

> **It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3).**

In this passage, Paul refers to something that believers must pursue. Sometimes this is called progressive holiness. Paul explained what it meant to be sanctified by associating it with avoiding sexual immorality. Here *hagiazō* refers to the ongoing process of believers avoiding sin throughout their lives.

In a third passage, Paul used the term *hagiazō* in yet another way. Listen to what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:14:

> **For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy (1 Corinthians 7:14).**

In this passage, Paul used the family of words associated with *hagiazō* three times as he described families that have believing and unbelieving spouses. First, he said that the unbelieving husband is sanctified, *hagiazō* by his believing wife. Second, he said that the same is true for the unbelieving wife. And third, he used the adjective form of the word to remind the Corinthians that the children of these families are "holy" or sanctified.

Now, Paul did not mean that God separates these unbelievers from sin to make them acceptable to him. Nor did he mean that the children of believers are saved. Nor did he mean that they are all pursuing holy living as Christians. It's clear from the rest of Paul's writing that saving faith is necessary for salvation. Paul referred instead to what we may call holiness without salvation, the concept that unbelievers and children in a family with at least one truly believing parent are sanctified in the sense that they are set apart from the rest of the world because of the presence of the believer. So we see that Paul used the biblical term *hagiazō* to refer to the initial experience of true believers, to the ongoing pursuit of holiness, and to the separation of some unbelievers even when they have no saving faith.

Now what we've seen about justification and sanctification is also true about many other theologically significant words in the Bible. Just like in ordinary language, one term in Scripture can signify many different concepts. These complex relationships between terms and concepts in Scripture lead to our third concern, the need for technical terms and phrases in systematic theology.

NEED

When students first encounter systematic theology, they're often bewildered by what seems to be an endless list of technical terms they must learn. I can't tell you how many times I've been asked, "Why do we have to learn all of these special ways of saying things? Why can't we just say things the way the Bible says them?"

Well, on one level technical terms aren't necessary. It would be possible to study, learn, and teach theology even without them. But on another level, technical terms are necessary to create a coherent system of theology that embraces all of Scripture. Because the connections between biblical terms and concepts are so manifold, systematic theologians have developed a special vocabulary that is sometimes artificial, but that makes communication much clearer.

It will help to see this need for clarity on both sides of the equation: first, we'll look at the confusion caused when many terms signify one concept; and second, we'll see the kinds of confusion that arise when one term signifies many concepts in the Bible. Let's look first at the need for technical terms when many terms in the Bible signify a single concept.

Many Terms — One Concept

As we have seen, biblical writers often refer to the same basic concept with many different expressions. Often, this fact makes it difficult for systematic theologians to reach the kind of clarity they desire. So, systematicians form technical terms to clarify

what they mean. To illustrate how this works, let's explore the way the Bible talks about the concept of the church.

The biblical teaching on the doctrine of the church is commonly called "ecclesiology." This technical term is derived from *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία), which is the New Testament Greek word for "church." Imagine a group of theologians who have come to give an address to a theological society on any topic they desire. One theologian might begin in this way: "Today I'm going to discuss the doctrine of the "Israel of God." Another theologian might say, "I'm going to discuss the doctrine of the "temple of God." Another might say, "I'm going to discuss the "body of Christ."

Of course, it would not be immediately apparent what these theologians were intending to talk about. After all, in Scripture the phrases "Israel of God," "temple of God," and "body of Christ" can refer to many things other than the church. "Israel of God" might pertain to the nation of Israel. "Temple of God" could refer to the temple of the Old Testament. The "Body of Christ" might refer to the physical body of Jesus. Who could tell?

Now, there would be nothing wrong with speaking about the church in all of these ways. The New Testament refers to the one concept of the church in these and many other ways. Yet, it's not difficult to imagine the kind of confusion these statements would cause. We could not be sure if these theologians planned to speak on the same topics or different topics. To avoid this kind of confusion, systematic theologians normally adopt the term "ecclesiology" as their technical term for discussions of the biblical teaching on the church.

Simply put, confusion arises because many biblical terms refer to the same concept. But this confusion can be eliminated when theologians use technical terms to make their meanings clear.

One Term — Many Concepts

Systematic theologians also form technical terms to avoid the confusion that's created by the fact that a single word or phrase can mean many different things in Scripture. So, in order to communicate clearly, systematicians develop very specific, and often artificially narrow, definitions for technical terms.

Take for example, the ways we use the terms "justification" and "sanctification" in systematic theology. In the Reformation, Protestants developed a way of describing the *ordo salutis* (the order in which salvation is applied to individuals) in contrast with Roman Catholic theology. In Protestant technical vocabulary, justification is the initial declaration of righteousness when God imputes the righteousness of Christ to an individual. Justification is monergistic, that is, it is all the work of God, and human beings are entirely passive. Sanctification, however, is defined in the Protestant *ordo salutis* as the ongoing process of pursuing holiness that follows justification. Sanctification, in this sense, is not monergistic, but synergistic, involving not only God but also the human will. These distinctions are very important to Protestant theology.

But imagine theologians explaining the doctrine of sanctification who feel free to use the terms "justification," and "sanctification" in all the ways we've seen that they appear in the New Testament.

We could easily expect theologians to say, first, "Sanctification occurs after justification." This statement fits well with the Protestant order of salvation. But such theologians who are not concerned with maintaining the technical vocabulary of Protestantism might also say, second, "Sanctification occurs simultaneously with justification." They could say this because the New Testament uses the term sanctification to refer to the initial holiness that is given to a person when that person is justified. And theologians not concerned with Protestant technical vocabulary might also say, third, "Sanctification occurs without justification." They could say this because the New Testament speaks of the sanctification of children and unbelieving spouses of believers.

All of these statements are biblical in the sense that they use the words in ways that the Bible uses them. But it's not difficult to see how confusing these statements could be. If we were to hear a theologian making all of these statements, one after another without extensive explanations, questions would naturally arise. Which proposition is true? They can't all be true. At first blush, we would tend to say that these propositions contradict each other.

Later in this lesson, we will see in more detail how systematic theologians deal with this kind of problem. At this point, it will suffice to say that systematic theologians try to avoid this kind of confusion by developing specialized or technical vocabulary as they discuss matters like sanctification and justification. They define these terms in limited ways that restrict the formulations they make.

Now that we have seen the need for technical terms in systematics, we should turn our attention to the place that technical terms have in systematic theology.

PLACE

In a word, technical terms form the basic building blocks of a systematic theology. In a prior lesson, we saw that Protestant systematic theology follows the patterns of medieval scholasticism, which greatly benefited from Aristotelian logic. In this regard, systematics proceeds in four major steps: First, it develops precise definitions for terms. Second, it uses these terms to formulate propositions. Third, it uses these propositions in syllogisms to create doctrinal statements. And fourth, it orders its logical arguments into a rational system of doctrine. Although no one follows a strictly linear process when constructing theology, this outline is a helpful way to summarize the strategy of building systematics.

Let's take an example to illustrate what we mean. Suppose some systematicians want to discuss the subject of Christ's death. First, they would create or draw on terminology from traditional Christian vocabulary. In this case, a number of special expressions might take center stage, such as: "soteriology" (the teaching of salvation), *historia salutis* (God's accomplishment of salvation in history), "substitutionary atonement" (the idea that Christ died as the substitute on whom God poured out his wrath), and "*ordo salutis"* (the order in which salvation comes to an individual's life). They might also employ terms like "saving faith," "repentance," "forgiveness," and of course "Christ."

Second, in one way or another, systematicians would typically incorporate these terms into propositions that express elements of what the Scriptures teach about the death of Christ. For instance, they might say or think things like these: "Soteriology divides into two important sub-topics: o*rdo salutis* and *historia salutis.*" "Christ's death was a substitutionary atonement on behalf of believers." "Christ's substitutionary atonement is the only hope for a person's forgiveness and eternal life." "Saving faith and repentance are essential aspects of the *ordo salutis*." These and many other propositions would express relevant facts for a theological discussion of Christ's death.

On a third level, systematicians would draw their technical terms and propositions into a doctrinal statement as they inferred logical connections among specific facts. For instance, they might say or write a summation like this: "The soteriological significance of Christ's death must be seen in the light of *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis.* On the one hand, the *historia salutis,* the history of salvation, reached a climactic moment in the death of Christ. His death was a substitutionary atonement securing eternal forgiveness of sins. On the other hand, no individuals are actually forgiven and saved until the benefits of Christ's atonement are applied to them in the *ordo salutis.* When individuals exercise saving faith by repenting of their sin and trusting in Christ for forgiveness, they receive eternal life."

Finally, these technical terms, propositions and doctrinal statements about Christ's atonement would lead systematicians to a larger outlook. They would connect their discussion of the substitutionary death of Christ with the large-scale pattern of systematic theology, seeking to answer questions like these. How does the death of Christ fit within the larger picture of soteriology? How does soteriology relate to other doctrines like theology proper, anthropology, ecclesiology and eschatology?

This way of looking at the process of building a systematic theology is somewhat artificial. In actual practice, all of these steps are highly interdependent and form webs of multiple reciprocities. As theologians actually build a systematic theology, they're involved in all four steps all the time. But regardless of the order in which theologians actually work, it is still the case that technical terms form the most basic building blocks of systematic theology.

Now that we've established a general orientation toward technical terms in theology, we should turn to our second major topic in this lesson: the formation of technical terms. How do systematicians create the specialized expressions they use?

FORMATION

I can still remember a frustrated seminary student coming up to me one day after class. He looked at me and he said. I've been a Christian for many years now, but I can't understand half the words you use. Where do you get all these strange words? I looked at him and said, "Most of the words I use don't come from me. I got them from systematic theologians." And, then he looked at me and said, "Okay, then tell me where they got those words."

It was obvious that the technical terminology we used in seminary had gotten under this man's skin and he asked a very good question. Where does all of this specialized vocabulary of systematic theology come from?

In reality, technical terms in systematics are formed in a number of ways. To explore some of the main ways they are developed, we'll look in two directions. First, we'll see that many technical terms in systematic theology come from biblical terms. And second, we'll see that many other technical terms actually come from extra-biblical sources. Let's look first at some of the ways systematicians form their special vocabulary by drawing upon the bible.

BIBLICAL TERMS

Most Christians feel much more at home when theologians use biblical expressions in their theology. We want our systematic theology to be true to the teaching of Scripture. So, it feels much more comfortable when theologians sound like the Bible. Even so, we need to realize that using biblical terminology as technical vocabulary for theology is not as straightforward as it may seem.

Systematic theologians actually form technical terms from the Scriptures in at least three ways: First, by emphasizing one biblical term over other biblical terms that refer to the same concept; second, by emphasizing one meaning of a biblical term over other biblical meanings of that term; and third, by creating new meanings for biblical terms, meanings that never appear in the Scriptures. It will be useful to unpack these three approaches. So let's begin with the ways systematicians emphasize one biblical term over others.

Emphasizing One Term

As we have seen, biblical writers often use more than one expression to refer to the same idea. To bring clarity to their discussions, systematicians frequently choose one of the many terms that refer to a concept in Scripture as a technical term, and they use this technical term rather exclusively.

To illustrate what we mean by this, we'll look at the example of the doctrine of regeneration. In systematics, "regeneration" is a term used to describe that act of God by which new spiritual life is granted to a person. It refers to the first transition or change that takes place as a person moves from sin and death into new life in Christ.

Many terms in Scripture refer to this concept. The term "regeneration" is a translation of the Greek word *palingenesia* (παλιγγενεσία), which occurs only twice in the New Testament — once in Matthew 19:28, and once in Titus 3:5. And Titus 3:5 is the only place in Scripture where "regeneration" is used in a way that signifies the beginning of new life in Christ. But this same concept is described by other terms as well. For instance, in John 3:3 we find the Greek phrase *gennaō anōthen* (γεννάω ἄνωθεν), translated "born again" or "born from above," and in 1 Peter 1:3 we find the Greek word *anagennaō* (ἀναγεννάω), often translated "born again." In James 1:18, the word is

apokueō (ἀποκυέω), which simply means "give birth" or "bring forth." And Ephesians 2:10 uses the term *ktizō* (κτίζω), which means "create." In Galatians 6:15, the concept of regeneration is also signified by the term *kainē ktisis* (καινὴ κτίσις) or "new creation," and in Ephesians 4:24, *kainos anthrōpos* (καινός ἄνθρωπος) or "new man".

Although many terms refer to this same concept, systematicians tend to refer to them all under the rubric of "regeneration." This one biblical term for this concept is chosen over others for simplicity and clarity.

Emphasizing One Meaning

In addition to emphasizing one biblical term over others, systematicians also create technical terms by emphasizing one meaning of one biblical term over its other meanings.

As we have seen, the writers of Scripture often use the same term to mean many different things. One of the ways systematicians try to avoid the confusion that this situation brings is to emphasize one biblical meaning of a term over its other meanings.

All reliable systematic theologians are aware that the term *dikaioō* (δικαιόω), often translated "justify" or "justification," is used in different ways in the New Testament. As we saw earlier in this lesson, it refers to at least two distinct concepts. In Romans 3:28, it refers to an initial declaration of righteousness by faith alone, but in James 2:24 it refers to proof or vindication of faith by works.

Imagine what might happen if systematicians regularly used the term justification in both of these ways. If they were asked, "How is a person justified?" One might say, "A person is justified by faith alone and not by works." But another might say, "A person is justified by works, and not by faith alone." This type of theological conversation would quickly become confusing.

One way systematicians avoid this kind of confusion is to turn "justification" into a theological technical term by emphasizing one of the biblical meanings of the term *dikaioō* over others. In response to the false teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestants have emphasized the meaning of justification as a "declaration of righteousness." This justification takes place by grace alone, through faith and apart from works. So, when traditional Protestants have used the term "justification" without qualification, this is what they have meant.

So we see that systematic theologians overcome the confusion that rises out of the diverse meanings of terms in the Bible by emphasizing one meaning of a term over others. This choice then gives the expression the value of a technical theological term.

In addition to emphasizing one term or one meaning, systematicians also form technical terms from biblical language by creating new meanings for biblical terms. In other words, they use biblical words in ways that they are never used in the Bible.

Creating New Meanings

One well-known example for creating new meanings for biblical terms is the technical theological expression, "covenant of grace." This phrase is used in traditional

Protestant theology to describe God's relationship with his people, not just in the New Testament, but throughout the whole history of the bible, from the time after the fall into sin until the return of Christ in glory. It's an umbrella concept that includes all divine covenants after the fall into sin, God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Christ. Listen to the way the *Westminster Confession of Faith* describes the covenant of grace in chapter VII, section 3:

> **Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by the Covenant of Works, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ.**

Notice that the confession does not suggest that the terminology, "Covenant of Grace," appears in the bible. Now it's obvious that the words "covenant" and "grace" are biblical words, but they do not appear in scripture in combination with each other with this technical meaning. As a result, the confession says that this covenantal arrangement is "*commonly* called the Covenant of Grace." The relationship between God the Father and the Son that unfolds throughout biblical history is commonly called this by theologians, but not by the bible. Systematic theologians have created this technical terminology using biblical expressions in new ways. To be sure, the concept expressed by the term, "covenant of grace," is a biblical concept. There is a unity to all of God's saving activity in the bible, and that unity is gracious and covenantal. But the Scriptures do not have a term for this large concept, so systematic theologians coin this technical term to express it.

So, we see that theologians form technical terminology using biblical language in at least three ways: They emphasize one biblical term for a concept over others; they emphasize one meaning of a term over other meanings in the Bible; and they give new meanings to biblical terms. By these means, systematic theologians seek to ensure the clarity of their discussions of the Christian faith.

Now that we have seen how systematic theologians form technical terms using biblical language, we should turn to the second major way the special vocabulary of systematic theology is formed. Systematicians also derive their terminology from sources outside of Scripture.

EXTRA-BIBLICAL LANGUAGE

We must always remember that to fulfill the great commission, Christian theologians have had to learn how to communicate Christian teachings in the various cultures where God has placed them. This is why patristic theologians often expressed themselves in neo-platonic terms, and it's why scholastics often expressed themselves in Aristotelian terminology. Protestant systematic theologians have also continued to follow the command of Christ by using extra-biblical terms, both by using terminology from earlier periods and by borrowing terms from their contemporary cultures.

There are many ways extra-biblical terms appear in systematic theology, but it helps to think of three main approaches. First, systematicians adopt common terminology

that is available to them. Second, systematic theologians attribute new meanings to extra-biblical philosophical and religious terms. Third, they often combine extra-biblical terminology with biblical expressions. Consider first how systematic theologians use common ways of saying things that come from outside the Bible.

Common Terminology

Perhaps the simplest way systematicians draw from extra-biblical terminology as they explain the teachings of Scripture is by adopting common vocabulary of their cultures. Now, in the patristic period, this pool of words and phrases came largely from Greek, the primary language of Christian scholars in the Mediterranean world at that time. In the medieval period, the primary language of Christian scholars had become Latin. In the modern period, Christians have used terminology from the various languages of the cultures in which Christianity has made significant inroads.

One of the most important examples of using common extra-biblical terminology is the term "Trinity." The word "Trinity" first appeared around AD 180 when Theophilus of Antioch used the Greek term *trias* (τρίας) to describe the three-ness of the Godhead. This term was later translated into Latin as *trinitas*, meaning "triad." Now, the term trinity never appears in the Bible. Nor was this term a technical, philosophical or religious expression. It was simply a word coined from the common word for three. Eventually, this extra-biblical term became the rubric under which theologians expressed the fact that the Scriptures sometimes speak of God as three and other times as one. As the bishops at the first council of Constantinople put it in AD 381:

> **The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have a single Godhead and power and substance, a dignity deserving the same honour and a co-eternal sovereignty, in three most perfect hypostases, or three perfect persons.**

In the past and present, the church has faced a number of false teachings about the relationships of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Put simply, some groups have tended to overemphasize the oneness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while others have overemphasized their distinction.

In order to reflect the whole teaching of Scripture on the unity and diversity of the Godhead, orthodox Christians use the extra-biblical expression "Trinity" as a technical term to signify that God is "three perfect persons" but "one in power and substance." Using this extra-biblical term helps to bring clarity to the issues at hand. God is Trinity.

In the second place, systematic theologians also create new meanings for extra-biblical terminology used in non-Christian philosophical and religious discussions. They adopt these terms and modify their meanings so that they conform to and explain Christian teaching.

Philosophical Terminology

Evangelical Christians often object when they realize that many terms in systematic theology come from religious and philosophical sources outside of the Bible. So, we should pause and offer a comment or two. We're right to fear that theologians may be led astray by using any vocabulary other than what we find in the bible. In fact, we must always be on guard against the encroachment of false non-Christian ideas into Christian theology. But, at the same time, so long as systematicians maintain Scripture as their final supreme judge, extra-biblical religious and philosophical expressions can be very helpful.

One example of a biblical character doing just this appears in Acts 17. This is the well-known passage where Paul addressed the crowd at the Areopagus in Athens. At one point in his speech, Paul positively quoted Greek poets. Listen to what he said in Acts 17:28-29:

> **As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring." Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man's design and skill (Acts 17:28-29).**

The expression "We are his offspring" was previously used by two Greek poets who wrote at different times: Cleanthes and Aratus. But Paul confidently adopted this pagan expression as his own, saying in verse 29: "Therefore since we are God's offspring…" Now, Cleanthes and Aratus actually referred to Zeus, the head of the Greek pantheon, not to the God of the Bible. But Paul gave the terminology of these Greek poets a distinctively Christian meaning, insisting that it was the Christian God, and not Zeus, who had created humanity.

Following Paul's example, systematicians may also adopt non-Christian religious and philosophical terminology at times, so long as they redefine them to refer to biblical concepts.

One noteworthy time when this happened was surrounding the doctrine of Christ or "Christology." Listen to the church's response to controversy over Christ in the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. There we read that:

> **[Christ is] truly God and truly man … recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons.**

This statement describes Christ in words that are different from the terminology of the Bible. The council drew from extra-biblical sources and spoke of the natures of Christ. The council also said that Christ's natures are distinct, being "without confusion," that they are not altered by one another, being "without change," but that they are nevertheless inseparably united in Christ's "one person," being "without division, without

separation." In fact, even the word "person," as used in this context, was probably borrowed from the legal vocabulary of that day in which a "person" was a legal term for an individual's identity.

This technical language did not come from Scripture, but it was true to Scripture. And it was necessary in order to communicate the church's doctrines about Christ with precision.

In the third place, systematicians also combine biblical and extra-biblical words in order to form their technical theological vocabulary.

Combined Terminology

This kind of combination occurs in many different ways, some more striking than others, but one clear example can be found in the doctrine of sanctification. As we have seen in this lesson, the term sanctification is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament. These uses of the term have created an occasion for combining the term sanctification which comes from the Bible with adjectives that do not come from the Bible. In the first place, we have seen that in 1 Corinthians 6:11 the verb *hagiazō* (ἁγιάζω) signifies the change that comes on a person when he or she first believes in Christ. In the second place, we have seen that 1 Thessalonians 4:3 uses the verb *hagiazō* to signify the ongoing growth in holiness that Christians are to experience in their daily lives.

Systematic theologians have brought clarity to the doctrine of sanctification by speaking of various types of sanctification. They speak of sanctification that occurs when a person first believes as "definitive sanctification," combining the extra-biblical word "definitive" with the biblical word "sanctification" to indicate that this kind of sanctification is once and for all, and that it moves a person into a state of holiness, separation from the world and consecration to God. The term "progressive sanctification" is used to denote the ongoing, progressive experience of growing in holiness, growing in separation from the world and consecration to God over a lifetime. In this case, the word "sanctification" comes from the Bible, but the word "progressive" comes from outside the Bible. As you can imagine, these combination technical terms can be very useful. Instead of speaking simply of sanctification, qualifications like these help to clarify what theologians mean. They help them distinguish the various uses of the term "sanctification" in the Scriptures.

So we see that systematic theologians form technical terms in two basic ways. They draw from Scripture, and they draw from outside the bible. By these means, theologians provide terminologies that clarify their discussions and serve as the basic building blocks for constructing systematic theology.

Now that we've gained a general orientation toward technical terms in systematic theology, and have seen how they are formed, we should turn to our third topic: the values and dangers of technical terms.

VALUES AND DANGERS

What are the advantages and disadvantages presented by the special words and phrases that we find in systematic theology? By this time in our lesson, I'm sure that many of you have very different feelings about the whole subject of technical terms. Some of you are probably ready to learn just as much as you can about them while others probably wonder whether something so complicated can actually be worth all the trouble. Well, as we'll see, it's important not to overestimate or underestimate how technical language in systematic theology can help us. A balanced outlook will be both positive and negative because technical terms present significant advantages and disadvantages.

To explore this matter, we'll look at the special vocabulary of systematics as it relates to the three major resources for building Christian theology. In other lessons we've suggested that God has provided three main ways for Christians to learn from special and general revelation. We gain understanding of special revelation through careful exegesis of Scripture, a vital resource for building Christian theology. Beyond this, God has also called us to take advantage of general revelation by giving attention to two other resources. We focus on one dimension of general revelation through interaction in community, learning from others, especially other Christians. And we focus on another important aspect of general revelation by giving attention to Christian living, our personal experiences of living for Christ as we seek to grow in our personal sanctification.

Exploring these resources as they inform us on any given subject helps us build a responsible Christian theology. As the witnesses of exegesis, interaction in community and Christian living are harmonious and weighty on a particular matter, our level of conviction and confidence about that issue should normally grow. But as these witnesses are disharmonious and of less weight our levels of conviction and confidence should normally be lessened on a given subject. These highly interdependent resources: exegesis, interaction in community and Christian living help us in countless ways as we build Christian theology.

Because these resources are so critical, we'll explore the values and dangers of technical terms in systematics in terms of each of them. We'll look first at technical terms and Christian living; second, we will explore technical terms in relation to interaction in community; and third, we will examine them in connection with the exegesis of Scripture. Let's look first at the theological resource of Christian living.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

You'll recall from the previous lesson that Christian living is the process of personal sanctification. This personal sanctification must take place on at least three levels: the conceptual, the behavioral and the emotional level. Or as we have put it, sanctification involves the development of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. Now these three dimensions of Christian living are highly interdependent, forming webs of multiple reciprocities. Correct thinking — or orthodoxy — affects our behavior (orthopraxis) and our emotions (orthopathos). Our behaviors (orthopraxis) influence the way we conceptualize things (orthodoxy) and how we feel about them (orthopathos). And

of course, our feelings (or orthopathos) deeply influence how we behave (orthopraxis) and how we think (orthodoxy).

Time will not allow us to explore all the ways technical terms impinge on this interplay. So, we will limit ourselves to one major way they can enhance and one way they can hinder Christian living. Let's look first at one way the special vocabulary of systematic theology can be a positive enhancement of living for Christ.

Enhancement

One of the most important advantages of learning technical terms for Christian living is that they serve as simple references for complex biblical teachings. At first, the list of special expressions that appear in systematic theology can be daunting. There are just so many of them and they seem so difficult to remember. But after some time, technical terms actually offer the great advantage of making things simpler. We can recall intricate biblical teachings with a quick reference to a technical term and then apply them to our thinking, behavior and emotions.

Imagine for a moment a person who does not have much knowledge of the vocabulary of systematic theology. For instance, as surprising as it may sound, I've often been asked by new Christians, "Is Jesus God or God's son?" It isn't difficult to understand why people can be confused about this. As they read the Bible without a knowledge of technical terms, they have no concept ready to hand that can help them. They read one biblical passage and it seems to say that Jesus is God. They read another passage and it seems to say that he is the Son of God who submits himself to God.

No wonder then that Christians are often confused when it comes to practical questions like: "To whom should I pray, Jesus or God? If Jesus taught us to pray to the Father, then why do so many Christians pray to Jesus?" For that matter, "If Jesus taught us to pray to the Father, then why do we sing praises to the Holy Spirit?"

To answer these questions for someone who has no background in technical theological language would take a lot of time and effort. They must search out countless biblical passages and draw them together into some kind of cogent understanding. This task is so complex that most young believers simply give up and just do what they see others doing.

But imagine for a moment believers who know the technical vocabulary of systematic theology. If they wonder "Is Jesus God or is he God's son?" Or if they wonder "should I pray to the Father or to the Son or to the Spirit?" then answering their questions is a much simpler task. In fact, Christians who know the technical vocabulary of systematics usually don't even raise these questions because the answer can be given in one simple technical term: the Trinity. If a person is aware of the meaning of this term, then many of these kinds of questions are answered almost immediately, and we can almost intuitively apply the orthodox answer to orthopraxis and orthopathos. The ability to simplify and recall complex issues is one of the greatest enhancements technical terms offer our Christian living.

Although the special vocabulary of systematic theology can enhance Christian living in a number of ways, we should also be aware that it can present hindrances to our sanctification.

Hindrance

As I have watched myself and others become increasingly familiar with the technical expressions of systematic theology, one disadvantage has come to the foreground time and again. Knowing the special vocabulary of systematics can lead to spiritual pride. This is especially true with younger students of theology.

Here's how the problem often comes up. Students of theology expend a lot of intellectual energy learning the technical terms of theology and they find them to be very convenient to use. But at the same time, most lay people do not have the ability, time or interest to learn these kinds of details. And often students of theology begin to think themselves superior to others who do not have the technical vocabulary of systematics. They become so full of pride that they actually believe increased vocabulary implies increased sanctification. But this is hardly the case.

As we have said, growth in the Christian life, increased personal sanctification, does not come simply from conforming our thinking to the Scriptures (or orthodoxy). Acting on our faith and feeling appropriately in our faith are just as important. In fact, most believers grow in grace even when they do not learn the technical vocabulary of systematic theology. We can still understand the Scriptures and apply them to our lives without such knowledge.

Experiences of life like persecution, suffering, and illness, often increase the sanctification of a person far more than the mere intellectual exercise of learning technical vocabulary. So, as important as it is to be familiar with the special words and phrases that appear in systematic theology, we must always be aware that they can actually hinder our Christian living if we allow them to lead us to spiritual pride, a sense that we are mature in Christ simply because we have learned a special vocabulary.

In addition to understanding how technical terms can bring advantages and disadvantages to Christian living, we should also become aware of how they impact our interaction in community.

Interaction in Community

Interaction in community is a major resource for building Christian theology because it helps us focus on the help that the body of Christ offers us. We can speak of three important dimensions of interaction within the Christian community: Christian heritage, present Christian community, and private judgment. Christian heritage represents the witness of the Holy Spirit's work in the church of the past. We learn what he taught our spiritual forebears. Our present Christian community represents the witness of Christians living today, what the Holy Spirit is teaching other believers around us. Our private judgment represents the witness of our personal conclusions and convictions on matters, the things that we bring to our interactions with others as the Spirit leads us individually. These dimensions of community interact with each other in a variety of ways, also forming webs of multiple reciprocities. Our heritage informs our present community and private judgments. Our present community mediates our heritage and

affects our personal views. And our private judgments mediate the influences of our heritage and present communities as well.

With these basic dynamics of interaction in mind, we should explore some of the ways the special vocabulary of systematic theology can enhance and hinder community interaction. Let's take a look first at one important way technical terms can enhance interaction in community.

Enhancement

One of the greatest ways technical terms can enhance community interaction can be summed up in one word: communication. When Christians know and are able to use the special expressions that systematicians have developed, they can communicate much more effectively with each other.

On the one hand, we are able to interact more effectively with our Christian heritage when we know the language of systematics. The vast majority of theological works, commentaries, creeds, confessions, and other theological writings from the past make frequent use of technical terms as a way of summarizing Christian beliefs. And typically, systematic theology is deeply concerned with these traditional ways of expressing things. So, the technical terms of systematics help us greatly as we interact with Christians from the past.

For instance, if you're interested in knowing what church leaders like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, or Calvin taught, you will be at a tremendous advantage if you are familiar with traditional technical terms. To be sure, many terms have been coined after the days of these men, but nevertheless, technical terms give us ways of connecting with their writings so that we may benefit from what God taught them.

On the other hand, interaction with our present communities can also be greatly enhanced if we and those around us share a common theological vocabulary.

The next time you are in a class or church conference, listen carefully to the ways your fellow believers talk to each other about theology. It will soon become quite evident that good communication takes place when the participants agree on the meanings of terms that they are using. When they don't, their communication is stifled.

Isn't it good that most Protestants use the term "justification" to mean "justification by faith alone"? Can you imagine the problems in communication if we were to use the term justification in different ways? Isn't it good that we can speak of "sanctification" and know what we're talking about? Isn't it positive that we can speak of the "humiliation of Christ" and the "exaltation of Christ" without having to ask what we mean? The more we know and share technical terms, the more we are able to communicate effectively with each other.

Although it is true that the special vocabulary of systematics can enhance our interaction in these and other ways, it is also the case that it can hinder interaction in community.

Hindrance

Many special expressions in systematic theology are archaic and do not communicate well today. Some of them come from as early as the patristic and medieval periods. Many others come from at least several centuries ago. Although these technical terms were created to facilitate communication when they were first formed, they are simply too archaic to communicate well today. As a result, *we* may learn these old terms, but many around us will not, and community interaction can be severely limited.

I've encountered this problem frequently when I explain the doctrine of the hypostatic union, the union of the divine and human natures of Christ in the one person of Christ. How many people even know what the word "hypostasis means"? We may think we know what the terms "nature" and "person" mean, but we mean something very different today by these terms than ancient Christians did.

So, as we become familiar with the technical terminology of systematic theology we have to be careful to recognize that it can actually hinder communication within community.

Having seen some of the ways technical terms relate to Christian living and interaction in community, we should turn to the third major theological resource: the exegesis of Scripture. How do the special words and phrases of systematics affect our interpretation of the Bible?

EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE

Exegesis is vital to building all Christian theology because it's our most direct access to God's special revelation in Scripture. We've suggested in another lesson, that it's helpful to think of three main ways the Holy Spirit has led the church to interpret Scripture. We've called these broad categories: literary analysis, historical analysis and thematic analysis. In the first place, literary analysis looks at the Scriptures as a picture, an artistic presentation designed by human authors under divine inspiration to influence their original audiences through their distinctive literary features. Second, historical analysis looks at the Scriptures as a window to history, a way of seeing and learning from ancient historical events that the Scriptures inerrantly report. And third, thematic analysis treats Scripture as a mirror, a way of reflecting on questions and topics that are of interest to us. Every time we interpret the Bible, we operate to some degree or another with all three kinds of analyses because they are highly interdependent. They too form webs of multiple reciprocities. Yet, at any given moment we may emphasize one approach over the others depending on our needs and our purposes.

Systematic theology employs thematic approaches to scripture more than any other exegetical strategy. Systematicians seek to find what the bible teaches about themes or topics that are of special interest to them. In other words, systematicians approach the scriptures with questions related to particular doctrines.

They ask questions like, "What does the bible say about God?" "What does it say about humanity?" "What does it say about salvation?" They examine the scriptures and gather information from this passage and that passage to find biblical answers to their

questions. One of the greatest challenges facing systematicians in this process is how to determine which portions of scripture comment on their questions. "Does this passage address this doctrine?" "Does that passage speak to this or that topic?" Sometimes the choice of this or that passage is obvious, but many times it is not so obvious. And technical terminology in systematic theology is one of the complicating factors in this entire process.

To understand how this is so, we must remember that the relationships between terms and concepts in Scripture are very complex. Among other things, many terms in the bible can signify one concept. And one term can signify many concepts. These manifold connections vary from one place to another in scripture and sometimes, they're quite confusing. By contrast, however, systematic theologians have developed technical terminology to avoid these kinds of ambiguities. They have created terms that are so specially defined that they are intended to express just one theological concept. In this sense, in systematic theology, there is a one-to-one correspondence between terms and concepts.

Now this difference between terms and concepts in systematic theology in the bible leads to a very important observation. On the level of terminology, systematicians exercise terminological freedom. They do not seek to conform their theological expressions to the expressions of the bible. Instead, systematicians use biblical terms in their own ways. They also employ extra-biblical terms and even combine biblical and extra-biblical terms.

At the same time however, on the level of concepts, sound systematic theologians always seek conceptual conformity to scripture. They strive to understand the ideas the bible teaches and to explain them in their own terminology. Although they exercise freedom in their terminology, systematicians have the goal of conceptual conformity.

This basic distinction helps us see why technical terms in systematic theology can both enhance and hinder our exegesis of Scripture. In a word, when the distinctions between terminological freedom and conceptual conformity are kept in mind, our ability to select the right passages for particular topics can be greatly enhanced. But when it is forgotten, our ability to select properly can be greatly hindered. Let's think first about one way understanding terminological freedom and conceptual conformity in systematic theology can help us in exegesis.

Enhancement

Unfortunately, many interpreters of scripture often operate in a way that may be described as overly restrictive. They wrongly assume that a passage of scripture speaks of a theological concept only if that passage uses the technical term that they identify with that topic. If their special theological term, usually a technical expression from systematic theology, does not appear in a passage, then they wrongly exclude that passage from consideration.

In reality, systematicians must not be overly restrictive but appropriately selective as they explore scriptures. They can do this when they remember that biblical writers express topics with all kinds of terms. Biblical writers often comment on a topic or concept even when their expressions do not match the technical terms of systematic

theology. For this reason, when systematic theologians turn to the scriptures for information on a given topic, they must be careful not to be overly restrictive by looking just for certain words. Instead, they must explore passages that have relevant concepts within them.

For example, in this lesson we have seen that the scriptures use many terms to describe the concept or doctrine of regeneration. The initial transformation of a person from spiritual death to life in Christ is called "regeneration" only in Titus 3:5. But if systematic theologians restrict themselves to this one passage because their technical term is not used elsewhere, then they will not learn much about this topic from the exegesis of scripture. The Bible's teaching on the subject of a person's initial transformation from death to life in Christ is not restricted to the term regeneration. The scriptures speak of the same theological doctrine using terms like "new man," "born from above," "born again" and countless other expressions. Passages with the expression, "new man," do not need to catalogued as a separate doctrine. Nor do verses with the expression "born from above" or "born again." They all speak of the same theological topic. In fact, there are passages that speak of this topic or concept without even using a particular word or phrase. When systematic theologians remember that they exercise terminological freedom and seek only conceptual conformity to scripture, they can learn about regeneration from all kinds of passages. They can be much more comprehensive as they look for what the scriptures teach about the concept of initial transformation no matter how it is expressed in the bible.

Hindrance

While it's true that keeping in mind the terminological freedom and conceptual conformity of systematic theology can enhance our exegesis, forgetting this fact can also hinder our interpretation of scripture. There are many ways in which this is true, but one of the most common ways technical terms hinder exegesis is what we might call "overgeneralization."

"Overgeneralization" is one of the most widespread problems introduced to exegesis by technical terms in systematic theology. It often occurs in this way: When students learn special terminologies in systematics and find them very helpful, they often begin to read their technical definitions into every place expressions appear in scripture. They wrongly assume that every passage where a word appears, addresses the same theological topic or doctrine.

But when we remember that systematicians exercise terminological freedom and only seek conceptual conformity to scripture, we can avoid "overgeneralization" and perform appropriate selection. In other words, we'll be better equipped to choose those portions of scripture that actually address the topic or doctrine in mind.

Take for instance what we have seen in this lesson about the term "justification." The term "justification" in traditional Protestant systematic theology refers to the concept of the initial declaration of righteousness that occurs through faith, apart from works, when Christ's righteousness is imputed to a person who believes. Now, this technical definition of justification is so prominent in systematic theology that it's easy to expect every verse with the word "justification," or *dikaioō*, to refer to the same doctrine. So

interpreters either force their technical meaning of justification onto passages where it does not mean this or they modify the traditional doctrine of justification to accommodate wrongly selected passages. We have seen that James 2:24 uses the term "justification" or *dikaioō* in a way that differs from traditional systematic theology. Unfortunately, some theologians have thought that because the term "justification" appears in this passage that it addresses the doctrine of justification in systematic theology. And as a result, they confuse the doctrine of justification with the many uses of the term in Scripture.

But we must understand James on a conceptual level rather than simply on a verbal level. Simply because the word "justification" appears in this or some other passage does not mean that it must be allowed to impinge on the systematic theological doctrine of justification.

Because systematicians exercise terminological freedom and only seek conceptual conformity to scripture, we should be careful never to flatten the diverse use of terms in scripture. To do so will greatly hinder our exegesis.

So it is that technical terms in systematic theology can both enhance and hinder our use of all three theological resources. Technical terms are valuable for Christian living, interaction in community and the exegesis of Scripture, but they also present dangers that must be avoided as we make use of these major theological resources.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored several dimensions of technical terms in systematic theology. We've gained an orientation toward what they are and how they fit within the whole process of systematics. We've seen how systematicians form their special or technical terms. And we've looked at some of the values and dangers that technical terms present.

As we continue this series on building systematic theology, we'll see the relevance of what we have learned about technical terms many times. Learning the special vocabulary of systematics and learning how to use it wisely can be one of the most helpful things a theologian can do. With a solid grounding in these matters, we can build a systematic theology that will both honor God and edify his church.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.

Building Systematic Theology

LESSON TWO

Technical Terms in Systematics

Faculty Forum

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Building Systematic Theology

Lesson Two: Technical Terms in Systematics

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Joe Creech
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
Are theological technical terms an unnecessary hindrance?

Student: Richard, in this lesson we're talking a lot about some very technical language, that it seems, really, that that distances theology from the person in the pew. How can we relate this to the listener in the church?

Dr. Pratt: That's a tough one, because systematic theology exists to create technical terms, and that is just the reality of its history, and it's even the reality of today. When people do systematic theology, it's all about finding and creating sometimes a jargon, a shorthand. That's all technical terms are, just shorthand. And unfortunately, one of things we see in this lesson is that one of the biggest problems with people that are really into systematic theology is a sort of spiritual pride in their ability to handle big words that have Latin derivatives and things like that. And that's not the kind of thing that of course I'm going to promote or that I want people to promote, but there is a certain level of understanding that if that every church community and every Bible study every denomination has of a sort of technical jargon that they use. I mean, it's a shorthand. We all do it. Families do it, churches do it, denominations do it, the body of Christ worldwide does it. We have ways in which we use words. So it's not, as it were, something that's unusual or unique to systematic theology, but it does sometimes get very harried when you get into it. I think it's a reality.

Question 2:
How can pastors help their congregations understand technical terms?

Student: Richard, you mentioned church communities. I'm a pastor in a local church. How can pastors really help their people really understand these terms?

Dr. Pratt: How do you do it?

Student: I don't use terms all the time. Sometimes you just use Scripture. But terms are important and I understand that, but sometimes I see others in the church, and I do too… I use the terminology and people glass over. They don't understand what is

being said, and it's easy to expect people to be on your understanding. And some are way beyond me and some don't understand those things.

Dr. Pratt: And you know, it gets down to where it's things… especially today in our culture, where people are largely unchurched… You know, if you stand up and sing the doxology, there are going to be people out there that don't know what a doxology is. Or even… I've found this to be true just traveling around, some people do not even know what the Lord's Prayer is. And these are all technical terms that we use. And if you add to that things like or *ordo salutis*, or you add things like effectual calling, or eschatology, and things like that, well now you're getting a list that's so long that it works as shorthand for professionals, but not for people that aren't professionals. I think that, I guess if I were pastor of a church, I would limit myself very much to just a handful of technical words, because you can find ways to communicate things shorthand without using sort of classical terminology. Like rather than saying eschatology, or this is the eschatological significance of such-and-such or such-and-such, you can say last days, or you can say end of the world. You can say all kinds of things like that other than eschatology, because all it does is just put people off, and there's no reason for it.

Now, don't you hate it when you go to a doctor and the doctor says, well, you have such-and-such and such-and-such, and you can't even pronounce the words? You say, well, can you explain that to me? So then they use more technical of a vocabulary to explain it to you. I hate that… I look at them and say, now look, just talk to me like a human being. Your heart's not working, your brains not working. Alright? That I can understand, but I can't understand all the other things you said. I think the purpose of theology, if you remember even from the last lesson, the purpose of theology and the reason it's changed through the centuries, is to fulfill the Great Commission, it's to communicate the teachings of Jesus to people. And it's not doing that. If technical terms are getting in the way of it, then we need to stop the technical terms and speak in new technical terms, or new jargon. Because the initial technical terms that we've sort of inherited were designed to facilitate communication originally, and sometimes they don't do that anymore.

Question 3:
Should we all encourage Christians to learn theological technical terms?

Student: Well, Richard, I'm wondering, though, if there really is a problem in teaching it. And what makes me think that is, look at the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a catechism that was designed for children, and it has questions in there like what is justification, what is sanctification? Have we lost something in our modern culture as we've shied away from teaching those questions?

Dr. Pratt: Well, we've lost what I call "traditioning." We lost some ability to create unity of language among us, and that's one of the issues. You just mentioned justification and sanctification. That's one of the things this lesson talks about is the difference in the ways different churches use that terminology and the way the Bible uses it. And it's caused controversy recently in my own denomination and in a number of others. There is some value in that, but I think most of that probably needs to stay on the level of the ministers and the elders and the church leaders as opposed to every single person, because you can find other ways to say it. And you can find other ways to communicate it in ways that work better for contemporary culture. At least I think you can.

Question 4:
Should we use technical terms when we teach and preach in church?

Student: What's the balance? Because the words are so full, the theological terms, and they have such meaning, and you are able to answer questions. I mean, in your teaching, you talked about the Trinity. Well, a lot of people don't understand the Trinity, and they're still wrestling with all those concepts. So, what is the balance between how much do we use and how much do we not use?

Dr. Pratt: That's just wisdom. There's no answer. I guess my answer would be: watch their eyes. When they glass over, stop. Because there is great value in these terms, in these traditional terms, and then there is also they can become an obstacle. The same words can be both obstacles and opportunities for people to learn the bible. We can become idols, too, as we force them and try to force people to understand them without understanding the heart behind them. That's a great point. I think also it could be very freeing for pastors and your preachers to understand that they don't have to use those terms, because some think they have to appear a certain way. That's right. As if the ideas and the terms meet together, and in this lesson we emphasize that a lot, that the difference between a word and a concept, or terms and concepts, are loose to say the least.

Question 5:
Why did God make language ambiguous?

Student: Richard, I understand that one word can have a number of different meanings, but it seems like that's because of that, language becomes obscure. Why would God put language together like that?

Dr. Pratt: I wish I knew why he did that that way, because it's caused all kinds of problems for us. And I don't think that that's something that's the result of the fall. Some people would say the obscurity of language, or maybe you could even say the elasticity of language, that words can be used in a variety of ways even though they

do have some limits, that they see that as the result of sin. I don't know why we would do that, because I just think it's a matter of the limitations that human beings have as finite creatures that the words we use are chosen, and they are developed by convention. I mean, basically, that's all language is. The way that words mean is by people agreeing that certain sounds or motions or whatever will represent certain ideas. And the task of people reading the Bible or doing theology is to figure out the conventions that govern that particular author or that particular time and that particular language, and so on and so on, and there's fluidity, there's elasticity among them. It does make for difficulty, but it also makes language fun. You wouldn't have a joke without it, that's for sure. You know, the turn of a phrase, those kinds of things that you get in the Bible. Not just in normal conversation, you get them in the Bible, too. And it's one of the wonderful things about language that it can have that elasticity but at the same time actually communicate. Actually, when you start thinking about how many meanings or how many concepts get associated with one word, you can sometimes wonder how in the world do we ever communicate with each other. And in fact, some people have gotten to that point in recent history, the sort of deconstructionist mentality that language is too obscure to communicate. Well, we communicate just fine, but sometimes we don't, too. I just think that you have to realize that that's true.

Question 6:
How can we be confident that our understanding of Scripture is correct?

Student: Richard, theologians commonly talk about how Scripture is understandable to just about any mind whether it's a young child — my 3-year-old has a certain comprehension of Scripture — up to the most brilliant of minds. God is still able to communicate through Scripture. How can we be confident that what we're reading is an accurate understanding?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's not exactly what we believe about the Bible. We believe that what's necessary to be believed and obeyed for salvation is clear in one place or another to the learned and unlearned alike. That's not saying that the Bible is clear enough to be understood by everybody, because in some parts the Bible is impossible to understand, I'm convinced, and certainly hasn't been understood up to this point. But I think that, you know, sometimes this mentality that systematic theologians have that comes from their heritage — okay, it comes from that neo-platonic heritage and especially the Aristotelian heritage — that we've got to have a way of talking about God and about the Bible and things in relation to God, we've got to have it in a way that is so rigid and so artificial that these words can mean only one thing and one thing only, and that would be just fine. In fact, there have been people who have tried to do that. Early in his career, Ludwig Wittgenstein tried to do that. He tried to create a perfect language in which there were no ambiguities whatsoever. He gave up on it, okay? He and Bertrand Russell both gave up on it, and that was a wise thing for them

to give up on. But they tried to do it because they realized that if you could do that, then you would create all kinds of clarity and you'd get rid of all kinds of confusion and things, and I wish we could do that in theology. But here's the problem. If you base your systematic theology on the Bible, then you are dealing with at least the Bible that doesn't treat language that way. Even if you could in your systematics make it perfectly, solidly one word, one concept all the way through — which you can't do, but if you could — you're still dealing with a Bible that doesn't do that. The Bible isn't written in that kind of formal style. It's not an attempt to create what we would call a systematic theology a la Neo-Platonism or Aristotelianism, or even modern mentalities. It's instead written in very common language for the most part for relatively uneducated people for the most part; there are parts of the Old Testament that are not that way, but it is nevertheless not a technical book. And what we're trying to do in systematic theology is take an authoritative Scripture that's not a technical theology book and turn it into technical theology, and that's where the mess begins.

Question 7:
Do problems arise when technical terms are translated into new languages?

Student: Let me ask something. We've been dealing with these theological terms for a few centuries in our language. I have friends around the world that I'm beginning to wonder, how do they take our terms and put new words into theological terminology now and have it mean the same thing?

Dr. Pratt: Right. Recently with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a dictionary created of theological terms for Russian, because the only technical terms they had were Orthodox terms. And so the Protestants came up with a dictionary. The same kind of thing is sort of happening in Arabic these days. They're trying to get a sort of pan-Arabic dictionary of theological terms. And it's very hard to do this because every tradition, every branch of the church uses the same set of words with few exceptions but mean very different things. I mean, this is why we have books like The Four Views of Sanctification. Well, yeah, one word sanctification, yet four views in the one book. You've got four views on baptism. One word baptism, but you've got four different concepts of baptism. It's a problem. And what probably is going to happen in the majority church out there where most Christians are now and certainly will be in the future, is that they'll end up this group will create this technical vocabulary, this group will create that technical vocabulary, then they will argue with each other over words rather than concepts just like we did. And that's very sad. I think the only way to avoid that is to get these groups together early on, and for some of them it may be too late already. But if you can get groups together and help them become self-conscious that their technical meanings are not Bible meanings necessarily, that will help. But we'll talk about that a little bit more.

Student: Which is more important, the terminology or the concept?

Dr. Pratt: The concept. Absolutely.

Question 8:
Are some concepts identified by multiple technical terms?

Student: Richard, we just talked about one term and many concepts, but what about one concept being described in many terms?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it works both ways. I know it's confusing because usually that's not the way we think about language. You know, when you're teaching a child how to speak, and when you're learning another language, you do things like tape the word on the refrigerator that says refrigerator in Spanish, whatever, and here's another word for window, here's another word for this object, that object. But while that's true enough, while it works enough that you can learn languages that way, you quickly learn that languages are much more flexible than that. So that one word can have many concepts associated with it. You can tell that easily by looking at a dictionary because a dictionary will have the word and it'll have meaning 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, however many it may have, and those are in the order presumably of the most frequently used, and that's why it changes so much. But it works the other way, too, that you can have one concept, one idea, and it can be expressed in many different ways. And even though each expression may have different nuances to it or slightly different emphases, as you say the same idea in different ways, it'll fundamentally or essentially be the same thing. Tell me this: what do you call your wife?

Student: Christy. I also call her my love or sweetheart, my bride.

Dr. Pratt: Well which is she?

Student: She's all these things.

Dr. Pratt: Okay. So how many different wives do you have? You just said four terms. Does that mean you have four wives?

Student: Oh no, one's enough.

Dr. Pratt: You have one wife; you've got four terms for her, right? Yes. And it's the same kind of thing in almost every single realm of language that a concept can be described in different ways. It can be talked about in words and phrases that are different, and sometimes this becomes extremely important in Christian theology, because if we act as if one word and one concept are always connected to each other, then we think that a person disagrees with us if they don't use the same word that we're using. And the reality is they can actually be in agreement and not use the same

words with us. Here the problem is that different traditions in the Christian church have gotten used to using words with association with certain concepts, and so as traditions in the body of Christ have sort of come apart from each other, they've developed like language dialects. Okay? They've developed their own special terminology, and then when they try to talk to each other, they're talking past each other. Very often, not always, but very often, we have a lot more conceptual unity even though our vocabulary many not reflect it. Have you ever seen that happen? You've been on the mission field before. You ever seen groups that talk right past each other? I have certainly. That's for sure.

Student: But I even see it in the local church because you have a variety of age groups there where words have different meanings, and so what's the role of the pastor in that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, the pastor's got to know what the various dialects are, doesn't he? Do you know what most Americans today when they're asked on the street what's the definition of gospel, do you know what they say? A genre of music. It's a type of religious music. And so when you stand up in the pulpit and say, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if the person isn't indoctrinated into your jargon, they're not going to know what you're talking about. They're using the same word as you, but their concept is very different from your concept of what gospel is. And so now you've got a problem. And when you take Christian denominations and you're trying to get them to come together, they are not — I can almost guarantee this — they're not going to give up their words because these become sacred items, and we get to the point where we think that the words we use, the phrases we use to describe an idea, are locked in and they're inseparable. And so they're not going to give up the words because they feel like they'll be losing their ideas then. But if we can start learning how to say these same ideas in different ways, then we may find ourselves a whole lot better off cooperating with each other, which we need to do a whole lot more in the way that the world is going these days.

I mean, take for example the word sanctified. You know, are you sanctified? If you as a Christian that, they're going to answer yes or no, maybe, depending on what denomination they're from. And that's a big problem, because a lot of people will say very sincerely, no, I'm not sanctified. And other people well say, yes I am sanctified. And they'll mean all kinds of different things by that. That's the one word having many meanings. But now, if you ask the concept question the opposite way, if you look at it the opposite way, you could ask somebody, do you struggle with sin even though you're a Christian? Well, I don't know a Christian that wouldn't say yes to that to some degree, in some way. All of a sudden, we've got a unity. Now we're not going to call that sanctification because different Christian groups use the word sanctification in different ways. So you can't use that term to describe it. You might call it the Christian struggle with sin. Alright, now we're talking a little more unity about this. And so it's just a matter of the flexibility creating opportunities for Christians to communicate across lines that seem impenetrable, and it's often just because of that vocabulary difference.

Question 9:
Should we vary our language in order to communicate to different people?

Student: Okay, I'm being really challenged here. I've been in the local church in a pastoral role for 30 years. Are you saying that I need to figure out how to preach differently, how to communicate differently today than I did then?

Dr. Pratt: That's exactly what I'm saying. Because I'm saying that what you want to do, unless your job is simply to reach the people that have already been reached and just dig them in deeper into the hole that you've dug them into already. If your goal is to reach the lost, if your goal is to reach people who haven't been churched in your own church forever, then you have to preach to people on a conceptual level and not so much on the technical term level. Because they will all have terms for these things. I'll give you an example. I did an evangelistic week (actually, I did 2 weeks) in a rural village in England, and the vicar there of an Anglican church who was a good friend of mine, he said, "Richard, don't use the word sin. I said, well, how am I going to have an evangelistic campaign and not use the word sin? And he said, you don't understand. In England, the word sin for most people simply means murderer, rapist, horrible things like that. Most people don't associate the word sin with the normal foibles that people have, of shortcomings that they have. They would call those shortcomings or just being human. And so he said, if you say you're a sinner, those people out there are going to say, no I'm not, I haven't murdered anybody, and very sincerely. They're not trying to avoid the issue, just very sincerely.

So what I had to do was find ways to talk about the shortcomings of people and how people don't measure up to God's standard of perfection and things like that, that brought the concept out rather than sticking with the traditional term, because the traditional term is just an English word. That's all it is. And happily, they were speaking English so I could use it. But I would have been miscommunicating because their concept of what a sinner is and what sin is, is so different than what my church and what my branch of the church says sin is, because we say sin is any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God. Well, great. Put that definition out there and see how it goes. But when you talk about sin being an imperfection, okay, even the British will agree they're not perfect and that God only accepts perfection, and that Jesus was perfect. Alright? We finally found a term that related to a concept that was a whole lot more fruitful than me just standing up there defining what the word sin means over and over and over by my catechism or whatever.

Question 10:
How can we communicate to diverse groups without using technical terms?

Student: Okay, I don't want to leave here depressed today. In our church, people generally come in from maybe three or four different backgrounds or churches, denominations, and then new people. To communicate to all of those people seems like an impossible task. Is there more to it?

Dr. Pratt: It's not an easy task, especially if you're trying to reach across age barriers, too. My own personal goal for preaching is that the 10-year-olds can understand it. If they can't understand it, I assume nobody else can. And I know that's kind of a low threshold, but I do believe that is for me the threshold. I mean, that's where I feel comfortable with it. I try to avoid any technical terms or any special definitions that go beyond about what a 10-year-old can get, because I figure that that means most of the adults might be able to tune in too if they want it. It is hard, but it's why pastors have to know their people. They have to know and diagnose their people, and they can't stand up there and be effective for their people if they're just preaching to themselves and to maybe the handful of other pastors and trained professional theologians that are out there. This difference between words and concepts is very important. One term can be many concepts, and one concept can be represented by many terms, and that reality is the reality of human language, and if we don't buy into that and learn to handle that — it's not just a matter of theory, it's how to handle that reality — then we're going to be sunk.

Student: And I think that perhaps we can have comfort, too, that God the Holy Spirit takes the word and the concept and applies it to the heart even when I don't communicate it.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, of course. All communication is weak apart from the power of the Spirit to do it. Thanks for saying that, because that's very important. You do the best you can, and then you trust God to go beyond it. How's that? That's effective preaching. That's right.

Question 11:
Does the Bible have its own theological technical terms?

Student: Richard, I think we agree that theologians are all trying to create technical vocabulary, but what makes us think that the Bible's not doing that also?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question, because you would, we would think anyway, that that's the way you do good theology, right? And we would assume the Bible has good theology, so what makes us think it's not consistent having one meaning for every word and just leaving it at that and working through it? Well, let me say first, even

though theologians try to do that, they don't do it. Okay? And this is where the slipperiness starts coming in, because you'll see them use a word and then qualify it in some way, and then drop the qualifier. Like, for example, the word election. Let's just take that… that's a hot one. You know, a typical systematic theologian will talk about elect to an office or official election, or they'll talk about national election, or covenant election. And they'll stick those words on there, and then they'll say election unto salvation is another one. Then all of a sudden, the next paragraph, all they're talking about is the word election and they're not putting any qualifiers on it. Which one are they talking about? Well, you have to watch and see and sort of figure it out. And so it's sort of slippery even on the theology side, but it's even slipperier on the Bible side. And I think part of the reason for this is that the Bible was written over thousands of years… thousands of years, and vocabulary changes in every language over that amount of time. It was written by lots of different people who lived in different periods of time and in different places. It's by people that have different personalities and different styles of thinking about things.

Just consider the contrast that we have just in the New Testament between Peter and his background and Paul and his background. I mean, Peter was fisherman, and we all know that fishermen don't know how to speak very well. And we know that Paul was a trained rabbi. So the difference between the two of them educationally and technically and those sorts of things is so enormous, we really can't expect them to go hand-in-hand with each other, walking step-by-step and defining the words exactly the same way. And the fact is that early Christian theology in the time of the New Testament did not develop in one central place where some big wig was establishing definitions of terms and came up with a whole long list of technical terms that everybody was going to adopt. Those words just kind of grew here and there. A lot of it was from Old Testament vocabulary, but the Old Testament vocabulary is different. And so the Bible is at time rather technical, but usually the Bible is very ordinary, the way we normally speak or write letters to each other, or write a novel about something; we won't be zeroed in on particular technical meanings of words, but rather we'll be much more flexible and elastic in the way that we use words. So it's more ordinary language.

Question 12:
How can we tell when the Bible is using multiple terms to refer to a single concept?

Student: So Richard, given the fact that there are so many differences among the writers of Scripture, what cues can we look for in Scripture that help us be confident that there is consistency in these concepts?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it's important to remember… it really is important. I don't know how to say this more strongly, that while there is not consistency in terminology — in fact, we say that Bible writers had liberty or freedom or flexibility in the terminology

they used, a wide flexibility. They did derive some from the Old Testament and that sort of narrowed things down, but the wide variety conceptually they did not differ from each other, at certain deep levels. We need to even think about concepts in this respect. Concepts are not just simple things themselves. The ideas we have in our minds are very complicated, even things that we think are simple are complex, and sometimes you have to go fairly deeply into the conceptual mindset of a person to find commonality with another. But when it comes to Bible writers, we don't think that they contradicted each other. That's our commitment and our belief because we they all spoke on behalf of God, and were inspired by Holy Spirit, so you can read them, and if you read them carefully enough on the conceptual level, you'll find they don't really disagree with each other, but they on the surface level of the words that they use. I mean the Apostle Paul said, I think it's fair to say, a summary, that a person is justified by faith alone. Now if you take that as a fair summary of what the Apostle Paul said in the book of Romans, then we have to say on a level of language that James contradicted him flat out, because James says that a man is not justified by faith alone. Now it could not be said any plainer than that. And on the level of the words that they're using, they sound like they are contradicting each other just toe-to-toe. Now what we believe is, because both of these people are speaking by the inspiration of Holy Spirit, is that while the words they're using seem to be contradictory, the concepts that are beneath them are not contradictory.

So let's talk about that for a minute. What did Paul mean by justification? Okay, that's the question. Well, I think in Romans where he's talking about it being by faith alone, he's using the word made righteous or justified, he's using that to indicate what happens initially when a person comes to Christ in faith. That person is rendered righteous in the eyes of God, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him. Well, James is not talking about what happens initially in a persons' life, obviously, because he talking about Abraham sacrificing Isaac and all those kinds of things and how faith without works is dead. And so he's talking about the ongoing Christian life and how justification occurs over and over and over and over again, and that would drive Paul crazy and most theologians crazy, most Protestants anyway, but that's the way he's using the term. And so in terms of normal Pauline understandings, what James is using the word justification for is what we think Paul would say sanctification is. Okay? Even though Paul uses the word sanctification to mean justification, too, but anyway, the idea of the ongoing. This is once again you see the need for sometimes pushing the technical words aside and saying what are we really talking about here? Are we talking about what happens initially to a person when they come to Christ? Or are we talking about something that's ongoing? Well, Paul's talking about what happens initially, and then James is talking about what's ongoing. And, of course, Paul and James are not disagreeing at that level, because the old adage is, we're justified by faith alone, but faith that justifies is never alone. And so that's a theological way of saying that Paul and James are right.

We have to hold that I think as Christians, because we believe in the inspiration of Scripture, and we believe that God wouldn't tell us one thing and then tell us the opposite of it. But it is difficult at times. And the cues that we find in the Bible… You

know, the question is how can you identify the concepts even though they're using words that seem to be contradictory? And the only answer to that is careful exegesis. That really is it, careful interpretation, where you take big chunks of the Bible and you try to understand, say, all the writings of Paul. You would want to look and see how Paul uses the word justification everywhere and then notice that there are different meanings that he attaches to that at different times and in different concepts associated with it in different context. And you'd look at James to see if James really believes that justification is something that happens over and over and over again, or if that's just his way of talking about what we would tend to call sanctification.

Question 13:
How important is it to understand the differences between biblical writers?

Student: Help me here. I'm really trying to come to grips with the importance of understanding the writer. So many different writers, you know, writing in scripture over so many different years, but you know, sometimes I'll hear someone preach and they never mention the writer, his background, anything about him. How important is it for us to understand and to help our people understand the differences of the writers?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think if you want them to go beyond the very basics of Christianity, they've got to grapple with the fact that the Bible was not written directly by God, as if it is a sort of flat book that has only one set of vocabulary that came right from the mouth of God, that God did what we call organic inspiration. And we've talked about that in other series. The organic inspiration means that Holy Spirit used human beings and used their backgrounds and personalities and vocabulary in this case… like Peter and Paul, like Isaiah and John, or Moses versus John of Revelation. You know, the concepts are different, but they are in harmony. The language can be sometimes very much disharmonious because the meanings of the words change through time. And so it's just important that we do help people on some levels anyway, depending on where they are in their understanding of the Bible, because it can be confusing. But here's the problem. If you don't allow them to see that to some extent, then what they're going to do is they're going to start taking the words that you teach them, the technical words that you and I give them, and they're going to start reading them back into the Bible everywhere they see the word. And that's real trouble, because they're going to find the same meaning, they're going to plug that meaning in every time they see the word, and when they do that, we're in trouble because this is one of the biggest problems that people have when they cannot distinguish between the word that is used and the concept that's being meant. And that freedom allows us to understand the Bible in its own terms in ways that we will not be able to do if we are forcing the technical meanings that we have every time we find that word in the Bible.

Question 14:
How are theological technical terms created?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you talk about the church or theologians creating new terms to help define concepts. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Dr. Pratt: Let's review what the options are. Basically, what theologians, systematic theologians usually do, is they'll take a Bible term that's used relatively frequently. They want to do that because, you know, the more you make your theology use Bible words, the more authoritative it sounds, and the holier it sounds. So they'll tend to do that. But the ones that do this either wittingly or unwittingly, because I think sometimes people do it without even realizing what they're doing, they'll narrow the meaning of the word down from all the varieties of meanings that are out there in the Bible. So maybe the Bible will have the word say sin, and maybe it will use that word in 10 different ways. Well, the theologian will narrow it down and say, now I'm going to use it just in this way. So that's one way, you refine a Bible term that's used in many ways into one meaning. So that's one way we create technical terms.

Another way we do it is we will take technical terms from the Bible and we'll use that word that's in the Bible, but we'll use it in a way that it's never used in the Bible. And that happens, too. It's quite remarkable how often that kind of thing happens, as a matter of fact. Maybe the people when they first did it thought it was the way the Bible uses it, but not in reality. And so you can refine the definition from the way the Bible uses it, picking one definition out of many, or use a Bible term that never is used in that way. And the third way is just to import a foreign word in. Take for example, the word Trinity. That's a foreign word. It's not a Bible term, it's nowhere in the Bible. You cannot even find the word person in the bible. You can't find the word essence in the Bible either, or substance in the Bible. Well, the doctrine of the Trinity is all about three persons, one substance or one essence. Okay? And none of those terms are in the Bible. So you've got a whole doctrine of Trinity that is developed out of technical terms that came from somewhere. Where'd they come from?

Student: The culture.

Dr. Pratt: The culture, that's right. The philosophical context that they were trying to address. In that case, it was Neo-Platonism, and they were trying to speak Christian talk according to the categories that people thought in terms of — the academics, the intellectuals did in that day. And so they came up with all these terms that they used. And this is why many times even ministers will say they believe in the Trinity, but they don't have a clue what they're talking about. I mean, they really don't. It surprises me. And people sometimes say, well what shall we do about that? I say, nothing, just keep repeating the formulas over and over again even if you don't understand them. That's a joke! Maybe we should try to understand a little more what

they meant by it. But the idea is just that technical terms do sometimes come from outside the Bible.

And the issue here is which of those is better? Which of those is more helpful? And the answer to that is it just all depends on what issue you're talking about. There is a danger when you take a word that's used many times in the Bible and just say we're only going to use it this way, and we mentioned that one already, and that is that you'll start reading that one meaning back into all the other passages. There's another danger when you take this Bible word and you give it a new meaning that's never in the Bible. Same danger. You can stick your concepts into the Bible real easily that way. And there's a danger of bringing eternal words in because now these words are loaded with all kinds of meaning that may not even be biblical, and all of a sudden you're jamming the Bible through the grid of that extrabiblical concept, and it doesn't necessarily need to be put that way.

Student: But don't some of the Bible writers actually do that? I'm thinking in terms of John utilizing the word *logos* in the opening of his gospel.

Dr. Pratt: That's the justification for using extrabiblical terms in theology. It's that fact that Paul was able and did quote Greek philosophers. We don't know about the particulars of the origin of John's *logos* because that's a debated item. But nevertheless, he certainly isn't using it exactly like Genesis chapter 1 used the word "*amar*" or to speak. Okay? There was a little something else going on there. But that's right. In fact, even when you start refining the word like messiah down, messiah gets refined in the New Testament teaching because it was refined by the inter-testamental use of the word messiah. I mean, you tell me, whom does Isaiah call my Messiah, God's Messiah? Well he calls the king of Israel that, but he also called Cyrus this. So, you know, Cyrus is called the messiah of God, my messiah, my anointed one. Alright, now of those two options, when we say Messiah, which do we pick? Cyrus? No, son of David, okay? So we're throwing out Cyrus, forget that. We're not even going to think about it. And that's a problem, of course, because sometimes people go back and read passages about Cyrus and think that he's Jesus or something, and he's not. And so we always wrestle with this because of the ways that languages work back-and-forth like this. So, New Testament writers are picking up on the ways that languages changed and shifted even in their own day and accommodating those both by the ways they narrowed down Bible use and then used extrabiblical terms as well.

Question 15:
Is there a continuing need to create new technical terms in theology?

Student: Richard, we as Protestants have a theological background of reimaging the use of theological terms. In light of "*semper reformata*", should we constantly be redefining and even coming up with new words?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I think you're right. I think people sometimes don't realize this, that if the Reformers, for example, had stuck with the traditional terminology, technical terminology and definitions, we would not have a Protestant church today. They broke with those, and they thought that they were going back to Bible uses of those terms. Now, centuries later, sometimes we wonder whether they really got that close to the Bible or not, and maybe they created technical words in ways that we've said before people do this. But it does raise the serious question that, yes, of course, it would seem to me anyway, that if our job and that the purpose of theology is to communicate the Gospel of Christ, to teach all nations, we have to be ready to re-up the definitions of words, to review what we mean by these things, and make sure that the terms we're using communicate to people that we're ministering to. But then part of the question is, well, what do we aim for. What are we really trying to get at? Are we trying to make our terms equal to the way the Bible uses the terms? Well, it's just not going to work, so what are we aiming for? In my opinion, theology has a tension, theologians have a tension, that as their technical terms get further away from the Bible, they may be more relevant to people, but they're going to get further away from the Bible, which is a problem. And the closer you get to the Bible's use of terms, the less people commonly use those terms, especially if you're in a post Christian culture like ours where Bible terms are not used much. So it's a tension there that I think takes pastoral wisdom to know how far to go in whichever direction.

Question 16:
Do we risk changing our concepts when we create new technical terms?

Student: Richard, we've been talking about terms and concepts. And if we start changing our terms quite a bit, do we run the risk of adjusting our concepts? And maybe do our concepts need to change?

Dr. Pratt: Absolutely we risk changing the concepts inadvertently, not even realizing we're doing it, because connotations come with these terms. There is a certain amount of indoctrination or traditioning that has to happen in any organization, whether it's the church or not, but especially in the body of Christ. You know, people use that word contextualization a lot these days, and sometimes they mean by that simply as missionaries go from one country to another, they need to adopt the language and the culture of these various groups that they meet. And that's a noteworthy and notable and honorable way to do and way to think. But at the same time, we have to always remind ourselves that we are trying to get people to think like the Bible. We are not trying to get them to think like North Americans or Western Christians — that is irrelevant — but we're trying to get them to think like the Bible. That makes all of us have to leave our common vocabulary and concepts that we grew up with in our culture and go back to Bible concepts. And yes, concepts have to be refined, too. This is always the tension, because we're not just changing words and keeping the concepts the same, but as we learn more about the Bible,

we're also trying to elucidate the concepts and clarify them, and a lot of that will be in the biblical theology series that follows. It shows how in modern Christianity we're changing the way we even think about the Bible's theology because of this different way of approaching it. But yes, we have refinement to do in those sorts of ways, and there are dangers at every turn.

Question 17:
Should we work with Christians in other cultures to develop technical terms?

Student: You know, sometimes it seems like we just talk to each other in our country. It seems like it might be really helpful to be talking to those from other cultures also about these very issues and concepts.

Dr. Pratt: Uh, huh. When you think about the mission field, I sometimes wonder, does it help us to understand that the things we believe are culturally driven, culturally influenced, or biblically influenced and biblically defined. And I think what we have to do is stop separating those two from each other, and rather than thinking of this is Bible, this is not, always remember that, assuming that we are getting the Bible right, that they're always together. I mean, there's no way to escape the fact that when we think biblically, we are also thinking our way of thinking biblically. And those two always work together. Now it is possible to be non-biblical or against the Bible, but if you are even doing the Bible, if you're doing it right, you're still going to be mixing in things that you and I have from our own culture. And so when you go on the mission field, you have to start realizing that and help people learn how to reinvigorate the language and reinvigorate the concepts for themselves where they are. And it even comes down to what you're going to emphasize, what priorities you're going to have. I mean, keep in mind that traditional systematic theology doesn't just give us concepts and terms but actually arranges those things in particular ways, and all of that is part of the package we are delivering to people. I hate to say it this way, but I think it's true, that sometimes what was important to us and what was important to our ancestors in Western culture and the priorities that they set up, may not be the priorities that other groups set up other places in the world. And this is going to cause tension, especially as Christianity continues to move outside of Western culture.

Student: Do you think it's easier for our brothers and sisters in an Eastern culture to grasp these concepts out of the Bible than it is for us?

I would assume that there are some things that are easier. But I would also assume there are probably some things that are more difficult. You'd have to ask them. You know, it's just, every culture is affected by sin and by redemption, by God's common grace, and the mixing of that is different in every situation. And that's what I think sets us up or makes the Bible difficult for us to know.

Question 18:
Is it wrong to assign new meaning to biblical terms in order to use them as technical terms?

Student: Richard, earlier we were talking about taking a biblical term but investing it with new meaning that's not necessarily a biblical meaning, and you used the concept of the covenant of grace. How would you respond to those who object to doing this form of theology?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think the first thing that I would say is, I'm sorry. In other words, I would admit it. A lot of people work very hard to try to show that the words that they are using are Bible words, and they're using them exactly like the Bible uses them. I just think we have to sort of admit to each other that we're not doing that. Depending on the context, I might even help them see that they're not doing that either, that no one is consistent in that ideal, that that's an impossible ideal to meet. And what that does, in my experience, is it sort of lowers the rhetoric a little bit. It lets people say, Okay, you do it, we do it, now let's just see if we can't work towards mutual understanding of what's going on. A great example of that is the ongoing battles, at least they used to be and I'm glad to see that they've slowed down a little bit, between dispensationalism and covenant theology. It used to be that you could say the word dispensationalism and it meant one thing, and you could say covenant theology and it meant one thing, and they would throw bombs at each other.

Well, now, happily, what we're doing is we're talking beyond those words. It's not just simply are you a covenant theologian? Or are you a dispensationalist? Now what's caused that I think is that there have been changes on both sides. The people on the covenant side like to talk about the changes in dispensationalism and never admit that their stuff has changed, but it's changed too. And dispensationalists like to talk about the changes that have occurred in that. And so what you're talking about now in the current situation is propensities. Okay? Just merely that. You're talking about propensities towards more unity or less unity for the Bible. That's really what you're talking about, because everyone realizes that the Bible, religion, faith changes through time, and everybody realizes there is a measure of unity to it all. Now we're getting down to the details. Now we're getting down to the real concepts that are underneath this rather than arguing, are you a covenant theologian? Are you a dispensationalist? I think that is bringing about a great deal of unity at least on the scholarly level at this point, and the pastoral level at this point, whereas, I can remember 30 years ago where that wasn't the case. Can you remember that Joe? You know, you just sort of wrote somebody off if they were on the other side of that issue. And happily, that's not happening anymore.

Question 19:
How can we make sure that we understand biblical terms rightly?

Student: I wonder as a pastor what concepts and words I'm using and giving unbiblical meaning to. How do I even check myself? Where do I go?

Dr. Pratt: I think, you know, everybody has to do this in different ways. But when you are a part of a body of Christ, you're a part of a branch of the church and that's become your family — we talked about this in the Building Your Theology series — if that's your family, then you learn the language of your family. I can remember that the definition of making up your bed was different in my childhood than it is now. And what makes the difference is just one family or the other family, and you sort of get the definition by learning the hard way usually, and now defining what it means to make up my bed is different than it was 40 years ago for me. Alright? Well, that's fine. And that's the way churches are. They develop this sort of family talk, and once you've identified your family, then you work within it and you reach back into its heritage, but not just on that linguistic or language level, but on a conceptual level, and ask, what were they trying to say? What were the ideas that they're presenting here? And hold on to those more tightly than the language. I just think we have to get to the point we can do that, and as we do, we're refining ourselves down to the important things because that really is the Bible task also. The task of reading the Bible and interpreting it is not to get the words right. The task is to get the concepts. So as we do that in theology, that sometimes will strip away some of the obstacles, and then when we do it with the Bible, they get stripped away as well, and we get down to that more conceptual level. Have you ever found your terminology changing, Rob?

Student: Oh yeah, definitely. Well, it changes between conversations. I can have a conversation with my wife and then turn around and have a conversation with my son. I'd better use a different terminology at that point.

Dr. Pratt: And even if you're talking about the same concept. I think that's really true. Theology is a lot like that. We will inevitably always be introducing things that are wrong. We're sinful people. And so when we use expressions like covenant of grace, you mentioned that earlier, and the Westminster Confession of Faith says "commonly called the covenant of grace," which indicates it's not a Bible term. It's just a theological convention, and they had to stick that in there probably, I don't know for a fact, but probably to get people off their backs. Where's the word covenant of grace used in the Bible? They said, well, it's commonly called that, and everybody goes, okay. And that's the way we've got to get with this, learning how to give and take on what words we use, sticking with the concepts, pushing the concepts. I think it will unify the church, and I think it will bring a lot more focus to where the true battle is, and that the battle is not between these isolated, small, secondary and even tertiary differences among Christians. The battle is with the world, and a lot of times we spend our energy, as one famous person put it, "we make

war with each other as if we are at peace with the world." And that is often the Christian theologian's motto: let's make war with other Christians. And the war is usually over the phraseology rather than even the concepts. And sometimes on the conceptual level, it's just subtle differences. And we need to learn with subtle differences. You have differences from me, and you have differences from me, but we're sitting here at this table and we're quite at peace, and I hope we will be afterwards, too. But that's the way theology has to be done, otherwise, we're going to lose the battle with the world.

Question 20:
Can believers from other cultures help us understand biblical concepts?

Student: Richard, it seems as I've matured in the ministry to the point I am now, that it's been helpful to understand that I have one perspective from my culture on things that I'm teaching. Recently I've taught some on *koinonia* and on fellowship and on community, and I bring one perspective. But I think sometimes I've thought that I'm giving everybody everything there is to know. And yet, as I've interacted with some of my African American brothers or Hispanic brothers and sisters, or even some Middle Eastern friends that I have who are followers of Christ, that their perspective brings so much richness to my understanding of these concepts.

Dr. Pratt: Isn't if funny how that happens? Because, you know, you do. I mean, I do it all the time, too. I think I have exhausted the subject. You know, I've taught everything there is in the Bible about this particular subject, say *koinonia,* and then you realize somebody that comes from a different culture, their concept of that is so strikingly different, and you realize you've barely scratched the surface of it. That's my experience over and over again. I have friends that were talking about the rituals that you go through in the Christian environment in the Middle East that when someone dies, the family, even extended family, will come and spend 3 or 4 days at the house. They go away at night, but they come and spend the whole day from morning until sunset every single day doing nothing but just sitting there. Nothing. Like Job's friends. You don't play football. What we'd be doing is putting the kids on some kind of video game or something, sticking them in the back room, and we then feel like we've got to talk about it.

And our rituals, which we have none, I think what it does is it sometimes exposes the superficiality of the Western Christian concept of what *koinonia* is. Because what do we do with sick people? We might visit them in the hospital. Because we have, unfortunately, drifted into the way secularists in our culture deal with sickness and death, and that is, get them out of here, get them away. We don't want to think about this. I gotta keep moving, kind of keep going on. My personal growth, my economic well-being. That's what's most important. And so we get rid of it really fast and go forward. And I think sometimes even some of the psychological problems people have with death or tragedy comes from the fact that we don't even have rituals of

mourning anymore. We're expected not to. But, yeah, I think… I mean, you've been in Latin America a lot. I've been in the Middle East and seen these kinds of things. And it's quite remarkable how your cultural background defines the concept and even becomes like lenses that keeps you from seeing things in the Bible. That's just amazing. And then if you can get out of your own skin a little bit and get into somebody else's skin by being forced into another culture, you might even see things that are in the Bible, but you just weren't able to see them before. I think that happens a lot with things like music, styles of music. I think it happens a lot with older people dealing with younger people, younger people dealing with older people the same way. You know, parents and children. They've got their set of things and they think, even if they're trying to be biblical, they've got their set of things, and they think they have exhausted the Bible because it matches their set of things, their criteria. And that distinction between the words and the concepts is so important.

Student: That's so true. You know, I think that one thing I've learned from other cultures is they value relationships far more than we do. I remember one time in a Middle Eastern country asking a taxi driver if tomorrow morning will you take me to the airport, and he says, well sit down and let's have some tea and we'll talk about it. I'm going, I just want to know if you'll take me to the airport. And then I stop and say, they've got it right. And the followers of Christ there put so much importance on relationship, but I've really been challenged with that.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I think that we have… when we realize those kinds of things, we begin to understand how non-Christian we are in the ways that we adapt the Bible to our culture. And that's the really sad part, isn't it, because we often think we've got it together because we've had a long tradition of this and we're Christianized, and these other cultures aren't. That's right, we're the experts. Then we realize that the concepts and the terms don't equal each other. Just because we're using Bible terms doesn't mean we're dealing with Bible concepts.

Student: And so there's even an importance of our, you know, teaching others to really do what we're trying to do right now, so that they might in turn teach us.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Exactly.

Question 21:
Do we really need a complex system of theology in addition to Scripture?

Student: Okay Richard, let's pull this down out of the clouds because we've been talking about a lot of stuff that's just very conceptual. On the other hand, if Scripture is sufficient for salvation, isn't it sufficient enough for our theology, or do we need this vast, seemingly complex system of theology?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's a hard one, because we never want to say that the Bible is insufficient. We always want to says it's sufficient, but once again, there's a difference in word and concept. What do we mean by sufficient? And I would say with regard to theology, that the Bible is sufficient to be our only absolute or unquestionable authority in theology, but it is not sufficient to tell us exactly what to say at every situation. I mean, I remember that in the great commission, Jesus said go ye therefore and teach all nations. He didn't say go ye therefore and read the Bible to all nations. And why? I think because there's a difference between teaching people and reading the Bible to them. And what's the difference? It is taking what's authoritative — that's the Bible, that's the absolutely unquestionable thing — and then communicating it to people. And communicating it is a whole other task. When you look at the ways or examples of the apostles doing this in the book of Acts, they didn't just read the Bible to people. And they didn't even just summarize the Bible. They actually took the Bible and put it in terminology that people would understand.

Hans Bayer in his series of lectures on the book of Acts talks about how different the language of Peter is from Paul and how Stephen's language is different. These speeches are representing different sorts of audiences. And so they were concerned with communicating to their audiences. And I think that's our concern in theology, too. If we try to make the Bible sufficient for our terminology and every single detail of every concept we have in theology, then what we're going to end up with is a theology that is as confusing as the Bible. So what was the purpose of having theology to begin with, if you're going to end up not knowing from one page to the next how a term is used, or what angle they're giving on this particular subject or that particular subject? That's what you end up in the Bible. You have to be very flexible in being able to move with that when you read the Bible. But if you're theology is that diverse, then it's going to end up becoming just as confusing as the Bible was, and the purpose of theology to begin with was to take the Bible and make it clearer to people. And so it's sort of a contradiction of motive here. If we try to take the Bible as sufficient for everything we do in theology, it is our authority, it is sufficient as the only absolute authority, but it is not sufficient to give us the terminology and the ways to communicate it to everyone.

Question 22:
Is it wrong to get theological technical terms from extrabiblical sources?

Student: What about the extrabiblical philosophical terms that some people use? Are those good?

Dr. Pratt: Well, they can be. Because, remember, we believe in general revelation also, and we believe just like Paul did apparently in Acts 17 that it's okay even to quote the Greek philosophers. So if unbelievers out there observing nature and science or philosophy, whatever it may be, psychology, whatever, if they are stumbling upon the truth because of God's common grace, then yes, we can use those

things. And we ought to use those things. I mean, that's the model. Jesus teaching in parables is frequently a reliance upon nature. Okay? Like the sower and the seeds. And so he's depending on general revelation as he teaches these lessons. And so to interface with general revelation in ways that are illustrative and bring the concepts out more clearly, and maybe in some respects purposefully ambiguous at times, this can be very helpful to theology. And happily, theologians have always done that. They sometimes break with their sort of scientific mentality and actually lean over into things like that, and all of a sudden, their theological works become lively and engaging, and you're not bored to death by some Latin term. But it's rare, unfortunately. But it is the thing that preaching is made of and teaching is made of, especially when you're talking about lay people.

Question 23:
How can technical terms answer deep questions about the Bible?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you claim that technical terms can sometimes answer some pretty deep questions that we have about the Bible. Help me understand that a little bit more.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, they can do it really quickly. It's really an issue of convenience. I think that's what I mean when I say that theological terms, concepts, are like shorthand. I mean, if you were to ask somebody… if you were having a conversation with a Muslim and they were to ask you do you believe God is one or three? Well, you can he's one, and without a bit of lying or a bit of hedging the issue at all, because we do believe he is one in essence, one in substance. Then you could turn around and talk about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit to them, too. That would be a problem. But nevertheless, that comes up in conversations. So that's a very complicated issue that's often summarized by that one word Trinity. And so it becomes a convenient way of us talking to each other, Christians talking to Christians, sort of in-house conversation. But as soon as you move out of that house, or whatever family you happen to be identified with at that point, you are going to cause confusion, and there's the huge danger of it, the confusion of quick answers to hard questions and people not knowing what you mean by them and what you think about them for real. I mean, many times people will, if they're being examined or something like that, they will give the "right answer," and by that we mean they give the right words. And if they always give the right words when they're being examined, say for ordination or something like that, if they're always giving just the perfect right word answer, it's going to make somebody in the crowd suspicious, and they're going to stand up and examine a little further.

Well, what are they asking about? They're not interested in can you recite the words. They want to know what does that mean for you, what concept do you have of it. Recently that issue has come up with inerrancy. Okay, we used to speak of the infallibility of Scripture. Then it got narrowed down to inerrancy because people

realized that some people were using the word infallible simply to mean it was infallible in that it accomplished all that it was intended to accomplish, meaning telling us about salvation and morality, but not about factual and historical things. So many evangelicals got around the concept of inerrancy. Okay, well that lasted for about two decades, and it was a fairly safe term, until then you had people that were saying the word inerrancy but meaning something different. What they meant was infallible, and that's all they meant by it. So all of a sudden, people are surprised that, even though seminary professors had to sign statements that they believed in inerrancy, that they were meaning something different, that the concept was different. So it becomes convenient, but with time, this sort of slippery slope of what the concept is gets in the way, and we have to be very careful about it. Have you seen people like at presbyteries or ordination exams and things like that get nailed for saying the right words but not knowing what it means?

Student: Well no, but I can think in my own experience early on in my seminary days where I had been asked to write on this particular assignment, and I have not been fully figure out, you know, where I stand on this, but I pretty much know what he wants to hear, and I can read the text and assemble a good paper and turn it in and get a decent grade one it, but still walk away thinking, you know, I didn't really fully understand that.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, you got the right words but not the right concepts. That happens to all of us. And that's where I think sometimes we really have to honest and frank about what we believe rather than just saying the right words. I remember in this recent controversy sort of even going on as we speak about what does inerrancy mean and things like that, it got down one day for me in a seminary where I was teaching to, Richard, do you believe in inerrancy? That was always the question, and everybody would say yes, yes, yes, because they wanted their job the next year. If you didn't say yes, you didn't get your job. But I knew that another person on faculty did not agree with what I believe inerrancy meant. And so he said, how do you sign this paper? What do you mean when you say, yes, I believe in inerrancy? So I had to say to him, I had to say, when I say yes I believe in inerrancy, what I mean by that is, if the board of this seminary knew what I believed, what the concept was, they would find it acceptable. And that's what I meant by it, that in good faith, I mean what I think would be acceptable to them. I wasn't going to check out every single time every single issue. That would be a lifetime to do that. And so I challenged the other guy who was using the word but using it differently, I said, would they accept your definition of it? And I think that's the way we have to do as we work with each other theologically. We have to ask the question in good faith. Are we establishing trust or are we involved in subterfuge? And you can go both and you can get away with it, but I think that really what we need to do is to be honest and faithful and in good conscience present our views as best we can to people.

Question 24:
Is it sometimes more efficient to avoid technical terms?

Student: We started talking about the one technical term that gives you an instant understanding about the concept, but it seems just from our conversation that it would take just as much time to explain the definition of this one new technical term to your people as opposed to just depend on Scripture and what it says, and just go straight to that, and let's not worry about creating new terms.

Dr. Pratt: It could. So long as the terminology is new, there is a learning curve. Yes, that's right, and it becomes a task in itself to communicate what we mean by a new word like inerrancy of Scripture. But if it's a longstanding technical term that comes from the history of theology, then it's a very convenient thing, and I think in many respects is already agreed upon as to what it's basic parameters are, what it's meanings are, the different dimensions of it, and then it becomes very convenient and easy to use.

Student: Until the language starts to change…

Dr. Pratt: Until somebody changes the concept the under your nose and you don't realize it. That's right. And that's why if you can't talk about the Bible and theology honestly, if you're more concerned about keeping your job in your church, or you're more concerned about keeping you seminary job, or your reputation, and your ideas really are different, then, you know, it's just flat out deception. It's not a good thing. We have to be able to trust each other not just on the linguistic level, but on the conceptual level and agree that there's enough flexibility or we can allow these differences and know in good faith that we're doing that before Christ. Otherwise, we're just killing ourselves. We're just hurting the church. Why would we want to do that?

Student: You know, I really love the tradition that we stand in and the theological terms have really helped me put so much of Scripture together. And what happens now is I find myself using those terms sometimes with people that I haven't ever explained that to, assuming they understand it. So it's incumbent upon me to put meat on the bone for these people when I do use it.

Dr. Pratt: Right, exactly. I mean, I had somebody just the other day.. we were talking about inerrancy in a situation with a lay person, and he said to me, well then you believe that every word that the gospel says that Jesus said, he said every word, every single one of those words, don't you. And that was his concept of inerrancy. And I said, well, that's a hard one to hold given that the different gospels summarize Jesus' words in different ways, and he didn't speak Greek and things like that, or at least he didn't normally speak Greek. And so that sort of messed up his notion of what inerrancy is, and so that caused the conversation to have to go deeper. But you're right. I mean, that's an example of me just sort of throwing the term out with

somebody I thought was right there with me, and then all of a sudden I realized, no, there's a big difference here, and that's where we have to back up. And I think that's just a learning… We do that with people in ordinary conversations all the time. You know, we'll talk and we'll use conventional talk until the person goes, what? Did you mean by that… Then all of a sudden you realize you have to back up and define what you meant. And I think that's just the kind of thing we have to do in theology, too.

Student: It seems like we just have to remember that our goal also has to be their growth and their maturity rather than our using the right words.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Spiritual gifts including doing theology is for the edification of the church. It's not for our personal edification. If you want to do your own theology, then do it all at home. We do theology in community. You remember how Paul said speak in tongues at home if you're not edifying people. Well, that's the way it is here, too. We do theology in church for the church and not for us. And I think that that's extremely important, and it does involve that give-and-take.

Question 25:
How do we help believers work with technical terms and concepts?

Student: Richard, in all honesty, this is hard, because there are a lot of theological terms out there, a lot of concepts. For those of us who are teaching, how do we work through it all? How do we really help our people?

Dr. Pratt: I wish there were an easy answer to that. I don't really think there is. I think that we do need to be more self-conscious and more deliberate in the ways that we revert to technical terms. I mean, I do think that, to be sure. Because people who are professional ministers, let's say, or people who have studied the Bible a lot and studies theology a lot, they've had an opportunity that most Christians don't have. Most Christians do not have even the time much less the interest in learning these kinds of things. And so I think that it's very important to be deliberate in the ways that we choose and rely on technical vocabulary as we do Sunday school lessons or Bible studies and things like that, and if there isn't a common consensus about that terminology, don't just pick up on some old word that you heard thrown around or read in a book by somebody, and a Latin phrase, or something like that, and feel as if you are somehow communicating with people. Frankly, when people do that, and I know a lot of those kinds of phrases, but when people do that from a pulpit or in a lesson, I don't think that they're trying to communicate at all except that they are superior to everybody else around them. I mean, this is one of the greatest dangers in using technical terms, is that you present yourself as better than the other people, more informed than the other people, and you're above them, and they can't understand these things because they haven't studied these phrases and those sorts of things for years like you have. And I just think that's a travesty.

Serving people in teaching means serving them in ways that can help them, and there's no dumbing down when that happens. Let me tell you a Jonathan Edwards quote that is really appropriate for this situation. Jonathan Edwards said, "An intellectual who cannot preach so that a farmer can understand, is not an intellectual, he's only a halfwit." You see, the hard work… the true intellectual is somebody who can think through the whole process, who can learn the technical vocabulary and then reinvent how to say that for the farmer, being used as someone who was illiterate, I assume, in his day. And if you don't do that, you're not an intellectual, you're just a halfwit, and you are really building yourself up just like Paul talks about in Corinthians, puffed up with knowledge because you don't have love, and that's the most ridiculous thing in the world, because all we know is in part, and I don't' care how many Latin phrases you stick on it, you only know in part. And so I think it takes a bit of humility and a devotion to people, a caring about the people you're serving to make it work for them. And, you know, gradually through time and that sort of thing, hopefully you can shorthand some of it here and there, but you don't want to do that too much too quickly because it will turn on you. It will destroy the teaching ministry.

Have you seen people destroy the teaching ministry by using that kind of thing? I surely have. You know, in the middle of a sermon you get a Latin phrase or something. Everyone goes, whatever. I can remember even as a student, professors of mine reading whole pages in German to the class. You know, most of us could do fairly well in German but not quite that well. And so as we were sitting there listening to him read a page and a half of German and then expecting us to understand it all, we were just looking back-and-forth at each other like, okay, whatever he thinks, and we'll hope that he says something in English afterwards. And that was nothing more than just a ploy. That was just a power play against the students to let us know that we weren't quite as bright as he was. And I'm afraid sometimes preachers have that problem. It may be they don't even intend to do that. Maybe they just to it because they've seen others do it. And to be plain-spoken is a gift, and it's the true intellectual who can do that, who doesn't show off, as it were. That's just half-wittedness.

Student: It seems as if the greatest love that we can show our people is to have a clear grasp of these concepts in their terms, and know how to parse them, and know how to work through them and discuss them and hash them out, but then, get in the pulpit or on the couch next to the grieving widow and say, "God is good," and have behind that all these things that we understand about big words — aseity, covenants, and all these — but be able to hold their hands and minister to them and truly believe how good and know how good God is, and then trust the Lord, whatever way he can speak through us to that need, to give us those words to comfort them in what ways they need.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly right. If you can't talk to a child, and talk to a weary grandmother, a very sick person in ways that mean to them, then you haven't learned the Bible yet. Joe, you've been through serious illness, close to death, a couple of times, huh… and when pastors came and visited you, did they give you Latin phrases?

Student: I don't think so, and I was really blessed with those who did come. But to know that someone loves you and… you know, some of those people that visited me knew all the terms, but they weren't trying to build themselves up. They were trying to love me as a brother in Christ. And I think that's what we have to do with other people. If we love people and put meaning behind these words that we've learned for God's glory, that's so cool.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's the key, isn't it? Caring about the people you're teaching. I'm afraid that often we don't, and then when you get into a situation like a surgery or some deathbed situation, if you have not practiced at it, you don't know what to do. And that's really serious then. I spent 8 hours with some good friends in another city as they were standing there watching the father of the family, the patriarch of the family, die. And I was there with them for 8 hours. They were looking to me to say the right thing, to have things to say that would comfort and sustain them, and it had nothing to do with the highfaluting theology. Nothing.

Student: I tell people all the time…they'll come to me and they'll say I'm going to visit so-and-so in the hospital, what do I say? I'll say, don't worry about saying anything, just be there.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Bring it incarnationally.

Student: There will be another time to say things.

Dr. Pratt: That's exactly right. So I think that that's the answer in many respects. Yes, it is hard to learn the technical terms, it takes a lot of effort, and we just need to be patient with other people. But we also, again, as people that are teachers of the Bible, we need to put the hard work in there so we can have the ability to do more than just be caught and entrapped by those words and by those terms, but also to be able to re-express, to be free of them as well, in ways that will meet the needs of people. And when we do that, we are using technical terms well.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles and Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.

Building Systematic Theology

LESSON THREE

PROPOSITIONS IN SYSTEMATICS

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

About Third Millennium Ministries

Founded in 1997, Third Millennium Ministries is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing award-winning multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our writers and editors are theologically-trained educators, our translators are theologically-astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world. In addition, our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards using state-of-the-art equipment and techniques.

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Propositions in Systematics

INTRODUCTION

In courts of law throughout the world, lawyers try to convince a judge or jury of their point of view. It's always crucial to their arguments that everyone understands the basic facts of the case. So, frequently near the end of a trial, lawyers review the facts stating them as plainly as possible in a series of propositions. "This is a fact." "That is a fact." "This happened." "That happened."

Well in many ways, the same kind of thing is true in systematic theology. Systematicians also have to establish certain facts, certain *theological* facts. So, they present their cases in straightforward theological propositions.

This is the third lesson in our series *Building Systematic Theology* and we've entitled this lesson "Propositions in Systematics." Traditional systematic theologians are committed to exploring, explaining and defending sound Christian theology. And as we will see in this lesson, an essential part of that commitment is expressing Christian beliefs in theological propositions.

Our lesson will divide into three main parts. First, we'll gain a general orientation toward propositions in Systematics. What are they? And how do they fit within the process of building systematic theology? Second, we'll explore how propositions are formed in systematic theology. And third, we'll examine some of the values and dangers of this focus on propositions. Let's begin by focusing our attention on some preliminary considerations, a general orientation toward this aspect of building systematic theology.

ORIENTATION

Our orientation toward propositions in systematics will touch on three issues. First, we'll provide a general definition of propositions. Second, we'll focus on their legitimacy. And third, we'll describe the place of theological propositions. What role do they have in the whole process of building a systematic theology? Let's look first at our definition of theological propositions.

DEFINITION

I suppose that most of us sense that theology can be expressed in a variety of ways. When we pray, sing hymns, evangelize, tell bible stories to our children, or discuss our faith with our friends, we're expressing Christian theology. But in the discipline of systematic theology, there is one main way theology is verbalized, and that is in the form

of theological propositions. For our purposes, we'll define theological propositions in this way:

> A theological proposition is as an indicative sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim.

Before we look at the details of this definition, let's take a look at some examples of what we mean.

In the second volume, part 2, chapter 2 of William Shedd's *Dogmatic Theology*, he made these statements about the twofold obedience of Christ:

> **A distinction is made between Christ's active and passive obedience. The latter denotes Christ's suffering of every kind… Christ's active obedience is his perfect performance of … the moral law.**

Here, we see that Shedd made three basic assertions. First, he made a general statement that Christ's obedience can be described in two categories: active and passive. The second is that Christ's passive obedience was his endurance of suffering. And the third is that Christ's active obedience was his flawless fulfillment of God's moral law.

Now, recalling our previous lessons, we can see that Shedd focused on two technical theological terms: "passive obedience" and "active obedience." But in this lesson, we're more interested in the way theologians like Shedd incorporate technical terms into theological propositions. To explore this issue, let's look once more at our definition:

> **A theological proposition is an indicative sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim.**

This definition focuses on four characteristics of propositions in systematic theology. First, they are "indicative sentences." Second, they are factual claims. Third, these factual claims are primarily theological in nature. And fourth, they make direct factual theological claims, or as we put it, they state matters "as directly as possible."

Let's take a closer look at each aspect of this definition, beginning with the idea that theological propositions are indicative sentences.

Indicative

Now we all know that there are different kinds of sentences in ordinary human language. For instance, the sentence, "Where is my key?" is an interrogative, a question. "Open the door" is an imperative sentence because it issues a command or invitation. Neither of these sentences qualifies as a proposition. But the sentence, "My key will open the door" is an indicative sentence that declares what the key will do.

We should be clear that as systematic theologians present their points of view, they use all kinds of expressions but at the same time, the dominant mode of expression in systematic theology is straightforward indicative statements. This mode of expression

is so dominant that it would be impossible to write a traditional systematic theology any other way.

In addition to understanding that propositions are in the form of indicative sentences, it's also important to see that they're designed to assert factual claims.

Factual

Propositions identify and describe facts. Now through the millennia, philosophers, theologians and linguists have noted that different kinds of propositions make different kinds of factual claims. These matters are far too complex for us to deal with comprehensively, but at the risk of oversimplifying the issues, we'll note two aspects of propositions that should be kept in mind as we explore systematic theology.

Following the contours of discussions rooted in Aristotle's writings on logic, we'll point out that propositions may be distinguished first as to their quantity, and second, as to their quality.

First, propositions may be described in terms of the quantity of their subject. The subject of a universal proposition includes every member of a set without exception. For example, the statement "All mammals have hair," claims that something is true of all mammals.

In much the same way, systematic theologians often make universal claims in theology. It's common for Christian theologians to say things like, "All human beings are the image of God" or "All good gifts come from God."

On the other hand, other propositions are "particular" because their subjects include only some members of a larger set. For instance, if I say, "This house is my house." I'm making a factual claim that is particular, not universal. I'm not saying something about all houses, only about my own house.

Systematicians frequently make particular factual claims as well. For instance, they might say something like, "Some church members are unbelievers," or they might claim that "Paul was an apostle."

Now for the most part, systematicians try to describe quantities as precisely as possible — sometimes even being more precise than particular verses in the bible. But from time to time, they'll abbreviate issues into generalizations by not mentioning exceptions. For instance, it would be common for a systematic theologian to say, "All human beings are sinners." And at first glance, this universal proposition seems to be true. But this statement is not as precise as it could be. In reality, the whole of Scripture teaches that Jesus was a human being, but that he was righteous. So, from time to time, we do have to pause and ask whether at any given moment systematicians are actually claiming something about all or just part of the classes of things they describe.

Second, in addition to quantity, propositions may be distinguished by their quality. That is, they may be categorized as either affirmative or negative assertions. On the one hand, affirmative propositions state positively that something is true. In everyday speech we might say something like, "This dog is mine." This is a particular and affirmative statement. It affirms that one particular dog is one of many things that belong to me. In systematic theology, a proposition like, "Some biblical passages teach about

sanctification" is also a particular affirmative proposition because it states that at least some biblical texts fall into this category.

A universal and affirmative statement in ordinary life would include something like: "Everything I lost is important to me." Because it states positively that everything I lost is at least part of what is important to me. Systematic theologians often make similar statements in their field of study. For instance, consider the statement "Everything that was created was created by God." This proposition affirms that everything that was created is in the set of things that are created by God.

On the other hand, propositions may also have a negative quality and they may be either universal or particular. For instance, when I say, "This house is not my house." I state a particular and negative proposition. And if I want to make a universal and negative proposition, I might say something like, "No one in the room speaks English." Negative claims also appear in systematic theology. For instance, "Jesus was not a sinner" is a negative and particular proposition. It denies something about the one person, Jesus. And we also find universal negatives in theology, such as the statement, "No one who remains an unbeliever can be saved." No persistent unbelievers are included among those who will receive salvation.

These distinctions in quantity and quality are important to keep in mind as we study systematic theology. To confuse them can lead to all kinds of serious misunderstandings of what theologians are claiming.

Now we should turn to the third dimension of our definition: theological propositions make theological claims.

Theological

As we put it in our definition, theological propositions don't just make factual claims they make factual theological claims. Now it's true that systematic theologians refer to facts of history and to philosophical concepts that don't fit neatly under the rubric of theology. But their main subject matter is theology.

Now to understand what we mean by "theological facts," we must remember that theology is a rather broad topic. You'll recall that Thomas Aquinas defined theology as having two main concerns. In book I, chapter 1, section 7 of his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas called theology "sacred doctrine," and defined it as:

> **A unified science in which all things are treated under the aspect of God either because they are God himself or because they refer to God.**

Aquinas' words reflect a common distinction in systematic theology between theology proper, which is the study of God himself, and general theology, the study of other subjects as they relate to God.

In line with this common distinction, systematics focuses on both of these levels of theology. On the one hand, systematicians focus attention on theology proper by making statements that directly concern God. They say things like: "God is holy," or "God created the world."

But on the other hand, in a broader sense, systematic theologians also concern themselves with general theology, claims about aspects of creation as they relate to God. Regarding salvation, they often say things like, "Salvation is by the grace of God." Or concerning the condition of humanity, they often say things like, "All people living today are sinners." In this sense, theological propositions address more subjects than God himself, but always, at least implicitly, in the context of their relationship to God.

In the fourth place, it's important to note that systematic theologians seek to express their views with heightened concern for being direct or straightforward.

Direct

Of course, we all realize that no description of anything, certainly not of God, is absolutely perfect. But at the same time, systematicians strive to be as direct as possible as they form theological propositions.

It would be quite unusual for a systematic theologian simply to say: "The Lord is a shepherd," and to leave it at that. This statement is true to the Scriptures, but systematicians tend to avoid indirect ways of putting things like metaphors and other figures of speech. So, rather than saying, "The Lord is a shepherd," systematicians tend to restate the matter more directly by saying something like, "God has special providential care for his people." They want to express themselves as much as possible in explicit, straightforward, prosaic, propositions.

To sum up, we need to keep in mind that we are focusing on a rather specific kind of expression that dominates systematic theology. For our purposes, we may think of theological expressions as indicative sentences that assert as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim.

With our basic definition in mind, we should turn to a second facet of our general orientation toward this subject: what is the justification for building theology with propositions? What makes this process legitimate?

LEGITIMACY

Throughout church history, Christians have often expressed their faith in the form of straightforward statements. Listen for instance to the opening of the fourth-century *Nicene Creed*:

> **I believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible.**

The *Nicene Creed* also lists a number of other very important theological propositions. It and many similar creeds have been endorsed by Christians throughout the centuries.

At the same time, throughout history there have been those who have questioned the legitimacy of using theological propositions. For our purposes, we will mention two major objections that have been raised: on the one hand, challenges that rise from the

doctrine of divine incomprehensibility; and on the other hand, challenges of modern scientific rationalism. Consider first how the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility has raised questions.

Divine Incomprehensibility

We're all familiar with the well-known words of Isaiah 55:8-9, the bedrock of this doctrine.

> **"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).**

Unfortunately, in many circles, this and similar passages have been used to support the idea that God is so far beyond our mental capacities that we simply cannot describe him.

In this view, to say that God is love is to try to speak of something that really cannot be described. To say that Jesus is the only way of salvation is to limit God without justification.

Now this kind of thinking has taken many forms throughout history. For instance, many theologians have argued that the only way to say anything about God is to follow the *via negativa* – the way of negation. In this view, we cannot make positive statements about God. We can only deny things about him by contrasting him with creation. We can only say things like, "God is not limited by space." "God is not bound by time." "God is not physical." Throughout history, a variety of skeptical, agnostic theologians have argued that we are simply not capable of positively describing God or things in relation to him.

In contrast with these misleading outlooks, as followers of Christ we must evaluate the legitimacy of theological propositions by the testimony of Scripture. Traditional systematic theologians follow the Scriptures by speaking of the incomprehensibility of God alongside the fact that God can be known when he reveals himself. On the one side, we can't know God *fully*, but on the other side, we *can* know him *in part when he reveals himself to us*. And this partial knowledge of God is still true knowledge. One passage in Scripture makes this distinction clear: Deuteronomy 29:29. In this verse, Moses summarized the matter this way for Israel:

> **The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).**

Notice that there are two categories of things in view here. On the one side, Moses spoke of "secret things." These are matters that God does not reveal to humanity, the knowledge of which he reserves only for himself. In fact, we must always remind ourselves that the secret, unrevealed things are infinite in scope.

At the same time, notice that Moses did not simply say that God keeps secrets from us. He also said that some things are "revealed." That is, God has revealed them in his word. And as Moses put it, these revealed things "belong to us and to our children forever." In other words, God expects us to believe and wholeheartedly to embrace what he has revealed. And this fact shows that it is legitimate to state what he has revealed

In addition to challenges that rise out of the doctrine of incomprehensibility, the legitimacy of theological propositions has also been challenged by modern scientific rationalism.

Modern Scientific Rationalism

In the last two centuries, the centuries of modern scientism, many different schools of thought have argued that theology is a pseudo or fake science. That is to say, systematic theologians may claim to state objective truths, but this is mere pretense. In modern sciences, when we want to know the truth of a matter, we form hypotheses and subject those hypotheses to empirical validation. And once a hypothesis has stood the test of direct or indirect empirical validation, we then accept it as true. But scientists have been quick to point out that theological propositions cannot be tested in this way.

Now, we should all admit that at least in one sense this is true. While we can place a liquid in a test tube and analyze its qualities, no one can put God in a test tube to see if God is Trinity. While we can use instruments to calculate the size of things, there is no instrument that can measure God to see if he is infinite. For this reason, many modern people have argued that at best, theologians are like artists and poets, who project their feelings, religious intuitions and sentiments. We're only fooling ourselves and others when we act as if we are describing objective facts. But there is a sense in which we can verify theological propositions empirically. It's all a matter of what we count as empirical evidence for and against our viewpoints.

As followers of Christ, we're committed to following the standards of verification in theology that he followed. And just how did Jesus validate his own theological claims? How did he test the theological propositions of others?

To be sure, Jesus relied on general revelation; the revelation of God in all things. Jesus also relied on the illumination of the Holy Spirit, just as we should today. But Jesus taught that the infallible Scriptures are the clearest and most authoritative source of evidence for testing theological viewpoints. When Jesus wanted to test theological claims, he most frequently turned to Scripture as his empirical standard. For example, in Matthew 15:7, when Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, he did so by referring to Scripture. There we read these words:

> **"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you" (Matthew 15:7).**

While Jesus did not put God himself in a test tube, he did put theological ideas to the test. He measured theological proposals by carefully evaluating them by the empirical standard of Scripture. As followers of Christ, we must not accept the charge that theology proposes ideas about God without any empirical validation. From a Christian point of

view, the claims of systematic theology are more than the expression of religious sentiments. They are proven and disproven by the empirical test of Scripture.

Now that we have seen what theological propositions are and how they are legitimate ways of expressing theological facts, we should turn to a third consideration: the place they have in building systematic theology.

PLACE

In previous lessons we've seen that Protestant systematic theology followed many of the priorities that medieval theologians had developed as they interacted with Aristotelian philosophy.

And as a result, building systematic theology requires four main steps: the formation of technical terms, the formation of propositions, doctrinal statements, and a comprehensive system of beliefs. Now, we always have to remember that speaking this way is somewhat artificial. Systematicians actually involve themselves in all of these steps all the time. But for the sake of clarity, it helps to think of the process as moving from the simplest to the most complex elements of this effort.

At the lowest level, theological technical terms comprise the most basic building blocks of systematic theology. Without carefully defined terminology it would be very difficult to construct sound systematic theology. The second step in the process is the formation of propositions. If we think of technical terms as the basic building blocks of systematics, then we may rightly think of propositions as rows of blocks that explain and elaborate on technical terms. Systematic theologians create these rows of blocks by making statements about God and creation in relation to him. And if we think of propositions as rows of blocks, then we may describe doctrinal statements as portions of walls or whole walls constructed out of these rows of propositions. And finally, the system of theology represents the ways theologians construct an entire building out of doctrinal statements. This analogy suggests the essential place propositions hold in the construction of systematic theology — they are rows of carefully laid blocks that become part of the entire edifice called systematic theology.

Take, for instance, the statement "Jesus is the second person of the Trinity." This claim is built with at least two technical terms: "person" and "Trinity." But this proposition does not leave these terms and their related concepts disconnected, instead, they're brought together into a straightforward factual claim about Jesus. Now, from this and other propositions, systematic theologians go on to form the full doctrine of the Trinity. And the doctrine of the Trinity is a part of the doctrine of God, which is a wall in the building that is the entire system of Christian theology.

It is important to remember that when systematic theologians discuss or write about theology, they employ all kinds of rhetorical techniques. They propose ideas and support them with evidence. They support and scrutinize the ideas of others. They ask rhetorical questions. They trace the historical developments of ideas. They expose motivations and point to the positive and negative consequences of various positions. A large array of rhetorical techniques is at their fingertips. But, theological propositions undergird all of the explanations, arguments, defenses and persuasive techniques that we

find in systematics. And they form an essential part of the process of building systematic theology.

Now that we have a general orientation toward propositions in systematics, we should turn to our second major topic: the formation of theological propositions. How do systematic theologians form the propositions with which they build their theology?

FORMATION

The processes experienced theologians follow as they create their propositions are enormously complex. So, as we explore how they're created, we must keep in mind that our discussion will be somewhat artificial. Even so, we'll highlight some of the important dimensions of these processes that will help us build systematic theology much more responsibly.

We'll look in two basic directions. First, we'll touch on propositions that derive from the ways systematicians interact with philosophy. And second, we'll look in more detail at the ways systematicians form propositions from the bible. Let's consider first the fact that many propositions in systematic theology actually stem from philosophy.

PHILOSOPHICAL INTERACTIONS

You'll recall from previous lessons that in the patristic period, many Christian theologians believed that many aspects of neo-Platonism were true to Scripture. So, they expressed their beliefs with an orientation toward that philosophy. In the medieval period, the vast majority of Christian scholars believed that Aristotelian philosophy was true to Scripture in many significant ways. So, many of the things they said were shaped by Aristotelian perspectives. And even in Protestant systematic theology, various modern philosophies have, for better or worse, provided important orientations. And as a result, many claims that appear in systematic theology stem from philosophical discussions.

Now, we have to be careful as we notice that many propositions derive from such philosophical roots, because the Scriptures both warn us against philosophy and encourage us to use it.

On the one side, we should give heed to warnings like 1 Corinthians 1:20, where the apostle Paul mocked non-Christian philosophy:

> **Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:20).**

It's critical that Christian theologians remember the basic antithesis between Christian theology and non-Christian philosophies.

But at the same time, in Acts 17:27-28 Paul demonstrated a positive use for philosophical reflection by drawing from the words of the Greek philosophical poets Clianthus and Aerates.

> **God … is not far from each of us… As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring" (Acts 17: 27-28).**

This passage demonstrates that although we must be aware of the dangers, Christian theologians have been right to interact with various philosophies. And they've been right even to incorporate true theological claims that stem from philosophical discussions even as Paul did when he was in Athens.

Although we should be aware of these philosophical roots, the Bible is by far the most important source for theological propositions in systematics. For this reason we should give special attention to the ways systematicians form their theological claims from what the Bible teaches.

INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

To accomplish this goal we'll look in three directions: first, we'll consider the challenges that systematicians face in this regard. Second, we'll see how systematicians meet one aspect of these challenges through a process that we will call, "factual reduction." And third, we'll explore how systematicians meet another aspect of these challenges through "factual collation." Let's look first at the challenges that systematicians face as they form propositions from the bible.

Challenges

When students of theology first begin to study systematics they often have the impression that creating theological propositions from the Bible is a simple matter. They think that we only need to read the bible and to repeat what it says. Sometimes this is true because the bible does include some propositions, but there are also many significant challenges.

In addition to the effects of human finitude and sin, the Scriptures themselves present at least two challenges to forming theological propositions. One challenge rises out of the literary variety we find in the bible. And another challenge rises out of the doctrinal arrangement of the Bible. Consider first the difficulties that systematicians face because of the literary variety of the Scriptures.

The Bible is not a flat literary terrain repeating the same kind of material over and over. Instead, a number of genres appear throughout the Bible and combine with each other in countless ways. The bible contains mixtures of narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, and epistles — to name just a few. Within each of these larger genres are different kinds of expressions: statements, commands, questions, complaints, encouragements, exclamations, benedictions, quotations, lists, statutes, titles, technical instructions, signatures. The list goes on, and on, and on. And along with these varieties are countless

figures of speech and other literary subtleties that flavor Scripture in many different ways. This great literary variety complicates the formation of theological propositions.

Imagine for a moment that the Bible were a book consisting of only of straightforward propositions, simply listing one theological fact after another. If this were the case, then using the bible in systematic theology would be relatively easy. But of course, Scripture is not like this; it's literarily diverse.

Now imagine that systematic theologians were inclined to express their theology with great literary variety. Imagine that their theologies were filled with poetry, narratives, commands, epistles, complaints, figures of speech and the like. If this were so, then once again the presentation of Scripture and systematics would fit nicely with each other. But of course, this is not the case either.

The fact is that the Bible is literarily diverse, but systematicians express the Bible's teaching almost exclusively in propositions. In effect, systematicians have to squeeze all the various types of literature they encounter in the Bible into one specific kind of expression. And this disparity is one of the greatest challenges facing systematic theologians.

A second challenge that Scripture presents to systematic theologians is the way it arranges or doesn't arrange its doctrines. In a word, the Scriptures do not deal with particular themes in complete, discrete units. Instead, the same topic is often addressed in bits and pieces scattered here and there throughout the Bible. And this characteristic of Scripture also challenges systematic theologians.

Imagine that the Bible were different in this regard. Suppose that it dealt completely with one doctrine at a time. Suppose the bible regularly dealt with one theme, thoroughly discussed it, and then moved on to the next theme. If this were so, then perhaps systematic theologians could simply read each portion of the Bible and easily form theological claims based on each part of the Bible. But of course, this is not how the bible presents its theological themes.

Or imagine that systematic theologians were less orderly, touching on one small aspect of a subject at a time, and suppose they commonly addressed many other bits and pieces of other doctrines before returning to address a second small aspect of the first doctrine. If they were satisfied to address a matter here and there in bits and pieces, then perhaps it would be relatively easy for them to work with Scripture.

But of course, this is not what systematicians want to do. They want to present the teachings of Scripture as fully and as orderly as they can. And as a result, they have to work hard to combine information from all kinds of places in the Scriptures.

The Scriptures touch on aspects of theological topics in various ways in different places and this feature of the bible's presentation of theology is another great challenge for systematic theologians.

Now that we've seen two of the main challenges systematicians face as they work with Scripture, we should turn our attention to the process of factual reduction. This is the strategy systematicians use to overcome the challenge of literary variety in the Bible.

Factual Reduction

In simple terms:

Factual reduction is the process of focusing on theological facts that biblical passages teach, and marginalizing other dimensions of these same passages.

As with human language in general, passages in the Bible were designed to have manifold impacts on their readers. They informed, inspired, accused, motivated, directed, encouraged, discouraged, delighted, perplexed, corrected, trained, facilitated, blessed, cursed, stirred the imagination, and so on and so on. Now not all passages in the Bible were designed to do all of these things, all of the time and certainly not with equal force, but every biblical passage of significant length was designed to have a variety of impacts.

But systematic theologians focus their attention primarily, if not exclusively, on the theological *facts* taught in Scripture. In other words, systematicians reduce their attention to factual considerations, while other features of biblical texts go largely unattended.

Now, the process of reducing Scripture to its facts is relatively straightforward when biblical passages were designed primarily to assert factual claims. In these situations, systematicians simply note the explicit and implicit facts presented in a biblical text, and then focus on those facts that are pertinent to their discussions.

Take 2 Timothy 3:16 as an example of a passage that focuses on facts. There Paul said:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Now, in the larger context, we can tell that this verse was designed to be much more than a mere catalogue of facts about the Bible. Paul connected this verse to the preceding context as a motivation for Timothy to pay careful attention to the Scriptures. At the very least, this verse was designed to encourage and to motivate Timothy to renew his commitments to the Scriptures. But a prominent dimension of this complex design was to make a number of explicit theological assertions. And systematic theologians make much use of this passage because they're interested in these factual theological claims.

The explicit facts of this passage can be summarized in a series of universal and affirmative propositions: "All Scripture is God-breathed." "All Scripture is useful for teaching." "All Scripture is useful for rebuking." "All Scripture is useful for correcting." "All Scripture is useful for training." These propositions reflect the factual considerations communicated explicitly by this verse.

In addition to these explicit claims, this verse logically entails a number of implicit claims that are also of interest to systematicians. For instance, it's fair to say that God desired to communicate his will. This passage also implies that attention to Scripture is vital to sanctification. And even though Paul spoke specifically of the Scriptures of the Old Testament, he implied that the New Testament Scriptures are also inspired and useful in these ways.

With these explicit and implicit theological facts delineated, systematicians can then use these truths to explain and defend their treatments of various theological topics.

As you can imagine, this verse frequently appears in systematic theology to support claims about the doctrine of Scripture.

For instance, in the second chapter of his *Systematic Theology* Robert Reymond referred to 2 Timothy 3:16 to support his claim that the Scriptures are inerrant. There he wrote:

> **Biblical writers claim inerrancy for the written Word of God which he gave to humankind through them by inspiration.**

This kind of statement is a typical way this verse is used in systematics. But the explicit and implicit theological facts taught in 2 Timothy 3:16 also address other traditional theological topics. For example, systematicians may refer to this passage under the rubric of theology proper as evidence that God is merciful because he revealed himself to humanity. They may use it in the doctrine of ecclesiology to establish that the reading and the preaching of Scripture is a means of grace in the church. They may also refer to it under the rubric of eschatology to establish the reliability of biblical prophecy. The possibilities are endless.

With biblical passages that are very similar to theological propositions, the process of factual reduction is relatively simple. When we read in Genesis 1:1, that God created all things, it's not difficult to infer the fact that God is the Creator. When we read in Isaiah 6:3, that the Seraphim cried, "Holy, holy, holy" before the Lord, it's simple to conclude that God is Holy. When we read in Romans 3:28 that justification is by faith apart from works, we may bring this statement into our discussion of Soteriology. Many passages in Scripture make claims that are easily brought into systematic theology. And not surprisingly, systematicians frequently draw from these kinds of passages.

But the process of factual reduction is a bit more complex when biblical passages are not so similar to theological propositions. Ideally, in these situations systematicians take care to notice the literary features of passages so that they can identify the facts that these passages teach. Then they use those delineated facts in their discussions of theology. For instance, Proverbs sometimes appeared to be simple theological propositions, but they usually are not. Take a look at Proverbs 23:13-14 where we read these words:

> **Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death (Proverbs 23:13-14).**

Now at first glance this proverb appears to make two factual claims. It says of a child who is disciplined, "he will not die." And it says that a father who disciplines his son will "save the son's soul from death."

But in the genre of proverb, statements like these are almost never straightforward propositions. A careful interpreter will see that these verses are not making straightforward claims or guarantees about the effectiveness of discipline. Instead, these verses encourage wise fathers to discipline their children because discipline tends to produce positive outcomes in their children's lives. In fact, as the first portions of these verses indicate, this proverb was designed primarily as an exhortation to fathers. The sage

said, "Do not withhold discipline, punish him." Fathers are advised here to discipline their children.

With these issues in mind, systematicians can delineate a number of implicit facts. For instance, under the doctrine of anthropology, systematicians could use this passage as evidence that children are sinful. Under the rubric of sanctification, they could use it to establish that parental discipline is designed for growth in holiness.

Interestingly enough, at least one systematic theologian actually used this passage to support a point of view in eschatology. In the third chapter of part 6 in his *Systematic Theology* Louis Berkof used Proverbs 23:14 to bring to light an aspect of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. He said this:

> **Certainly evidences are not wanting that there was a belief in the resurrection long before the exile. It is implied in the passages that speak of a deliverance from Sheol.**

Here, Berkhof concluded that the words "save his soul from death," in Proverbs 23:14, implied that faithful Israelites in the Old Testament believed in the general resurrection of the dead. Through significant factual reduction Berkhof supported an aspect of eschatology with a passage primarily designed to encourage fathers to discipline their children.

Now, at times focusing on facts can be even more reductionistic. For example, you'll recall that systematic theologians tend to state things as directly as possible. So, if a passage employs figures of speech, systematicians tend to explain what those figures of speech mean plainly.

Consider this kind of dramatic factual reduction in the 48th chapter of Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology* where he discussed the Word of God as a means of grace. He noted a series of metaphors and similes for God's word that appear in an assortment of biblical passages. As he put it:

> **There is a rich series of images depicting the nature and function of the Word of God… a hammer … a mirror … a seed … rain and snow … milk … strong meat … gold and silver … a lamp … a sword … [and] a fire."**

Now the fact that Erickson even mentioned these images is a bit unusual for systematic theology. Yet, we should notice that rather than exploring the rich imaginative impact these images were to have on readers, he summed them up through factual reduction in a simple straightforward proposition. As he put it:

> **These images graphically convey the idea that the Word of God is powerful and able to accomplish great work in the life of the individual.**

Now I can't imagine anyone seriously disagreeing with his assessment, but it's also clear that this assessment is the product of extensive factual reduction, marginalizing the wider impact of these images in favor of simply stating a fact that they proved.

As you can imagine, the process of factual reduction works this way with many passages. For instance, we can draw from the first commandment, in Exodus 20:3 where God says there should be no other gods before Him, that the God of Scripture is supreme over all other supernatural powers. We can conclude from the first verse of Psalms 105, which calls for praise to God, that God is worthy of praise. Even when biblical passages were designed to have manifold impacts on their readers, systematicians almost always focus on factual content, and explain these facts in direct theological propositions.

Systematicians overcome the challenge of the variety of biblical literature through the process of factual reduction. But they deal with the challenge of the bible's doctrinal arrangement through a process we will call "factual collation."

Factual Collation

Because the teachings of Scripture on particular topics are scattered throughout the Bible, systematicians have to collate or collect passages from all over the Bible as they form their propositions. It's not uncommon to see passages from Genesis set alongside passages from Romans, or portions of the Psalms next to verses from James, or sections of Matthew alongside Revelation. Passages are gathered from very different parts of the Bible and associated with each other because they teach related theological facts.

This process of collating facts from different portions of Scripture follows many different patterns, but for the sake of simplicity we'll speak of two main ways this is done. On the one hand, some passages are collated, gathered together because they repeat the same facts. On the other hand, some passages are collated or gathered because together, they compose a complex theological claim. Let's unpack these two processes.

In the first place, systematicians often form theological propositions by drawing from passages that repeat the same basic idea.

We think this way many times in everyday life. Suppose you suspect you've lost some money. What do you do? You may count the money in your pocket once. But if you're still not sure, you might count it again and again until you're fully convinced that you either did or did not lose the money.

Well, in many ways, this is what systematic theologians do when they collate Scriptures that repeat the same theological facts. They may suspect that they've understood a passage correctly. They may believe that they formed a true theological proposition from it. So, they look at many parts of the bible to see if the same motif can be discovered there as well.

For example, when Louis Berkhof discussed the deity of Christ in the eighth chapter of the first part of his *Systematic Theology* he claimed this:

> **[The Bible] explicitly asserts the deity of the Son.**

But because Berkhof was aware that many people have denied this claim, he did not support his view with just one passage. Instead, he pointed out that this theological fact is explicitly asserted in John 1:1, in John 20:28, in Romans 9:5, Philippians 2:6, Titus 2:13,

and 1 John 5:20. In this case, Berkhof collated verses from five different books in the New Testament because they repeated the same teaching.

Most of us have heard the principle that we should always seek support for major doctrines from a variety of passages in Scripture. The reason for following this principle is that it's easy to misunderstand a single biblical reference. One way to confirm that we've understood the claim of one passage correctly is to show that the same claim is repeated in other parts of the Bible.

In other lessons we've spoken of theological certainty using a model that we called "the cone of certainty." We noted that responsible Christian theologians are not simply interested in determining what to believe, but also in coordinating the strength of their convictions with the strength of the evidence for those convictions. In many respects, this is why we collate verses that repeat the same theological fact. When we cannot find repetitive scriptural support for a proposition, we should normally lower our confidence in that proposition. But seeing a fact repeated over and over in the Scriptures is an ordinary way we can gain more confidence.

As important as repetitive collation may be, systematicians also collate biblical passages to form composite support for a theological proposition. In other words, systematicians find various factual claims throughout the Bible, and collect these to form larger, multifaceted theological assertions.

Let's illustrate the process of compositional collation with an example from everyday life. Imagine that I'm about to go outside and I hear thunder and suspect that it's raining. How do I confirm that suspicion? Well, one way is to notice other things that confirm it. When a friend comes running in and is drenched with water, I am more convinced that it's raining. If my friend hands me his wet umbrella, then I'm even more convinced that it's raining. And then if he says, "It's raining cats and dogs outside," I'm going to be so fully convinced that I won't even think about going outside without my own umbrella. These observations are not repetitive; I hear thunder; I see my soaked friend; I touch his umbrella; and I receive an explicit report. Each one of these evidences contributes something different, and together they compose evidence that convinces me that my suspicion was true.

In many ways, systematicians follow a similar pattern of compositional collation. They note that one thing is taught in one passage. Then they notice that another related matter is claimed in another passage. Then they find other passages that teach other relevant ideas. Then they gather all of this information together to form a theological proposition composed of all these theological facts.

To see how this process works, let's return to Berkhof's discussion of the deity of Christ in Chapter 8 of part 1 of his *Systematic Theology*. We've already seen that he noted the repetition of explicit claims that Christ is divine when he said that the Bible "explicitly asserts the deity of the Son." But his theological proposition that Christ is fully divine is also supported by compositional collation of related but different claims that he discovered from many parts of Scripture. He continued in this way:

> **[The Bible also] applies divine names to him … ascribes to Him divine attributes … speaks of Him as doing divine works … and accords Him divine honor.**

Berkhof's conclusion that Christ is God was not based on any of these claims individually, but on the aggregate of all of these theological claims.

It isn't difficult to understand why Berkhof did this. The belief that Christ is divine has been challenged by many interpreters of Scripture. So, it wasn't adequate simply to show that some verses explicitly assert his deity. He wanted to confirm that he had understood these verses correctly by adding the support of other considerations. The fact that the Scriptures attribute to Christ divine names; that they ascribe divine attributes to him, like omnipresence, and omniscience, that they speak of him doing things that God does like creating and sustaining all things; that they give him honor that is due only to God, like worship and prayer. These biblical factual claims come together to compose compelling evidence that Berkhof had a true theological proposition: the proposition that Christ is divine.

So it is that systematic theologians form theological propositions from the Scriptures first by reducing their focus to the facts asserted in biblical passages. And second by collating passages from various parts of Scripture. By these means systematicians are able to have confidence that they have formed theological propositions that are true to Scripture.

Now that we've gained a general orientation toward theological propositions and we've seen how systematicians form them, we're ready to turn to our third main topic: the values and dangers of theological propositions in systematic theology.

VALUES AND DANGERS

As we explore this matter, we'll follow the pattern of previous lessons in this series by looking at the effects of propositions on the three major resources for building Christian theology.

You'll recall that Christians are to build theology out of God's special and general revelation. We gain understanding of special revelation primarily through the exegesis of Scripture, and we avail ourselves of important dimensions of general revelation by focusing on interaction in community, learning from others, especially other Christians, and by focusing on Christian living; our experiences of living for Christ.

Because these resources are so critical, we'll explore the values and dangers of theological propositions in terms of each of them. We'll look first at propositions and Christian living; second, we'll explore propositions in relation to interaction in community; and third, we'll examine propositions in connection with the exegesis of Scripture. Let's look first at the theological resource of Christian living.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

Christian living amounts to the process of personal sanctification, and we've seen in other lessons that personal sanctification takes place on conceptual, behavioral and

emotional levels. Or as we've put it: on the levels of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos.

Time will not allow us to explore all the ways theological propositions affect these various aspects of sanctification. So, we'll limit ourselves to one major way they can enhance and one major way they can hinder Christian living. Let's look first at one way theological propositions can enhance our attempts to live for Christ.

Enhancement

One of the greatest advantages of traditional theological propositions is that they clearly and succinctly express many crucial aspects of our faith. In our day, most Christians are unable to articulate what they believe with much precision. And because we can't make sound summaries of our beliefs, we often have difficulty living for Christ in our daily lives.

I remember once talking with a young woman who didn't know how to make a decision about her church. She felt uneasy about the fact that her church tolerated some immoral lifestyles among its members, but she didn't want to leave. She came to me and said, "I don't know what to do. I get so much from the preaching that I don't want to stop going to my church. How can I make a decision?" So, I asked her, "What do you think the marks of the true church are?" She looked at me with a blank stare and finally said, "I don't know."

So I followed up this way "I don't think you'll be able to decide what to do about your church until you decide what you believe characterizes the *true* church." Then I told her, "Protestant theology teaches that there are three marks of the true church. They're the faithful preaching of the word, the faithful administration of the sacraments, and the faithful practice of church discipline." Her response was remarkable. She said to me "I wish someone had told me this before. I just didn't know what to think."

In the modern world, Christians often don't want to take the time to learn even the most basic theological claims that Christianity makes. So, they substitute sentiment or uninformed opinion for well-formed theological propositions. But the result of this is often the same: when we have important decisions to make, moral choices that we face every day, we don't know what to do because we're not able to articulate well-formed theological propositions. Traditional systematic theology has given us many propositions that are true to Scripture. And learning them is one of the most helpful things Christians can do as they seek to live for Christ.

Now, as positive as it can be to become familiar with traditional theological propositions, it's also the case that overemphasizing them or relying too heavily on them can actually hinder Christian living.

Hindrance

One way this is true is that Christians who study systematics often think that an extensive set of theological propositions is all they need to make practical decisions in the Christian life.

Now, as we've already seen, theological propositions can be very helpful. But at the same time, we must always remember that there is a gap between the standard propositions of theology and the choices we have to make as Christians. Theological propositions are typically rather abstract or about matters other than those we're facing. So they do not directly address the specifics of the situations we face. And as result, they cannot offer sufficient guidance for the practical decisions we must make.

Unfortunately, believers who become overly invested in propositions often don't realize how great this gap is. They convince themselves that all they have to do is to think logically about a set of propositions, and then everything will make perfectly good sense.

But in reality, in every decision we make as Christians we must depend not only on theological formulations, but also on things like the details of our situation and the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit. We must use these aspects of general revelation to fill in the gap between theological principles and real life decisions.

Let me return to the example of the young woman who was thinking about leaving her church. As soon as she heard the three marks of the church faithful preaching, faithful administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of church discipline, she quickly made up her mind to leave her church. But I immediately cautioned her.

I warned her, "Wait a minute. You need to realize something. No church anywhere in the world has the three marks of the church perfectly. You need to look carefully at your church and decide just how bad things are. And more than this, you also need to spend time in prayer, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit so you can make a firm decision. Only then can you leave in good conscience."

In a word, I was telling that young woman that as important as theological propositions were in her circumstance, relying *only* on theological propositions could actually hinder her Christian living. Before acting, she needed to look to general revelation. She needed to understand her situation well, and to submit herself to the personal ministry of the Spirit.

In addition to understanding how theological propositions can bring advantages and disadvantages to Christian living, we should also be aware of how they influence our interaction in community.

Interaction in Community

Interaction in community helps us focus on the importance of the body of Christ in our lives. In these lessons, we've spoken of three important dimensions of interaction within the Christian community: Christian heritage — the witness of the Holy Spirit's work in the church of the past; present Christian community — the witness of the Holy Spirit in Christians living today; and private judgment — the witness of the Holy Spirit

working in our personal conclusions and convictions. These dimensions of community interact with each other in countless ways.

We'll briefly mention just a couple of thoughts about the ways theological propositions can enhance and hinder these elements of community interaction. Let's look first at one important way theological propositions can enhance interaction in community.

Enhancement

As sad as it is, many evangelical Christians in our day bounce from one church to another, from one preacher or teacher to another, with little ability to determine how they should interact with those churches and preachers. We don't know whom to follow. We can't discern the positives and negatives of a church. This lack of discernment commonly stems from ignorance of the basic factual claims of the Christian faith. Becoming aware of the fundamental theological propositions of systematic theology is one of the best ways to become a more discerning follower of Christ.

One very practical way to take advantage of sound theological propositions is to become acquainted with some Protestant catechisms. Catechisms like the *Heidelberg Catechism*, or the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* offer short theological propositions that are easy to learn. And with these theological views in hand, followers of Christ can be more discerning.

For instance, if someone wants to discuss the purpose or goal of life, it's extremely helpful to know the first question and answer of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Listen to the way it summarizes a great deal of biblical teaching in one simple sentence. In answer to the question:

> **What is the chief end of man?**

The catechism responds:

> **Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.**

Suppose someone comes up with a novel outlook on how Christians can have comfort in life, it's very helpful to know the first question and answer to the Heidelberg catechism. The first question is:

> **What is your only comfort in life and in death?**

And the catechism answers this way:

> **That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him,**

> **Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.**

Learning solid theological viewpoints like these can equip us to be much more discerning as we interact with other Christians. And in this way, they greatly enhance our interaction in community.

At the same time, while understanding sound theological propositions can enhance interaction by making us more discerning, focusing on theological propositions can also hinder interaction among Christians.

Hindrance

Sometimes Christians so closely attach themselves to a set of propositions that they have a difficult time interacting in positive ways with other believers who may not say things in exactly the same way.

You see, there's a problem with theological propositions that we often forget: most of them are not quotations from the Bible. Instead, they are the products of human interpretation. They attempt to summarize biblical teachings as accurately as possible. But as we've seen in this lesson, sometimes they result from very complex processes. Even the best theological propositions are limited in scope. And all are flawed in one way or another. Consequently, as we learn more about the theological propositions of systematic theology, we must always temper our attachment to them with the knowledge that they are not inspired, they are not infallible, and their authority is not as great as the Bible's.

I remember once talking with a friend who said he had no Christian friends. He complained of being lonely. So, I asked him if he had fellowship with anyone. He told me, "I can't find anyone who agrees with what I believe. So, I don't have any fellowship." I responded this way, "Do you mean you can't find anyone who believes in Christ?" "Oh no, not that," he replied. "I just can't find anyone who agrees with me on everything." I was dismayed by this friend. He should have known that Christians have never agreed on every detail of theology.

But sadly, this friend of mine had terrible priorities. He had placed so much emphasis on theological propositions, that it completely hindered his ability to fellowship with others. Throughout the centuries, the cause of Christ has suffered tremendous harm when Christians have allowed their theological commitments to hinder their interactions with other Christians. When we insist that others conform to our beliefs on this or that subtle dimension of theological issue, we go far beyond the instructions of Scripture.

Consider, in this regard, the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:4-12. There we read these words about our theological commitments:

> **We know that an idol is nothing … But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols … their conscience is weak … [I]f anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat**

> **what has been sacrificed to idols?... When you sin against your brothers in this way … you sin against Christ (1 Corinthians 8:4-12).**

Paul exhorted the knowledgeable Christians to love those who were not as knowledgeable, and to serve them. He even exhorted those who were knowledgeable to restrict acting on their knowledge to avoid causing others to stumble. Rather than encouraging division and elitism, Paul insisted that those with good theology find ways to fellowship with those whose theology was weak on non-essential topics. In short, he taught them that fellowship was more important than precision on non-essential theological propositions. It's time for all of us to learn how to work together with Christians who don't agree with us in every detail.

Having seen some of the ways theological propositions relate to Christian Living and Interaction in Community, we should turn to the third major theological resource: the exegesis of Scripture. How do propositions in systematics affect our interpretation of the Bible?

EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE

Exegesis is vital to building Christian theology because it's our most direct access to God's special revelation in Scripture. We've suggested in another lesson that it's helpful to think of three main ways the Holy Spirit has led the church to interpret the Scriptures. We've dubbed these broad categories: literary analysis, historical analysis and thematic analysis. Literary analysis looks at the Scriptures as a picture, as artistic presentations designed by human authors to influence their original audiences through their distinctive literary features. Historical analysis looks at the Scriptures as a window to history, a way of seeing and learning from the ancient historical events that the Bible reports. And thematic analysis treats the Scriptures as a mirror, a way of reflecting on questions and topics that are of interest to us.

With these contours of exegesis in mind, we should explore the ways theological propositions can enhance and hinder our interpretation of the Bible.

Enhancement

One of the most obvious ways propositions help us in exegesis is the way they clarify the theological claims that are spread throughout the Bible.

If there's one thing that's true: the Bible is a complex book. Its various literary genres, historical references and theological teachings are so extensive that many Christians are unable to see much coherence in the Bible. And as a result, many of us are satisfied with searching and studying only small portions of the Scriptures to learn a few principles here and there from this passage or that passage. As soon as we begin to broaden our awareness of the bible, we find ourselves lost in confusion.

Into this confusion comes the help of centuries of faithful interpretation represented by theological propositions of systematic theology. For centuries, well-

informed Christians have searched the Scriptures to find the theological claims that appear there. And knowing those summaries of the teaching of Scripture can provide helpful guideposts for us as we make our way through the varied terrain of the Bible.

I often recommend to students that one helpful way to enter into the teaching of any biblical passage is to look for the ways the passage touches on important theological themes that appear in systematic theology. Now, not every portion of the Bible will have something to say about every theological proposition, but reading a passage with basic theological propositions in mind will often help to provide an orientation toward a biblical passage.

For instance, we might ask, "What does Genesis 1 teach about God that systematic theologians emphasize?" Well, among other things, it teaches that God is the creator of the universe. And what does it say about human beings that is emphasized in systematic theology? Well, it teaches that we're creatures, that we're the image of God, and that God has commanded us to exercise dominion over the earth. Learning how specific passages touch on the factual claims of systematic theology is one of the greatest enhancements of exegesis that systematics offers.

As valuable as propositions may be for exegesis, we must also become aware of one of the most significant ways they can hinder our interpretation of Scripture.

Hindrance

We've spoken already about the ways that systematic theologians interpret Scripture through factual reduction, how they focus on the explicit and implicit factual claims of biblical passages and marginalize other things the Scriptures have for us.

But the fact is, God inspired Scripture to impact us on a variety of levels, and he did this because we need his guidance in all of these ways. So, when we habitually highlight only factual claims, we cut ourselves off from many things that God offers us in Scripture.

We can speak of the various impacts that Scriptures were designed to have in many different ways. But one helpful approach is to speak of three interconnected dimensions of all biblical texts.

In the first place, biblical passages have informative impact. That is to say, they convey explicit and implicit facts that we should know and believe. This is the strength of systematic theology. Its goal is to isolate and collate these facts into theological propositions.

But at the same time, biblical passages also have directive impact. They give us explicit and implicit moral directions for our lives. This is most obvious when we approach passages that come in the form of commands. But even passages that are designed primarily to state information also imply moral responsibilities.

Paul made this point very clearly in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Listen to his words there once again:

> **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).**

According to Paul, every biblical passage is designed to have some measure of directive impact.

In the third place, biblical passages also have affective impact. They explicitly or implicitly target the emotions of readers. This function of Scripture is most obvious when we read highly emotional texts like the Psalms, or other passages where biblical writers emphasize emotions. But every biblical passage has the potential to touch us emotionally.

Consider Matthew 22:37-40, where Jesus summarized the Old Testament in this way:

> **"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).**

In the Scriptures, love is a very emotional concept. And according to Jesus, it is fundamental to our faith. Biblical writers call for us to experience all sorts of holy emotions. They expect us to be motivated to hate sin and its consequences. They expect us to weep and to rejoice and to experience the full range of proper human emotions in response to what we see on the pages of Scripture.

This manifold design of the Scriptures is the reason we must not restrict ourselves to looking for theological propositions in the Bible. It's important to get our facts straight. But it's just as important to get our morals and our emotions straight as well. The riches of Scripture wait to be discovered through careful exegesis. But careful interpretation of the Bible must be broad enough to uncover all that the Scriptures offer us.

So it is that propositions in systematics offer us many values and many dangers. They can enhance Christian living, interaction in community, and the exegesis of Scripture in many ways. But they can also hinder our access to these three major theological resources.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored propositions and systematics. And we've come to a basic understanding of what they are and why they are important. We've also seen how propositions are formed in systematic theology. And we've explored some of the values and dangers they present.

Forming theological propositions is essential to the process of building systematic theology. We must know how to express and defend the facts of the Christian faith. For this reason, theological propositions have been crucial to building systematic theology throughout the centuries and they are vital to building sound systematic theology even today.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.

Building Systematic Theology

LESSON THREE

Propositions in Systematics

Faculty Forum

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Building Systematic Theology

Lesson Three: Propositions in Systematics

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Michael Briggs
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
What is a proposition?

Student: Okay, Richard, we just covered a lot of information in this lesson, and some of it's hard. But I know we're going to sort these things out at this table. So, let's start off our discussion by just laying the groundwork again. What is a proposition?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, this is all about propositions. And you'll remember that I'm suggesting, although it's a little artificial, that systematic theology starts with these technical terms, and then the technical terms are used in propositions, and then the propositions are used in doctrinal statements, and then all that's combined into this big comprehensive system. So we're basically at step two. Even those all those work together all the time, we artificially are saying, now step two, propositions. And you can define propositions very simply in a very straightforward way, by saying that they are an indicative sentence that says as directly as possible a factual theological claim, at least one of those. You can have more than that, but at least one.

Let's break that out for just a minute. An indicative sentence, I think we know what that is. That's just where you have a subject and a predicate of some sort. And then the next part is that the proposition has to be made as straightforward or as directly as possible, which means that you don't use figures of speech usually, like hyperbole, or like a metaphor, a simile, and things like that, because those kind of cloud the issues. And remember, for a systematician, the goal is clarity, and so you get rid of, as much of you can, issues like metaphors and those kinds of things. And then you take this indicative sentence that's stated as directly as possible one factual claim, one theological factual claim, and so it's not an expression of thanks, it's not really an expression of praise or lament, it wouldn't be a question. It wouldn't be those kinds of things, it would be a statement of fact. For example, that cup is on the table. That is a proposition. Okay? You are here in the room. That's a proposition. Now to make that theological, we've have to say something like God is in the room with us. That's a theological claim. We have not used metaphors in that. We've not used figures of speech. We've tried to say it just as straightforwardly as we possibly can. Does that make any sense at all? Okay. I mean, that part of it is not so complicated, but it is

important… if you don't have that clarified in your mind, then the rest of this falls to pieces as we go because it does get more and more complicated.

So let's test it out a little bit. Let me give you some statements. I'll give you some Bible quotes and then I'll give you some other kinds of statements, and you tell me whether you think it is a theological proposition or not, okay? How about this one? In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Yes or no? Yes. Yes, it's an indicative sentence. It's stated straightforwardly, and it's making a theological claim about God or something in relation to God. Okay, so it passes. If we were to take a passage like John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life," is that a proposition? Yes, that's a proposition, too. Okay. If we were to take something like Jesus' Great Commission, it starts off this way, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." Is that a proposition? Yes, that part is a proposition. But the next part goes, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit." Is that a proposition? No, it's not, because it's a command.

Now let's go again. Let's think about the 23rd Psalm. This will a little bit sneakier here, okay, so be careful. "The Lord is"… sounds like a proposition… "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. There's a metaphor in there. Yeah, there's a metaphor that God is a shepherd. And so that makes it a little… it is propositional in one sense, in the sense that it is an indicative sentence, but it's not straightforward. Okay? It's using the metaphor, and heavily using the metaphor of the shepherd. "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Student: That seems like another metaphor to me.

Dr. Pratt: It could be. Okay, you'd have to figure out whether it is or not. Okay, good. And so what systematicians do is they take everything they find from the Bible and they reduce them down to theological propositions. Now please don't be confused at this. This doesn't mean that their writings and their books are just one proposition after another after another after another, because for stylistic flair and for literary quality, they'll do all kinds of things as they write. But the reality that's behind their writing is a propositionalizing where they have taken the Bible and they have turned it into straightforward propositions. And so if we were to say, God is one essence and three persons, is that a theological proposition? Yes. Yes. Okay. If I were to say to you, we should praise the one God, the three Persons, is that a proposition?

Student: Well, it depends on if there's an "ought" there, but probably not because you're giving a command.

Dr. Pratt: I am, I'm giving a command. We are obligated to. If I were to say, Halleluiah, is that a proposition? No. So you can imagine that those kinds of expressions that are biblical expressions are not going to be found usually in the arguments that systematic theologians make. Does that make any sense? Yes, it does.

So a proposition is an indicative sentence that states as plainly and straightforwardly, directly, as possible, one or more theological claims, factual claims. And if we can get that solidly in our minds, we can see how then systematic theologians use those things.

Question 2:
Why are propositions so important to systematic theology?

Student: Richard, why are propositions so important to systematics? I mean, haven't there been other theologians that have done propositions in other ways?

Dr. Pratt: There have been and there will be… there are, and this, of course, is one of the things that troubles people that are troubled by how reductionistic systematic theology can be sometimes. The early Church Fathers under the influence, remember, of their mysticism, would often produce theological works in the genre of prayer, and so they would be talking to God — Augustine did this, Irenaeus did this — they would be talking to God as they did what we would call very serious theology. I can't imagine anyone disagreeing that hymns, for example, or sometimes extremely… traditional hymns are extremely theological. They've been very well thought through, they've been expressed in very careful ways, and they're very biblical and those kinds of things. So it can be done. It can be done. The reality, however, is that systematic theology as we know it today is highly influenced not only by Neo-Platonism but also by Aristotelianism or scholasticism, and in scholasticism, the operating genre was that of argument. Okay? Logical argument. And if you're going to do that in theology, then your basic working tool, your building block, has to be propositions. It can't be nice sweet hymns or poems or other sorts of things. It just can't be.

Question 3:
What can we lose if we focus only on propositions?

Student: Richard, can you give us an example right up front of one of the things that we have to be careful of losing by focusing just on the proposition and not incorporating things in our systematic theology like prayer?

Dr. Pratt: Well, you lose emotion very easily, which is of course one of the reasons why systematics is usually accused of being stark and cold. You lose a lot of the devotional aspect, that is, the personal encounter with God in doing theology. It becomes rather abstract and God becomes an object that you talk about rather than an object with whom you engage. The separation becomes rather big, and the distance grows. The more you do it, the more the distance grows I'm afraid, sometimes. You can imagine just in your own mind what's the difference between singing a hymn that's a good hymn that does what the Bible does… between that and giving propositions out of that hymn? And you can get a sense of it very quickly that it lacks

the intuitive, it lacks sometimes imaginative reflection, it lacks emotion as we said before — those kinds of things. And that is on the one side the strength of systematics. If you're looking for how to argue your way into truth, that's a strength. But at the same time, it's a great weakness, too.

Question 4:
Do Protestant churches tend to overemphasize propositional truth?

Student: Richard, would you say that our emphasis in Protestant circles, at least in our worship with our emphasis on preaching, that we focus maybe too much of propositional truth?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I guess in some Protestant circles that would certainly be true. Because if you think about it this way, if you have a worship service and it goes on for an hour, an hour and 15 minutes, and 45 minutes of that is the sermon, that will tend to be a giveaway that there's a lot of emphasis on the propositional nature of doing theology, because typically in those circles, the sermons themselves will be two or three or four propositions that are then explained. Here's my first point, you make the proposition, explain it. Second point, it's a proposition, you explain it. I have to confess that's basically the way I preach. But that's just my tradition, and that's the way that that kind of preaching is done. But in every service, there are also other elements that use theological language in other ways. I mean, think about the way the worship service goes. You have a call to worship which is basically an invitation to come and worship God. So there's no proposition in that unless we slip one in somehow. There is the invocation of God, you pray to God. So you're using language in prayer. You have the pastoral prayer which is usually requests and petitions to God. You have thanksgiving. You talk about the offering and dedicate it to God. You have the benediction at the end. So we do a number of different things.

But to be perfectly frank, I think that you can tell a lot about a church by whether or not it looks at its worship service as a whole as leading up to the preaching. There are churches where everything that's done in the worship service other than the preaching is just preliminary to the preaching, and there will be a tendency in those kinds of churches for them to be a lot like systematic theology; their thinking will be a lot like systematic theology in that they will be propositional in the way they focus. Now, I have to say that I believe that the Bible does give us propositions, and so we have to hold onto that and never let go of it, but also gives us other things, too.

Question 5:
Why is it important not to abandon propositional truth?

Student: Okay, Richard, we're talking about an overemphasis on propositional truth within a worship service. But what about other traditions that may lean more

heavily on worship or on prayer? Can you talk about the necessity of not abandoning propositional truth?

Dr. Pratt: Well, there are churches that do that, obviously. There are some, for example, liturgical churches, high church, will often have a lot of liturgy, a lot of ceremony, and then they'll just have a short homily maybe… some I've seen as short as 5 or 6 minutes. That's probably, from my point of view, a little too little. Other churches, maybe low-end churches, lower churches, will have singing and dancing for a long, long time, and then they'll have a relatively short sermon. You know, everybody's going to do these things in different balance points. I mean, definitely that's going to be true, and traditions tend to have a different sense of what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. But the fact is, and I think this is what we have to reckon with, is that the Bible has all of those kinds of statements, those kinds of language of theology, and we've got to just live with the fact that all of them should be there in our worship service. Now you can vary one to another from time to time, but you've also got to remember, it seems to me, that the way you do your worship service is not just going to reflect your priorities, it's going to create priorities, and the people are going to begin to feel that this is the most important element. And so in churches — what I would do if I were king of a church — if I had a church that was emphasizing propositions, I'd pull the other way and worship at least for a while, and if they were on the other end of it, I'd pull them back toward propositions for a little while. And so it's the kind of thing where we have to remember not to go overboard with the importance of theological propositions, because as valuable as they are — and the Bible does give them to us and so they are important — as valuable as they are, they can be overemphasized, and that can have devastating effects on the ways people live their Christian lives and the way they do theology. We should be more fully orbed than that.

Question 6:
What genres does Scripture use to teach theology?

Student: Richard, what are some of the genres that Scripture uses to help us learn theology?

Dr. Pratt: Other than propositions? Yeah, I guess that would be good. Well, genre, of course, is a sort of flexible or slippery word, but let me just give you some, okay? Some of them involve propositions but not just propositions. Narrative is obviously one of the big ones in the Bible. You think of that at the beginning of the Bible especially. But mixed in with that are genealogies, and then you have laws, and then you have ritual directives and things like that in a book like Leviticus. If you move on forward, you know, you have a number of books that have a lot of narrative following that, the so-called historical books. Then you get to Job which is poetry plus a little bit of prose narrative. Then you get the Psalms which are all poetry, and Proverbs which is probably, strangely enough, a very diverse genre because the book of

Proverbs represents things like adages, but it also represents things like riddles and jokes. There are jokes in the Proverbs as well. Then you get the sort of philosophical reflections of Ecclesiastes, and then you get to the Prophets and you've got a mixture of prose speeches plus a lot of historical narrative and then a lot of poetic materials where they give their speeches in poetry.

You know, frankly, we have some of that in a typical Protestant worship service, some of that diversity. You get, for example, poetry in the hymnody, but I'm afraid that it's lost usually; people don't get much sense of that because, you know, the typical thing in a church of my sort anyway, is that the minister will stand up and say, now pay attention to the words, and what he means by that is pay attention to the theological propositions that are hidden there, and you're not really dealing with the poetic dimensions of it.

But all of those different genres, and we've only named a few of them, not all of them, have different ways in which they communicate, and that's what's important — different ways they communicate to God and different ways they communicate to people. And as you deal with all of those different kinds of genres, they will touch different aspects of the human condition, and I think that is why the Bible as well as Christian liturgy and Christian theology has been expressed, they've all been expressed, in these various genres. It's because we don't want to be reduced down to one kind of theological reflection. And again, the main reason why systematicians have reduced down to propositions is because of the tradition of scholasticism where theology was primarily conceived of as an argumentation, and to do argumentation, you've got to have propositions.

Question 7:
Can systematic theology be done with other types of statements than propositions?

Student: Richard, it seems like if we have a Scripture that is full of things other than propositional truth, I mean just straight propositional truth, and then we do our systematic theology just with straight propositional truth, first of all, it seems like systematic theology could be a little, you know, less practical for our uses, but at the same time, what does systematic theology look like if it incorporated all these other genres?

Dr. Pratt: It wouldn't look like a systematic theology. That's the problem, is that it's become such a genre of its own that you almost have to do it that way in order for it to fit, for people to call it a systematic theology. Now there is a recent systematic theology that has at the end of some of its chapters a hymn, a traditional hymn that's actually printed there. And knowing the author of that systematic theology, what he's trying to do is to bring more of the doxological, more of the affective, more of the poetic into it. But it's still just an appendix at the end of every chapter. And the

reason for that is because it wouldn't be called a systematic theology if he wove poetry in and out of it. You see? It just wouldn't work. It's a little bit like preaching in that sense. Every branch of the church has a definition of what the genre of preaching is, and so if you were to get up and tell a story in many Protestant churches, they would not consider that a good sermon, because even though you have storytelling in the Bible, and even though Jesus preached that way just by telling a parable or telling a story, people would feel like, well, that's an odd thing, why are we calling that a sermon? Where's the sermon today? And the reason is because people are just used to that, and that's what they've become accustomed to, that's the genre that they expect. Well, when you talk about systematic theology, that's the genre people expect. And so in this series, of course, we're talking about traditional systematic theology, and that's why we went through the history from Neo-Platonism to Aristotelianism to modern rationalism and that kind of thing, it's to say that this is what we're talking about. So it would make it very different, and the more you brought in other genres and different styles of talking theology, the less it would be identifiable, I'm afraid, as a systematic theology.

Student: But it could be a legitimate next step. We've talked about this progression, and I'm thinking of Augustine and much of what he wrote was written in the form of prayer, and maybe something like that would be a next step.

Dr. Pratt: It would certainly be refreshing. I mean, there are some people who have written narratives that are very theological and very good, but unfortunately, they're taken as narratives as opposed to theology with a capital "T". And again, that's just the genre expectation. But someone with the credentials of being a systematician needs to sort of step into that and just let things fall as they may so that it can open the door for that kind of multiple expression.

Question 8:
What are some examples of factual reduction?

Student: Okay, Richard. Let's talk about factual reduction. You gave a few examples in the lesson, but I'm still not quite getting it. So could you give us some more? Could we talk about that a little bit?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, we can do that. Let me just tell you in general, the idea is that no matter what you have in the Bible, whatever form of the text may be, whatever genre it may be, what a systematician does basically is to take what's explicitly said and what's implied in it and get out the factual content that he or she wants to get out of it. That's basically what they do. But that's not just something that's just what systematicians do. Bible figures do that, too. I've got some Bibles here. Let's take a look. If you'll look at Romans 15, I think you'll be able to see the kind of thing I'm talking about, and I'll try to find it, too. But in Romans 15, we can see that the Apostle Paul actually goes through the process of factual reduction. Sometimes we,

you know, you use a word like reduction and you go, well, that must be bad because you don't want to reduce God's Word, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. It can be a bad thing.

Let's look at Romans 15, and maybe a good way to do this would be starting at verse 8. What I'm going to do… let's just walk through the whole process here, and let me just read to you and ask you a question as we go along. Okay? Now be careful, here we go. [Romans] 15:8: "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of the truth to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." Now, is that a proposition? No. Why not? I think the right answer is yes. Okay. So let's go back and I'll start reading it again. So let's read again. We'll start at verse 8, and I'm going to read it to you along with verse 9. You tell me if this is a proposition or not, a theological proposition. "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy."

Now that's a complicated sentence, but it's basically a proposition. Okay? He's basically saying there something about Christ, that he became a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm a promise made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy. Okay. Now what Paul does in the verses that follow here, is he proves this. Okay? He proves it by, as it were, quoting some Bible passages, but he's making a reductionistic use of these proof texts, and we'll be able to see that I think in just a moment. He says in verse 9, "as it is written: 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.'" And here he's quoting from Psalm 18:49. Now if you take a look back at Psalm 18:49, this is a psalm of praise. Okay? He's honoring God. He's saying I'm going to praise you, which is another way of saying, I'm praising you. I'm praising you now before the Gentiles, I'll be rejoicing, I'll be happy. So in its original context, it's more than just a proposition. It's actually a statement of praise, right?

But here, the only point that Paul's trying to make here is that the Gentiles will glorify God for his mercy, and what he's saying there… what's the salient point that he's drawing from this verse? He doesn't do it explicitly by implicitly. He's saying that Gentiles will see someone praise God, right? The inclusion of Gentiles in this. Now look again at verse 10. "Again it says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.'" This is at the end of Deuteronomy, a quote from Deuteronomy 32. Is this itself a proposition? It's a command, so it's not a proposition from Deuteronomy 32, but what's the salient or essential idea that Paul is getting out of this? It is… that Gentiles will be included. Right, that Gentiles will praise him, too. "And again, 'Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.'" That's from Psalm 117:1. Is that a proposition? No, that's a command. It's a call to praise. And again, what he's saying… basically what Paul's saying is, because of this call to praise to Gentiles, the fact is that Gentiles will praise him one day. Okay? God wants that, or however you want to say it. You can summarize it in many ways. And in verse 12, "And again, Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.'" Now is that a proposition? Several

of them, I think, right? Several propositions from Isaiah 11:10 where this is at the end of that very famous passage about the rising up of a son of David who will rule over the world and that the Gentiles will one day worship God along with the Jews. And so what Paul does here, he has this proposition in verses 8 and 9, saying that… concluding that the Gentiles will glorify God for his mercy because of what Jesus did with the Jews, and then he supports this — as it is written, again it says, and again, and again Isaiah says — he supports it with implicit propositional statements of fact that come from these different kinds of passages.

And so it's not as if this is something that's wrong to do. It's something that we ought to do based on this example if none other, and there are plenty of them in the Bible, where they'll take a different genre, in this case many of them Psalms, worship songs, things like that, or a prophesy, and they will draw out a proposition from that, a factual conclusion from it, that they'll use in support of some factual belief that they have, which is what Paul's doing right here.

So factual reduction is not an evil thing. It's just a way in which we can handle the Bible, and it is the way in which systematicians tend to handle the Bible all the time. That's very important. And why do they do that? Do you remember why? Because of scholasticism, theology is…

Student: Theology is a system of propositions.

Dr. Pratt: Uh huh, and arguments. And you have to have propositions to make the argument. And that in effect is what Paul's doing here. He's making an argument for this idea that Jesus came to the Jews in a particular way as the servant of God's truth and then for this reason that the Gentiles may worship. And then he uses these as his proof text as it were. So he's operating a lot like a systematician would in this passage. The only thing he doesn't do is make it very explicit. And so you can see verse 13, his sort of conclusion, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Now that, you see, is a blessing, a benediction. So he feels like he's made his point, he's proven his point, so now he's blessing them and saying, now be happy about this. Now that I've proven it to you, be happy. So I think that's a lovely example of how propositional reduction happens in the Bible itself.

Question 9:
What is factual collation?

Student: Richard, I think I've got this whole idea of factual reduction, but you also talk about factual collation, which is a whole other concept. Could you go a little bit more into that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, collation. Let's talk about what collation is. You know, when you make copies of something and you want each set to have the same pages in it? That's collating. It's just sort of bringing things together, batching them together in certain ways. And systematic theologians, because they are dealing with a Bible that has it's doctrines taught in many different places — in other words, there's not just one place where any doctrine is taught in the Bible; it's taught a little bit here, a little bit there, a little bit here, a little bit there — what they have to do is go out there and find those places and bring them together, collate them, match them up. And that's really all I mean by collation.

But they do that in different ways. One of the ways they do that is what I call… I believe the terminology is called composite collation or compositional collation. And that means you take one little piece, you take another piece, you take another piece, and you sort of bring all those pieces together like pieces of a puzzle, and then you get a whole picture. Another way they did it in traditional systematic theology is to find repetition, so it's repetitive collation. So that you find the truth one time, but you want to reinforce it, so you find it another time, you find it another time, and another time, and you draw from different verses by doing that too, and piling them up on top of each other. And both of those approaches are perfectly fine, because the Bible does it also. And I tried to give some examples in the actual lesson of the Bible doing this kind of thing.

But let's look again at Romans 15 because this is a great example, and I'll ask you at the end of this, is this repetitive collation or is it compositional collation? Remember, the proposition he's trying to prove is verse 8 and 9: "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." There is the proposition. Now he's going to prove it, and he's going to prove it by doing these implicit factual reductions of these four different verses. And he gives first that the Gentiles will come and sing and rejoice and they'll praise the Lord, Gentiles, and the Gentiles will hope in him. So would you call that compositional, or would you call that repetitive? Or is he basically saying the thing over and over and over? Is that what these verses are doing? Or are they giving you this side of it, that side of it, that side of it, that you had to bring together?

Student: It seems like he is reinforcing the same idea, but he's using kind of different facets.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, remember, no biblical passage except the very same biblical passage will say exactly the same thing, but somewhere in between and probably more toward the repetitive. Okay? Because the point is basically, this is true. The Gentiles are going to praise him, the Gentiles are going to praise him, the Gentiles are going to praise him, and if you didn't get it yet, the Gentiles are going to praise him.

Student: And then he says let's all praise him.

Dr. Pratt: And now let's all praise him for that. So it's a wonderful thing, because really, in some respects, factual collation is little more than making sure that your Bible doctrines that you're creating, the propositions that you're creating, are based on more than just one passage of the Scriptures. Okay? And if you don't make sure of that, if you don't make sure that your beliefs, your propositions, are based on a variety of Bible passages, then you run a very serious risk of misunderstanding the one verse that you're stuck on.

Let me take an example. Romans 3:23 is one of those typical examples of how Christians will say the Bible says it, therefore it's true, but when they compare other Bible passages, they find out it's not quite to be understood the way they did. Now you know Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Now if we were to just take that verse alone from the whole of the Bible and stick it out here without any kind of verses impinging on it, then we would have to conclude that every human being that's ever lived is a sinner. Okay? And that just seems to be straight up. And in fact, we could probably have people agree to that. Most Christians would say, yeah, that's true. Every human being is a sinner. But it's not true. It's not. What's missing? There has been one. There has been one who was not a sinner, and that's Jesus. Well, he wasn't really human. Yes he was too… that's a whole other issue. He was really human, and he did not sin, which is what makes him the Savior. It's that fact that he is purely righteous in and of himself. And so when Paul said that in Romans 3:23, he was not meaning that as a categorical statement, and the only way we can make sure that that's true, the only way we would know that that's true is to get into Paul's brain as it were by means of other verses. And so the composite of various verses would make us want to say something like, every human being is a sinner except Jesus.

Question 10:
Is proof-texting a responsible practice?

Student: You highlight a very important point. I don't have a problem with Paul doing this, but what we need to do is we need to read these in context. And where I see a problem arising is in somebody having an idea that they just want to prove it, and so they do what we call proof-texting, and they find as many verses out there that they can that supports their theological position. And how do we avoid that danger?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think proof testing at its best is just sort of a short-hand. At best, when it's done well, it's a reference to a verse or to part of a chapter in a book of the Bible that is sort of a quick way to refer people to it. But hopefully, the people who are using those proof texts have read more than just the one or two lines, and they are sure that this is what the verse means by reading the larger context. But unfortunately, sometimes they don't, and so proof-texting really can sometimes misrepresent what the Bible says. And that is not done by Bible writers, and it shouldn't be done by us

either. We need to make sure that when we quote part of a verse or use a verse as a proof of something, that we are reading that verse in context along with other verses in the Bible, and that's the way to avoid the negative proof-texting. Yeah, I think that's very true. So when we talk about factual collation, we're simply saying that systematicians of course are going to reduce Bible passages to propositions, but to make their propositions sound and truly reflective of the Bible, they're going to either find other passages in Scripture that repeat the same idea to confirm it, or they're going to find composite pictures they're going to make by bringing this aspect of that verse, this verse, this verse, and creating a whole that will qualify. And so that repetitive and composite collation is what we're going for in systematics.

Question 11:
Should preachers ever reduce biblical texts to propositions?

Student: So Richard, now I'm thinking about being in the pulpit, and I'm wondering how much should we propositionalize the Bible for our preaching?

Dr. Pratt: That's a hard one, because from my point of view anyway, what you do in preaching depends a lot on what you have been doing in preaching. Because, from my point of view, or what I'm trying to get across in this series and even in the Building Your Theology series, is that the goal of doing theology is not just to teach people true statements or truth propositions that they need to endorse… which are still important. Right, they're important. But orthodoxy is not the only goal, but orthopraxis is also the goal, the goal of doing the right thing, and orthopathos is also a goal of theology, of feeling the right way. And frankly, if you've had a preaching ministry that tends to be more propositional, it's going to be oriented more toward the orthodoxy side. You can see that, right? Because you're teaching facts and propositional facts, and that's going to push you up toward, the most important thing for you to get today from my sermon is, what's the truth of the matter? Now, typically that's where young preachers begin, because they're sort of fascinated with the truth statements of the Bible and what they're learning in theology, and so they tend as young preachers or inexperienced preachers, to think that that's what their congregation will be fascinated with, too, or that that's what they need. And perhaps they do to some extent. And then typically what happens to younger preachers as they mature a little bit, is they realize that telling people the truth and people understanding the truth doesn't do enough. So they often become a little embittered, and then they start moving over toward orthopraxis. Now what would you think would be the normal genre or style of language that you would use if you were going to emphasize the practice of theology, doing theology?

Student: How you would apply this today, or thou shalt.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, you'd give a lot of rules. So then the preachers start laying out rules all the time, and they feel like now I'm being practical. Before, I was being

intellectual because I'm talking about orthodoxy, but now I've got 6 rules at the end of every sermon, so now I'm being practical. Okay. Well, they are perhaps being practical to some extent, and there is an important place for rules in the Christian life. The Bible gives us plenty of them, that's for sure, and so preachers ought to be able to give some too, at least every once in a while. But the thing that's still missing is that orthopathos, or at least the full range of orthopathos, right feelings. See, because you get a certain kind of feeling if you get the doctrines right or if you get the orthodoxy, the propositions right. You get certain kinds of feelings if you get the commands out, guilt and those kinds of things if you're hearing a lot of rules or frustration. Those are emotions that are appropriate for Christians to have. But what you're not going to get a lot of is joy and exuberance and delight and hopefulness, and things like that. You're not going to get a lot of that side of the fruit of the Spirit by orthodoxy and by orthopraxis. Orthopathos is what gives you that, and that takes certain kinds of speech, certain kinds of theologizing, too. Now what kinds of things have you ever heard ministers do that allow people to be happy? To experience joy? What kinds of things have you ever heard them do? I guess they don't do it much, eh?

Student: Well, no. Tell jokes for one. I've heard that.

Dr. Pratt: Sometimes… that's right, they'll tell a joke or two.

Student: Often times there'll be a big buildup to something about reminding us of our salvation or reminding us of our faith. So it may be a more dramatic statement of that.

Dr. Pratt: Okay. Or a testimony or his own personal experience that has a good, positive, joyous ending. Those kinds of things are the sorts of talk that normally get us there. Sometimes propositions do, and sometimes even rules can do it. But they tend not to be the things that emphasize the fuller range of orthopathos. And so when you ask the question of how much should a person use propositions in preaching, the reason I answer, well that depends on what you have been doing, is that I think that preaching in some ways has to deal with the fact that the ship is rocking all the time and that the balance point is depending on where the ship is lilting this way or lilting that way. And that depends a lot on what you've been doing up to that point. So it could very well be that rather than always thinking, well, what I need to do is make sure that I emphasize all the orthodox teachings, so let me give the six propositions from this passage. Maybe what you need to do is something a little different than that. Or rather than six rules all the time, maybe what you need to do is something a little different from that. And some of the techniques of, for example, storytelling, or testimonial, or painting pictures for people, those kinds of things often will bring out a fuller emotional experience of the passage for people.

You know, propositionalizing is very important, in our day especially, because there are groups that are now so repelled, even repulsed by systematic theology. They think of it as artificial, it's rationalistic, it's not valuable, it makes people heady, it makes people proud, it makes people arrogant, and so they want to back away from all these

sort of doctrinal commitments, these propositional commitments, into a sort of nebulous let's all feel good with each other. Well, in that kind of context, that needs to be corrected with more theology or systematic theology.

Student: Now, one of my professors in seminary has a statement where he says theology is practice. What do you think about that?

Dr. Pratt: Are you thinking about theology as application? Yeah? Well, that's good. We talk that way a lot. I talk that way a lot, too. And I think it means at least two things. I think this is the way most students hear all theology is application, or all theology is practice. A lot of students will hear that and they'll think, okay, what he's saying is that all theologizing, all talk about God ought to be applied. In other words, if you don't apply it, then you are missing… you're just taking step one and not step two. Okay? Well, that's true enough. Okay, I'll buy that. But I think he is saying — and here we have in mind John Frame I assume? — he is saying something a little more profound than that. He's actually saying that every time you do theology, no matter what kind you're doing, whether it's propositions for orthodoxy, commands, rules for orthopraxis, or storytelling perhaps for orthopathos, that you are in fact applying. Because we do have to remember that the application of Scripture involves the changing of the way we think, not just the way we do and the way we feel. And I think that's very important, because sometimes we can get, even in an educational environment like this, we can become very anti-intellectual, and we can make a distinction between theology which is impractical and high and abstract and just affects the mind, it doesn't affect the heart — you know, you hear those things all the time — but the reality is that that part of applying the Bible to life is applying it to the ways we think, because thinking is a part of living, and it's all wrapped up in you practices and your emotions. And so it's not as if we do systematic theology and that's impractical. It actually is very practical at least in this one sense of orthodoxy. It gets you to think the right ways. And we need to go further into praxis and pathos, but nevertheless, it's a very practical thing. So all theology, whether it's systematic theology or not, whether we call it practical theology or not, is practical in that sense.

Question 12:
Are propositional statements less manipulative than emotional appeals?

Student: Richard, what will you say to the pastor who is really focused on the orthodoxy part, and when he looks at the pathos part, he may think that might be a bit manipulative? How would you address a concern like that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, manipulative is a negative word isn't it? I think it means sort of deceiving people, doing things to people that they don't realize you're doing to them. Would that be fair? Is that basically what we mean by manipulative? I don't think people ought to be manipulated in that sense in a sneaky, conniving way, but there is as much manipulation going on when you're talking about orthodoxy as when you're

talking about orthopathos. Okay? Because what you are trying to do is to get people to change. You're trying to get them to appropriate the Word of God. And if you can do that honestly, if you can do that forthrightly, and admit that that's what you're doing, that you're trying to get people to appropriate the Word of God intellectually, and appropriate it in their behavior, and appropriate it in their emotions, there's absolutely nothing wrong with this. I mean, when Jesus said, pluck out your eye if it offends you, that was quite emotional. Sure, shocking. Okay? And was he manipulating them? I don't think so. He was trying to get the truth over to them in a way that would change them emotionally. And in fact, it was the emotional impact that he was hoping would bring out the truth of the matter. What? Pluck my eye out? And so I think all things always work together.

And I agree with you that sometimes people will say that, oh, he's weeping from the pulpit and he's just trying to manipulate us. Well, no he's not. He is trying to communicate on a different level. Now if he's faking that weeping, that's just fake. And that would be something like telling a truth, a doctrinal truth, a proposition that you don't really believe, but you just say it in order to get people to play up to it. And that you don't want to do. You want it all to be sincere, which does mean, of course, that if you're going to preach in ways that go beyond propositions, you've got to go beyond propositions yourself first so that it seeps down into your heart.

But I think the reality, to come back to what you asked at the beginning, is that preaching, everyone's preaching tends to go one way or the other because of who they are and what their natural tendencies are, and what we have to do is guard against allowing our natural tendencies to be the default to which we always go, and to push ourselves to move in other directions as well.

Question 13:
Do propositions contribute both to unity and to disunity in the church?

Student: Richard, in the video you talk about how propositional truth can bring about unity and sometimes even disunity. Could you go into that a little bit more, how that plays out?

Dr. Pratt: I think it's really important to see that there can very positive effects on interacting and community with each other, and very negative effects from this part of systematic theology. Maybe we should start with the negatives… let's start with the negative and then we'll come to the more positive and end up with that. When you think about the negatives, I would have to say that probably the worst part of is that once a group of people, or sometimes even individuals, come up with the way they think a doctrine of the Bible ought to be stated, that if you don't match that statement word for word, then they're not going to have anything to do with you. That is just so sad because the reality is that… Remember how we said in the earlier lesson that one term can mean many concepts and one concept can be expressed in many terms? The

same is true on the propositional level. You can have one concept that's expressed by a variety of propositions, and there won't be much difference among them except just the wording. But unfortunately, people sometimes aren't willing to give and take on that much. And it's just terribly sad because we have so much to do other than nit-pick each other to death on the little phrases that we use this way or that way. I mean, there are favorite ways that different groups will say things, and you can just let people have their favorite ways to say them and flex with it a little bit.

But the more positive side of it is that propositions can give us ways of summarizing what we believe that are very succinct, very straightforward, and we can work at them and agree on them and then move on to other things. I mean, I think of the Apostles' Creed — we mentioned that in the lesson — that the Apostles' Creed is a series of propositions, I believe in God the Father, I believe in Jesus Christ, so on, so on, and so on. And, you know, we may have things that we would like to add or take away from that here and there, but the reality is, those are propositions that establish unity among us. It's a very convenient and helpful and good, historically speaking, way of doing that. I don't know. Have you ever seen proposition differences between different churches become a hindrance to the unity of the church?

Student: Oh definitely, within a church.

Dr. Pratt: Within one local church? Yeah, it happens because people are just sort of stuck, and we have to just get to the point that just because someone doesn't say things exactly the way we do, it doesn't mean that they don't believe what we believe. And if we can learn how to do that, within limits, of course, but if we can learn how to do that, it will help us focus our attention on the more important things of life. And I think once again we just sort of face what Paul said in I Corinthians 13, We know part, so don't take it so seriously. Now that's my paraphrase, okay? We know in part, so don't get puffed up by your knowledge, because the most you know is, only a little bit. And that would be true of every proposition. No proposition we make is, as it were, sacred or indisputable or unrefinable. They're all refinable. Every proposition that's not just a straight quote from the Bible is refinable, and it's not a quote from the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, it's refinable as we know because translations even change over time.

Student: Wow, Richard, it seems like doing systematic theology requires just a ton of humility, and it reminds me of Christ's prayer, his priestly prayer in John 17. He prays for unity in the midst of him knowing full well that we're just going to be a bunch of boneheads sometimes and argue about these things.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, the truth is important to Jesus. In John 17, he says, "Sanctify them by the truth; your Word is truth." But then practically in the same breath he goes on to say make them one, Father, as you and I are one, so that the world may know that you sent me. And even there, we can see a balance between a concern with precision and truth, propositions, and the love we're supposed to have and the unity we're supposed to have with each other. It's not by the truths that we proclaim that the world would

know that Jesus was sent. Not according to that passage. It's by the love we have for each other, and that involves give and take on propositions at times.

Question 14:
What perspectives on propositions are most beneficial for Christian living?

Student: Richard, at the end of this lesson, you talk about the impact of propositions on Christian living. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Dr. Pratt: It's one of the worst things, one of the worst results, of people entering into the study of systematic theology, and it is this reduction of the Bible and then eventually the Christian life to propositions — statements, I believe, I believe, I believe. And what it tends to do is something that's almost predictable. Especially if a person has come to the Christian faith from outside the church, they've usually not been very indoctrinated, and they don't have very many beliefs that are set up for them already, categories and statements, this or that's true, that's true, that's true. And then they start studying systematic theology and they become overwhelmed by how many things they're supposed to affirm as true. So as they're trying to plod their ways through these reams and reams and reams of propositions that they get out of typical systematic theology, their eyes are turned away from what used to be very important to them. What used to be important to them was that relational dimension, that existential dimension of their relationship with Christ, and now they're pulled into something that's good, which is the truths of the matter, but pulled too much. Have you ever seen that?

Student: Wow, I've seen that in my own life. As you know, I not too long ago finished my time in seminary, and I thought I had a pretty good grasp on Scripture actually before going to school, and then I showed up and sat through classes where we're discussing, you know, the nuts and bolts of these types of theological questions, and I tell ya, it's a struggle. It's a struggle to focus on these issues and really tear them apart and keep the heart, keep that devotion, keep the love and the excitement about worshiping in the Lord when you're got all these facts floating around in your head. And I know I'm not the only one. I know a lot of my fellow students in the seminary struggled with the same thing.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I did. I certainly did and still do to some degree. You know, we can always feel free to talk about sins in the past, but I'll just go ahead and admit that I can do it now, okay? Not just in the past. I guess, for myself, one of the things that helps me, keeps me from going too far into this propositionalizing of my faith is the realization that even the best propositions that I can come up with or that anyone else has ever come up with that express our faith, falls short of the reality. And when you realize that's the case, that they are, as it were, pointers to something that's beyond themselves. Like the doctrine of the Trinity points beyond itself to God himself, or

when you say Jesus is Savior of the world, that points to Jesus beyond itself. It always reminds me that my faith is not in the ways I formulate these teachings and state these teachings and propositions, but my faith is in the person behind it. And that is something that requires a severe dependence on the Holy Spirit, and it makes it a very spiritual thing rather than just an intellectual sort of thing. Because we can analyze a radio and tear it apart and make all kinds of propositions about it, but there's no person behind it that we're trying to get to. But that's not true in theology. It's always a matter of me facing the Lord Jesus, me facing God the Father, me facing Holy Spirit. And if we depersonalize it and leave those people, those persons I should say, out, then we are missing the mark completely. And that's the only thing that helps me in it; it's just to realize that these propositions are pushing us beyond.

Think about that with you and your wife. Can you propositionalize your wife? Well, sure. Okay. To the point that you maybe are missing the mark of her?

Student: Absolutely. I can think more about the things that she does or certain things about her character, but then actually forget to actually love her in the process.

Dr. Pratt: Right, to love her as opposed to like those qualities that she has, or those statements that you've made. And that I think is kind of the picture here, because we're not commanded to love the propositions, we're commanded to love God. And while propositions are important in that process, they're not the endpoint. The endpoint, the goal, the *telos* of all of this is to love God more and our neighbor as ourselves. And we can end up propositionalizing people out of existence, we can end up propositionalizing God out of existence, and that is a serious problem for Christians when they become students of theology.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles and Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.

Building Systematic Theology

LESSON FOUR

DOCTRINES IN SYSTEMATICS

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Doctrines in Systematics

INTRODUCTION

Maybe you're like me. I grew up in a church where the word "doctrine" was not a very positive word. Doctrines were things that people believed instead of believing in the Bible. So, when I first began to learn that systematic theology focused on this doctrine and that doctrine, I recoiled. Why would any follower of Christ want to learn doctrines instead of the Bible? But in traditional systematic theology, doctrines are not substitutes for the Bible. Rather, they are simply ways to summarize what we sincerely believe the Bible teaches. And as such, sound doctrines have a very important place in Christian theology.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *Building Systematic Theology*. We have entitled this lesson "Doctrines in Systematics" because we will look at the ways constructing a systematic theology involves the formation of doctrines or teachings on many different subjects.

Our lesson will divide into three main parts. We will begin with a general orientation toward doctrines in systematics. What are they? What place do they hold in systematic theology? Second, we will explore the formation of doctrines. How do theologians create their doctrinal discussions? And third, we will explore the values and dangers of doctrines in systematic theology. What advantages and disadvantages do they present to us? Let's begin with a general orientation to our subject.

ORIENTATION

Our orientation toward doctrines in systematics will touch on four issues. First, we will provide a definition of what we mean. Second, we will focus on the legitimacy of creating doctrines. Third, we will turn to the goals of doctrines in systematics. And fourth, we will describe the place doctrines hold in systematic theology. Let's look first at what we mean by doctrines in systematics.

DEFINITION

We'll begin with a simple definition. The term "doctrine" is used in so many ways in theology that it is difficult to come up with a definition that will satisfy everyone. But for our purposes, a doctrine in systematic theology may be defined in this way:

A doctrine is a synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic.

This definition points to three major dimensions of what we will mean in this lesson when we speak of doctrines. First, doctrines concern theological topics; second, they synthesize biblical teachings; and third, they explain biblical teachings.

Let's unpack each dimension of our definition, beginning with the ways doctrinal statements focus on theological topics, then moving to the fact that they synthesize biblical teachings, and then to the fact that they explain the teachings of Scripture.

Topics

We should all realize by now that theology is a vast field of study with countless topics. It is so expansive that it may be compared to the vast stretches of the night sky. The sheer size and complexity of theology often tempts us to deal with it in a haphazard, random manner. Yet, just as astronomers find it helpful to divide the night sky into regions to study it, systematic theologians have found it useful to divide theology into various topics.

We have seen in this series that from the medieval period there has been a strong tendency for systematic theology to divide into five or six main regions: bibliology, which focuses on the Bible; theology proper, which gives attention to God himself; anthropology, a concern with theological perspectives on humanity; soteriology, the topic of salvation; ecclesiology, a focus on the church; and eschatology, the subject of last things. In this lesson, the term "doctrine" includes a statement or explanation related to any of these very broad topics.

But as we know, these and other larger categories of doctrines also divide into smaller and smaller topics. Take for instance, theology proper. One aspect of theology proper is the doctrine of Christology. It covers both the person and work of Christ. And Christ's person divides into both his human and divine natures. And his human nature includes both his body and his soul, and so on and so on.

Every major doctrine in systematic theology divides into smaller and smaller topics. Now for the most part, in this lesson we will tend to use the term "doctrine" to refer to discussions of topics in systematic theology that are fairly substantial in size. But we must remain flexible knowing that any level of theology, no matter how small, involves some measure of doctrinal discussion.

In addition to focusing on theological topics, doctrinal discussions in systematic theology synthesize biblical teachings by relating them to each other.

Synthesis

In an earlier lesson we compared systematics to a tree. A tree grows out of the ground, but it looks very different from the soil out of which it grows. In a similar way, doctrinal discussions in systematics grow out of Scripture, but they also look very

different from the Scriptures.

One of the main reasons doctrines look different from the Bible is that they are synthetic. Rather than focusing on just one passage at a time, doctrines normally express the teachings of many Scriptures.

Let's take a simple example. Consider the doctrinal formulation known as the *Apostles' Creed*. It summarizes some of the most basic doctrines or teachings we affirm as followers of Christ. It is fair to say that it focuses on the topic, "Basic Christian Beliefs." You know how it goes:

> **I believe in God the Father Almighty,**
> **Maker of heaven and earth.**
> **I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,**
> **Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,**
> **Born of the Virgin Mary.**
> **He suffered under Pontius Pilate,**
> **Was crucified, died, and was buried;**
> **He descended into hell.**
> **The third day he rose again from the dead.**
> **He ascended into heaven**
> **And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.**
> **From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.**
> **I believe in the Holy Spirit,**
> **The holy catholic Church,**
> **The communion of saints,**
> **The forgiveness of sins,**
> **The resurrection of the body,**
> **And the life everlasting. Amen.**

Notice how this historical expression of Christian beliefs compares to the Bible. In a word, the creed looks very different from the Bible. Nowhere does Scripture include this exact wording. It doesn't even sum up Christian beliefs with this list of ideas, or gather these various themes together in one place.

Still, the *Apostles' Creed* is biblical because it correctly reflects many different parts of the Bible. Think about the last lines of the creed:

> **I believe in …**
> **The forgiveness of sins,**
> **The resurrection of the body,**
> **And the life everlasting.**

No single verse or set of verses in the Bible contains all of these teachings. Yet, all of these teachings can be found in various places in the Bible. The *Apostles' Creed* synthesizes these beliefs together as a doctrinal summary of what we believe as Christians.

Explanation

A third facet of our definition is that doctrines explain what the Bible teaches about a topic. These explanations can be as simple as collating information into theological propositions, or as involved as an exhaustive defense of a complex theological teaching.

It helps to think of the explanatory quality of doctrinal discussions as falling along a continuum. At one end, we have simple statements of biblical teaching with very little explanation. In the middle range we find those discussions that have moderate levels of explanation. And at the other end of the spectrum, some doctrinal discussions offer extensive explanations. Let's consider an example of a doctrinal statement that says very little about a topic.

The *Apostles' Creed* represents such an extreme as it provides almost no explanations. For example, the only things it says about God the Father is that he is almighty, and that he is the maker of heaven and earth. These qualifications explain a little of what it means to believe in the Father, but they don't say much. The creed says a little more about the Son. But with regard to the Holy Spirit, the *Apostles' Creed* merely says, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," and that "Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit," but nothing more. Quite often doctrines are stated in these simple ways. Such simple statements have many positive uses in the life of the church, but they are not the only way doctrines appear.

Toward the center of the spectrum are discussions of doctrines that include moderate levels of explanation. For example, most Protestant catechisms and confessions handle theological topics in this way.

We have already seen how the *Apostles' Creed* handles the doctrine of the Trinity in just a few lines. But by way of comparison consider how the *Heidelberg Catechism* (written in 1563 — is much more elaborate in its explanation of the Trinity. To begin with, in Question and Answer 23, the *Heidelberg Catechism* actually quotes the entire *Apostles' Creed*. But this quotation of the creed is then followed by 31 additional questions and answers that focus on the Trinity. Take for instance, Question 26. It asks:

> **What do you believe when you say, "I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth"?**

And of course, this is a reference to the opening line of the *Apostles' Creed*. And here is the explanation that follows in answer number 26:

> **That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence, is my God and Father because of Christ his son. I trust him so much that I do not doubt that he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and he will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.**

This explanation of what it means to believe in the Father is much fuller than the single sentence we find in the *Apostles' Creed*.

Now on the other end of the spectrum are those doctrinal discussions that include extensive explanations. Very often these more elaborate explanations also present extensive evidences for theological viewpoints, arguing for this or that point of view.

For the most part, formal writings in systematic theology fall into this category. Thoroughgoing systematic theologies often incorporate everything found in creeds, catechisms and confessions, and then add volumes of explanatory material.

For instance, whereas the *Apostles' Creed* devotes only a few lines to the doctrine of Trinity, and the *Heidelberg Catechism* devotes 31 questions and answers to it, Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology* dedicates four chapters to the doctrine, and these chapters span over 200 pages. Extensive explanations of doctrines are characteristic of formal systematic theologies.

So, as we approach the subject of doctrines in systematic theology, we need to realize that we are dealing with various levels of explanation; doctrines explain biblical teachings on theological topics to different degrees.

Now that we have seen what we mean when we speak of doctrines in systematic theology, we should turn to the second concern of our orientation to this topic. How can we justify creating doctrines? Why do theologians think it is legitimate to synthesize and explain biblical teachings in these ways?

LEGITIMACY

These are important questions because so many Christian churches resist affirming doctrines. Maybe you've heard the slogans, "No creed but Christ." "We want no doctrine but the Bible." Now, we can appreciate the motives behind these sentiments because they usually reflect a very high view of Scripture. So, why can't systematic theologians just leave the teachings of the Bible as they are? Why do they divide the teachings of Scripture into topics, and synthesize and explain what the Scriptures say about those topics?

One of the most compelling cases in favor of creating doctrines is that biblical figures model this practice for us. We will touch on just two examples of biblical figures discussing doctrines. First, we'll look at the example of Jesus, and second, at the example of the apostle Paul. Let's look first at a time when Jesus gave us a topical syntheses and explanation of biblical teachings.

Jesus

For example, consider the time when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment. Listen to these words from Matthew 22:35-40:

> **One of [the Pharisees], an expert in the law, tested [Jesus] with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:35-40).**

As we will see, what Jesus did here has all the elements of our definition of a theological doctrine.

First, this passage focuses on a theological topic. A Pharisee approached Jesus with a question. "Lord, what is the greatest commandment?" This question rose out of the ways theologians in Jesus' day had mapped their theological concerns. There is no Old Testament book, chapter, paragraph, or even a verse that directly addresses this question. So, in effect, the Pharisee raised a theological topic that was very similar to the kinds of topics we find in systematic theology.

Second, Jesus responded by synthesizing two biblical passages. He did not simply quote a single biblical passage and leave it at that. Instead, he brought together two verses from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. On the one hand, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 when he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." And he quoted Leviticus 19:18 when he said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Like systematic theologians, Jesus synthesized various biblical passages into a doctrinal discussion about the greatest commandment.

Third, Jesus gave an explanation of his viewpoints on this topic. He explained the priorities of these commandments when he said, "This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it." And finally, Jesus explained the importance of the commands with his closing theological comment, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Jesus' example affirms the legitimacy of forming doctrines in systematic theology. Had Jesus felt negatively about doctrines, he might have asked the Pharisee, "Why are you trying to come up with doctrines? You should be satisfied with what the Scriptures say." But instead, Jesus engaged in a doctrinal discussion.

Having seen one of the many times when Jesus engaged in doctrines, we should see that the apostle Paul did the same thing.

Paul

Paul wrote many letters to Christians throughout the Mediterranean world, and he primarily addressed practical, pastoral issues. But he frequently approached these pastoral issues by giving attention to theological doctrines.

Let's look at the way Paul did this in one portion of the book of Romans. As he dealt with the pastoral issue of conflicts between Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome, Paul created a rather elaborate doctrinal presentation. One well-known example appears in Romans 4:1-25.

Now there are countless things that could be said about this passage, but we will

simply point out how this passage reflects the three elements of our definition of theological doctrines. It concentrates on a topic, it synthesizes many biblical passages and it explains them. In the first place, Paul focused on a topic: Justification by faith in the Old Testament.

Romans 4 is introduced by a question at the end of the prior chapter. Listen to this question from Romans 3:31:

Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? (Romans 3:31).

This question set the stage for Paul to express his views on the topic of Romans 4 — justification by faith in the Old Testament. There is no Old Testament book, chapter, paragraph or even verse that directly explains this issue. Rather, it was a theological topic of interest to Paul.

In addition to being a theological topic, Romans 4:1-25 fits our definition of a doctrinal discussion because Paul addressed this issue by synthesizing the teachings of a number of biblical passages. A quick glance at this chapter reveals that he appealed to the Old Testament no less than seven times.

In verse 3, Paul quoted Genesis 15:6. In verse 6, Paul appealed to Psalm 32: 1- 2. In verse 10, he compared Genesis 15 and 17. In verses 16 and 17, Paul quoted Genesis 17:5. In verse 18, he quoted Genesis 15:5. In verse 19, the apostle alluded to Genesis 17:17 and 18:11. And finally, in verses 23-24, Paul quoted Genesis 15:6 once again. Simply noting that Paul referred this many times to verses from the Old Testament shows us that he was synthesizing biblical passages to construct his doctrine.

In the third place, as our definition of doctrinal discussions suggests, Paul explained his viewpoints on this subject. His overall doctrinal assertion was that justification by faith is confirmed by Old Testament law. He explained his view in a number of ways. First, Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham's faith was "credited" to him as righteousness, and Paul explained that something "credited" is not earned by good works. Paul also explained that David confirmed this idea by using the term "credited" in the same way in Psalm 32:1-2. The apostle went on to show that justification was by faith apart from the law because Abraham was counted righteous in Genesis 15 before he was circumcised in Genesis 17.

Further, Paul made the point that in Genesis 17:5 Abraham was promised that he would be the father of Jews and Gentiles, those who had the law and those who did not. In fact, as he pointed out Genesis 15:5 indicates that Abraham's only hope was to have faith in God's promise because he had no child. And as Genesis 17:17 and 18:11 show, faith was continually required of Abraham because both he and his wife were too old to have children by normal means.

Finally, Paul concluded that Genesis 15:6 is more than a mere historical statement about Abraham; it is a lesson about the centrality of faith for Christian believers. In short, we see that, like Jesus, Paul involved himself in doctrinal discussions. He synthesized and explained biblical teachings on theological topics.

In addition to understanding our definition of a doctrine and the legitimacy of doctrinal discussions, it's very important that we also grasp the goals of doctrines in systematics.

GOALS

To understand how systematicians form their doctrines, it is essential to see that two goals govern doctrinal discussions. On the one hand, doctrines are shaped by a positive goal of establishing true teachings — what followers of Christ ought to believe. But on the other hand, they are also shaped by a negative goal of opposing false doctrines. Both of these goals deeply influence the character of doctrines in systematics. So, let's take a look at both of them, beginning first with the positive goal of forming true doctrines.

Positive

As we've seen sound systematic theologians have a keen desire to follow the teachings of Scripture. A concern for expressing the truth leads systematicians to follow the Scriptures as the supreme judge of truth. But there is a problem that systematicians face. The Bible presents so many interconnected teachings on so many topics that systematicians would be overwhelmed if they only had the Bible to guide them.

Consider, for instance, how much the Bible teaches about Christology, the doctrine of Christ. In many respects, the entire Bible talks about Christ either directly or indirectly. It represents a vast storehouse of information about him. And if systematicians were to try to say every true thing the Bible says about the doctrine of Christ, they would never be able to put down their pens.

How then do systematicians determine what portions of the Bible they will include or exclude?

The positive direction of systematics is guided not only by the Scriptures, but also by traditional Christian emphases and priorities. In many respects, systematicians determine which issues to address by looking at what faithful Christians have done in the past. The efforts of individual leading theologians, creeds, confessions and the like have a major effect on the shape of doctrinal discussions in systematic theology.

Negative

Now as important as the positive goal of systematics may be for shaping doctrines, systematicians also determine the content and emphases of their doctrines according to a negative goal. By this we mean that one of the main purposes of doctrinal discussions has been to counter false teachings.

This negative goal also derives from Scripture. In fact, a great portion of the Bible is devoted to opposing false teaching. The theology of Scripture is constantly two-sided, giving attention both to positive presentations of doctrines, and to negative opposition to false teaching. So, when systematicians pick and choose what they will include or exclude, emphasize or marginalize, many of their decisions are influenced by a desire to correct false doctrines.

In addition to opposing falsehoods because Scriptures do, systematicians also adopt this negative goal because they seek to follow traditional Christian emphases and

priorities.

It would be very difficult to overemphasize this side of doctrinal formulations in systematics. For example, think about what the *Creed of Chalcedon* written in 451 said about the person and natures of Christ. It reads this way:

> **[Christ is] truly God and truly man … recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons.**

Now in one sense this statement is guided by the positive goal of being true to Scripture and to expressing what faithful Christians had already believed. That is clear enough. But look again at what the Creed says about Christ. Of all the things that could be said about Christ, why did Chalcedon go into specifics of how the two natures maintain their divine and human attributes? Why did it say that these natures are not confused, that they do not change, that they cannot be divided, that they cannot be separated? Why did it stress that Christ's two natures are united in one person? These issues are not emphasized in Scripture. But this is precisely why the creed had to deal with them.

In fact, the particular emphases of Chalcedon developed largely in response to false teachings about Christ that had risen in the early centuries of Christianity. Some of these false teachings denied the full humanity of Christ, others denied his full divinity, and still others denied that he was only one person.

And in much the same way, many doctrinal discussions in formal systematic theologies adopt this kind of negative agenda. For example, when Charles Hodge discussed the doctrine of the knowledge of God in volume 1, chapter 4 of his *Systematic Theology*, he began with a short paragraph in which he explained positively that:

> **It is the clear doctrine of the Scriptures that God can be known.**

But immediately following this initial affirmation, Hodge discussed in lengthy paragraphs three false concepts of what it means to know God. In opposition to other teachings, he first said:

> **This does not mean that we can know all that is true concerning God.**

Then he went on to address another false teaching by saying:

> **[We should not believe] that we can form a mental image of God.**

And third, he wrote:

> **[We should not believe] that [God] can be comprehended (or known exhaustively).**

Following these negative rebuttals of false views, Hodge returned to explaining positively the ways God can be known. What Hodge did here is very typical of systematic theology.

So, we see that the goals of doctrinal discussions are shaped by at least two main desires: the desire to express the truth, but also the desire to counter falsehood.

Now that we have a basic definition of doctrines in systematics and we have seen the legitimacy and goals of doctrinal discussions, we should turn to the third aspect of our orientation: The place of doctrines in the entire program of systematic theology.

PLACE

In previous lessons, we have seen that from the medieval period theology was built with four basic steps: the formation of carefully defined technical terms, the creation of propositions, then the formation of doctrines, and finally, a comprehensive system of beliefs.

Now we always have to remember that it is somewhat artificial to speak of these concerns as steps in building theology. Systematicians actually involve themselves in all of these steps all of the time. But it helps to think of the process of building systematic theology as moving from the simplest to the most complex. At the lowest level, theological technical terms comprise the most basic building blocks of systematic theology. Without carefully defined terminology, it would be very difficult to construct sound systematic theology. The second step is the formation of propositions. If we think of technical terms as the basic building blocks of systematics, then we may think of propositions as rows of blocks that use and explain technical terms. And we may describe doctrines as rows of propositions that form portions of walls or whole walls. And finally, the system of theology represents the ways theologians build an entire building out of doctrinal statements. So we see that just as walls are essential to a building, doctrines hold an essential place in the construction of systematic theology.

Now that we have a general orientation toward doctrines in systematics, we should move to our second major topic: The formation of doctrines. How do systematicians create the doctrinal discussions that are so vital to their project?

FORMATION

When students first begin to study systematic theology they often have the false impression that doctrines result from little more than piecing together propositional truths from Scripture. To the novice the entire project often appears to be very simple. But the processes that go into forming doctrines in formal systematic theology are actually quite complex. In fact, they involve so many different factors that a thorough analysis is impossible. Yet we can still gain some insights into the ways doctrines are normally formed in systematic theology.

To understand the processes that go into forming doctrines in systematics, we'll look into two topics: First we'll see the ways systematicians develop biblical support for their views. And second, we'll explore how systematicians employ logic to explain and

support their doctrines. Let's look first at biblical support for doctrines.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT

Now, it is always important to remember that systematicians often build their cases philosophically and historically. Who believed what, and when did they believe these things? Were they right or were they wrong? These kinds of concerns can be very significant at times, especially as systematicians deal with the history of doctrines and try to identify falsehoods that opposed their views. But by and large, the most critical way systematic theologians support their doctrinal discussions is by seeking the support of Scripture.

We will examine biblical support in doctrinal discussions in two ways. First, we will describe the basic process systematicians follow as they garner biblical support for their outlooks. And second, we will see an example of this process in systematic theology. Let's consider first the basic process that systematicians follow as they build their case from Scripture.

Process

In earlier lessons, we have seen that systematicians begin to handle the Scriptures by subjecting them to factual reduction. They look for the theological facts that biblical passages teach. And as we have also seen they collate these facts into theological propositions. But as systematic theologians move toward forming doctrines, they go beyond these basic processes toward large-scale synthesis and explanation.

When we speak of large-scale synthesis and explanation, we have in mind the fact that systematic theologians continue the process of collating different aspects of biblical teachings. They use theological propositions to create larger, more complex theological syntheses. They form layers upon layers of biblical teachings until they have finished their discussion of a theological topic. In effect, doctrinal discussions consist of layers of syntheses and explanations of increasingly larger and more complex theological ideas.

With these basic processes in mind, we should look at an example.

Example

By way of illustration, we will look at Berkhof's discussion of "Objections to the theory of Perfectionism," found in part 4, chapter 10 of his *Systematic Theology*. Perfectionism is the belief of some Christians that we can be entirely free of sin in this life, and in this section Berkhof gathered biblical support for the negative goal of opposing this false view. In Berkhof's presentation, he first claimed that:

> **In the light of Scripture the doctrine of Perfectionism is absolutely untenable.**

He then sought to prove his viewpoint in three lengthy paragraphs, each of which makes one basic claim. The first paragraph says:

> **The Bible gives … assurance that there is no one on earth who does not sin.**

The second paragraph begins with this claim:

> **According to the Scripture there is a constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit in the lives of God's children, and even the best of them are still striving for perfection.**

And his third paragraph begins:

> **Confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness are continually required [in Scripture].**

Berkhof's presentation isn't difficult to understand. He argued that perfectionism is against the Scriptures because the Scriptures teach that everyone on earth sins, that all believers struggle with sin, and that everyone must confess and seek forgiveness.

Now, while Berkhof's position can be understood in the order in which he presented it on paper, we want to work backwards to see how he garnered biblical support for his presentation.

Berkhof either quoted or referred to nineteen biblical passages. After gathering these verses into three groups Berkhof formed propositions that he derived from these texts. In the first paragraph, he simply listed the first six biblical references and concluded:

> **The Bible gives us assurance that there is no one on earth who does not sin.**

In the second paragraph, Berkhof summarized each verse separately with a simple theological proposition. Referring to Romans 7:7-26 Berkhof wrote:

> **Paul gives a very striking description of this struggle … which certainly refers to him in his regenerate state.**

Referring to Galatians 5:16-24 he wrote that:

> **[Paul] speaks of … a struggle that characterizes all the children of God.**

Referring to Philippians 3:10-14 he said that:

> **[Paul] speaks of himself, practically at the end of his career, as one who has not yet reached perfection.**

After forming these propositions from Scripture, he took his three propositions and synthesized them into one broader truth. As he put it:

> **According to the Scripture there is a constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit in the lives of God's children, and even the best of them are still striving for perfection.**

In the third paragraph, Berkhof continued to summarize verses with simple propositions. First, he referred to Matthew 6:12-13, writing these words

> **Jesus taught all His disciples … to pray for the forgiveness of sins.**

Then he simply quoted 1 John 1:9 implying that it repeated the same theme.

Next, Berkhof referred to verses from Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Daniel and Romans that repeat examples of holy men praying for forgiveness, and on the basis of these verses he formed this proposition:

> **Bible saints are constantly represented as confessing their sins.**

After forming these propositions from Scripture, he synthesized his two more basic theological propositions into a higher claim that:

> **Confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness are continually required in Scripture.**

So, we see that Berkhof developed three main biblical claims in his discussion of the doctrine of Perfectionism — one in each paragraph — through ever larger and more complex layers of synthesis and explanation. In the first paragraph, he asserted "The Bible gives … assurance that there is no one on earth who does not sin." In the second paragraph, he asserted "According to the Scripture there is a constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit in the lives of God's children, and even the best of them are still striving for perfection." And in the third paragraph, he asserted "Confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness are continually required [in Scripture]."

Then to complete this doctrinal discussion of Perfectionism, Berkhof brought these three assertions to an even higher level of synthesis. He concluded:

> **In the light of Scripture the doctrine of Perfectionism is absolutely untenable.**

Now, the writings of systematic theologians are not always as explicit and straightforward as this example may suggest. But what we have seen here is characteristic of the ways systematicians find biblical support for their doctrines. They reduce Scriptures to facts, they collate those facts to develop theological propositions, and they synthesize those propositions into higher and more complex levels of theological claims. This is the basic process followed every time systematicians gather biblical support for their doctrines.

Now that we have seen how systematicians find biblical support for their doctrines, we should turn to the ways they find logical support for their views.

LOGICAL SUPPORT

Although systematicians employ logic at every step in the process of building systematic theology, logic is especially important as they form their doctrines.

It will be helpful to touch on three basic aspects of logical support for doctrinal discussions. First, we will look at the authority of logic. How much authority does systematic theology acknowledge for logic? Second, we will see how systematicians establish logical support by drawing out the deductive implications of Scripture — how they logically deduce outlooks from the Bible. And third, we will turn to the levels of certainty that inductive logic offers to doctrinal discussions. How much confidence can we have in the inductive logical explorations that are so vital to establishing doctrines? Let's think first of the authority of logic.

Authority

In earlier lessons in this series, we saw that as Christian faith moved from its roots in Jewish culture and spread throughout the Mediterranean world, Christian theologians gave much more attention to Hellenistic ways of thinking.

In the patristic period, interaction with neo-Platonism heightened interest in logical analysis for Christian theology. But the early Christian fathers typically circumscribed their rational reflection with acknowledgments that the higher truths of Christian faith could be grasped only through mystical enlightenment that went far beyond the limits of logical analysis.

During the medieval period, Christian scholastics ascribed much higher authority to reason or logic. As scholastics applied Aristotle's views on logic to theology, theological discussions became largely rational enterprises. Against the protests of Christian mystics, scholastics applied reason to all aspects of Christian faith as much as they possibly could. In many cases, rational analysis became so highly prized in scholasticism that appeals to logic took precedence over appeals to Scripture.

Protestant theologians countered this tendency of medieval rationalism with their doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Protestants called for the church to commit itself to absolute biblical authority, even biblical authority over human reason. Although there have always been variations among Protestants on this issue, in very general terms, Protestants have believed two truths about logic.

On the one hand, Protestants have realized that the capacity to reason logically is a valuable ability. It is a gift from God, and it must be employed with enthusiasm as we build theology. But on the other hand, the capacity to reason logically is still a limited ability that must be exercised in submission to God's revelation in Scripture.

One important example of this twofold outlook on logic can be seen in the ways sound systematicians employ the law of non-contradiction. They value the principle of

non-contradiction highly, but also realize its limitations.

The law of non-contradiction is one of the first principles or laws of logic championed by Aristotle and affirmed in one way or another by the vast majority of Christian theologians. This principle can be stated in many ways, but for our purposes here it may be summarized in this way: "Nothing can be both true and not true at the same time and in the same sense." For example, in every day life we might say that an animal cannot be a dog and not be a dog at the same time and in the same sense. Or in theology, we might say that Jesus cannot be the Savior and not the Savior at the same time and in the same sense.

Now, just as sound Protestant theologians have looked at logic in general in two ways, they have also looked at the principle of non-contradiction in two ways. On the one hand, the principle of non-contradiction is highly valued in systematic theology. It is God's gift to us. It gives us the ability to apply careful reasoning to theological matters, making it possible to distinguish truth from falsehood.

Yet, through the millennia faithful Protestant theologians have also held another outlook. As with all of our reasoning abilities, the law of non-contradiction is limited as we use it to explore the Scriptures. It must be used in submission to the Bible.

The submission of the principle of non-contradiction to Scripture is important because at times, the Scriptures seem to contradict themselves. They seem to claim things that are logically incompatible. What do systematicians do when this is the case? How do they handle apparent contradictions as they seek to synthesize biblical teachings, logically?

In general, systematicians respond to such apparent contradictions in the Bible by emphasizing one of two factors: our fallibility and our finitude. On the one hand, the Scriptures often appear to be contradictory because we are fallible. In other words, sin has corrupted our thinking so that we fall into errors. Because we are fallible, we sometimes misread the Bible, imagining contradictions where none actually exist.

Now, we all know from ordinary conversations that when people seem to contradict themselves, a few questions and a little sympathetic listening can often clear up matters. Well, the same kind of thing is true with Scripture. At times, the Scriptures may appear to be contradictory, but further exploration will clear up matters. For instance, consider Proverbs 26:4-5:

> **Do not answer a fool according to his folly,**
> **or you will be like him yourself.**
> **Answer a fool according to his folly,**
> **or he will be wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 26:4-5).**

Through the centuries, many skeptics have argued that these verses are contradictory. Verse 4 tells us not to answer the fool according to his folly and verse 5 tells us to answer the fool according to his folly. But the truth is that these two verses do not use the expression "answer a fool according to his folly" in the same sense. Instead, each verse simply tells us when to do one and when to do the other. With a bit of careful reflection, we can see that while passages like this one may look contradictory, they are not.

This example illustrates why systematicians work so hard to harmonize the teachings of Scripture. They approach the Scriptures with the expectation that they are

logically compatible because they come from God who does not lie. Besides this, systematicians know from experience that when the law of non-contradiction is carefully applied to Scriptures, apparent contradictions often disappear.

Now as important as it is to remember that Scriptures sometimes seem contradictory because we have misunderstood them, many times they seem this way because we are finite. They seem logically incompatible because we simply cannot comprehend them fully.

Remember, our infinite God is incomprehensible. So, when he reveals himself to finite creatures, his statements sometimes appear contradictory to us. But this is not because God or the Scriptures actually contradict themselves. Rather, it is because we are so finite that we simply cannot understand how they are compatible. So, when careful study of Scripture is unable to discern the logical compatibility of various teachings in the Bible, sound systematicians do not reject the Scriptures. Instead, they assume that the Scriptures are true, and that they simply cannot understand the solution to the apparent contradictions.

Let's see how this outlook works on a doctrinal level with two traditional doctrines: the doctrine of divine transcendence and the doctrine of divine immanence. Divine transcendence refers to the biblical teaching that God is above all the limitations of the created universe, including above space and time. Divine immanence refers to the biblical teaching that God is thoroughly involved in space and time, engaged in the details of the created universe. Now, if it were not for the fact that the Bible speaks of both of these truths about God, many of us might be inclined to think that these concepts are contradictory. After all, transcendence is typically thought of as being the opposite of immanence. Not surprisingly, various theologians have attempted to resolve this logical tension in different ways.

Some Christian traditions tend to fall into fatalism. They so emphasized the transcendence of God that his immanence is severely minimized. For instance, some Christians talk this way. "Because God is so far above space and time, he does not really respond to prayer." In other words, these Christians believe that God is unresponsive to historical events — that he does not actually react to prayer or to anything else for that matter.

Other Christian groups, adhering to forms of Open Theism, have tried to resolve the logical tension between transcendence and immanence by stressing God's immanence to the point that God is no longer considered truly transcendent. Maybe you've heard some of these Christians talk in this way. "Because God responds to prayer, he must be limited in space and time like we are."

Now it isn't difficult to understand why Christians would go in these directions. Absolute transcendence and absolute immanence seem to be contradictory. And one way to resolve this tension is to affirm one so strongly that we nearly deny the other.

But it is precisely here that we have to remember that the Scriptures are our supreme authority. As much as we may want to think otherwise, there is very strong evidence in Scripture that God is both transcendent and immanent. In relation to prayer, a compelling case can be made from Scripture that God is absolutely above such events. But a compelling case can also be made from Scripture that God listens to and responds to prayer. Despite the logical tension that this creates for our finite minds, we must accept both as true. And if we are unable to reconcile ideas like these, we must attribute this

inability to our limitations.

So, as we explore how systematicians seek logical support for their doctrinal viewpoints, we must recognize on the one hand that logic is an important valuable ability for systematics. On the other hand, if careful biblical exegesis makes it clear that at certain points the Scriptures are beyond logical analysis, we must still recall that our logic is very limited. The authority of the Bible always trumps the authority of logic.

As important as it is to remember the limited authority of logic in systematics, it is also vital to see that logic enables systematicians to deduce many implications from biblical passages.

Deductive Implications

When systematicians handle Scripture they are not merely interested in making a list of the explicit teachings of the Bible. They are just as interested in drawing out its implicit teachings.

The Bible explicitly and plainly addresses many issues. But at the same time, it does not explicitly address every facet of every teaching. Consequently, as systematicians handle Scripture they often face the need to fill in the gaps between the explicit teachings of Scripture. And they also face the need to deduce the assumptions underlying the explicit teachings of Scripture. One of the most important values of logic in systematic theology is the ability it gives us to discern the implicit teachings of Scripture through deductive logic.

The term "deductive logic" refers to a form of logical reasoning that may be defined in this way:

> **Deduction is a way of reasoning from premises to necessary conclusions.**

We speak of the conclusions of deductive reasoning as "necessary" because they are unquestionably true so long as their premises are true. We simply take the implicit ideas contained in the premises of an argument, and make them explicit in the conclusion. In the case of systematic theology, once systematicians have settled judgments that the Scriptures teach this or that premise, they can deduce many necessary implications from the Scriptures.

Take this simple example — we discover in Scripture this premise: "If a person believes in Christ, then that person will be saved." Then we discover in Scripture this premise: "John the Baptist believed in Christ." If both of these premises are true, then it is logically necessary to conclude that "John the Baptist will be saved." To deduce this conclusion is not to add a thing to the teaching of Scripture. It is simply to state clearly what is already implied.

Consider this second example — suppose systematicians establish that the Scriptures teach this proposition: "If Christ is resurrected, then he is Lord." In other words, the Scriptures teach that the resurrection of Christ would be sufficient proof that he is Lord. This proposition could be established by sound exegesis of a number of biblical passages. Second, suppose systematicians see in Scripture that: "Christ is

resurrected." This proposition could also be established by referring to any number of passages. But with these two propositions established, systematic theologians can move to a conclusion: "Therefore, Christ is Lord." Premise One: If Christ is resurrected, then he is Lord. Premise two: Christ is resurrected. Conclusion: "Therefore, Christ is Lord." The conclusion of this syllogism is logically certain. So long as the premises of deductive arguments are certain, then the conclusion is certain.

Now, in actual theological discussions, deductive arguments are seldom set forth plainly. They lie beneath the surface of what is said, because theologians often assume that their arguments are so obvious that they do not need to be explained. For example, it would be very common for a systematician to form a premise by referring to John 14:6 where Jesus said these words:

> **No one comes to the father except through me (John 14:6).**

And then they could conclude on the basis of this verse, that "Faith in Christ is the only way of salvation."

In most cases, a systematician would be right to assume that this summation of the argument is more than adequate. But we must realize that the argument is actually more complex, and that sometimes these complexities need to be expressed.

In real systematic theologies, theologians present only those premises they believe offer the most helpful and most compelling support for their beliefs. Sometimes deduction is abbreviated because so much is assumed, but other times the deductions are spelled out in much more detail.

In all events, deducing the logical implications of biblical teachings is one of the chief ways systematicians build theological doctrines. As they synthesize layers and layers of biblical information, a major part of that process is deducing implications of what they have found in the Scriptures.

As we have seen, systematic theologians apply deductive logic when they form doctrines. And when their premises are true, their deductive conclusions are absolutely certain. But to one degree or another, systematicians also apply inductive logic. And the question that we face at this point is this: What kinds of logical certainty does inductive logic bring to systematic theology?

Inductive Certainty

Although inductive logic can be defined in a number of ways, it will suffice for us to put it this way:

> **Inductive logic is a way of reasoning from particular facts to probable conclusions.**

In the case of systematic theology, the primary facts that come into focus are the facts of Scripture – how the Scriptures teach this or that. And from these particular biblical facts, systematicians infer probable conclusions.

To explore how induction works in systematic theology, we will touch on three

issues: first, types of induction; second, the inductive gap; and third, the implications of induction for systematic theology. Let's look first at the types of induction.

Types. In many respects, induction proceeds in two ways we have seen before. On the one side, we may speak of repetitive induction, those times when we draw conclusions from particular facts that repeat the same truth over and over. And on the other hand, we may speak of compositional induction, those times when we draw conclusions from particular facts that come together to form compound truths.

Think about this example of repetitive induction from outside the Bible. Imagine that I see one goose and it is white, then I see another goose and it is white, another goose and it is white, and another goose and it is white. After having this experience a million times, I would normally feel satisfied with concluding, "All geese are white."

Now think of this example of compositional induction, those times when we reason from particular facts to a compound conclusion. We do this all the time in everyday life. Imagine that I walk up to my house and notice the door is ajar. Then I look in and I see furniture has been moved. I look further into the house and I see a stranger carrying my television out the back door. What might I conclude? In all likelihood I would piece together all this information and feel very confident that "I am being robbed." This is a form of compositional induction, bringing all kinds of information together into one compound conclusion.

As systematic theologians deal with Scriptures, they perform both kinds of induction. On the one side, they deal with repetitive induction, where they find the same themes repeated again and again in the Bible to the point that they conclude that something is always true. On the other side, they form compositional induction, where they find this fact and that fact in the Bible that forms compound conclusions. Both forms of induction are essential to the processes of systematic theology.

With these two processes of induction in mind, let's turn to the inductive gap as a second important aspect of inductive logic.

Inductive Gap. It's important to realize that in inductive arguments, conclusions often add information that is not contained in the premises. They often go beyond the premises. As a result, there is some distance between what we observe and what we conclude. Logicians often use the phrase "the inductive gap" to refer to this distance between what we know and what we conclude in an inductive argument.

Think about the examples we have just mentioned. First, the example of repetitive induction. If we observe one goose and say "This goose is white." And then we see another and say, "It is white." And we do this a million times; we might feel safe in concluding that all geese are white. But there is a big difference between knowing that one million geese are white and claiming that all geese are white. The conclusion that all geese are white may be very probable, but it is not utterly certain. There is an inductive gap between our observations and our conclusion.

So, what allows us to draw the conclusion that all geese are white when we know it is beyond what we have observed? In a word, we draw upon other things we know. We draw from many other experiences and what we might call common sense — what makes sense from our general world view. We say to ourselves, "Looking at a million geese is enough to prove my point."

The same kind of thing is true of compositional induction. Remember how I concluded that my house was being robbed? I saw the open door, moved furniture, and a man carrying my television away. These observations led me to a reasonable or probable conclusion that I was being robbed. But this conclusion was not utterly sure. It was only probable. After all, the man might have been a television repairman. He might have been in the wrong house. Any number of other factors may have shown that my conclusion was wrong. Once again, we face the inductive gap.

What then made me able to conclude that I was being robbed? What enabled me to bridge the inductive gap? I just assumed from past experience and general cultural influences that no one would be in my house doing those things unless he was robbing me.

Remembering the inductive gap is important because as systematic theologians build their doctrines, they have to face the limits of the inductive gap. As they cull through the Scriptures and the theological propositions they have derived from Scripture, systematicians are deeply involved in inductive logic. And as we have seen, this means that their conclusions are not utterly certain. They may be very likely, or even settled judgments but not utterly certain in every detail because they are based on induction. To one degree or another, systematicians always face the inductive gap.

Unfortunately, systematicians sometimes forget that their doctrinal conclusions are based on induction and that they face the inductive gap. So, they often make claims that go far beyond what they have proven. Consider again the example of Berkhof's "Objections to the theory of Perfectionism" found in part 4, 10 of his *Systematic Theology*. At one point in his discussion, Berkhof refers to a number of holy men in the Bible. Job in Job 9:3 and 20; the psalmist in Psalms 32:5; 130:3; and 143:2; and the sage in Proverbs 20:9; Isaiah in Isaiah 64:6; Daniel in Daniel 9:16; and Paul in Romans 7:14. On the basis of these examples, Berkhof concluded that:

> **Bible saints are constantly represented as confessing their sins [in Scripture].**

Now, as much as we may believe this conclusion to be true — and I think that other considerations show that it is very likely — Berkhof's conclusion faces the problem of the inductive gap. Berkhof overstated the evidence he set forth when he concluded that saints are *constantly* represented as confessing their sins. He showed only nine times that this happened. Nine examples cannot prove that the Bible constantly represents saints as confessing their sins. All it would take to disprove this claim is one example of a biblical believer who did not struggle in this way. The only absolutely certain conclusion to draw, assuming that Berkhof had rightly interpreted each passage is this: "The Bible saints are sometimes represented as confessing their sins [in Scripture]."

Why then did Berkhof feel comfortable drawing the conclusion that "saints are constantly represented as confessing"? How did he bridge the inductive gap from his scant evidence to his grand conclusion? The answer is simple: he bridged the inductive gap as we do in ordinary life with information from his broader Christian outlook. He was satisfied with his conclusion because it coordinated with so many other things he believed and things he assumed his readers would believe. But we should all recognize that his conclusion went far beyond the evidence he presented.

Now we are ready to turn to a third issue related to inductive certainty. What are the implications of the inductive processes that are so essential to doctrines in systematic theology?

Implications. There are at least two things to learn from what we have seen: first, we need to narrow the inductive gap and second, we need to remember the inductive gap.

In the first place, it is the responsibility of every believer to work as hard as possible to narrow the inductive gap so that we can have as much certainty as possible in our conclusions. As we work our way through theological discussions in systematic theology, it is often the case that we need to make as strong a case as possible for a point of view. To do this, we need to narrow the distance between our evidence and our conclusions.

One way to do this is to collect more biblical evidence that points to the same conclusion. The more evidence there is, the more likely it is that our conclusion is true. For instance, Berkhof's conclusion that "Bible saints are constantly represented as confessing their sins [in Scripture]" reflects a large gap because he only cited nine examples. But had he cited one hundred examples, his conclusion would have been much stronger. Had he taken the time to give 1000 examples, his conclusion would have been even more certain, even though it may have bordered on overkill. Now, finding this many examples may not have been practical but it would have made his conclusion much more logically certain and compelling.

As we involve ourselves with inductive logic in doctrinal discussions, it is always important to ask of ourselves and of others: Have enough evidences been brought forward to prove the likelihood of a point of view? Often, we will find that there is a need for more inductive evidence to narrow the inductive gap.

A second practical implication of what we have seen is this: we must always remember that we cannot utterly escape the inductive gap. As a result, it is often wise simply to acknowledge that certain theological conclusions are less likely or more likely than others.

As we've seen in other lessons, it is helpful to think of doctrinal conclusions in terms of a cone of certainty. There are a few beliefs that we hold with great confidence, and these rise to the top of the cone. We have a lesser degree of certainty regarding other beliefs, and so we place these lower in the cone. And finally, there are many beliefs we hold with little certainty, and these occupy the bottom of the cone. As we think about the certainty of our inductive conclusions, it helps to consider them in accordance with this model.

Specifically, we can be more confident of some beliefs because the inductive evidence is strong and the inductive gap is relatively small. So, these beliefs rise to the top of the cone. These doctrines become settled judgments in our system of belief. But the inductive evidence for other beliefs is not so strong, so that the inductive gap is much more significant, leaving us with less logical certainty about them. As a result, it is very helpful to realize that doctrinal discussions in systematic theology often come down to which view is more likely to be the biblical point of view, which is more comprehensive in its representation of the Bible.

For instance, in eschatology we may be very confident from the teachings of Scripture that Jesus will return in glory. The inductive evidence for this belief is so strong that it should not be doubted. It should be at the top of our cone of certainty. But the

evidence is much weaker for particular scenarios that Christians have developed as they discuss when and how Jesus will return. So, these conclusions should be much lower in our cone of certainty. We can and should affirm Christ's return with great confidence. But we go far beyond the evidence of induction when we are too dogmatic about many of the specifics of his return.

There is nothing wrong with admitting to ourselves and to others that we do not have absolutely conclusive evidence for everything we believe. Often, the challenge we should put forth to ourselves and others should not be, "This is the only way this doctrine can be understood." Instead, it is often better to say, "This understanding of the doctrine is more likely than others." Then we can fruitfully engage fellow believers by examining the evidence for particular points of view.

To sum up, logic is very important in doctrinal discussions that take place in systematic theology. We should employ logic in submission to Scripture as we synthesize biblical teachings. As we discuss theological doctrines, we should also be ready to deduce the implications of Scriptures for various issues we are addressing. But in the end, the inductive basis of theological doctrines should remind us that no human formulation of a doctrine is utterly final. There are always ways to improve what we believe.

Now that we have a general orientation toward doctrines in systematics and how doctrines are formed, we should take a look at our third topic, the values and dangers of doctrines in systematics.

VALUES AND DANGERS

As we explore the values and dangers of theological doctrines, we will follow the pattern we've seen in previous lessons by looking at the effects of doctrines on the three major resources for building Christian theology.

You will recall that Christians are to build theology out of God's special and general revelation. We gain understanding of special revelation primarily through the exegesis of Scripture, and we avail ourselves of important dimensions of general revelation by focusing on interaction in community — learning from others, especially other Christians — and by focusing on Christian living — our personal experiences of living for Christ.

Because these resources are so critical, we will explore the values and dangers of doctrinal discussions in systematics in terms of each of them. We will look first at doctrines and Christian living; second, we will explore doctrines in relation to interaction in community; and third, we will examine them in connection with the exegesis of Scripture. Let's look first at the theological resource of Christian living.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

As we have seen, Christian living amounts to the process of personal sanctification, and it takes place on conceptual, behavioral and emotional levels. Or as we

have put it: on the levels of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos.

Time will not allow us to explore all the ways doctrines affect sanctification. So, we will limit ourselves to one major way they can enhance and one major way they can hinder Christian living. Let's look first at one way doctrinal discussions can enhance our attempts to live for Christ.

Enhancement

One of the greatest advantages of traditional theological doctrines is that they help us to think logically about our faith on a large-scale. As we have seen, doctrines are built by logically synthesizing and explaining many biblical passages together. Unfortunately, many Christians do not know how to think logically about what they believe. In fact, at times well-meaning Christians actually reject the notion that they should think through the logical connections among the many things they believe. Instead, they prefer to rest their decisions on just one or two biblical considerations.

I remember once having a conversation with a young man who was convinced that he should not pay taxes to his government. He referred to 1 Corinthians 10:31 and said, "I'm supposed to do everything for the glory of God. And I don't think paying taxes is glorifying to God." Of course, I had to agree with at least part of what he said. It is true that we are to do everything for God's glory. But the implication he drew was based on too little biblical information; it was not guided by a host of other relevant biblical teachings.

What was wrong with this young man's argument? He had forgotten a basic principle about the Scriptures that we always need to remember. I often put it like this: "You can't say everything all at once. Even God can't when he is talking to us."

We know this is true in everyday life. We can never say every imaginable thing that we might need to say about a subject. Time will not allow it. We are limited to picking just a few things to say. And we expect people around us to remember other things that will help them understand the few things that we might be able to say to them at any given moment.

Well, the same kind of thing is true even for God when he speaks to us in Scripture. And this is not because God is incapable of communicating vast amounts of information clearly and immediately. Rather, it is because we, as finite creatures, are incapable of understanding vast amounts of information immediately and comprehensively. Because God accommodates Scripture to our finitude, no single biblical passage can say everything that might be said about a topic. So, to get a fuller picture of what we are to believe about a topic, we must not rely on just one or two biblical passages. They simply cannot say everything about a subject that we might need to know. Instead, we need to draw logical connections among a wide range of biblical passages.

For instance, to make a decision about paying taxes, we have to consider more than one simple theological proposition, such as: "Everything is for the glory of God" from 1 Corinthians 10:31. We have to perform a compositional collation of many passages. For example, we also have to factor in that 2 Chronicles 28:21 distinguishes between "the things of the Lord and the things of the king." We also have to consider that

in Matthew 22:21 Christ spoke this way even about pagan governments when he told his disciples:

> **Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:21).**

And of course, Paul said in Romans 13:6-7 that we should pay taxes to our governments because they are ordained by God. Now, to draw these theological propositions together requires a lot of careful logical reasoning. But it is our responsibility to think through these passages to form a logically coherent doctrine. And when we do so, we see that we should give governments their due.

The ability to synthesize many biblical teachings of Scripture into logically coherent doctrines is a vital skill for every Christian to have. When we are able to make large-scale syntheses of biblical teachings by using inductive and deductive logic appropriately, we can greatly enhance our Christian living.

Now, as positive as it can be to learn how to formulate what we believe in a logical manner, we also have to be aware that focusing on logical reasoning in theology has pitfalls that can actually hinder our Christian living.

Hindrance

Often Christians who see the value of logically coherent theological doctrines fall into the trap of thinking that all they have to do is to be reasonable or logical as they work through various doctrines. They ignore other aspects of Christian living, reducing the theological process to mere rational, logical reflection. But when we think this way, we cut ourselves off from some of the most vital influences on our theological reflections.

Earlier in this lesson we saw that doctrines are built on inductive logic that leaves an inductive gap between the evidence and the conclusions we draw. We also noticed that this inductive gap can be bridged by many things that come from our general knowledge and convictions, including some important factors that are not matters of logical reflection.

Because this is true, we must always be careful not to allow rigorous logical analysis to crowd out other godly influences. We should be motivated to read the Scriptures devotionally, with sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit. We should be motivated to interact with other Christians finding strength of conviction from their fellowship. We should be motivated to walk with Christ, finding guidance in providence and even in our consciences. Only as we are sanctified in these ways can we have confidence that we are filling in the inductive gap in ways that are pleasing to God. Reducing the process of drawing theological conclusions to mere logical rigor will cut us off from many of the vital resources that God has provided in the full range of Christian living.

In addition to understanding how doctrines can bring advantages and disadvantages to Christian living, we should also be aware of how they influence our

interaction in community.

INTERACTION IN COMMUNITY

Interaction in community helps us focus on the importance of the body of Christ in our lives. In these lessons, we have spoken of three important dimensions of interaction within the Christian community: Christian heritage — the witness of the Holy Spirit's work in the church of the past — present Christian community — the witness of Christians living today — and private judgment — the witness of our personal conclusions and convictions. These dimensions of community interact with each other in countless ways

We will mention just a couple of ways doctrines can enhance and hinder these elements of community interaction. Let's look first at one important way doctrinal discussions can enhance interaction in community.

Enhancement

Perhaps the most positive impact of theological doctrines on Christian living is the way that they can bring unity and harmony to the church. If there is one way to enhance our ability to interact with each other, it is to become more capable of reasoning together through the many teachings of Scripture.

I have a friend who formed a team of volunteers who spent their weekends building homes for the poor. It was a great ministry and he blessed many people through his efforts. I once asked him, "What's the biggest problem you face in your projects." He replied quickly, "New people; that's our biggest problem. We have to stop everything we are doing to explain the basics to them. New people can keep the whole team from being able to finish the job."

Well, in many ways my friend's experience reminds me of theological interaction within the Christian community. As wonderful as it is to have new people coming to Christ, we have a building project to do. It is ever so important for us to train fellow believers in the doctrines of the Christian faith, so that we don't have to keep stopping here and there to go back to this basic teaching and that basic teaching.

You'll recall that the writer of Hebrews scolded his readers for not growing beyond the milk of the faith, the simplest teachings of Christianity. In Hebrews 5:12 he wrote these words:

> **Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food (Hebrews 5:12).**

Knowledge of doctrines is not the only thing we need in order to grow together in Christ, but when we share common doctrinal beliefs, we can build the Kingdom of God more effectively.

At the same time, while understanding sound doctrines can enhance interaction, focusing on doctrines too much can actually hinder interaction among Christians.

Hindrance

Consider the fact that different branches of the church tend to find their community focus in different things. Some branches of the church focus on traditional corporate worship as a source of community. This is especially true of liturgical churches. Others look to dramatic personal religious experience to find commonality with each other. These churches often focus on converting the lost or on extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. Still other branches of the church look to doctrine to find community. They see their unity primarily in terms of the theological stances they take.

Now each of these tendencies has its strengths. But each also has its weaknesses. In fact, churches could avoid many problems if they would just pay more attention to the things that other churches consider most important.

Those who center on corporate worship often need to give more attention to doctrine and personal religious experience. Those who tend to center on religious experience usually could use a good dose of doctrinal and corporate worship emphasis. And of course, those who find their unity in doctrine often need to spend more time looking in the direction of worship and personal religious experience.

It is this last group that often runs into the problem of overemphasizing theological doctrines to the point that they actually become a hindrance to community interaction. We've all heard of Christians who are dogmatic, doctrinaire, arrogant, and prideful in their doctrinal purity. They are so proud that they do not value anything except doctrinal purity.

I think we need to remember something about the body of Christ. God has given each of us different natural gifts and different gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts tend to make some of us more inclined toward the logical rigors of systematic theology. And they tend to make others of us less interested in doctrinal matters. It is not necessarily wrong or sinful for one person to pursue a good thing like doctrines less vigorously than someone else pursues them. We need to understand that our level of zeal for doctrine is often a matter of gifting and calling. And beyond this, we need to remember that every Christian needs every other Christian. Those who are more inclined toward doctrinal concerns need those who are not inclined in this way and vice versa. We balance each other out; helping each other to live for Christ in ways we cannot on our own.

But this kind of community interaction and interdependence is often hindered when we overemphasize the rigors of doctrinal purity.

Having seen some of the ways doctrines relate to Christian Living and Interaction in Community, we should turn to the third major theological resource: the exegesis of Scripture. How do doctrinal discussions in systematics affect our interpretation of the Bible?

EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE

Exegesis is vital to building Christian theology because it is our most direct access to God's special revelation in Scripture. We have suggested in another lesson that it is helpful to think of three main ways the Holy Spirit has led the church to interpret the Scriptures. We have dubbed these broad categories: literary analysis, historical analysis and thematic analysis. Literary analysis looks at the Scriptures as a picture, as artistic presentations designed by human authors to influence their original audiences through their distinctive literary features. Historical analysis looks at the Scriptures as a window to history, a way of seeing and learning from the ancient historical events that the Scriptures report. And thematic analysis treats the Scriptures as a mirror, a way of reflecting on questions and topics that are of interest to us.

With these contours of exegesis in mind, we should explore the ways doctrines can enhance and hinder our interpretation of the Bible. Let's look first at one of the ways doctrinal discussions can help us interpret the Bible.

Enhancement

I am often amazed at how many Christians believe that most of the basic doctrines of Christianity are taught explicitly in the Bible. The truth is, many of the most basic tenets of our faith are not directly or specifically addressed in the Bible.

I once heard a well-known pastor tell his congregation, "We should believe only what the Bible teaches plainly and openly, not the implications we might think it has." In my experience, it is common for Christians to claim that we should place much more priority on the explicit teachings of the Bible than its implicit teachings.

But there is a principle of communication that we all need to remember: Often, the most foundational things that people believe are never stated explicitly. Instead, they are assumed. In other words, whenever we have a conversation with someone, or whenever we write a letter, or a book, we usually do not explicitly state our most basic, shared convictions.

Think about this principle for a moment. I have not once said throughout this entire series that I believe in the existence of God. Why not? It is because this belief is so foundational to our lessons that we all assume that I believe in God. I have not argued that the Bible is the word of God in this lesson. Why not? Because it is assumed among us. These and many other truths; they form an implicit foundation for what I have said explicitly.

In many ways the same is true of Scriptures. The writers of Scripture do not explicitly focus on the most systemic things they are communicating. Those truths underlie what they say explicitly. And one of the goals of systematic theology is to discover the doctrinal assumptions that gave rise to what we find in the Scriptures. For example, nowhere in Scripture do we find an explicit teaching on the Trinity or on how the two natures of Christ relate to each other in his one person. Both of these doctrines are hallmarks of historical Christianity. These and a host of other very important teachings of Christianity are based in large part on the logical implications of teachings

that are scattered throughout the Bible. When systematicians develop doctrines like the Trinity or the natures of Christ, they are not adding to the Bible, rather they are seeking to make explicit what already lies beneath the surface of the Bible.

For this reason, our exegesis of Scripture can be greatly enhanced by the wisdom that the church has developed through the centuries as it has used rigorous logical reflection to discern the implications of Scripture. Much of what the Scriptures teach, they never say explicitly. And systematic theology is one of the most helpful tools for uncovering these implicit teachings.

As valuable as doctrines in systematics may be for exegesis, we must also become aware of one of the most significant ways they can actually hinder our interpretation of Scripture.

Hindrance

In a word, one of the greatest dangers of doctrines in systematic theology is speculation. As we have noted many times, modern systematic theology owes a great debt to medieval scholasticism. But one of the chief characteristics of medieval scholasticism was the assumption that logical analysis can take the church to truths that go far beyond the teachings of Scripture. Many of us have heard one of the speculative questions that preoccupied medieval theologians: "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?"

Now because Protestant systematics is so greatly indebted to scholastic theology, it too sometimes strays into speculation. It also explores ideas and reaches conclusions for which there is very little or no biblical support simply because these conclusions seem logical.

For instance, you might be surprised to know that in traditional Protestant systematic theology great debates have raged over the very speculative matter called "the lapsarian question." Perhaps you've heard the terms supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism, and sublapsarianism or several other variations. Heated debates have occurred between advocates of these positions. And the entire debate amounts to this question: "In what logical order should we conceive of God's eternal decrees?" That's right. The logical order of the eternal decrees of God — his eternal plan for the universe.

Now I hope that everyone realizes that the Bible does not even come close to addressing this issue. It is one of those great mysteries about which the Bible gives us next to no information. But an overly enthusiastic endorsement of logical analysis in doctrinal discussions can lead to this and many other speculations.

As we learn how to apply logical reflection to develop doctrines out of Scripture, we would all be wise to remember those well-known words of Moses in Deuteronomy 29:29:

> **The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever that we may follow all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).**

There are secret things, mysteries that have not been revealed to us. So, careful logical reflection often leads us to speculation.

As we interpret the Scriptures in the process of doctrinal discussions we must always remind ourselves not to stray too far from what the Scriptures actually teach. We must constantly ask ourselves at each step what evidence from the Bible supports this doctrine. Regularly substituting logical speculation for scriptural support will undoubtedly hinder our exegesis of Scripture.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored doctrines in systematic theology. We have seen what they are and how they fit into systematic theology. We've also explored how doctrines are formed and we've looked at a number of the values and dangers they present.

All Christians have doctrines they believe. Whether they have been written down or simply taught by word of mouth. But learning how systematic theologians have formed Christian doctrines through the centuries is one of the best ways for us to evaluate what we already believe and to further our understanding of God's word as we serve him and as we serve His people.

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Building Systematic Theology

LESSON FOUR

Doctrines in Systematics

Faculty Forum

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

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Lesson Four: Doctrines in Systematics

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Michael Briggs
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
How can we ensure that doctrine doesn't divide us unnecessarily?

Student: Richard, this lesson is all about doctrines, and I come from a church where it's pretty much said that doctrines divide. So how can we study doctrine without that happening?

Dr. Pratt: Well, doctrines do divide. I think that's just a reality that we have to admit in some respects is that they do divide, and sometimes necessarily and sometimes unnecessarily. But before I talk about that, let me remind us of what we're doing here. We are looking at systematic theology, and we have said that systematicians form technical terms that they use in propositions, and then they take those propositions and build them into doctrinal statements. Okay? So we're up here… we're at a very high level in systematic theology where they're accumulating data from the Bible and they're putting them into a shape that expresses what we believe about larger issues than just a single proposition — a little more complicated — and of course the more complicated a theological point of view is, the harder it's going to be to have people all agree on it. And I think that doctrines do divide sometimes. It's necessary at times when you're talking about the difference between true doctrine and false doctrine. Sometimes, though, we do, I think, go too far and emphasize the details of a doctrinal statement where we ought to be able to live and let live, let people just kind of fudge on certain things and not worry about it. But, unfortunately, as soon as people get into this, if they really believe it strongly then they, at least for a period of time, believe that everything is just as important as everything else, and then they end up dividing. And so the two of them go away and start their own church, and then they have a division between the two of them, too, because you can't get any two people in this world to agree on everything, and if you work hard enough, you're going to find a disagreement with every single person in the world. And that's just the reality. So we have to learn to adjudicate between things that are more important and less important and those kinds of things.

Question 2:
If Christians all read the same Bible, why don't we all affirm the same doctrines?

Student: Richard, it seems like if we're reading the same Scripture that we would come to the same conclusions, and yet, just think in the case of the doctrine of election, you have one church that teaches staunchly that we are elect before the foundations of the earth, and another church teaches that our salvation is based on our response. And it seems like there is a lot of fight over that issue.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. Well that's a great example, because the reality is you don't have to choose between those two, because the Bible teaches them both, and we ought to take pride in that and be happy with that. But Christians sometimes are just not willing to do it. You know, we always have to remember that the Bible is not clear about everything. It's only clear so that people with skill and without skill, learned and unlearned, that they can understand what is necessary to believe and to do to be saved. Everything else is just relatively clear or unclear. And we have to just live with that reality. In some respects… I mean, can you imagine, we already substitute the Bible for Jesus sometimes, and we still already substitute our theology sometimes for the Bible which substitutes for Jesus sometimes. And can you imagine if we had absolutely perfect doctrine, how much we would just get rid of Jesus completely? We wouldn't need the Bible either. All we'd need is our perfect doctrine. But we don't have perfect doctrine, none of us do, and so we can learn to let go of some of the things and to live with each other in harmony even if we disagree, if we can figure out ways of determining what's more important, what's less important, what's toward the center, what's toward the outside of our beliefs. But unfortunately, sometimes students, especially, can't do that. And sometimes I believe that it's almost a biological thing. You know, developmental psychologists tell us that there are stages that people go through in their mentality, and one of the stages is that of an ideology where you have to formulate what you believe is true. And a lot of times, younger students, especially seminary students, are at the age where they're doing that. It used to be earlier, it used to be 18, 19. Now it's a little more into the 20s because we delay adulthood. At least in my country we do, we delay adulthood. And so at 22, 25, 26, people are still formulating what they believe, especially if they've just come to Christ recently, and they can easily become so preoccupied with getting every single detail right that they just can't live with somebody else who doesn't agree with them on every detail. And that's the great danger.

Question 3:
How confident should we be that traditional doctrines are correct?

Student: Richard, if systematic theologians are guided by traditional Christian priorities and emphases, how can we be confident that those traditions are right?

Dr. Pratt: Well, you can't. I mean, the reality is, in this series, we are not talking so much about how systematic theology ought to be done or even how it could be done. We're talking about how it is done, okay? How traditional Christian systematic theology has been done. And the course that has been set, and was set a long, long time ago back in the early Neo-platonic period, and then in the Aristotelian scholastic period, and then the modern period, they were set up for a certain priority, certain emphases. The fact is, is that when you start looking at doctrines, let's say, the doctrine of Christ — just take that as an example, Christology. Let's just isolate ourselves into that realm of Christology. How many things would you say the Bible teaches about Christ that we could emphasize?

Student: Oh wow, there are many.

Dr. Pratt: Like a million? At least 10,000 shall we say.

Student: More than I care to count.

Dr. Pratt: Yet, whenever you look at a traditional systematic theology, you're going to find the same basic issues discussed over and over and over again. You're going to be asking questions like, who was Jesus. And that's going to raise the issue of his two natures and one person, his human and divine natures in the one person of Christ, or the hypostatic union. So almost every systematic theologian that does it, traditionally, is going to talk about that. Then they're going to talk about his preexistence and his humiliation, and then his exaltation. Things like that. Then they're going to talk about his atoning work on the cross, and maybe occasionally you'll even get the resurrection stuck in there. But that's usually downplayed in traditional systematic theology because of the controversies of the church. All these kinds of things were determined a long time ago. And the reason I want to emphasize again that we're not saying this is the way it ought to be, we're simply trying to say this is the way it is. Now becoming aware that this is the way it is, allows you then the freedom of saying, well, should it be this way? Does it need to be this way?

One great example of this is from the theologian B.B. Warfield. He has an essay called The Emotional Life of our Lord. Okay? Now, that comes under the topic of the humanity of Christ, but the reality is that you don't find that discussed typically in a systematic theology. The emotions of Jesus are just not there. And the question might be raised, why not? Instead, what you find is that Christology begins with Jesus as divine, then adds to it the concept that he is human and how those two natures relate to each other, and then his atoning work and so on and so on. But why do you think systematic theology almost always begins with Jesus' divinity, his preexistence, or his unity with God the Father in the doctrine of the Trinity? Why would you think that's true historically speaking?

Student: That comes from the Neo-platonic influences, the top down theology.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, exactly. And you know, the reality is that's not the only way you can do Christology. You could just as well do it from the bottom up. So you could formulate your whole doctrine of Christ out of the human being that was walking around on this planet, which is, by the way, the way the New Testament tends to do it. Okay? The New Testament kind of jumps back and forth, needless to say in the Gospels and that kind of thing, but its emphasis is certainly on building up to Jesus' messiahship and his divinity out of all these realities of his life, his empirical life as a human being. Is there a result to that? I mean, if you were take the traditional approach, can you see that if that's the only way you ever think about the doctrine of Christ that you might actually end up leaving some things out? Of course, because, what you're going to end up doing… because all systematicians have to face this fact, they are finite, they can't do it all. Okay? They can't do it all. And you can't say it all. So you start off really strong on the things that you emphasize and then you sort of taper away as you get toward the end. Then you say, well, the rest of it, I'm not going to talk about. So where a person chooses to start, and where a person sets priorities, also affects how much they talk about those things.

And so we get the impression from systematic theology that the emotional life of Christ is not important, but the essay that B.B. Warfield wrote shows that it is extremely important to the gospel writers. That Jesus had pity on the hungry, that Jesus showed compassion to people, that Jesus wept, those are trivial things in traditional systematic theology, but not in the Bible. So you can see right away that a doctrine that's been formed by the church over and over and over again tends to get in a rut, as it were, and realizing that it's a rut and not just THE way to do it, becomes then an opportunity for us to ask the question, well, what's missing? What do we need to emphasize that hasn't been emphasized? And in recent history, that has happened… Thanks to the biblical theology movement, it's happened in the area of resurrection.

We've mentioned many times Charles Hodge's systematic theology, a sort of a bid three volume thing, so it's a nice one to sort of pick at. But he has over 200 pages on the doctrine of atonement and only 20 pages or so on the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus. Wow. Now why would that be true? It's because the controversy between Protestants and Catholics was not over the resurrection, it was all about the nature of the atonement. And so that became THE issue, and it has priority in Protestant systematic theology as opposed to the resurrection. And what people like Ridderbos and Geerhardus Vos, and other biblical theologians did, was they noticed that the resurrection of Jesus is just as important to salvation as the death of Jesus. And when you realize that in the New Testament that's the case, that if Christ died, as Paul said, and was not raised, then what good is it? The answer is: no good. We're to be pitied above all others. So suddenly the doctrine of resurrection started becoming emphasized, and it became more than it was in Charles Hodge which was basically an apologetic proving that the death of Christ was sufficient to pay for sins. That's about all he did with it. And so now resurrection is just as essential to salvation as the death was. So Christ pays for our sins, but now what does resurrection do for us? Well,

resurrection is the fact that we are joined to Jesus in his death pays for our sins, but Jesus didn't stay dead. Jesus is the first man ever to rise from the dead in his glorified body and take the first step toward the world to come. The writer of Hebrews says, because Jesus has done that, we can be sure we will, too. He's the first fruits, and so connecting to Jesus' death and his resurrection seem to be just as important for the Apostle Paul, anyway, and other biblical writers.

Question 4:
How might the church's expansion in Africa and South America impact its doctrinal emphases?

Student: Well Richard, do you think that the emphases will shift now, now that the leadership of the church seems to be moving south — you talked about that earlier — into South America and in Africa. Do you think they'll change?

Dr. Pratt: Well, it could. It could. Something like Christology will be reshaped. Clearly for groups that have suffered a lot, the suffering of Jesus will mean much more to them, and that entails emotions and the like. There does seem to be something about the Western tradition, the Western European, North American tradition of Christianity, that has sort of intellectualized things and sort of pushed emotions to the corner, so that the more academic you are, or the more intellectual you are about your faith, the less emotional you are. I mean, it seems that there is this correlation there, this inverse correlation. And perhaps, if people can hold onto their backgrounds in Africa, Latin America. Chinese? They can be very unemotional, too, though. This is a problem there. I don't know how that's going to work. But with this movement southward and eastward, there's also going to be much more impact from charismatic movements, because that's the majority of the churches in those areas of the world. And that's going to have much more of a sensitivity to the emotional, and hopefully so, because this is something that is missing from a lot of Western intellectual Christianity. And we have a lot to learn from them. We have a lot to learn from the emotional side which should be evident, if nothing else, from the fact that our whole life has become reduced to everyone going to a therapist to try to figure out what's wrong with themselves emotionally. And so just that reality should clue us in that maybe something is missing from our faith. And so that would reshape Christology in significant ways much more from below, as we say, from the experience of Jesus on the earth as opposed to the normal from above stemming from Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism. I think that's probably true.

Question 5:
How do systematic theologians' positive and negative goals impact their theological emphases?

Student: Richard, in the video, you talk about how systematicians have positive and negative goals. Could you talk about how that impacts the different emphases?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, because it really does. I'm glad you brought it up, because it's really very important for us to understand that systematic theologians are not simply trying to find the truth that's in the Bible about any topic. I know that may sound strange in some respects, but there's so much truth in the Bible about every topic that that is not, it could not possibly be, the only goal that they have had as they have set the pace and set the emphases and the priorities through the centuries. Instead, the priorities have also been set by what I call a negative purpose or a negative goal, and that is to oppose false teachings. Let me just give you an example. I have it here. I want to read this statement to you about Christology. I think this will be a great example of that. If I can just find it here, let me see. Christology… listen to what is said about Jesus here, the second person of the Trinity. "The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. And so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man."

Okay, now. That's very deep, and it's also very different from the Bible. That's not to say that it's not true, and that it's not true to the Bible, but do you think those kinds of things are emphasized in the Bible? I mean, when you hear things like that he is one person with two distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, and they were inseparably joined together in one person without conversion, composition or confusion.. Those are technical terms that I don't think you find in the Bible.

Student: Right, there's definitely not one spot… that's not in 2 Corinthians. That statement is not there.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly. And in fact, what you have to do is piece together a lot of things in the Bible to come up with a doctrinal statement like that. Well, where did that come from then? Why in the world would anyone even imagine that what we need to talk about in Christology is the fact that Jesus is one person with two distinct natures and that these two natures don't mix, aren't confused, they don't convert, they don't shift back-and-forth, and all those kinds of things? Where in the world did all of that come from?

Student: Probably a big conflict.

Dr. Pratt: Uh-huh, big conflict, false teachings in the early church. That's where it came from. And so when you're dealing with one group in the church that says Jesus was not really human, he only appeared to be human, and you're dealing with another group that says Jesus was only human, he only became divine later. And you're dealing with groups that say, well, he was human part of the time and divine part of the time. And you have other groups that say, well, the two things were mixed together so they really can't be distinguished from each other. And this is what was going on in the early church. Then you end up with doctrinal statements like that. And even though today those words hardly communicate to anyone — the average person would not know what it means to say that the two natures of Christ are without conversion and without confusion, yes? So even though it has not been something that the church continues to be concerned about, it's part of the tradition because the priorities were set a long time ago.

Frankly, I could think of a million things I would want to say about Jesus in a statement of faith about Jesus other than that his two natures don't convert and they're not confused, although I believe that. I don't believe that they do. I believe they remain distinct and that each nature keeps all of the attributes of the nature and so on and so on. And I think it's an important thing to remind people of now and then. I can think of a million other things that I would put into a statement.

So the priorities and the traditions come both from trying to find what the Bible says, but also the answer the current questions. And systematics is so concerned with maintaining continuity with the past, that those questions keep being answered even when they're not being asked later on. Wow. I think that's very significant, because if you were to start asking questions about the nature of Christ and who he was, and what it meant for him to be human and divine today, you would probably have to reformulate the ways that you say these things. You at least would have to choose different technical terms, wouldn't you? Definitely. You see, they understood those technical terms because they were basically philosophical terms, and they had borrowed them from outside of the Bible for their day, and then they became a part of the tradition that moved forward that way. And so the negative side of what systematicians emphasize, the negative meaning that they are opposing, falsehoods, is very much a matter of the time in which these doctrinal statements were formed.

Question 6:
Are traditional doctrines relevant to the modern church?

Student: Richard, now are you saying, though, that these theological constructs are simply tied to a cultural situation?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I guess in some ways I am. I am saying that the emphases and the priorities that are put on things in systematic theology often come out of the situations in which they were birthed. Before the ecumenical councils, a lot of these issues were not talked about. Then the ecumenical councils were called to deal with those issues, and then they became part of the tradition. Now you wouldn't want to reduce everything that the systematicians say to just their own cultural day, but they do obviously have emphases that come from where they are, what questions their cultures are asking. This is one of the reasons why Catholic and Protestant systematicians are so different, because once that controversy took place, once the Reformation took place, all of a sudden, every issue is now slanted toward that controversy one way or the other, depending on which side you're on. And so I just think that it doesn't mean that we throw it away because it's tied to historical circumstances, and, in fact, in many respects, traditional systematicians look back at those things and ask the question, what's the value of those earlier discussions for today? That would be more what I would want to say. What can we learn about the hypostatic union — the two natures in one person — what can we learn about that for today? Why would that be significant for us today as opposed to why it was significant for them back them? And sometimes it can be very similar, but sometimes it can be very different, too.

Question 7:
How does the metaphor of a brick wall for systematic theology relate to the web of multiple reciprocities?

Student: Now Richard, in the video you talk about building a systematic theology like building a brick wall. But then elsewhere in your teachings, you talk about or use the phrase, "webs of multiple reciprocities." Can you relate those two together? Or do they relate?

Dr. Pratt: Well, they are two different metaphors. I could come up with a third one which is a liquid metaphor that I use sometimes to talk about how our beliefs work together. Basically, you know, every metaphor is deceptive. Aristotle said that because the thing you're talking about is like it, but it's not exactly like it. So the wall building is just to give the idea that theological technical terms are small items that are engulfed in larger items called theological propositions — larger things, doctrines — and then the whole edifice would be the whole system of theology. The idea… that's an easy one, because we use that kind of thinking a lot, you know, from small bricks up to the wall up to the whole house.

The more difficult one is this idea that all beliefs form webs of multiple reciprocities. And let me talk about that just a little bit. This is important because when systematic theologians form their doctrines, whether they realize it or not, or whether they're doing it explicitly or not, they are pulling from all kinds of directions to formulate this one doctrine, and doctrines are not in isolation from each other. And the idea is that

you may have this set of beliefs over here and this set of beliefs over here, and they relate to each other in reciprocal ways. Now what you believe here affects what you believe over here, and what you believe over here affects what you believe over here. And in reality, systematic theology, the doctrines of systematics, connect to each other in so many different ways that you could not write about it. It would be just almost impossible to summarize all those interconnections. And so what systematicians do is they tend to just isolate maybe one way in which something connects to another, or several ways, and they limit that. And that, of course, is a little bit artificial because in the Bible itself, all these beliefs kinds of form these webs that have these impacts on each other, the nodes of which have impacts on each other in so many ways you cannot even count them. So this is to say and to reemphasize the idea that you don't just have one way in which you can make a doctrinal formulation.

The doctrine of God is not simply settled when you deal with the Trinity. The Trinity is *a* way to do that. It's a very important way, and is something that we all ought to believe, but it is not the only thing that needs to be said about God, or even the relationship of God the Father to God the Son; there would be other things that can be said as well, because all these different beliefs that we have from the Bible impact that one belief. So one doctrine is impacted by all doctrines, and all doctrines are impacted by the one doctrine as you center attention on that one. And so obviously then, systematicians have to set limits on what they're going to do, and that limits then the value and the importance of any particular doctrinal statement.

I mentioned the liquid. The liquid is also trying to illustrate the idea of how one set of doctrines affects another, how one set of beliefs affects another. So you can think of a bowl having white paint in it and you pour blue paint into the white paint, and what you're eventually going to get, especially if you stir it just a little bit, is shades of light blue, various shades. Why is that? It's because this belief we have over here and the first belief that we were thinking about mixed together and to the point that they are almost indecipherable, they can't be separated. And that's the way our beliefs, every day in life, this is the way we live with the things that we understand, the things we know, the things we believe. They intermingle like this. And when you're writing a systematic theology, the tendency is to take something that's intermingled, organically connected, and split them apart and isolate them from each other, and it makes it just a bit artificial. And I think we just have to say that. But that's the nature of life. We do that with everything. Every time you describe anything, you are in some respects making an artificial summary of it that leaves a lot of things out that you don't even sometimes realize you're leaving out.

Student: Yeah, I found that last analogy really helpful, because when I'm sitting down looking at, you know, a systematic theology text book or whatever — going through Berkhof, let's say — it's really confusing. And so the whole idea of being able to break it apart makes it a little less overwhelming.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, that's what it does. And that's the value of systematic theology, is you break it down. But you mustn't get caught in it, and I guess that's really the emphasis that I want to give, that the traditional emphases, even the traditional topics, the way they break down the topics and the priorities they give to them, is not necessarily the only way it can be done, and I think that's the value of realizing these different models for what systematic theology is and how doctrines relate to each other.

Question 8:
How can we do systematic theology if we aren't trained in logic?

Student: Richard, you say in the video that systematicians rely on the Bible and logic. What about those folks who really don't know a lot about logic? How are they supposed to interact with that?

Dr. Pratt: That's a huge problem, isn't it, because… let me just say first, it is true that systematic theologians in that traditional vein are not just concerned with the data of the Bible. What they want to do is, and they feel that it's their job, to connect the various data points of the Bible that they've gotten from factual reduction of Bible verses, to connect them to each other logically. Now that stems, as you remember, basically from scholasticism because they championed that. Aristotelian logic, the purpose was to make everything fit together and connect everything logically. And it's a problem, because sometimes when people are not aware of what's happening, they are sometimes fooled, as it were, into thinking that the implications that are being drawn from the Bible, and the inferences that are being made, are just as solid as the Bible itself. And that sometimes isn't so, because human logic has limitations, and no matter how much we want to exalt it, we all know that logic has limitations and that there are different forms of logic historically. And how one thinks about logical reasoning affects then what deductions and the like, and implications you draw from the Bible. And so it's a big problem.

I don't suggest that people go out and buy a logic textbook and try to figure out logic, because the reality is that you have to study logic an awful lot, a huge amount, to ever get to where you can actually handle what these people are doing with these things. But just to take a simple example of this, if you start off with this proposition that we mentioned in the earlier lesson that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, if you're not careful to get the fact right, you're going to be able to draw off all kinds of false implications from it. Because the fact is, not that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, but that all but one did. Well, that really is a sort of refinement of the proposition, bringing a lot of biblical data together — so you've got to make sure that your data is right — and sometimes we mess up even at that level. But then, at other times, we sort of reason our way through from one or two propositions into all kinds of implications, and I think that sort of the practical

guideline is this, it's that if you're inferencing takes you to the point where you realize, whoops, I'm contradicting something else in the Bible, then you back off.

And you can do that very easily. You can very easily come to the point of saying something that is contrary to the Bible. For example, if we believe, as the Bible says, that God is sovereign over everything, that he is in control of everything, then it would be only reasonable to infer from that that human actions are insignificant. If God is in control of everything, then what you and I do is insignificant, and we would end up with something like Plato's cave where human actions are just shadows on the cave wall and they're not real, they're just sort of the appearance of reality. But as soon as you draw that inference from the sovereignty of God, then you've contradicted what the Bible says, because the Bible is very clear that human choice, human effort, human desires, human actions are extraordinarily significant.

Student: It'll also take you down the wrong path or wrong conclusion in the discussion of prayer.

Dr. Pratt: Absolutely it will. Exactly. Precisely. Because if, for example, a person says, well God is sovereign and God already knows my prayer, so why should I ever pray since he's just going to do what he wants to anyway? Well, that would be a wrong conclusion. Okay? Well, how do you know that? It's not by judging the logic itself, because to get at that is a very hard thing to do. Because really what you want is a logical argument that entails all the data of the Bible as its premises. Good luck. If you did that, if all the premises of the logical argument included all the data of the Bible, then you'd never go wrong. Okay? But we don't do that. What we do is we start our logical thinking about something based on some of the Bible, and then we start reasoning, reasoning, reasoning. And for some distance, that's okay. But eventually what you're going to do, you're going to bounce into another doctrinal statement of the Bible that you'll be contradicting. And when that happens, you have to back off. And sometimes, of course, we're just left sort of in mystery not being able to figure out exactly how those things work together.

But I know some people, for example, who think this way: Okay, God knows everything, and he even knows my prayers, so therefore prayer is not really an attempt to get God to do something, it's really an attempt to change me, because God already knows everything so we're not going to change him. What we need to do is just change ourselves. So they reduce prayer down to self-reflection and self-motivation and self-renewal, and things like that, okay? And then they feel very satisfied, except that that's not what the Bible says. The Bible does not say in James the prayer of a righteous man changes himself. That's not what it says. It says that the prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Okay? It gets God to do things. And that truth has got to be factored in, and if you can't factor it in at the beginning to control where you're logic goes, then you have to factor it in at the end when your logic starts

taking you places that Bible says no, no, no, no. And I think that's the practical reality for people, even those that haven't study logic in any serious way.

Student: So Richard, then is it possible for us to just create a series of syllogisms where we start with the text, but that we just end up somewhere else?

Dr. Pratt: You can end up on another universe altogether. This is why you have so many cults, so many Christian cults, because what they'll do is they'll take a piece of the Bible and they'll reason from that way out here and not pay attention to the rest of the things that the Bible says. And so they're taken way far away from the Bible's teaching because they haven't taken at the beginning enough of the Bible into account, and they haven't allowed the Bible constantly to guide their logical reasoning from it. And I think that that's just the reality of what people face these days. And we have to be careful as we go through the practical steps of developing a doctrine, both to try to begin with as much as we can handle of the Bible and then to allow what we haven't handled at the beginning to come in and sort of direct our logical inferences as we go through the process. And that's a constantly renewing thing; we can't do it all at once.

Question 9:
How do we handle statements in Scripture that seem to be illogical?

Student: So Richard, what should we do then when we come across a statement or statements in Scripture that seem to be illogical?

Dr. Pratt: Well, we do it. That's one thing, and we have to admit that. I mean, there are things in the Bible that don't seem to fit together, very neatly anyway, logically. And I think in terms of practice, what we have to do is first sort of recognize that the human mind is limited. As Isaiah says, you know, that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts as the heavens are above the earth, and so we shouldn't expect ourselves to be able to get it all, and we need to sometimes just simply live without the ability to make logical sense out of everything. But there are certain kinds of practical steps we can take.

Sometimes people find these kinds of illogical things in the Bible when they're really not so illogical. In our day, especially, people are more prone to accept things that sound illogical, and that's just part of our culture at this point, the world is coming to that point, I think in large part because life is confusing and is so complicated. So they sometimes just give up. And a good example of that would be people walk around these days saying, if they're Trinitarian, they think that the doctrine of the Trinity says God is three and God is one. Well, it doesn't say that. It makes a distinction between the sense in which God is one and the sense in which God is three. Because the early church fathers were not interested in talking about illogical

things, they were very concerned about the logic of these things, so God is one in essence or substance or being, but three in persons. There is one "what" of God and three "whos" of God. And I think that's an important distinction.

So sometimes the distinctions that theologians have made are very good and very helpful, and people just don't know them. They have a propensity just to sort of give up and just say, yeah, three in one, I don't know what to do with that. Okay? Other things, however, don't relate so much to God but relate to the creation. And this is where I will differ with some people, because a lot of theologians will say, yes, there are things about God that don't seem logical, but they'll say that things that deal with the creation are all very logical. Okay? Well, I'm sure that we can make more logical sense out of the creation than we can God. I'm sure that's true because God is so far above us. But I think personally, I'm convinced that life itself, or life in this world, is so complex that we meet the limits of our reasoning ability even when we're dealing with created things. I mean, for example, how can I be the same person today as I was yesterday when I have changed so much between yesterday and today? Or how can I be the same person who seven years ago lived when every cell of my body has been replaced over the period of seven years? And, you know, I don't know the answer to that. A lot of people will say, well the reality then is that you're not the same person, and in fact you're a different person every moment, and so certain psychological theories these days have to do with the fact that people are different people every single moment, and so you're not really who you were in the past anymore and da-da-da-da. And I can't buy that because there's continuity between me and the past, but I can't put my finger on exactly what makes me the same person as I was before. And I would probably challenge anyone that tried to do that, in some way, to show them that probably what they're saying is a little bit inadequate. But that's one of the mysteries to life, it seems to me, just one of the things that I just can't make sense of.

Sometimes, however, the Bible seems to be illogical because the statements of the Bible are not supposed to be taken as universal truths, but they're supposed to be taken as situational statements. So, for example, when Paul says in Thessalonians, let him that does not work not eat. Well now, if you take that as a universal truth, that means of course that babies don't get to eat because they're not working, or the elderly don't get to eat because they're not working. Well, we don't do that of course. We say that's nonsense, but the only reason we don't do it is because we find other things in the Bible that tell us to care for the infant and care for the older, and that we know won't contradict what Paul says about let him who does not work not eat. And so we limit the meaning of Paul's words to the situation in the Thessalonica and their particular circumstances because of the rest of the Bible. So we sometimes have to work hard to figure out how these different situationally oriented statements in the Bible are compatible with each other on a higher level. And those are the kinds of the ways we can go at this thing.

Question 10:
Does the Old Testament have statements that appear to be contradictory?

Student: Richard, some of the examples you just used were from the New Testament, but could you talk a little bit more about how the Old Testament has examples of that? I think about in the Pentateuch with the Israelites, if you could go into that a little bit.

Dr. Pratt: Well, let's put it this way. A lot of people would say that the Bible teaches that God is immutable, that he's unchanging. Okay? And you can get a lot of that from the Old Testament, several passages that say that, I do not change. Well, if you were to take that statement there and compare it to things that go on in the Bible itself in the Pentateuch, then you're going to run into some problems, because God seems very much to change. In the days of Noah he was grieved that he even made man. It grieved him. Okay? And so you get these kinds of things coming up all the time. When God is determined to destroy the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, Moses says please don't do this, in Exodus 32, and then God does not carry through with what he said he was going to do, which was to destroy them. And so, does God change? Well, the theologians say, of course, first God is immutable. But then what they do is, they in the fine print, will explain that this doesn't mean that God is unchanging in every way you could possibly conceive of God being unchanging. God in the Bible obviously does things. He is, in fact, what the theologians called often pure action, he's always in action, but he doesn't change in certain ways. And so theologians, systematicians, tend to try to identify what those ways are. And so they'll say, God is immutable in his character, so he doesn't change from being loving to being hateful, or from being just to being unjust. That never happens. If he's just, he's just. He's always that way, always will be that way. He doesn't change not only in his character but his eternal plan. And not only his eternal plan, some theologians add to that his covenant promises. They are immutable. They don't change once they're set up, once they're said.

And this is where understanding that systematic theologians are not ignorant of the Bible is very important. Sometimes we will get ideas from quick summaries that we hear, like God is immutable, and we won't realize that the theologians themselves have dealt with the Bible, too. They know that that can't mean that God doesn't grieve over having made humanity, that God can't say to Moses, well, I'm going to destroy them and say, well okay, I won't, because he does that. And that would be something that theologians would want to account for as they refine the definition of immutability. So it's just very important to remember that a quick snapshot of what a systematic theologian says about any doctrine may not be everything that they take into account in the fine print of their discussions of it.

Question 11:
What is the law of non-contradiction?

Student: Richard, you talk about in the video about the law of non-contradiction. What is that exactly? And how are we supposed to use that in our ministry?

Dr. Pratt: I wish we could say what it is exactly, because logicians and systems of logic through history have described it in different ways. Now, the natural tendency of most traditional systematic theologians is to define the law of non-contradiction along the lines of Aristotle. And I don't remember his precise way of putting it, but it amounts to something like this: That something, say "A", cannot be both "A" and not "A" at the same time and in the same sense. Okay, now that's a mouthful. Typically symbolic logic will symbolize it as it is not case, a little squiggly not (PN not P), which means same thing. But the reality is that different forms of logic, and there have been many of those… in our day we have what's often called fuzzy logic or multivalent logic, and that means that you don't just have yes and no or correct or incorrect, but you have a variety of in-betweens as well. The law of non-contradiction begins to become a whole lot more complicated.

But let's just stick with this basic idea that something can't be and not be at the same time and in the same sense. Well, most of systematic theology is guided by that principle. Okay? And that is why you find systematicians working very hard to take things in the Bible that seem to violate that law, and they do seem to violate them at times like, Jesus is God, Jesus is man. Well, if there was ever something that is "A" and "not A", it would be to say that this person here is God and man. So that would appear to be a contradiction. So how do you keep it from being a contradiction? Well, you have to either say he changed from one to the other, so he was at different times, or you have say there were senses in which he is God and man, and so typically you will choose the sense. Because the only thing you have to do is explain just one sense, or one way in which "A" and "not A" are different. That's all you have to do. Just one tiny little sense, and you don't have a contradiction anymore.

And so that's why sometimes you find systematic theologians refining their discussions very tightly right down to the nth degree so they can find some kind of way to distinguish things that appear in the Bible to be contradictory. And I think that's a valuable thing to do, so long as we don't go too far away from what the Bible actually says. And I think we have to give a sort of presumption of the logical nature of biblical claims. That doesn't mean that we can always show them, or that we can always justify how something is — "A" is different from "not A" in some sense or another — but we can work very hard to try to understand those things and to figure them out so that we don't sound like we're talking out of both sides of our mouths.

But the fact is, when you're dealing with an incomprehensible God, sometimes you're going to sound like you're talking out of both sides of your mouth. You're going to say things like God is transcendent, but God is immanent. Well, which is he? Those

are hard things to bring together. I mean, is he utterly distant, or is he utterly here. And the answer in the Bible is, yes. And both are true.

Sometimes people in our circles will, in evangelical circles, they will make a mistake of thinking that Bible talk or Christian talk is always either/or. It's either this, or it's that. But the fact is that… and they'll contrast that with Hindu thought which they say is both/and. That's not right. The Bible does a lot of either/or, and the Bible does a lot of both/and. Okay? But it never truly contradicts itself, but sometimes it doesn't make it clear as to how it isn't contradicting itself. And sometimes we are just left with a mystery as to how those two things work together.

Question 12:
How can we use the law of non-contradiction when we apply the Bible to our lives?

Student: You know, we're talking about this again in a very high plane, and we need to. That' what systematic theology does, but how do I take this idea and communicate it to the person in the pew and give them assurance that when they see two things that are apparently contradictory, that you can still trust your Bible?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. That's great. Well, can we take it down even lower to real life? You tell people that if they love Christ, God will make them their children and that God loves his children. Okay. And that creates certain expectations, certain logical expectations, because if we know what love is at all, that means that God is going to do good things for you, and he's going to bless you, and those sorts of things. And then that same person who is a child of God and who is loved and being blessed by God ends up with a debilitating, horrible, terminal disease. At times like that then they wonder to themselves, does God really love me? And that also raises even questions and doubts about whether there even is a God, and whether the Gospel is true, and so on and so on. And a lot of that stems from the fact that Christian leaders don't help people understand the nuances of what it means to say that God loves us and that God blesses us. And if we were able to teach people ahead of time what the small, fine print nuances are on this, it might help them deal with the realities of life as they face them.

I know several people that have gone through horrible divorces, Christian people, and they say to me, Richard, if God loves me, why would he have ever allowed that to happen to me? I have friends who are sick who are going to die from their illnesses, and they sit there and they say, how can a loving God do this to me? The problem, of course, is that we're defining "loving God" in a non-biblical way, and we are extending that definition to all kinds of inferences and implications that the Bible doesn't encourage us to do. This was Job's friends' problems, wasn't it? They thought they had God in a box. If God likes you, then he'll give you blessings. If he's

not giving you blessings, therefore, he doesn't like you. Okay? That made perfectly logical sense to them. The problem was, their premises were wrong; they were too limited. It's easy for me since I'm not terminally ill right now to say, well, one day God will show you so much blessing, you can't even imagine it. And in fact, you know, when that day comes in the new world, you'll look back at this time as just a blink of the eye. But still, it doesn't fit.

And so we really need to be careful not to allow ourselves to be fooled into thinking that we have mastered a concept or mastered a premise in our argument, and as pastors and as leaders, we've always got to start bringing up these sort of exceptions, we might call them, the sort of "but." God loves you and God will bless you, but, not in this way necessarily or not in that way necessarily. And if we look at it closely enough, then the logical conflict that comes up, if we've taught it well, will disappear. At least it won't be a logical problem. There might be emotional problems with how can God love me and let this happen to me, but it won't be a logical issue. And that's the fault of the teacher who wants so much to be able to say things in simple ways and straightforward ways and give it in a nutshell, put it all in a nice little pill so you take it and go home with it without helping people understand the subtleties of real life with God. And so I think that in many respects, you're right. It makes us wonder whether the Bible is true and whether God is even there if we're not careful in the ways we formulate our basic propositions and then derive those implications, those logical implications, following the law of non-contradiction.

Question 13:
What's the difference between induction and deduction?

Student: Richard, in the video you talk about systematic theology's use of induction and deduction. Could you elaborate on that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, it's a big one. Let me see if we can just do it this way. Let's define the terms again first. The first thing we need to say is that people don't define these terms in the same way, but basically, deductive logic is where the premises of the argument necessarily imply the conclusion. That means there is no if, ands or buts. So in other words, you're taking premises that actually contain all the information of the conclusion right there, and all you're doing is sort of drawing them out. Induction, however, has premises that have all kinds of information in them, but you are concluding something that goes beyond what's contained in them. You're making a probable, you hope probable, conclusion from a list of premises that you've made.

Now that sounds kind of abstract and difficult, but maybe it's not quite as hard as I'm trying to make it here. I think a lot of us know from Bible study methods that are out there, very popular ones, a lot of people talk about the inductive Bible study method, and we know what that means. It means basically, look at Bible verses, read them, draw things out of them, and then put them together into a conclusion. And that's

basically what induction is. It's taking particular items, particular beliefs, or particular truths, and trying to draw more general conclusions from those particular things. And the general conclusions go beyond what any particular premise or even the combination of all the premises will give you.

Question 14:
What is the "inductive gap"?

Student: Richard, you talked about the inductive gap in the video, and it seemed like something that was really important, but I'm not quite sure I got that. Could you go into that a little bit more?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, because it really is important. You remember, we have said that systematic theologians, just like do when we read the Bible and come up with theology, that we begin basically, though not exactly, though not in reality — we can say artificially — we begin by looking at the Bible and getting all this induction going on, and then we deduce things from that. Now again, those things happen all the time in a variety of ways, multiple reciprocities and so on and so on, but that's basically what happens. And that means then that the deductions that we make in theology are all based on inductions, so the sure conclusions that we draw, or the sure inferences we draw from what we think the Bible says, are based upon an inductive analysis of the Bible. And that's why the inductive gap is so important, because the inductive gap limits the ability of induction to come up with sure conclusions. Okay? So basically what we're saying here is that all of our deductions from the Bible are based on inductions in one way or another, and the inductive process has a problem in it.

Alright, now what's the problem? The problem is that you always say more in your conclusion from induction than you have facts in your premises. It's just always true. And there are two basic kinds of inductions. Let me just say this because this will help us work with this. You have the repetitive induction, and I gave the example of geese flying. Remember that? You watch one goose fly by, it's white. Another, another, another, maybe watch 10 million geese fly by and they're all white, and you conclude on the basis of those 10 million geese, all geese are white. Well, that seems rather reasonable. I've watched 10 million of them. Surely they're all that color, and they all thought that they were so long as they were talking about Europe. But as soon as they got to Australia, they found out that not all geese are white. Whoops. Because all you have to have is one exception, and the conclusion is destroyed. All you have to have is one exception, and the conclusion's destroyed.

Okay. It's the distance between the premises and the conclusion that is called the inductive gap, because you're always adding or assuming more than your premises give you. For example, if we were to look at the Bible and we were to say, Jesus says that if you pray in my name, you'll get what you ask for. And then you say, I prayed

in the name of Jesus, and he prayed in the name of Jesus, and he prayed in the name of Jesus, and so we're all going to get what we asked for. There's a nice generalized conclusion. Okay. But the problem is that person A and person B are praying opposite things. One's praying for it to rain and the other is praying for it not to rain. Now who gets it in Jesus' name? There's the problem. Because what you're doing, is you're going beyond what the data can give you.

And in that inductive gap in there, what we do to feel at ease, what we do to feel sort of psychologically at rest about it, is we fill that hole in with other things we believe. For example, take the geese example: 10 million geese have flown by, and what you do is you fill in the hole. Before you say all geese are white, you fill in the hole by saying, well, it must be the same way everywhere. And you fill in the hole by saying, that will be a sufficient number. And you fill in the hole by saying my eyes have not played a trick on me. You fill in the hole by saying no one else has reported any other color of a goose anywhere in the universe. Okay? And then those extra things that you don't even state in your inductive argument sort of make you feel at peace in saying the generalized conclusion that all geese are white. And that is the problem. That's where it really breaks apart. It's all those unspoken assumptions that you bring to bear on the argument that allows you to make that general statement that goes beyond what you've actually examined.

So we'll look at the Bible and we'll see, for example, that the Bible says Jesus is a man here, Jesus is a man there, he's a man this way, he's a man that way, a man, a man, a man, a man. And so we'll draw the conclusion Jesus is only a man. Well, the problem there is not the logic. The problem is that we have not had the right data in there, okay? And we filled in the hole of the inductive gap with insufficient information, and it has led to the wrong conclusion. Then you might start deducing all kinds of things from that if you've gotten to the wrong conclusion. That's one kind of induction, is the repetition, and all you've got to have is just one exception that you may not have ever seen or ever experienced. You've got to find some verse in the Bible that says Jesus is God. Oops. Now you've got the exception.

The other kind of inductive argument is what we call compositional, and what that means is that it's like pieces of a puzzle where you experience bits and pieces of a situation, and you draw them together, and you make a conclusion that applies to the whole situation out of the pieces. For example, I think we even use this illustration, don't we, that you see a friend come in from outside and he's soaking wet and he's got a wet umbrella, and you walk out and you see him in your hallway, and you conclude therefore it must be raining. Well, not necessarily. I mean, it's a logical conclusion. Maybe you heard thunder. Maybe 5 minutes before you looked out the window and it was raining, and now 5 minutes later the guy comes in, he's soaking wet, the umbrellas wet, and you conclude it's raining. Well, not necessarily, because all you have to do is have somebody on the roof of the house with a garden hose, who is spraying water down on the person after the rain stopped, and you're tricked into thinking that it's still raining. That's the inductive gap. And we fill in that inductive

gap with all kinds of things that we don't even realize, like, if it was raining 5 minutes before, it must be still raining. Those kinds of things. Or I heard thunder; that means it must be raining. And we know those are not necessarily true, but we fill them in anyway, and we make these things connect in ways that are beyond the data that we actually know.

And this is the problem with Bible study. This is the problem that even systematicians face, and it's why you don't just have one systematic theology that stands forever. It's because systematic theology is based on induction, and that means it can always be improved upon by somebody bringing up a bit of fact that nobody had thought of before. So that's typically what happens, that a systematic theologian will talk about what guys in the past have said, and then they'll say, but, now listen to this verse. Oops. Now here's another piece to the puzzle, and now we've got to factor that into the induction conclusion that you bring. Have you ever made a mistake like that, thinking that a situation is a particular sort and then found out that you didn't have enough information?

Student: Oh definitely.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I mean, this is just the way it happens. This is life. And that's what happens in systematically theology, too. And as we build systematic theology, it's always good to lean on other people who are experts but never accept that they have gotten all the data together, because they haven't. That's not possible. And we always have to be asking the question, what is it about this person, his background, his theological assumptions, that he's not stating that's filling in that hole of the inductive gap? That's the key, and that takes a little bit of mindreading to be sure. It takes a little bit of historical referencing, because when you are dealing, for example, with people in the earlier stages, say the Neo-platonic stages of systematic theology, they're going to have all kinds of philosophical beliefs and beliefs about the world and beliefs about God and things like that that are filling in the inductive gap that you don't share anymore, that you don't even believe in. You might not even be aware of them, but if you become of them, you don't believe in them anymore, and that's going to affect the conclusions that you draw. And so it's just very important always to remember this.

Now, some people are scared to death, absolutely scared to death when they realize that their Bible reading is never comprehensive. Because that's what it would take. You would have to know everything about the Bible and everything about general revelation, because that also impinges on this, in order to be sure that you're not making the wrong jump over that inductive gap, to be absolutely confident, and that would turn it then into a deductive argument, okay? So the conclusion would be necessarily held in the premises themselves. They're thrown into a tailspin sometimes, because they're so scared that what they're getting from the Bible isn't sure, isn't firm, isn't certain. Well, when people get that way, I usually say to them, welcome to the human race, because this is the nature of being human. We are finite,

and we cannot account for all the facts. And what we can do is do our very best and be responsible in the ways that we handle these things.
The inductive gap can be very large, or you can narrow it. Okay? And the way you can narrow the gap is, one, by getting more data. Okay? So that sort of closes the gap a little bit. And the other way you can lower the gap or make the gap smaller is by lessening your conclusion, not making it so extreme. Okay? You can work at it in both ways. You can say, well, you know, I believe this is true, but I won't make it quite this big, or let me go back and read the Bible again. That can make the inductive gap a little bit smaller, but it's never going to go away absolutely. And so that means then all the inferences, all the deductions that we make from these propositions and things that will imply this and imply that necessarily, are all based on these faulty inductive arguments that we've made from reading the Bible.

And that is why we believe that theology ought to be reforming all the time. It's why we think we always need to go back to the Bible and judge what theologians have said. It's our only absolutely unquestionable authority, and that means that every theological proposition ought to be questioned. Every theological proposition needs to be refined. If you allow one of them to be perfect and unrefinable, then you've taken a theological proposition and you've made it equal to the Bible, and that we don't want to do. Otherwise, we make our theology equal to the scriptures themselves, and that's contrary to the whole notion of what it means to be a Protestant. And so it's just very important. Have you ever seen people… have you ever experienced, let's put it this way, where you thought that you had a firm and a full grasp of a Bible teaching on some subject and then found out later you didn't, that you didn't account for a particular verse or something like that?

Student: Oh certainly, certainly. My own understanding of theology has changed so much since I first became a Christian. From one extreme to another in some cases.

Dr. Pratt: Me too. You know, I remember when I first became a believer, I read a few verses in the Bible that said to me — I understood them to say because other people were telling me this — that Richard, if you'll just believe hard enough, you will be well. Okay. And they had a couple of verses that indicated that that was the case. For everything I could tell, that's what they said. So I agreed with the conclusion. All I needed to do was believe. And I remember I had poison oak on my face and my face was swollen out like this. And I can tell you honestly, I believed so strongly that I was going to be well, that I challenged God and said, I'm going to believe you now, and I firmly believed it, and I spun around… and I said, Lord, when I come back and look in this mirror again, I'm going to be well. And I spun around and looked in the mirror again and I wasn't well. I had friends that took their glasses off and threw them away because they believed that they were healed. Well, see, the problem there was not the belief. It wasn't the faith. The problem was that I had not gathered enough data from my inductive conclusion from which then I deduced certain things for my life. And so it's just very important both on the systematic theology level and practical level, always to be aware that there's more to learned,

and if things aren't working our quite the way you thought they were supposed to work out, it could very well be that you haven't gotten all the data of the Bible into your induction because of that inductive gap.

Question 15:
How does the Holy Spirit help us to bridge the inductive gap?

Student: Richard, how does the Holy Spirit help us in bridging this inductive gap?

Dr. Pratt: He does, and I think it's really important for us to realize that. Basically, what we're saying at this point is that theology is not a matter just of logic, that it must remain a very personalistic thing, and that if we reduce this whole process to induction followed by deduction and things like that, just get the rules right and you'll be led to the correct conclusion, then we are missing the point altogether. I think that the most visible way, or the most obvious way that we can emphasize how much we need the personal ministry of Holy Spirit is in the fact that we have this inductive problem, that we've got this gap, that we are just never going to be able to get all the data of the Bible, much less add to that all the data of general revelation, into our brains at any moment, and then just think logically and churn out the right answers. It's just not going to happen. And so how do we then live without just giving up? And I think the answer is that we have to, we are forced to, we're compelled by this, to go to Holy Spirit's leading.

You know, the Bible does not encourage us to think logically and everything will be fine. The Bible encourages us to walk by the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit. Now being led by the Spirit and walking by the Spirit doesn't mean that you don't think logically. It just means that you, as it were, baptize and renovate and refresh your thinking processes by the power and influence of Holy Spirit. And that brings in then issues like intuition, emotional issues, conscience, and things like that, where the Holy Spirit works within us, leading us in imperceptible ways, in ways that might even seem opposite of what we might conclude logically. And that is a matter, however, of every theologian becoming very personal in their theologizing.

It's a difficult thing to express, because, unfortunately, systematic theologians have not talked about this enough to give us good vocabulary for it, and because they do tend to emphasize the logic and the ways of reasoning through things. But in reality, the best of theologians have always done this. They have always come to the point where they have to lean on the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit to convince them that what they are saying and what they're believing is right. And we must never allow ourselves to reduce systematic theology just to logical conclusions. And the evidence again for that is that inductive gap that never goes away. Somebody's got to fill in it, and I think that the way you fill it in is by prayerful devotion to Him who is our teacher, to Him who is to lead us into all truth, to Him who empowers us even to see the truth, who illumines us to know the truth. And if we ignore Him, and I mean

personally ignore him and just assume he's in the background working around, then what we're going to do is miss the most important piece of coming to conclusions that we can live with. And of course, we often misperceive the leading of the Holy Spirit, don't we? I mean, we do things… we draw conclusions out, we come to conclusions that we found out later were wrong. And that does happen in sincerity, but I think responsible theology comes from sincerely adopting what we believe to be true of the Bible, influenced then and confirmed by the work of Holy Spirit in us. Have you ever had a time when you thought the Holy Spirit was leading you to something and found out later it maybe wasn't quite the way you thought it was?

Student: Absolutely. I remember being so convinced that the Holy Spirit was calling my wife and I to the mission field, so much so that we had folks praying for us, and we actually ended up moving overseas. After a few years, learning a little bit more about who I was, and who my wife was, and our gifting, and the skills that we had, and as the Spirit revealed more things to us, we realized that that wasn't exactly what he was calling us to do, and we actually made another move to come back to the States in a different way. So it's very true what you're saying.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I think so. Because, you know, I wish that we could have a vision where the Holy Spirit would come and just answer all our questions, but he usually doesn't do that. He usually works where we are. But I think that raises then the issue then of the difference between having right theology and responsible theology. See, that's a big difference, because I think ideally we think of systematic theology as leading us to the right answer. And in some respects that' true. I don't want to deny that completely. But I think a better way to think of it is that we come to answers that are responsible, and by that I mean all the things we know about the Bible, and all the things we are feeling from Holy Spirit, and the leading of the Holy Spirit as best we can understand that, and the situation that we're facing — you just mentioned yourself, your knowledge of yourself — you've done the best you can, you're being responsible, and you make the choice based on that, but always being able to say later on, well, I didn't quite get it right. That's responsible theology. Otherwise, you know, if you have a good systematic theology, you don't need any more. It answers the question. There's no issue involved anymore. But people always need to be revising their theology to be closer and closer to the Bible and truer and truer to the work of Holy Spirit. And so I think the goal here, even with that inductive gap, is responsibility not perfection and I think that's extremely important.

Question 16:
How can we discern doctrinal emphases from doctrinal differences?

Student: Richard, when we talk about differences among us in the Christian community, how can we discern between something that may be just a different emphasis, or actually a real disagreement like a doctrinal difference of some sort?

Dr. Pratt: I think it's real important just to raise the question, because I think that when two Christians get together, or when Christian groups try to get together, the natural tendency is to want to say, we are right , they are wrong. I just think that's just sort of natural to people. And they don't even ask the question, could we both be right? Because the normal options are I'm right, you're wrong, you're right, I'm wrong, we're both wrong. Okay? But seldom do we come to the point where we say, well we're both right, but we've just got different angles on this, or different emphases on this. And of course, you know, we all would love to be able to say that our church or our denomination gets it all right and everybody else is wrong, so come to my church. And in fact, that's the way lots of Christians live their lives, is that they cannot even fathom the notion that maybe their own denomination or their own local church doesn't have all the right answers. Unfortunately, though, that's the reality. No church has all the right answers.

And if we're going to promote cooperation among Christians without just giving up our convictions, giving up what we believe to be true, there are going to be times when we have to admit that they are doing something that's right, but it looks so different from me because they're emphasizing certain things. And that comes from cultures — different cultures get together. It comes from different groups within the same culture — they'll have different emphases. And it will look like they're contradicting each other, and they really aren't.

Now there are real contradictions between different Christian groups, and we have to be sensitive to that and aware of it and know when to draw the line and put our foot down. But at the same time, we have to be ready to admit that we are emphasizing this, and we can go along with what you're saying, but we're not going to emphasize it the way that you are, we're not going to formulate it the way you are, we're not going to give the priority to it the way you are. And that would involve any topic in systematic theology, any doctrine. And the question would then be, is what this person or this group is saying compatible in some way with me and what my group believes, or is it truly contradictory? Oh it different, that's obvious. Okay? But is it compatible or contradictory? And if it's compatible in some fashion, then I think we need to emphasize that it is compatible, but at the same time, realize there are lots of truly false teachings out there that we need to stand against.

I mean, for example, if somebody says, well, I don't believe the Bible is really the authoritative Word of God. Well, I don't know how I can make that compatible with believing that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. That would be a hard one to do.

Student: That goes back to non-contradiction.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, exactly. Exactly. And so, you know, it's either one or the other now. It can't be both in the same sense, the same time. So I'm going to have to stand against that because that's a fairly clear delineation between the two of us. Now

if somebody says to me something along the lines of, well, I believe that we must lean upon the Holy Spirit to guide us through life, and that's all they want to talk about is the Holy Spirit's guidance and that sort of thing, and in my church the tendency is to say learn Bible principles and that will guide you through life. Well, they seem very different. They seem incompatible. But when you work at it a little bit, you can begin to see that really those two sides of the same coin are both important to us. So they're different but compatible and not contradictory. Have you ever known of groups that have had things go on that they think are absolutely contradictory against each other but you believe are just compatible differences of emphasis?

Student: Well, I can think in my own life early on, just being involved in worship, I myself had an idea of what was the right way to do this, and as I've gotten older and hopefully a little bit wiser, I've begun to realize and see that these really have been issues of emphasis more than something that I needed to be really staunch about.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, you know, and churches split over these kinds of things. Right. It's just amazing to me in many respects that churches will always go through these things, especially as you go generation to generation. You're always going to have the younger generation wanting to do things differently than the older generation did, and it's always going to cause some tension. But for the most part, even though there might be some real contradictions there, for the most part, they are compatible beliefs, compatible ways of worshiping with different emphases, and if we could just begin to talk that way about it, we might actually be able to come to some resolution, some kind of temporary blending of the two that then moves later on, rather than seeing churches split over such things, and actually see them love each other through such things. But that takes a lot of effort, especially — I hate to say this, but it takes a lot of effort from the younger ones, a lot of effort, because they have to back off and say, okay, I would rather have this in worship, but we have in worship from the older generation is not contradictory of this. They're not mutually exclusive. And what I can be satisfied with is loving my older brothers and sisters and a little bit of movement my way. And I think that's the kind of thing we're talking about.

And as the church of Christ becomes more and more globally minded so that as the earth has flattened out, that what happens over here affects what happens over there, and over there over here, we're not separate from each other — we're not just going to face this from generation to generation, we're going to face this with immigration, we're going to face this with ethnic groups, ethnic minorities and the like, saying it's now time to respect our opinions on these things, too. And that happens all through, not just worship and practical matters like that, but happens even in the theoretical emphases of systematic theology. As those things come up, as the changes come up, the question is always going to have to be, are these compatible, or are they truly contradictory? And to answer that sometimes is a hard thing and takes a lot of work, but it is the crucial answer, the crucial question to which we must come up with an answer.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles and Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.