Building Your Theology

Lesson 1 What is Theology?

Manuscript

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Lesson One

What is Theology?

INTRODUCTION

At one time or another, most of us have seen young children build things. Usually, children don't make elaborate plans. They simply piece things together as seems best at the moment. But when adults build things, like homes or other buildings, they understand how important it is to have a reliable plan and to execute that plan as carefully as possible.

In many ways, the same ought to be true when followers of Christ build their theology. Theology isn't child's play. We live, work and worship every day of our lives within the structures that Christian theology provides. And for this reason, it's important to have a reliable plan and to execute that plan as carefully as possible as we build our Christian theology.

This is the first lesson in our series *Building Your Theology*. In this series, we'll explore some of the basic directions we should follow to construct a responsible theology — one that honors God and furthers his purposes for our lives. This lesson is entitled "What is Theology?" Our answer to this question will touch on some essential considerations we must keep in mind as we study and live out Christian theology.

Our lesson will divide into three main parts. First, we'll look at the definitions of theology. Second, we'll explore the goals of theology. And third, we'll touch on the topics of theology. Let's begin by defining what we mean by the term "theology."

DEFINITIONS

Christians use the word "theology" so much that you might think we all agree on what it means. But throughout the centuries leading theologians have promoted different concepts of Christian theology. The word itself derives from ancient Greek philosophy before the days of Jesus, but it never appears in the Scriptures. It isn't found in the Septuagint — the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament — nor does it appear in the New Testament. This is probably because the word "theology" had pagan connotations that were unacceptable to early believers. Even so, Christians began to adopt the term "theology" not long after the time of the New Testament, and it's become a regular term in our Christian vocabulary today. Of course, throughout the millennia, we've understood what it means in different ways. So it's important to clarify from the outset the concept of theology that we will follow in this series.

We'll discuss the definitions of theology in three ways. First, we'll introduce four typical definitions. Second, we'll describe the tendencies that these definitions exemplify. And third, we'll touch on some evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of these tendencies. Let's get started by noting four typical definitions of the term "theology."

TYPICAL DEFINITIONS

According to Romans 1, there's a sense in which all human beings are involved with theology every day of their lives. Here, Paul explained that, from the beginning, God's invisible attributes and his moral requirements have been revealed to the human race through creation. When confronted with God's revelation in creation, even unbelievers, however unconsciously at times, reflect on God and his just requirements. And believers, no matter when or where they live, spend much of their time with thoughts of God. Yet, in this series, we want to focus on theology as a more formal task — a task performed by people who make a concerted and well-informed effort to pursue theology as a discipline of study.

There are countless ways that both Christians and non-Christians have defined the formal discipline of theology. But for our purposes here, we'll limit ourselves to just a sampling of typical definitions from four respected Christian theologians: Thomas Aquinas, Charles Hodge, William Ames and the contemporary theologian John Frame. Consider first how Thomas Aquinas defined theology.

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas, the renowned Roman Catholic theologian who lived from around 1225 to 1274, represents a very traditional definition of theology. His outlooks grew out of the practices of theologians who lived before him, and his views continue to influence theologians in many branches of the church, even today.

> **Thomas is a huge inspiration to me, because Thomas models for us how we could approach, on the one hand, the sacred texts of Scripture and the teachings of Christianity and the desire to be faithful to this, and at the same time all of the input, all of the data, all of the research, all of the movements in mainstream philosophy and science of your day as well. Thomas was known as the great synthesizer because of the way he brought Aristotelian thought and Christian thought together, which at the time, nobody thought you could do that. Aristotle had kind of been forgotten about. He'd been reintroduced to the western world through the Arabs who'd translated him into Latin so that everybody could read him again. And when Aristotle was rediscovered, there was a bit of a panic in Christendom at this moment because everybody recognized that Aristotle was a genius. He was brilliant. He had written on everything, I mean, literally everything. And then, thirdly, it looked like everything Aristotle was saying was at odds with Christianity, and that, therefore, could somehow disprove Christianity. And along comes Thomas who takes this stuff very, very seriously — this philosophy, very, very seriously — and at the same time he maintains his orthodoxy. He maintains a strong, deep, not just *ideological***

> **commitment to Christianity, but a *spiritual* commitment to Christianity as well. And he begins working on the intersection between these two.**
>
> **— Dr. James K. Dew, Jr.**

In Part 1, Question 1, Article 7 of his well-known *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**

Two dimensions of this definition deserve special attention. Notice first that Aquinas identified theology as a "science."

Now, here, Aquinas didn't refer to science in the modern sense of the word. Rather, he used the term "science" in the older and broader sense of "an intellectual or scholarly pursuit." In this sense, theology is an academic task with a rather specific goal. Much like people study biology, psychology, literature, law or history, theologians pursue theology as an academic discipline.

In Aquinas' view, the theologian's task was primarily to think, speak or write about doctrines or concepts. Of course, Aquinas believed that theology should have practical influences on every dimension of the Christian life. But he primarily conceived of theology as a science, an intellectual pursuit.

In addition to theology being a unified science, Aquinas determined that the discipline of theology focuses on two main subjects. On the one hand, theologians address issues pertaining to "God himself."

For instance, theologians formulate what they believe about matters such as the attributes of God — his omniscience, his omnipresence, his holiness and the like — as well as his plan and works. We often call these and similar topics the study of "theology proper." God himself is the object we study.

On the other hand, for Aquinas, the discipline of theology is also the study of other subjects in ways that "*refer to* God." These subjects are often discussed in other disciplines without reference to God, but theologians study them *in relation to* God. For instance, eschatology, the study of last things, is an important subject in what we may call "general theology." And Christian teachings about the nature of human beings, evil and sin, redemption, and similar topics all fall under the rubric of theology as well, even though they're not theology proper.

With Aquinas' typical definition of theology in mind, let's consider a similar point of view from the Protestant theologian Charles Hodge, who lived from 1797 to 1878.

Charles Hodge

Although Protestant theologians have differed from their Roman Catholic counterparts in many ways, by and large, they haven't greatly altered the basic definition of theology. Charles Hodge of Princeton defined theology in the Introduction to his *Systematic Theology*, chapter 2, section 1, as:

> **the science of the facts of divine revelation so far as those facts concern the nature of God and our relation to him**

We can see here that Hodge's definition is very similar to Aquinas' definition. Both Aquinas and Hodge described theology as a "science." Like Aquinas, Hodge viewed theology mainly as an academic discipline. In fact, he even went so far as to use the methods of natural or physical science in his day as a model for theologians to follow. Listen to the way Hodge compared theology with natural science in the Introduction of *Systematic Theology*, chapter 1, section 1:

The Bible is no more a system of theology than nature is a system of chemistry or of mechanics. We find in nature the facts which the chemist or the mechanical philosopher has to examine … to ascertain the laws by which they are determined. So the Bible contains the truths which the theologian has to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit in their internal relation to each other.

> **Charles Hodge was a man of the 1800s, and in the 1800s the word "science" was used more broadly than it is today. To modern ears the idea of theology as a science sounds jarring because we think of science as the hard sciences. But in the 1800s science was an organized, systematic, focused body of knowledge that was focused on a particular area of inquiry. So Hodge opens his systematic theology by referring to sciences in his day, such as history, science of geography. We wouldn't think of those as sciences today, but in his day they were sciences. Also, in his day, science and the scientific method had accomplished so very much in the century before him that it was very much esteemed as a method for gaining knowledge. But in addition to that, he wanted to emphasize that theology is the organization of facts; it's not simply the accumulation of facts. So, just like in astronomy, an astronomer doesn't simply look at the celestial bodies and make a list of facts about them. He or she tries to organize those facts into a coherent system, and that is astronomy. In theology, the theologian looks at the facts of the Bible and doesn't just list the facts of the Bible, but takes those facts of the Bible and organizes them into a system so that we can appreciate the interrelatedness of all those facts each to the others.**
>
> **— Dr. Larry Trotter**

For Hodge, the task of the theologian was to approach the Bible much like a scientist approaches nature. He was to gather, analyze and organize the facts of Scripture. Now, Hodge also believed that theology should be applied to Christian living. But, like Aquinas, Hodge didn't see this as the central focus of formal theology. Rather, he tended to leave application in the hands of ministers and pastors, limiting the actual work of formal theology largely to academics and scholars.

In addition to describing theology as a science, Hodge also claimed that there were two main topics in theology: first, the "nature of God" and second, "our relation to him." This twofold division of theology is similar to Aquinas' distinction between theology proper and general theology.

Having seen the typical definitions of theology in Aquinas and Hodge, it will be helpful to look at a third viewpoint. William Ames, an influential Puritan who lived from 1576 to 1633, characterized the task of theology in a strikingly different way.

William Ames

In the opening section of his book, *The Marrow of Theology,* Ames wrote that theology should focus on:

the doctrine or teaching of living to God

Now, it's clear from Ames' writings that his views reflected traditional outlooks on theology. As he put it here, theology is "doctrine or teaching" — the intellectual pursuit of ideas. But it's important to note that he did *not* refer to theology as a "science." Rather, he de-emphasized the close association of theology with other academic disciplines suggested by the language in Aquinas and Hodge. Instead, he identified the marrow of theology — theology's most central focus — as "living to God."

Aquinas, and to some extent Hodge, focused on theology as a collection of facts and ideas. But for Ames, the goal of all theological endeavors involved how to live in service to God. Instead of limiting theology primarily to an intellectual, factual pursuit, Ames looked with an experiential — or what the Puritans called "experimental" — orientation toward theology. In Ames view, the most significant dimension of theology is a focus on the full range of the believer's life before God.

With the views of Aquinas, Hodge and Ames in mind, let's consider a fourth typical definition offered by the contemporary theologian John Frame.

John Frame

In chapter 3 of his book, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,* Frame defined theology as:

the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life

Now, elsewhere Frame affirmed that theology involves the intellectual pursuit of Christian teaching or doctrine. But here Frame stressed that theology is the "application" of God's Word to "all areas of life."

For Frame, theology is not merely thinking about a set of traditional, relatively academic issues. Instead, like Ames, Frame sees theology as application. Applying the Scriptures to life is the centerpiece of all Christian theological work.

> **Theology really can go a couple of different directions. It can go in the path of academic pursuit, and that can be a legitimate and important thing. It can go in the direction of application to life. Part of what's interesting is people tend to choose between those and pit them against one another. Within the church there is rightly an emphasis on application to life; so we want to know not just information, we want to know how it applies to your life. That's good and legitimate and ultimately the right end of this theology — how we enjoy God, how we worship him, how we obey him in this world. When we emphasize that, we can say, "Why would academic theology have any importance to us?" But actually, it can have importance because it can help keep us honest. The reality is, we can take the Scriptures and try and apply them and say, "Here's theology, and here's how it applies to your life." But what if we have the theology wrong? What if we're saying things that historically, biblically, linguistically are just not true? So the academic is a fancy way of just saying, it's a legitimate discipline to do theology. Another way sometimes as theologians we talk about it is, good theology is public theology. It's open for critique. It's open for feedback because we want to make sure we're not worshiping an idol but the living God, that that, then, for that *good* theology, can shape our lives. So, it's got to be about application, but it's appropriate for us to be rigorous and careful in our reflections.**
>
> **— Dr. Kelly M. Kapic**

As we've just seen, these typical definitions of theology have similarities. But they also reflect two distinct emphases or tendencies in the field of formal theology.

TENDENCIES

To unpack these tendencies we'll consider first what we may call the academic orientation in theology. Then we'll look at the life orientation that some theologians have taken toward their discipline. Let's start with an academic orientation.

Academic Orientation

On the one side, Aquinas and Hodge represent an academic orientation in theology. Their outlooks reflect the majority of Christian theologians' views. In simple terms, they define theology in ways that correspond to the etymology, or linguistic background, of the word itself. "Theology" derives from two Greek words: *theos* (θεός), meaning "God," and *logos* (λόγος), meaning "doctrine or study." So, the etymology of the word suggests that theology is "the doctrine or study of God." This academic understanding of theology characterizes the vast majority of formal theological works, both in the past and today.

Of course, there's hardly a sincere Christian theologian who would say that merely studying about God and other topics in relation to God should be an end in itself. Faithful Christians affirm that theology is supposed to be applied to their lives in one way or another. But in this dominant, traditional outlook, application to the daily lives of believers is not seen as primary. Rather, it's a secondary enterprise — often called "practical theology" — that we do *after* we've settled scholarly, academic issues in formal theology. As a result, formal theology often can be performed with very little concern for ordinary living. It remains an area in which only a few academically-gifted people can involve themselves to any significant degree. And a sort of culture of intellectual expertise develops in theology.

Now on the other side, rather than a tendency toward an academic orientation in theology, some theologians approach theology with a life orientation.

Life Orientation

Ames and Frame represent this important minority view in which applying theology to the practicalities of life isn't a secondary task. Rather, it's the essence of theological reflection in the Christian faith.

Of course, throughout the centuries, there have been theologians who have seen theology as inextricably tied to the broader range of living as a believer. But in the past, relatively few *leading* theologians held this view. In recent decades, however, more and more Christian theologians have begun to reject the concept that theology should be concerned *simply* with intellectual matters. They've argued against formal theology as just an academic or conceptual basis for Christian living, but rather as a discipline that is deeply and essentially concerned with living for Christ.

As theologians have carefully reflected on the Scriptures, they've come to realize more clearly that love, devotion and service to Christ entail every aspect of our lives, not simply how we *think* about things. This biblical teaching has become increasingly significant in recent decades because scholars in nearly every field of study have begun to acknowledge how much life experiences influence their academic fields. Even the most gifted scholars in the world cannot escape the influence of their cultures and life experiences. And the same is true when it comes to formal theology. We're constantly reminded these days of the humanity of intellectuals and how their personal lives can deeply influence their academic pursuits.

For example, scientists and medical professionals, who were once thought to be purely objective, are now seen as ordinary people. We regularly question their opinions in ways that would have been unimaginable just a few decades ago. And, in much the same way, the church now recognizes more clearly that no matter how brilliant theologians may be, they are still mere humans. As much as they may claim to be objective observers of the facts, their views are deeply affected by their life experiences. As a result, purely academic approaches to theology are valued much less today, and the need for application is seen much more clearly than before.

So far, we've touched on four typical definitions of theology and two important tendencies that they represent. Now, we should step back and offer some evaluations of these tendencies.

EVALUATIONS

Many of us have heard the adage, "Our greatest strength can also be our greatest weakness." And we all know what this means. Our beliefs, our attitudes and our actions can be of great value to us, but if we aren't careful, they can also hurt us. In many ways, both academic and life orientations in theology offer many benefits, but they also have the potential for harm. For this reason, we should take a few moments to evaluate both of these theological orientations.

As we make our evaluations, we'll be looking at the advantages and disadvantages of both an academic orientation and a life orientation in the formal discipline of theology. Let's start with an academic orientation.

Academic Orientation

Perhaps the greatest advantage or strength of academic approaches to theology is that they emphasize one of God's most wondrous gifts to humanity: our rational abilities. God has granted human beings intellectual capacities, and he expects theologians to exercise those abilities as they pursue theological truths.

Throughout Scripture, wise men are honored for using their intellectual abilities in service to God. The Bible shows us that to be wise is to ponder what is true and to formulate sets of coherent beliefs out of those rational enquiries. For instance, Solomon was considered wise because he exercised his ability to think through matters. Listen to the high praise given to Solomon in 1 Kings 4:29-31:

> God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore … For he was wiser than all other men … and his fame was in all the surrounding nations (1 Kings 4:29-31).

Similarly, the wisdom literature of the Bible repeatedly calls on faithful believers to develop and use their reasoning abilities.

God has generally and graciously revealed himself to us in so many ways, so we can actually understand God and who he is and what he wants from us, maybe through what people preach to us and through reading the Scriptures as well. So that is there… That doesn't mean that we don't need to use our intellectual faculties to understand the Christian faith. Now, if you look at Paul, when he met the philosophers in Acts 17, he actually used his intellectual capabilities to be able to convince them about what he believes, and through that he was able to win some people over to the Lord. And I think we also need to actually use our intellectual faculties to understand the Christian faith, first, so that we can understand God and what he has revealed about himself, so that we can have a meaningful relationship with him. And number two, so that when anybody asks us about our faith, we'll be in a good position, whether a philosopher or whoever that person may be, we'll be in a good position to explain our Christian faith to that person like Paul did. So I think it is very, very important for us to use our intellectual faculties, or the gift that God has given us to reason, to be able to understand our Christian faith.

— Rev. Dr. Humphrey Akogyeram

Learning theology formally and systematically is so important for both the church and the believers to grow, through understanding Scripture and the Christian doctrines. The church usually doesn't cover these subjects, and we need to train people who can study the Word of God and teach it to others in order to create a generation capable of bearing the message and the depth of teaching God's Word to others, through their training, evangelism, relationship with the church, and especially, the relationship between the church and the society.

— Rev. Azar Ajaj, translation

Peter acknowledged the importance of intellectual sophistication in 2 Peter 3:15-16 when he commented on the theology of the apostle Paul. He noted:

> Our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him … There are some things in [his letters] that are hard to understand (2 Peter 3:15-16).

As we can see, the intellectual or academic emphasis of traditional theology doesn't oppose the biblical notion of good theology. On the contrary, rigorous thinking is a great strength of traditional theology.

Still, as valuable as academic orientations toward theology may be, we must always be alert to the dangers they pose. All too often, theologians gather, analyze and collate facts about God with remarkable skill, but they fail to give the same careful attention to *living* in service to God. Sophisticated, rational theological analysis often becomes an end in itself. We commonly consider people to be "good theologians" simply because they know a lot about theological subjects. But at times we have to admit that good theologians are not always good people.

How do we get to the point where someone can be a good theologian but not be a good person? It's when we operate with a definition of theology that merely includes academic activities, when we think that doing theology means studying well, writing well, and teaching true ideas.

> **It's quite possible to be a good theologian, or called a good theologian, and not be a good person. In fact, it happens all too often that people write really great books, they preach great sermons, they're leaders of the church, and then we find out that they really weren't good people all along. It happens far too much. And it does happen because often we identify a good theologian with somebody who's smart and who can be rigorous in their thinking, and we don't consider whether that thinking is impacting their lives. And it's a very serious problem… They can be good in their task, in their art, but they can be very bad people in the ways that they live. Now, the problem is that often we're willing to accept that. We're willing to just sort of let it be that way and never really challenge our best intellectual theologians to turn their great thoughts into real life. And that's where it becomes a problem, when it's in the church of Jesus Christ and among our leaders, because the truth is, we don't just need good academic theologians. We need good academic theologians who are also good people, people who are conforming their lives to the ways of Christ.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

> **Theology is not just simply head knowledge. Theology is a knowledge that actually informs both our hearts and our lives. And so, if someone has knowledge, if they have biblical or theological knowledge, and yet it's not impacting their life — that is, the way they treat people; that is, the way that they live; that is, the way that they serve God in their life — then they don't have good theology. I would actually argue that is not theology, because the goal of theology is to apply Scriptures into our life. And so, I would say, in the end, that someone whom we might regard as good theologian but rather not a good person is not in the end a good theologian.**
>
> **— Rev. Hutch Garmany**

As important as it is to evaluate the pros and cons of academic orientations in Christian theology, we should also be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of life orientations. How should we assess the growing consensus that theology must be connected more directly with life?

Life Orientation

In many respects, the greatest strength of a life orientation in theology is that it enables us to fulfill important biblical values. We all know that passages like James 1:22 call for us to go beyond mere academic theological pursuits. As James put it:

> Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves (James 1:22).

The intellectual hypocrisy of many theologians is utterly discounted by James' words. Good theology will lead to proper living and not just proper learning. If we believe anything different, we're only deceiving ourselves. Isn't this what Paul indicated in 1 Corinthians 8:1 where he warned:

> "Knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1).

And in 1 Corinthians 13:2, the apostle went so far as to say:

> If I … understand all mysteries and all knowledge … but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

The apostle Paul insisted that even if we're able to grasp every imaginable theological concept, if those concepts don't yield the fruit of love then our theological efforts amount to nothing.

The Scriptures constantly call faithful followers of Christ to orient their theological reflections toward living for God. We really aren't fulfilling biblical standards if we only concentrate on learning about theology in some objective, conceptual way. Rather, theology that endorses the values of Scripture will be theology that fleshes out what we believe.

At the same time, however, life orientations toward theology also pose a serious danger, especially the risk of what we may call "anti-intellectualism." All too often, Christians who value living for Christ reject the value of careful, rigorous theological analysis. Some actually view traditional, academic-oriented formal theology as *harmful* to Christian living.

We've all heard sincere people say things like, "I don't think we should get into doctrine. That will only take our minds off of Christ." Or, maybe you've heard, "You don't need to study theology; just be filled with the Spirit." Or perhaps, "Intellectual Christianity is dead Christianity." These well-meaning believers reject traditional, academically-oriented theology for an anti-intellectual approach to the faith. Instead of building their lives on carefully, even rigorously-conceived theology, believers like these

often simply lean on their spiritual intuitions without carefully examining them. Now, it's true that we should live for Christ and be filled with the Spirit. It's also true that intellectually-oriented Christianity can be deadly. But at the same time, all of us should resist the serious danger of anti-intellectualism in the church. This anti-intellectualism will inevitably lead to false teachings and misconceptions of the Christian faith that will have dreadful ramifications for the lives of many believers.

Paul acknowledged this danger in 2 Timothy 2:15 where he encouraged Timothy in this way:

> Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Here Paul insisted that Timothy must handle the word of truth rightly. But to do this was not an easy task. Handling the word of truth properly required Timothy to become a "worker" — *ergates* (ἐργάτης) in Greek — a term for someone who works diligently. Building Christian theology requires rigorous intellectual reflection.

Each of us must look carefully at the way we define theology. Some of us naturally tend toward an academically-oriented view of theology to the neglect of other aspects of life. Others of us tend toward a life orientation to the neglect of intellectual matters. To avoid these extremes, we must acknowledge that there are strengths and dangers in both views. The way of wisdom is to embrace both outlooks at the same time. We need both academic theology and theology for life.

Having explored several facets of the definitions of theology, we're ready to look at a second issue: the goals of theology. What purposes should move to the foreground as Christians build their theology? And how are these aims interconnected?

GOALS

There are countless ways we could summarize the goals we should try to reach as we build our theology. Certainly, Jesus' words about the greatest commandments in all of Scripture apply. Building theology should lead us toward loving God with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our strength, and toward loving our neighbors as ourselves. We can also summarize the goals of theology in light of Paul's instruction to the Corinthians and build our theology "for the glory of God." These and similar passages in Scripture set very high standards for our entire lives. But at this point in our series, we want to explore the goals of theology in a slightly different way.

We'll explore Christian goals for building theology in three steps. First, we'll identify three primary goals of theology. Second, we'll comment on the interdependence of these goals. And third, we'll examine the priorities we should observe as we seek to fulfill these goals. Let's begin with the primary goals of building Christian theology.

PRIMARY GOALS

In many respects, the definitions of theology that we've already explored provide a starting point for distinguishing several goals of theology. On one side, defining formal theology primarily as a science, with an academic orientation, indicates that one goal is teaching or developing doctrines that focus on intellectual matters. On the other side, defining theology with a life orientation indicates that another goal is to develop teachings or doctrines that focus on the broader issues of our whole lives in Christ.

We'll build on these two orientations by speaking of three primary goals for theology. First, we'll consider what has often been called orthodoxy. Second, we'll explore what a number of recent theologians have called orthopraxis. And third, we'll discuss a primary goal that is often overlooked in formal Christian theology called orthopathos. Let's start with what we mean by orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy

The term "orthodoxy" is sometimes used to identify particular branches of the church, like the orthodox churches of eastern Christianity. But here we'll use the word in its generic sense simply to mean:

right or straight thinking

The goal of orthodoxy is to reach right or true doctrines. No matter what our denomination or church, when we build theology we're interested, to one degree or another, in the truthfulness of what we believe. We want to believe the right things about God and other matters in relation to God. So, it's not hard to see why this conceptual goal has been emphasized by those who follow an academic orientation toward theology.

Theologians are right to make orthodoxy a primary goal of their theological work. Today, with rapid communication and worldwide shifts in populations, we encounter faiths other than Christianity at nearly every turn. This leaves many people confused about what to believe. Even many Christian theologians wonder if we really can be so sure about the traditional truth claims of our faith. Besides the confusing influences from *outside* the Christian community, it's also difficult to find Christians *within* the church who understand and can agree on more than a handful of core doctrines.

In spite of these current tendencies, we should reaffirm that developing orthodox outlooks — a set of what we would call "true doctrines" — should be one of the chief goals of theology. We must always remind ourselves that in Jesus' day there were many religions, and even many theological differences among the Jews. But despite the challenges that this diversity raised, Jesus insisted on the pursuit of orthodoxy. He spent much of his earthly ministry correcting falsehoods and teaching his followers what they should believe. He proclaimed, without hesitation, that his followers had to be people who sought truth.

Listen to Jesus' prayer for his apostles in John 17:17:

> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17).

Jesus was deeply concerned with true doctrine. Many today believe that we can be sanctified — set apart for God's service — without learning true theological concepts. But Jesus prayed that the apostles would be sanctified by the truth of God's word. He affirmed that orthodoxy is one of the principal goals of theology, and as his followers, we must do the same.

Now, as important as it is to affirm the primary goal of orthodoxy, Christians must also acknowledge the goal of orthopraxis.

Orthopraxis

As the word itself indicates, orthopraxis amounts to focusing on:

right behavior or practice

This term has moved to the foreground of many theological discussions in recent decades, especially among those who have taken up a life orientation toward theology. You'll recall that William Ames described the marrow, or core of theology as the doctrine of "living to God." One aspect of living to God is our practice or behavior. It's not enough simply to *think* correctly about theological concepts. We must also put these concepts into practice. Here we have in mind specifically physical behaviors. For instance, in theology we learn that we are to pray, evangelize, worship, serve each other, and give generously to the poor. But learning about these and other truths is not enough for responsible Christian theology. These truths must be translated into proper *actions* — into orthopraxis.

> **The relationship between theology and orthopraxis, or the way in which that theology works itself out in our lives, is crucial in part because it's not just about what we believe, but how what it is that we believe works itself out in our lives. You could think back to the early church, for example, about the Gnostics, and for the Gnostics it was all about just having this right belief, these secret understandings of God and his word and who Jesus was. And it didn't matter how that worked itself out in one's life because everything about this world, everything about this earth is accidental — there is no sense in which the behavior that relates to what one believes matters. But Christ doesn't say that at all. In his own teachings, and in the writings throughout the rest of the New Testament, and indeed throughout the whole Old Testament, God is saying to his people, "You are my people, and as such, because we have this relationship, you are my emissaries to the world. What it is that you do reflects your relationship with me." And so, it's an inextricable bond between what**

> **we believe and how we behave, how we go about living that out, either in terms of ministry and those that are called to be leaders of a church or a ministry and how they shepherd the flock, or even those just within the church that are living out their faith in their own ministry calling that God has called them to in their work or life or school. What we believe and how that works itself out in our lives is absolutely an essential relationship.**
>
> **— Dr. Scott Manor**

Sadly, evangelicals face several enormous challenges in maintaining their interest in the theological goal of orthopraxis. First, people outside of the church constantly bombard us with the lie that there are no moral absolutes, that no behaviors are particularly good or bad. So, many of us grow weary of standing against the tide of our cultures by insisting that there are right and wrong ways to behave.

But even from within the church, some of our reticence to make orthopraxis a crucial goal stems from how we as Christians have failed in this endeavor in the past. The church has committed many sins in the name of truth. We look into the history of the church and see horrendous behaviors that were supported by serious theological reasoning. It's a sad fact of history that religious people, even sincere Christians, often use their theology to justify all kinds of terrible sins.

But despite these serious difficulties, orthopraxis is still critical because our behavior still matters to God. Our good and bad works still affect our eternal rewards. The good things we do can also be God's means of ministering to our fellow Christians. We can still present a powerful witness for Christ to the unbelieving world through proper behavior. For these and other reasons, orthopraxis must be an essential goal of theology.

Now we need to be cautious on many levels. Humility and love must characterize our behavior at every turn. And we mustn't reduce Christian life to mere actions. Scripture is clear that we cannot earn our salvation through good works. Still, theology should never be concerned merely with conceptual correctness, but also with teaching and doing the right kinds of actions. Listen to James 2:19 where James warned against pursuing orthodoxy without orthopraxis:

> You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder (James 2:19).

In this passage James made a remarkable claim. In many respects, demons are orthodox. They believe that God is one. And they believe this truth so deeply that they "shudder" in fear. But the demons' orthodoxy does them no good because they refuse to submit to God in their practices.

> **James is writing to Jewish Christians scattered abroad, and he picks up on their central confession of faith. He says, "Do you believe that God is one?" Well, that comes from the *Shema,* a prayer that they prayed every day from Deuteronomy. He says, "Well, if you believe**

that, you do well. But also the devils believe and they tremble." Well, what's the difference between believing like the devils even believe and then faith that really means something, that actually saves us and creates a relationship with God? Well, the difference is in loving God and obeying God. James is focusing on not just reading the Word, not just hearing God's words, not just embracing them in the idea, but following them, attaching our affections to God. Jesus said it this way, he said, "If you love me, you'll keep my commandments."

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

In addition to the primary goals of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, we must also mention the goal of orthopathos.

Orthopathos

This terminology is not widely used, but it's not difficult to understand. The term "orthopathos" means:

right or correct feelings or emotions

Living for God involves making sure that our deepest sentiments are used in his service. Our joys, our disappointments, our yearnings, our anger, our exhilaration and a host of other emotions must be brought into conformity with the will of God. Unfortunately, if academic theologians tend to overlook any goal of theology, it's the goal of orthopathos. Neglect of the emotional dimension of theology occurs for at least two reasons.

First, many academic theologians are often psychologically inept at expressing or exploring emotions. In fact, the often sterile academic model frequently influences people to take up careers in academic theology — becoming professors and teachers — so they can avoid confronting the emotional dimensions of life. Consequently, it's not surprising to find about as little excitement, joy, pain, sympathy, care and love expressed in academic theological writings as you do in academic botany textbooks. If you've ever read much academic theology, you know that very little attention is given to emotional matters. Sadly, this occurs most often because professional theologians themselves do not value emotions, or they simply haven't developed themselves emotionally.

A second obstacle to orthopathos is that many evangelicals have fallen into the trap of believing that feelings are amoral, or morally neutral. It's not appropriate, they say, to speak of some feelings being right and others wrong. They believe that the notion of orthopathos — right feelings — is entirely misguided. But it's interesting to note that as widespread as the amoral outlook on emotions may be, it is much more in line with certain modern psychological theories than it is with the Bible's perspectives.

When you think about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and

self-control — when you think about those words, they're *highly* emotional. And what this tells us is that the work of Holy Spirit in the life of the believer impacts the emotions. So, emotions are not morally neutral. There are good emotions, and there are bad emotions. There are righteous emotions, and there are evil emotions. Now, we often have a hard time distinguishing those in this situation and that situation, but the fact is, is that the more we think along the lines of what the Bible teaches us, the more we'll be asking questions like, is my emotion correct for this situation? Is my feeling about this circumstance the way God wants me to feel about it? The fact that the fruit of the Spirit involves all kinds of emotional terms like kindness and gentleness and self-control and things like that — love, joy, peace, patience — I mean, what could be more emotional than those kinds of words? And the truth is, then, that emotions must be a part of Christian theology. When we think about the Bible and when we apply the Bible to life, it must impact our emotional lives. Not just our intellectual lives, not just our behaviors, but our emotions as well.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The Bible tells us a lot about how we're to think about God, how we're to act toward God, and also what we're to feel about God. So, the Bible is very clear that emotions are not morally neutral. Emotions are one of the ways that we are to glorify God with the whole of who we are… I pray that every aspect of my emotional response to the Lord and my emotional response to my life and what happens in my life would reflect who God is, who he's made me, and how he's made me to respond to this broken world, but this world also that he's redeeming and going to bring to fruition as he creates the new heavens and new earth.

— Dr. M. B.

A wonderful example of pathos within theological writing is found in the writings of the apostle Paul. We all know that Paul was concerned with orthodoxy. He was committed to pursuing the truth. Yet, time and again, as he wrote about truth, Paul could not contain his feelings. His reflections on orthodoxy caused spontaneous emotional outbursts. As just one example, listen to Romans 11:33-36 where Paul broke out in exuberant praise:

> Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:33-36).

Now when was the last time you read something like that in the middle of an academic theological treatise?

> **The book of Romans, in the first 11 chapters, teaches us all the depth of who God is and what he has done. In each chapter, Paul is adding something more, and when you get to chapter 11, at the end of chapter 11, the apostle is expressing all that greatness of what he has known of God… When you come to know God in that way, as he did — that merciful, loving, just, good, powerful God — you cannot avoid coming to a physical, spiritual, total worship in your being, a grand expression, an awesome expression of worship of God, because you recognize and understand who he is.**
>
> **— Rev. Pablo Torres, translation**

Now that we've identified three primary goals of theology, we should comment on their interdependence. This interdependence is an important reason why we can't ignore any one of these goals. In fact, they are so intertwined that we can't be strong in one area without being strong in the other two.

INTERDEPENDENCE

We'll look at this interdependence in three ways. First, we'll see some of the ways orthodoxy impacts the other two goals of theology. Then we'll note how orthopraxis affects both orthodoxy and orthopathos. And third, we'll consider how orthopathos influences the goals of orthopraxis and orthodoxy. Let's look first at the ways orthodoxy, or right thinking, impacts our behaviors and emotions.

Orthodoxy

Most evangelicals today rightly believe that some measure of orthodoxy is necessary for orthopraxis and orthopathos to occur. We learn from many academic and popular theologians that we must first understand the truth, and *then* apply it to our lives. It's quite common for Christians to operate with a rather straightforward perspective on these matters: "What I believe will determine how I live." And this is certainly true. What we believe to be true deeply influences our behaviors and our emotions.

At times, as our orthodoxy develops, what we come to believe will *confirm* our behaviors and emotions. Perhaps you're a person who's naturally inclined to feel sympathy for others and to act on those feelings. As you study theological concepts like humanity as the image of God and the kindness and mercy of God himself, you'll find that the deepening of your orthodoxy will confirm and enhance your behaviors and emotions.

At the same time, however, orthodox theological concepts often *challenge* us to change our behaviors and feelings. Perhaps you're a person who struggles with selfishness and greed. You're indifferent to the poor, and you do nothing to help relieve their suffering. Then, as your theological concepts of humanity and God become more orthodox, you will find it necessary to change your behaviors and emotions. Pursuing orthodoxy impacts orthopraxis and orthopathos in these and countless other ways.

> **Orthodox beliefs — that is, right beliefs — impact and should impact our emotions and our actions and our life because what we believe should be expressed in our lives. And we are called not to live to be transformed in our minds but also in our emotions. And what we believe should inform our lives. The information that we have through our beliefs, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, should transform us and eventually to form us so that our affections are really according to the will of God and our actions are also according to his revealed in the Word of God. And that is possible only by the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit.**
>
> **— Dr. David Samuel**

Now let's turn to a second way the goals of theology are interdependent. How does orthopraxis influence orthodoxy and orthopathos? How do our behaviors affect our beliefs and our emotions?

Orthopraxis

In the first place, orthopraxis often confirms or challenges what we believe to be true. For instance, consider what happens when inexperienced students of theology are asked, "Why should Christians pray?"

All too often, when believers don't have much experience of God answering their prayers, they respond to this question with something like, "We should pray because God commanded it." Now, this answer is true, as far as it goes. But I've never heard a prayer warrior — someone who is known for having an extensive, fully developed prayer life — answer in this way. It's true that the Bible teaches us to pray because we're commanded to, but a lack of prayer experience often hinders us from seeing many other biblical motivations for prayer. So, our *practice* of prayer influences what we understand to be true about prayer.

When believers are more experienced in prayer, they're often able to see more clearly all kinds of reasons the Bible gives us to pray. We pray because God is worthy of our prayers. We pray because we need him. We pray because, well, as James said in James 5:16:

> The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (James 5:16).

Righteous behavior and the experience of prayer yield the true insight that prayer is not only commanded; it's also powerful and effective. A lack of godly behavior robs us of these theological beliefs. But the experience of holy living challenges, confirms, and enhances our beliefs in many ways.

Beyond this, our actions also influence the emotional dimensions of our theology. That is to say, orthopraxis impacts orthopathos. For example, when believers commit serious sins, they often go through the emotional experience of guilt and conviction. At the same time, when we do what is right, we often find the joy and pleasure of God's approval and blessing. We all know from common experience that feelings of shame and sadness, confidence and calm, joy and excitement often result from our behaviors.

> **Recently there was a crisis in an institution in which I serve as the president of the board. There were some people coming from outside with some vested interest, especially from other religions, trying to create trouble in the institution. So there was an option that we really compromise with them, but we stood firm and decided that we will do the right thing and will not make compromises for the sake of false peace. And God honored our stand for him, and we were delivered from all those enemies, and it has really led to great joy energizing the community.**
>
> **— Dr. David Samuel**

As we've seen, orthodoxy — holding to true theological concepts — affects what we do and feel. And orthopraxis — behaving as truth requires — affects what we feel and believe. Now let's take one more look at the interdependence of the goals. How does our orthopathos — our right emotions and attitudes — influence what we believe and do?

Orthopathos

> **I think everybody understands from daily experience that the way we think about things impacts our emotions. And we also understand that when we do certain things, that also has an emotional impact. But sometimes we don't consider just how much emotions feed back into the ways we think and the ways we behave. And when you do Christian theology, it's very important to keep that direction of influence in mind also. I mean, think about it this way, when you're discouraged, you're just not motivated much to delve into complicated ideas. So, your emotions are impacting the way you think about things. Or we could put it this way, your orthopathos, your pathos, is impacting your orthodoxy. But on the other side, if you're optimistic in a situation, then you're ready to tackle all kinds of intellectual problems and issues and ideas, and so once again your emotions are impacting the way you think. This is so very important, and every teacher know this, that one of the critical things in teaching is the**

> **motivation or the emotions of the student and how that impacts the way they think, even the way they learn about things. And this is true all through Christian theology. And at the same time, emotions also impact our actions. When we're bewildered, it's hard to do the right thing. It's just that simple. And it's true for Christians when they do Christian theology that when they start drawing out the implications of the Bible for their orthopraxis, the ways they live, the ways they behave, if they're tired and bewildered and discouraged, they're just not going to have the energy for doing the right thing. But the flip side of that is that if you're encouraged, something's happened that's made you feel good and strong, then you find that you'll do what you ought to do more readily. I just think that's very important to us because even in the Bible, when the Lord calls his people to obey him, he often gives them motivations for why they should obey him. He calls them to rejoice and to reflect on the good things that have happened, or the bad things that have happened. And that emotional impact then leads them into obedience to God. So, as important as it is to realize that our emotions are affected by the ways we think and the ways we act, it's also just as important to realize that our emotions impact how we think and how we behave. So, all of these are critical to the process of studying Christian theology.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

We find some of the best examples of orthopathos in the Psalms. Time and again, the psalmists' emotions moved their thinking and actions in one way or another. For instance, when a psalmist felt forsaken, his expressions of orthodox thinking focused primarily on the trials he underwent and how his faith in God factored into this suffering. Listen to Psalm 13:1-3 and the way the psalmist's sorrow pressed him to ask perplexing theological questions. He pleaded:

> How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? … Consider and answer me, O Lord my God (Psalm 13:1-3).

In much the same way, the psalmists' emotions also influenced their *actions.* When forlorn, the psalmists were not quietly passive. Instead, they wept profusely; they grew sick. As the psalmist put it in Psalm 6:6:

> I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping (Psalm 6:6).

At the same time, when the psalmists were joyful, they displayed this feeling with the behaviors of dance and praise. As we read in Psalm 30:11:

> You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness (Psalm 30:11).

> **Good theology will be concerned not only with the intellectual or the outward working of the Christian faith in our actions, but what is sometimes called orthopathos, in other words, our emotional reaction to the truth of God's Word. And I think that it's important that the truth shouldn't just remain at the cognitive and intellectual level because it impacts who we are as human beings. And anything that we truly love or believe in incites in us emotions and affections and feelings, and that sort of "pathos" side of our humanity is part of the true outworking of the Spirit of God when we've grasped the truth of God.**
>
> **— Dr. Simon Vibert**

All of this is to say that the three goals of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos do not operate apart from each other. They are highly interdependent. As we build our theology, we must always keep in mind that what we believe impacts our actions and attitudes. Our practices influence our beliefs and emotions. And our emotions affect our beliefs and actions as well.

Understanding the interdependence of the three primary goals of theology raises a critical issue. What priorities should we observe as we pursue the goals of theology? Should we concentrate more on orthodoxy, orthopraxis or orthopathos?

PRIORITIES

We all know that Christians can be very different from each other in many ways. Some of these differences stem from the personalities God has given us. Other differences come from our various circumstances. Still others derive from the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit within us. God designed the body of Christ to be diverse in these and many other ways. And in many respects, our diverse personalities, circumstances or the special work of the Spirit of God within us, can affect how we prioritize the three primary goals of theology. Not surprisingly, we all tend to favor one or two goals more than the others. But is there one *correct* set of priorities that every Christian should follow? Is there one right way to approach orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

Many evangelicals have a simple answer to this question. They insist that we should always give first place to orthodoxy, second place to orthopraxis and third place to orthopathos. As we often hear, "Think right; then do right; and then you'll feel right."

Now, it's true that orthodoxy can lead to orthopraxis, and orthopraxis can lead to orthopathos. But a problem arises when we follow these priorities *all* the time. Most often, we never get beyond the first step. We're so focused on orthodoxy that we neglect our theology of action and pathos, or at best we consider these other goals secondary. Unfortunately, because of these goals' interdependence, when we give little attention to our behaviors and emotions, we also diminish our orthodoxy.

Thoughts, actions and emotions in theology interconnect with each other like the vital systems of the human body. Our bodies have a number of vital systems: a central nervous system, a digestive system, a cardiovascular system, and so on. Now, which of these systems should be given priority? What is the proper order for managing the interconnections among these systems? We may think about how the nervous system affects the digestive system, but we may also think about how the digestive system affects the nervous system. There are many legitimate and useful ways of working our way through these interconnections.

In much the same way, we've seen that our pursuits of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos form webs of multiple reciprocities. That is to say, they all influence each other in countless ways. Rather than simply being linear in their relationships, they are multi-linear, or reciprocal, to the point that we can't always assign one priority. It's true that we should think rightly so that we can do rightly and then feel rightly. But at times we should also do the right thing so that we can think the right way and feel the right way. And sometimes, we should even feel the right way so that we can think and do correctly. The Holy Spirit leads his people toward the goals of theology in many different ways.

> **I would say the relationship between orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos is at the core of a Christian understanding of the human person and redemption and conformity to the image of Christ … our beliefs, and what we do, and our desires all coming together and acting as one, as a sign of and as an element of our restoration and redemption. And so, this is what Paul understands as a fundamental goal of and product of the gospel, that we are the ones who actually are freed by the love of God to obey God and to love others and to do that from the heart. And that's exactly what Jesus commands on the Sermon on the Mount. You know, Jesus says, "Your righteousness has to be better than the scribes and the Pharisees," which means you need to do the right things, but don't do it for hypocritical, legalistic motivations. Do it from the heart. And so, Jesus sees that as the fundamental fruit of the gospel of what salvation is and brings to our humanity.**
>
> **— Dr. Jeff Dryden**

How then do we decide what to do? How do we decide whether to stress right thinking, doing or feeling? The answer is that we must develop the wisdom to give priority and emphasis to the goals of theology that are needed most in any given situation.

In many ways, it helps to think of balancing the goals of theology as if we are maintaining our balance on the deck of a rocking ship. Because the deck of life is always shifting, balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity. To stand on a shifting deck, we have to lean one way and then another over and over. If we fail to adjust to the needs of the moment, we'll surely fall overboard.

In much the same way, as we build our theology we have to ask ourselves which goal of theology we need to emphasize in each circumstance. "What theological goal do I

need to stress at this moment?" "What do others around me need most right now?" "Should I give priority to right thinking, to right behavior or to right emotions?" "Should I stress orthodoxy, orthopraxis or orthopathos?" Then we establish the appropriate orientation for that time, and we pursue all the goals of theology with all of our hearts.

Much harm can come to us as individuals, and to others around us, if we don't learn how to shift our priorities. If we constantly pursue orthodoxy as our top priority, we easily neglect the other goals of theology and stumble into intellectualism. If we constantly emphasize orthopraxis to the neglect of the other goals of theology, we easily fall into legalism. And if we always stress orthopathos to the neglect of the other goals of theology, we easily fall into emotionalism. But learning how to balance these goals, as the deck of life turns one way or the other, can help us avoid these extremes. So, each of us needs to ask the question, "Which of these tendencies characterizes the way that I approach theology? Am I prone toward intellectualism? Am I prone toward legalism or emotionalism or some combination of these?" Whatever our natural tendencies may be, we need to work hard to focus on those goals of theology that we tend to ignore. Then we'll be able to build a theology that leads to the glory of God and to our unending enjoyment of him.

> **I think it's important to remember that God created the totality of the person, not just their mind but created humans as emotive beings and as thinking beings and as acting beings. So when Jesus tells us we're to love the Lord God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, it's with the totality of the person. And I think that one of the ways to avoid an extreme in one area is to seek to love God in all dimensions of the human person. So, in other words, if someone is very emotional in their love of God, crying and ecstatic, this person needs to be rooted in deep-thinking of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 14, God tells us through Paul, Paul tells us that God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace and that where God's Spirit reigns, there's an order in the worship of the church. And so, where that is lacking, I think that reflects the community is not living in accord with God's revelation. They need to be instructed. They need to learn. There needs to be intellectual learning and growth that then results in a balanced expression — joy, emotion, passion, but not out of control out of control behavior.**
>
> **— Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

Now that we've looked into the definition and goals of Christian theology, we should turn to a third issue, the topics or subjects that comprise theology as a formal field of study.

TOPICS

Introducing someone to the theological enterprise is like introducing someone to the universe. It's a daunting task to say the least. So, in these lessons, we'll have to narrow our focus in theology to just a few topics.

To understand the topics that will interest us, we'll touch on two matters: first, the many options before theologians; and second, the selections we'll make in *these* lessons. Let's look first at the options that await anyone who ventures into the formal study of theology.

OPTIONS

When people first enter the serious pursuit of theology, they're often overwhelmed by the large scope of the field. It's common to think of theology as covering a long list of subjects. Throughout the two millennia of the Christian faith, a number of topics have come to occupy those who focus much attention on theology. The list of subjects differs from one branch of the church to another, but there are enough similarities that we can name a number of major theological categories.

The pursuit of theology normally includes some relatively practical topics like:

- missions
- evangelism
- apologetics — or defending the faith
- worship
- mercy ministries
- pastoral counseling, and
- homiletics — or preaching

It also includes a vast array of more theoretical or abstract subjects like:

- soteriology — the doctrine of salvation
- ecclesiology — the doctrine of the church
- anthropology — the doctrine of humanity
- pneumatology — the doctrine of the Holy Spirit
- Christology — the doctrine of Christ
- theology proper — the doctrine of God
- eschatology — the doctrine of end times
- biblical theology — theology of redemptive history recorded in the Bible
- systematic theology — the logical arrangement of biblical teaching
- historical theology — tracing the development of doctrines in the history of the church, and
- hermeneutics — or interpretation

Now for the most part, traditional academic theology has focused on these topics primarily from the vantage point of orthodoxy, or the right way of *thinking* about these

matters. A typical seminary class on any of these subjects will concentrate on getting the concepts straight — making sure that everyone is thinking properly. Occasionally, some seminary classes will concentrate on learning skills. Classes that focus on worship, evangelism, counseling, and homiletics — preaching — normally have a significant concern for skills or orthopraxis. Unfortunately, it's not common for seminary classes to concentrate on orthopathos, or the emotional dimensions of theology, even in a homiletics class. Yet, as we've learned in this lesson, a more adequate approach to the topics of theology requires deepening our concern in all *three* directions. So, we can see that the task before a student of theology is colossal. With every topic of theology, there are countless directions to pursue.

As you might imagine, the long list of topics and the many options that we face when building our theology leads to the necessity of making selections. We have to choose the topics and the emphases that we will pursue.

SELECTIONS

Everyone who builds houses will tell you that it's good to learn from what others have done. But at the same time, builders must also determine what it will take to complete their own projects. Well, in many ways, the same is true for us as we build Christian theology. It's good to learn from other followers of Christ. There's much to learn from the topics they've identified and how they've handled those topics. But at the same time, each of us must still determine what it will take to build our *own* theology — theology that furthers our service to God.

There's a grave danger that new students of theology face. The number and complexity of theological topics can be overwhelming. In fact, the field is so large that many students can do little more than barely learn the raw data of these topics. As a result, students often find themselves focusing almost exclusively on orthodoxy because there's so little time to explore other dimensions.

Well, in these lessons we want to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the vast array of theological topics. So, rather than trying to introduce the entire encyclopedia of theology, we're going to limit ourselves to just a few, select subjects. As we move forward, we'll concentrate on the aspects of theology that we'll call pastoral theological concerns. What we mean by this is those sets of beliefs, practices, and pathos that are more directly beneficial for pastors and church leaders. We'll be asking ourselves questions like: How do people training for church leadership need to approach the study of theology? What do they need to know? What do they need to do? And what do they need to feel theologically?

Happily, we don't have to invent answers to these questions. The church has already pointed in several important directions. As theological education has developed over the centuries, a consensus has grown among a variety of denominations throughout the world. Today, there's general agreement on the kinds of topics that need to be covered when educating leaders in the church.

When it comes to discussing which theological topics are important in developing Christian leaders, one can think of any number of them.

> **First of all, the Bible, from the Old Testament to the New, is all about God's kingdom and holy covenant. There are also the traditional topics of systematic theology, such as theology proper, Christology, pneumatology, anthropology, eschatology and so forth. Of course, there are even more relevant topics such as practical theology and church history. For me, as someone who especially focuses on the development of church leaders, they need to know how to evangelize, pray, and have the gift of teaching. Evangelism in particular isn't just a matter of teaching a crowd, but a church leader has to lead disciples just as Jesus did with the Apostles. The scope involved here is quite broad.**
>
> **— Dr. Biao Chen, Translation**

A typical seminary curriculum is often divided into three major divisions that look something like this: the biblical division; the doctrinal and historical division, and the practical division. These three divisions represent major ways the Holy Spirit has led the church to develop theological education for its leaders. Let's unpack each area starting with the biblical division.

The biblical division normally divides into Old Testament studies and New Testament studies. These areas of the curriculum focus on the content of Scripture and expose future church leaders to responsible interpretation of the Bible. The doctrinal and historical division often divides into church history and systematic theology. Church history focuses on how God has developed theology in the church as the body of Christ has struggled against the world in different ways at different times. Systematic theology exposes students to the ways the church has organized the teaching of the Bible into logical or systematic arrangements. Finally, the practical division draws attention to students' personal spiritual development and practical ministry skills such as preaching and evangelism.

As we progress through this series of lessons, we'll acknowledge the important contours of these theological divisions. We'll look into the ways each of these areas of theology function and how they work together as we pursue theology. In addition, we'll keep all three of our theological goals in mind as we study each division. We'll not only focus on orthodoxy, but on orthopraxis and orthopathos as well. And in this way, we'll work toward building a responsible Christian theology.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored the most basic question we can ask as we venture into theology, namely, "What is theology?" We've touched on three aspects of this question: the definitions of theology, the goals of theology and the topics of theology.

It's the privilege and responsibility of every follower of Christ to build theology. And as we've seen in this lesson, doing this in a formal way presents both challenges and

opportunities. We must be mindful to avoid paths that harm how we think, act and feel about the Christian faith. And we must do all we can to pursue theology in ways that enhance how we think, act and feel as servants of Christ. The issues we've addressed in this lesson are so basic that they will impact this entire series of lessons on *Building Your Theology*. And by God's grace, we'll be better equipped to build theology that honors Christ and furthers his kingdom in our personal lives and in the church throughout the world.

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Building Your Theology

LESSON ONE

What is Theology?

Faculty Forum

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Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Graham Buck
David Zoeller

Question 1:
How are orthopraxis and orthopathos different from orthodoxy?

Student: Richard, I've heard the term orthodoxy many times, but I haven't really heard the terms orthopraxis or orthopathos. Can you explain those a little bit more?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's a great question because I am using those three terms of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos, and they're real important in these lessons. And you're right, orthodoxy people talk about it all the time, but they don't talk much about orthopraxis or orthopathos. Now you'll find some groups in recent history, especially liberationists and people like that, Marxist — so-called Marxist Christians who talk about orthopraxis, and that orthopraxis for them means you can't just think about theology. You do theology. You live it. And I think a lot of people would just be comfortable living with the idea of orthodoxy and now add to that orthopraxis. You hear people all the time saying, "Yeah, let's be right theologically, but let's be practical" — praxis. And so they like to live with those two. But there's a problem with just living with those two, and it is that when people think just orthodoxy, orthopraxis, the third dimension, orthopathos — or feeling the right way — gets ignored. I mean, I think usually people include orthopathos, or feelings, within orthopraxis, but it's very easy especially in some branches of the church to ignore the feelings if you're not actually giving it a title, giving it a name. And so, yeah, for me it really means something very important to say that when you do theology, you're not just interested in thinking the right way, nor are you interested in just behaving the right way — and that's what I mean by praxis, I mean things you actually do, physically do — but you're also interested in the feeling side of all of this. You can't separate them as if they're separate things, but you can distinguish them. They are different focal points, they are different centers as you work through your theological issues.

Question 2:
What are some examples of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

Student: Could you give me an example of what orthopathos might be? Because it seems like everybody like feels different from one minute to the next. How do we define it?

Dr. Pratt: Well let's just take an example of all of them. Okay, let's just say, "Jesus is Lord." Let's just take that; that's probably the most basic Christian commitment we have or basic theological notion we have. And if we say that Jesus is Lord, orthodoxy means: we know what that means. We know for example that it means he is the controller of everything, that he's not a creature but he's the creator himself. So the lordship of Christ would mean that we have the right kinds of ideas associated with that, unlike, say, Jehovah's Witnesses. When they say Jesus is Lord — and they do — what they mean by that is that he's the biggest and the best of all the creatures. Okay? So that would be an unorthodox way of thinking about Jesus. So there's orthodoxy, you think about him. Now the practice, the orthopraxis of that statement, "Jesus is Lord," is that you do things with your body that demonstrate that you believe in it. Okay? Like, you don't kill people, or things like you share your faith with people, or you seek to make Christ the Lord of your life in your behavior, so you try to treat people better, you try to obey the Bible. You do those kinds of things in outward ways with your body.

Orthopathos is a little bit different than that. You can believe the right things about Jesus, and you can do the right things about the lordship of Jesus is some ways, physically, without ever really touching the attitude, or the sentiment, or the affect, or the emotions. And to know that Jesus is Lord in the fuller sense of that expression means that you'll also be "orthopathetic", that is — not pathetic in the way we often use the word meaning miserable or aren't we sorry for this person, but thinking, doing, and then feeling the fact that Jesus is Lord. So when you and I think about the lordship of Christ, it ought not just cause us to think the right doctrines, it ought not just cause us to do certain things with our bodies, but it should also cause us feelings of awe, and reverence, and adoration, feelings of repentance and sorrow over sin, affection for Jesus, love for him. These are the kinds of things that come from a true knowledge, a fuller knowledge, of "Jesus is Lord." And the same kind of schema can be applied to every single theological truth, because people just tend to think theologians are dry and cold. And the reason they think that is because theologians, by and large — that is, professional ones, the ones that write the books — they do tend, the more academic they are, to focus more on the orthodoxy and leave the others. Or if they're super-practical, they'll move down into the orthopraxis. But very seldom do you hear people talking explicitly about orthopathos. And that's what we are saying in this lesson is one of the distinctive and specific goals of Christian theology.

Question 3:
Does orthopraxis add a requirement of works to the gospel?

Student: Now Richard, I understand that orthopraxis, it's really important and we need to emphasize it, but doesn't it seem like we're adding something to the gospel?

Dr. Pratt: Wow. Yeah, I think a lot of people would hear it that way, so I'm glad you raised that. It's real important to understand that we have a misconception among us, and that is that many times we think of faith, saving faith, the faith that justifies us, as something that's purely mental and that, in other words, it's just an orthodox thing — meaning in other words, if people come to faith in Christ, what that means is somehow they agree that the gospel is true and that they're saved by faith in Christ rather than by their own good works, things like that. And if they just agree, if they just give mental ascent to that teaching or that doctrine, then they're okay. They're saved, they're justified, no problem. That's what we say. That's wrong. Nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to what saving faith is, because as we know, the Bible doesn't just say believe in Christ, it also uses synonymously at times that they obeyed the gospel — not that they just believed the gospel but that they obeyed the gospel, the New Testament says. And the reason for that is because saving faith is something larger than mere orthodoxy, merely being able to say the right words or being able to enunciate exactly how Jesus is the Lord and Savior and the way of faith, and things like that.

And that's why the Bible connects saving faith to things like repentance and change of life, because saving faith is more than orthodoxy. It also involves behavior. If we don't confess with our lips — and there's a behavior — that Jesus is Lord, then we cannot be saved. Now don't take that too literally because if people don't have lips, that's not what they have to do. It is still possible for mute people, for example, to be saved. But if they don't behave in ways that demonstrate that they have the right way of thinking and that they are repenting of their sins in their lives, then they're not having initial saving faith. That's why even in the Bible, often for adults anyway, baptism is associated with saving faith, because the baptism in the New Testament is often the sort of first step a person takes. In modern day evangelicalism it's often walking down an aisle, or raising your hand, or signing a care, something like that — making a decision, praying to receive Christ, we say. So believing in Christ does involve not just orthodoxy but also orthopraxis.

Now it also involves orthopathos, feelings. Because repentance is not just being sorry for your sins and loving God, but it does involve feeling sorry for your sins and love for God. If you don't have the love of God in you, then you cannot be saved. It's really that simple. And love in many ways is an affect, it's a pathos, it's a feeling. And we mustn't reduce that to an action, and we mustn't reduce that just to an idea, or a doctrine, as it were. So all three of these, orthodoxy, orthopathos, orthopraxis, all three of those are involved in the initial commitment that people make to Christ

which saves them by faith alone, as we say in my tradition — by faith alone. But faith involves orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos.

Now, where works comes — this is where the confusion comes — is in the ongoing life of the person after they've received Christ, after they have been saved initially. And if we think somehow that in order to be saved God accepts our faith but then we have to add to that works of righteousness to be saved, then we're missing it. Now, orthopraxis, or good works, is important, and it's part of the whole package of salvation, but it's the working of God's Spirit within us bringing the fruit of saving faith out. It's not that we're adding merit, not that we're adding goodness. So sometimes we overstate the case when we tell people that believing in Christ is a simple thing, and we let them think that believing is just affirming certain truths. And it's not that. It does involve illustrating that acceptance of truth in your behavior and demonstrating it in the way you feel as well.

Question 4:
Which is primary: orthodoxy, orthopraxis or orthopathos?

Student: Now, is there any sort of primacy because it seems like we emphasis you get orthodoxy right which will lead to orthopraxis and pathos, but it seems that you're saying they're all perspectives on one thing?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that is what I'm saying. And just to put it in a nutshell, the idea here is that the old language that people used to use was there's an economic priority to ideas, and I think there's some truth to that, that you have to know something before you can behave on the basis of it and before you can feel about it. But we'll talk more, though, about how they interrelate to each other, but there is this kind of economic priority. It's not that it's somehow closer to God or of substantial value to believe something and then to move toward praxis and feelings, but there is the sense in which you've got to have ideas. For example, people are not saved by grabbing a Bible and holding it close to their chest and feeling how good it feels. Okay? They're saved by opening it up and reading it and understanding it. Or when the gospel is spoken to someone, they don't somehow take that and just sort of embrace it emotionally without any cognizance. So there's a sense in which, yes, there is this kind of economic priority to believing it in the sense of orthodoxy and then moving to praxis and pathos.

Question 5:
How do orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos interrelate?

Student: Now Richard, I'd like to ask you a little bit more about how these three perspectives can act — orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. Is one supreme above the others?

Dr. Pratt: That's great, because it's real important, and that's why we spend some time on it in the lesson. The normal way that evangelical Christians think is that there's a priority of orthodoxy which then will result in orthopraxis — meaning in other words, think right, then you'll act the right way. And then if you act the right way, then maybe, they usually say, you might begin to feel the right way. And so there's this one, two, three priority given. And there's nothing wrong with that in itself, because it does work that way; thinking right leads you to right kinds of practices, and the right kinds of practices can lead you to the right kinds of feelings. So there's nothing wrong with the one, two, three.

The biggest problem I have with the one, two, three system is that if it's the only way you work your way around that triangle, then number three always gets ignored, or underplayed at least. Because when can you ever get your thinking straight enough to move on to number two? And then when can you ever get number two — acting on things — when do you ever get enough of that going that you can then move on and concentrate on number three? The answer is never, usually. And unfortunately, the Westminster Shorter Catechism even leads us into that kind of prioritizing when it says that the chief teachings of Scripture — "What do the Scriptures principally teach?" — the answer is "what we are to believe concerning God and what duty he requires of man," and there you have orthodoxy, what we believe about God, and what duties — that's orthopraxis in most of our minds. Although I don't think that's the best way to read the catechism, that is the way people tend to do it. And so this one, two, three prioritizing is alright, but if that's the only way you do it, then you end up ignoring number two, and the you end up really ignoring number three, which is orthopathos.

And so what I'm arguing for in this lesson is that there is a wisdom to learning how to reprioritize, in other words, to start emphasizing different things, because all three of these are interdependent. Orthodoxy depends on orthopathos. For example — every teacher will tell you this — the most important role that a teacher has is affective, that is, dealing with the affect, that you have to be motivating people to learn. If you're not motivated to learn, it's very hard to learn ideas. So orthodoxy is influenced by your orthopathos. So if you're in love with God, if you're thrilled about your faith, if you're really excited about learning about something in the Bible, then your pathos, or orthopathos, which is a good thing to have, is motivating you to orthodoxy. And also — I think we all know this — that orthopraxis can also help us in our orthodoxy because very often — we talk about this with students especially — that students don't have enough experience many times to avoid crazy theories. You know, they

get these ideas of, "Oh, I know exactly what the Bible says about how to start a church." And so they get all the rules out in abstract and then they go out and try to start the church, and they realize it doesn't work. And then they go to somebody who's had some experience, some practical experience, some orthopraxis, and they begin to realize, "Hey, I don't need to compromise with praxis or practical things; the problem is that I didn't have enough practice to know what the Bible is actually saying." That's the problem. So practice actually clarifies what the Bible was actually saying to us in terms of orthodoxy. And so these three connect to each other in every way imaginable. And that's why that slogan comes up in there, that all beliefs form webs of multiple reciprocities, because all of these things are interconnected in a variety of ways.

Question 6:
What is a web of multiple reciprocities?

Student: Now, that term, "web of multiple reciprocities." That's mentioned in the video as well. And it's kind mentioned in passing, and you just mentioned it again. Can you kind of flesh that out a little bit more?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. It's hard to flesh it out without going into a long explanation, and that's why I didn't do it in the video, frankly. But let me just say it this way. We usually think that there is not just a set of right beliefs but that this set of right beliefs has a particular logical connection among its various pieces that a right-thinking person will always observe. In other words, this belief connects to that belief in this logical way, and that belief connects to that belief in this logical way, and logical, logical, logical. And then we do that and we think well that's the only way to connect those things, that that's the only logical relationship among them. But the fact is that all of our beliefs connect to all of our beliefs with manifold logical connections.

Let me give you example. A lot of people would say I believe in the Bible as, say, their first premise, and that leads me to the conclusion, because I read the Bible, that Jesus is the Lord. So I believe in the Bible first and then I believe Jesus is Lord. I conclude that. Well, the fact is, that's true, that if a person believes in the Bible then they're going to come to believe that Jesus is Lord. But you can reverse it as well. A person who believes that Jesus is the Lord is led to the conclusion on the basis of Jesus' own life that the Bible should be believed. So which comes first? Which is more important, believing in the Bible or believing in Jesus as Lord? Well, the fact is both of these work on each other in reciprocities. And a web of reciprocities occurs when you have multiples of these interconnections where they just start piling on top of each other, on top of each other. So rather than thinking of our Christian belief system as — in terms of orthodoxy, orthopathos, orthopraxis — as just connecting in one particular way, these all connect in manifold ways. And the limitations of those manifold connections is just a matter of our imagination, the limits of our imaginations, because orthopathos connects to orthopraxis which connects to

orthodoxy, and orthopraxis connects to orthopathos which connects to orthodoxy, and orthodoxy leads to orthopathos which leads to orthopraxis, on and on and on and on it goes.

And that's the way it is with every single thing of the Christian life. All beliefs form webs of multiple reciprocities. And then when we begin to think of an argument or we start at any particular moment to trace our way through different Christian beliefs, what we end up doing then is just picking one or two of those paths of connections, and we don't ever get them all in any particular paragraph or any particular sentence. And so it's just real important to keep that in mind. And that's where that balancing act comes in. Because you've got these beliefs that form these huge webs of interconnections or multiple reciprocities, the question is always which do I emphasize? And that's where we have to make the wisdom choice.

Question 7:
How can we balance orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

Student: Now Richard, you also bring up the term or the phrase, "The deck of life is always shifting," and applying that to how we should interconnect orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos. Talk about what you mean by that shifting.

Dr. Pratt: Well let me remind you of the whole expression, okay? It goes something like this: "Because the deck of life is always shifting, balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity." That's a mouthful, I know. I'm sorry. But you have to say it in ways like that to get people to remember it. Once they get it, they got it, okay? So let me do it again. Because the deck of life is always shifting — so imagine your life as a theologian as if you're standing on a boat, the deck of a ship, and you're standing on top of a beach ball on top of the deck of that ship. And you're holding a tray with a cup of tea. Now that cup of tea is the theological concept you're trying to serve to the body of Christ. But as you do that, you're balancing yourself on this huge beach ball that's rolling around on the deck, and the deck is moving back-and-forth like this in this rocking ocean. And that's the way life actually is. I know a lot of times we don't think of it that way. We think of the earth as if it were flat and somehow it was established on pillars and everything just stays the same, but it doesn't. It's always changing, sometimes more dramatically than other times, but it's always shifting. We change, the world around us changes, what God is doing in the world changes. All those kinds of things shift all the time. And the people whom we're teaching are also changing all the time. They're on their own decks of life.

So here we are, trying to figure out what should we emphasize at any given moment? I mean, pastors have to do this all the time. Teachers have to do it. Ordinary Christians have to do it when they deal with their friends and even with their own personal lives. How do you decide what you're going to emphasize? Okay, so let's just stick with the orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos options. Which of those three

should a person emphasize? Well the answer is it just depends on the tilt of the deck. If the deck is tilted this way, then if you don't lean the other way, then you fall overboard. So if you're in a situation where the need of the body of Christ that you're worshiping with or teaching in Sunday school, or a friend that you're witnessing to, whatever it may be, if it's leaned over very heavily on the emotional — orthopathos — then probably you need to be pulling hard the other direction more toward orthodoxy and orthopraxis. If you find churches that are very much oriented toward orthopraxis — and there a lots of those where they are, you know, everything has to do with let's do something for Christ; we're not going to think about this anymore; we don't care what we feel, we're just going to do the right thing; love is a verb. I mean, you hear that all the time, right? Love is a verb. You know, you "do" love, you don't "feel" love. Well if that's the kind of thing that's being said all the time in a church, well then people tend to be like this — way over on orthopraxis. If you see a situation like that, then you probably need to be pulling them the other direction more toward orthodoxy and orthopathos. And if you find a church that's oriented toward orthodoxy where they just want to study the Bible more and more and more, learn more and more doctrines, memorize catechisms, things like that, and they think that's the end goal, that that's the end of the game, then you probably need to be pulling the other two directions leaning back this way. However the deck is lilting at the time, we usually as teachers need to acknowledge that and diagnose that, get a sense of that, and then pull back the other direction.

So in terms of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos, the goal is to constantly be moving. We all have our natural propensities. My natural propensity is towards orthodoxy. I mean, I would love not to ever have to do anything for Christ; I would love to never have to feel anything, if I could just be satisfied with getting the right ideas. But that's not good, that's not holy, that's not wholesome. There are other Christians I know that couldn't care less about doctrine and all they want to do is just be active for Christ. Well, you can't say that's a bad thing in the sense of desire to serve Christ, but we've got to have good doctrine and pathos, too. And then there are groups that want to do nothing unless it feels good or feels exciting, so they're way out on the orthopathos and we pull them back the other direction. But that always changes — that's what's so important. It always changes. So you trace your way through the web of multiple reciprocities — remember that one? You trace your way through that depending on how the deck is shifting. Have you ever seen people that have gone one direction or the other? How would you describe a church that overemphasizes orthodoxy?

Student: The church that overemphasizes orthodoxy is going to be dry. It's going to be like you're going to walk in there and think, are these people even alive? All they do is just try and memorize and don't actually put feet on the ground and do something for Jesus.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Have you ever known churches like that?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Pratt: Me too. See? And this is why I'm sensitive to it. My own tradition does that a lot. We're not called the "frozen chosen" for nothing. Okay? It's because we just sit around and talk about our religion and think that that's doing religion, and it's not. Have you ever seen churches that overemphasize orthopathos?

Student: Yes, actually. I've been in situations where that's been the case.

Dr. Pratt: I would guess that you've probably been one of those.

Student: No, not necessarily. No, I would probably find myself with you in the orthodoxy camp. But churches that emphasize orthopathos tend not to want to necessarily look at Scripture, or look at all of Scripture. They tend to maybe pick out a few verses here or there that apply to their situation, but they don't look at the whole of Scripture, at what it teaches about a certain subject, so they're not really intent on really learning about something. They just kind of go with it, go with it and just kind of go off on it.

Dr. Pratt: And some of those churches emphasize supernatural spiritual gifts, for example. But others — and this would be more common because they're not the only ones that overemphasize orthopathos — would be those that sort of turn church into a therapy session. You know, that the goal of the gospel is for you feel better about yourself and your relationship with God, and that's all they're concerned about. So if you're not feeling better, then it's not worth our discussion, it's not worth our time. Especially if it's going to make me feel bad or feel empty, then I don't want to talk about it. I'm not going to do anything that's not going to make me happy.

In fact, I was in the airport one time and a pastor, a friend of mine, actually walked to me and said, "Hey, I've heard that you're working with Third Millennium. You must be so thrilled. You must be so happy." And I said, "Well, I'm committed. I don't know that it's making me happy right now," because it was at a pretty hard time. And he said, "But Richard, if you're in the will of God, you're going to be happy." And I looked at him and I said, "What religion are you talking about?" I said, "I don't think Paul was really thrilled to death when he heard that he was going to have to suffer much for Christ." You know, people aren't happy about that. But they're committed and they endure, and they try to have proper Christian attitudes toward it. But happiness is what it's made up to be sometimes. And unfortunately, especially in prosperous Western culture, fulfillment, and self-actualization, and happiness, those attitudes, those feelings, just seem to be the end-all. But now, let's pick on the third group. You ever been in churches that are activistic — orthopraxis?

Student: Absolutely. I can actually remember a friend of my mine saying systematic theology is pointless. It's just guys sitting around talking about ideas. They're not out there living, being Jesus to the world around them.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, there are lots of churches that do that know. I know like one thing that's happening these days is the "emerging church" talks that way a lot. They talk a lot about Christianity, Christ religion, Christ faith is an active faith of service. Well, who could disagree with that? It is an act of service, and sitting around and just talking about ideas is fairly worthless. But you can go to the point, like many of them do, of saying therefore theology, traditional theology, is not important anymore. It doesn't matter if you believe in the Trinity, it doesn't matter if you believe in the divinity of Christ anymore. All you have to do is just live the Christian life. And the reality is you can't live the Christian life without the right doctrines and without the right feelings. And so all these things go together, and this web of multiple reciprocities and this deck of life balancing act is what we've got to shoot for.

Question 8:
How can we resolve tensions between orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

Student: Now Richard, a question that I have is what do we do when there seems to be a tension or conflict between something we read in the Bible and then when we try and live that out in real life?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, like when orthodoxy and orthopraxis and orthopathos conflict with each other, or seem to?

Student: Yeah.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, because they do. And this is one of the realities of that web of multiple reciprocities is that things don't always just jive with each other. They often create tensions. I mean, if you start valuing the way you feel about certain things, then there are going to be things in the Bible that are said that are not going to make you feel quite at home, or safe, or identified with these things, or sympathetic toward these truths. I mean, let's just face it. When we read about the holy wars of Israel, I hope that very few of us sort naturally feel like, well that's a great idea, let's just kill everybody. I mean, it should create a sense of disconnect or dissonance.

Or take another example. When the Bible tells us in Revelation 6, for example, that Jesus won't return until the full number of martyrs has been completed. And then somebody stands up and says, "Alright, now that means you need to be a martyr, you need to practice that" — orthopraxis — endanger yourself. Well, you know, that's going to be a different thing for many people to do. So there are tensions here, and the reality is sometimes the tensions that we feel are clues. They're like caution lights coming on on the traffic light. They're clues that maybe we haven't understood the doctrine correctly. That's one good thing about orthopraxis and orthopathos, that you try to practice a teaching and you see it's not working. And sometimes the failure in

practice can be a caution light that comes on and says, "Well, maybe I didn't quite understand it."

I can think of an example in my own life. When I was a very young Christian, I thought that if I just believed hard enough that a poison oak infection I had on my face, if I just believed hard enough that it would go away that it would. And so I can honestly tell you sitting right here that I believed with all of my heart that it would go away. I told the Lord, I said, "I'm going to spin around and when I look back in this mirror it's going to be gone," because that's what I had been taught. As a very young Christian I'd been taught if you just believe it, it will happen. Okay, so act on it, take a step of faith — orthopraxis. And so I spun around in front of that mirror and opened my eyes, and it was still there. And what that experience of orthopraxis, the attempt at orthopraxis did was not show that the Bible was wrong. The light came on. Maybe I didn't understand the Bible correctly. Maybe my teachers were not telling me the right thing when they told me if I just believed hard enough that…the Bible taught that I just believed hard enough it would be done. So sometimes those tensions alert us to the fact that we are not understanding the Bible correctly. And so we go back to the orthodoxy and work at it harder.

Other times, however, orthopraxis and orthopathos — and this would especially true in Western culture where Christianity is relatively easy — sometimes we feel tension simply because we're not willing to accept the truth. The truth of the Bible is hard. I mean, when Jesus tells us for example that you save your life by losing it, basically in Western Christianity we don't know that that means. We don't have a clue what that means. And so it's very hard for us even to conceive of a practice that would lead us into risking our safety, risking our prosperity, those kinds of things, for the sake of the gospel, even though clearly that it what the passage is teaching. Jesus is saying if you try to secure your life in this world, if you try to make everything just right and safe and wholesome and good, then you're actually going to end up losing the faith. And so risking is something that's hard to do, but at the same time we understand the Bible correctly and we must work hard at it, even if it's uncomfortable.

And "feelings" is the same thing, because we all have this notion, especially again in modern Western Christianity, that if you're thinking the right thoughts and you're believing the right things, then God wants good for you, and that means you're going to be a happy person. In fact, the largest churches in my own country are just filled with pastors that go around telling people all the time that Jesus wants them to feel better, Jesus just wants them happy. You know, that's the goal of the Christian life. But it's not true. Jesus himself was not happy all the time, and yet he obeyed the Lord. Remember he begged not to have to go to the cross, "If there's any way possible, I don't want to have to do this." But instead of saying, "Well, now my feeling bad about this means I'm misunderstanding what God has told me to do," what he finally came to was, "I've got to do it anyway." So sometimes the tension between these various things that we have going on of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos brings up a caution light and says maybe you're really not understanding

it correctly. But other times it just says it's just time to go on and do what God says even if you don't feel like it, even if you don't see it working out easily.

Student: So that kind of would help us with a situation like a lot of people feel the tension between God being good and in control of all things and the fact that our world is really messed up. We see death and pain. How can we hold together a loving God and a messed-up world?

Dr. Pratt: Exactly. That's an easy thing to hold so long as you don't know real suffering. If you're not doing the orthopraxis of getting your hands dirty with real life in this world. And often that then creates other tensions even inside of orthodoxy — how can I work this out? The orthopraxis of serving the poor, of helping the needy and seeing their suffering can then move you back into orthodoxy and say I've got to work on this a whole lot more. How can God be good and the world be like it is?

And here's another frustrating thing. Okay, so God has called me to do something good in this world, but I've spent the last 15 years of my life in this place trying to do something good and it's all falling to pieces. And unfortunately, that's something that pastors often have to face; they work very hard in a church, they build that church up, then they go on, they're called to someplace else, and the next thing you know, the church they just left is falling to pieces. And so they look at it and say, then what sense does all this make? My orthopraxis did not comply with my orthodoxy, and it certainly isn't making me feel good. So those tensions just keep moving us around, which is what we have to do. We have to keep moving, moving, moving around. And if do, then we'll be able to see how these tensions can actually help us grow.

Question 9:
Why is the series titled "Building *Your* Theology"?

Student: Now we've entitled the series "Building *Your* Theology." Now just from the very title, isn't that being subjective? Isn't it more proper to say building "God's" theology or building "the" theology?"

Dr. Pratt: The "right" theology maybe?

Student: Yeah, exactly.

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's good. I mean, I don't want anyone to misunderstand it, so I'm glad you raised the question. Because it is important to realize we're not just going after our personal theologies. That would be something that you might hear in different groups other than this one, that, you know, well you can your theology, I'll have mine, you have yours, so you just build your own theology the way you want to do it. We are concerned with making theology as biblical as it could possibly be because for us here the standard is the Bible, and so we're trying to approximate the

teachings of the Bible in whatever we do in theology. But at the same time, we use the word "your" in there, your theology, building your theology, because we want to emphasize that this is not something that's impersonal, that it really does involve you and me — us together, in fact — doing this in ways that are as best we can right for us and the best we can possibly do so that it is something that we can own. A lot of times people think about theology in very abstract terms and they end up not really affirming it from their hearts, and we're concerned that this be something that, as you build, that it's something that touches your heart and comes out of your heart so that you own it in that sense; it's yours in the sense of owning it, not yours in the sense of it's your opinion. Though, of course, there's a sense in which no matter how hard we work to make to make a theology as objectively true as possible, it's still going to have that subjective element, right?

Student: Right, because we're dealing with people. We're dealing with fallen human beings.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. So in that sense it is your theology versus my theology versus his. And so there's sort of a lesson of humility in that, too. On the one side we do want to say your theology in the sense of you own it, but on the other side we want to say it's your theology and that's the best you're ever going to do. It's yours. So insofar as you are a fallen creature and limited in your perspectives and your ability to understand, then you've got to acknowledge that, that what your theology is might not be exactly right. And so you do the best you can. You build a responsible theology, not a perfect theology. I used to always tell people there are two kinds of books in this world: perfect ones and finished ones. And the same kind of thing is true in theology. There is perfect theology and then there's your theology, and my theology, and we just have to sort of live with that. Have you met people that think their theology is "the" theology? It happens all the time. And then you get the other extreme of people saying you can't know "the" theology, "the" truth. So you end up with this sort of where it's kind of in between those two extremes.

Student: So you're really wanting people to take their theology, or what they're building, and apply it? Is that part of what mean by "your"?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, by making it yours, right. Applying it to your life, letting it be true to who you are, letting it shape you and then you affirming it and being able to own it. I mean, what good is a theology that's just academic or just abstract? If it doesn't affect your life, if it doesn't reflect who you are, if it doesn't move you forward in life, then it's not Christian theology in the purest sense of that word. We want theology that's going to create a love for God and a love for people — the two great commandments — and that involves the whole person. So theology has to be embraced not just thought about.

Question 10:
Is it biblical to engage in formal theology?

Student: Richard, we don't see in the Bible formal structures of theology, formal theological statements. How do we justify saying that we should build these kinds of theologies? Shouldn't we just read the Bible and then use that as our theology?

Dr. Pratt: That's great. Good. That is a hard question because you do get the impression, especially from the New Testament that the kind of theologizing talk about God that they were doing doesn't really match up with what we tend to do today as Christians. I mean, let's just sort of face it. It looks like a different sort of thing. There are two things I would just say about that. One is that what we have in the New Testament is not formal theology because the New Testament is, as it were, written out of the formal theology that the apostles and other New Testament writers believed. These are letters, for example — the Pauline epistles — are letters addressing practical issues in the lives of those people, but they address the practical issues of those people's lives out of a system or systems, a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world that the apostle Paul had in his heart. Now he never sat down and wrote, "The Philosophy of the Apostle Paul." In fact, people want to argue that the book of Romans is that, but it's not. The book of Romans is very much oriented toward the conflicts between the Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome, and if you think about how those chapters lay out, you can see almost everything is about Jewish and Gentile controversy. And so even that is very pastoral.

But what we do in Christian theology is we take these letters, these pastoral letters — and even the Gospels are in many respects pastoral, and Jesus' own personal ministry was pastoral — we take that material and we try to reconstruct, as it were, what was underneath it, what was behind it. What makes sense out of these sort of pieces sticking up out of the surface of the water or the tips of the iceberg that we find in the New Testament? What makes sense of that underneath? And that's what formal theology is. It's sort of piecing together all these different pastoral things. It would be like my sermons, and when I preach I don't preach theology in a formal sense. I'm trying to preach — and even teach — I'm trying to teach to the needs of the people that are out there as good pastors would try to do, always. But back inside of me is a sort of frame of reference, a way of looking at life and a way of looking at theology that informs those applications. And unfortunately — sometimes unfortunately — in formal academic theology all we ever do is try to talk about what's under the surface — What's that frame of reference? What's that format out of which we speak in pastoral ways? And that's where I think the disconnect happens, is that people don't see the almost immediate connection between the more formal and the practical — the more informal as it were — because everybody does theology to one degree or another, and everybody has even a sort of set of beliefs, and all we're doing in formal theology is speaking to that set of beliefs and trying to refine that and mature that as much as possible.

Student: So as we try to read the Bible and formulate our theology, it seems like it would take a lot of wisdom to do something like that.

Dr. Pratt: It takes a lot. I mean, a huge amount. Because you have to take not just the New Testament which is all these pastoral tips of the iceberg sticking up out of the water, but you also take all the variety that's in the Old Testament, too, and bring that in as well. And in addition to that, as we say in this lesson in fact, you have to bring general revelation, the revelation of God in all things into play as well. So yes, creating a formal theology is very complicated, and that's why we have to talk about it to some degree. David, have you ever seen people that become so formal and so academic in their theology that they don't bring it up to the surface?

Student: Or they don't admit it. They don't think that they have any kind of formal theology. They sort of deny it almost, but you can tell by the way they talk and the way act that they do have a very formal theology. And so they almost kind of betray their own person.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, maybe they haven't learned it in a school, and in that sense it's not formal. But they've got a way of looking at life. They have a "world and life view" we say often. And they do. And that's the reality that we're talking about. That's what we mean by more formal theology. And hopefully, by giving attention to that, you actually do it better. Now that doesn't always work. Sometimes you do it worse when you give attention to it. But if you can think of it like a computer, I think of formal theology or the sort of undergirding theology that's down here as sort of the default drive to which people drop when they're not being forced into answering a particular kind of question or think it a particular way by some software. It's just sort of where they naturally go back to.

My grandmother who was a Christian but not very well educated in Christianity, she had a very developed theological posture about all kinds of things. And it worked for her. She had a system by which she thought about things. Now some of the things she thought were wacky, but nevertheless she thought them. And every time a question would come up, she would drop down to that default. I mean, that was what she believed. That was her bottom line. It was a system of beliefs that she had. And so in formal theology we do things like come up with words, jargon, that hopefully clarify things and help us do it in better ways. We interact with other people who have done this through the centuries so we can do it in better ways. We go back to the Bible in more academic ways so that we can create a better system, a more formalized and reflective system. But it's something that everybody does. It's not something that is utterly different even from the New Testament, because the writers of the New Testament had their theological belief system as well. And that's what we're trying to uncover, that kind of thing, in formal theology.

Question 11:
Do the academic and life orientations toward theology influence each other?

Student: Richard, in the video you talked about the academic orientation toward theology and then the life orientation — one being more formal, that being academic, and one being more practical being life orientation. It would seem that academic informs the life orientation, but couldn't you reverse the process?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, well that's the way most people would think of it. They think in terms of you have to have to formal theological academic approach much like what was Aquinas and Hodge — we used their definitions of theology to illustrate that — and that's the source from which you get practical theology. And then you would say that the more practical orientation, or life orientation that we found in Ames' and Frames' definition of theology is really derivative. It comes from the more academic. Well, to run the risk of losing my job since I do academic theology, it is true that academic leads to practical, but what we often miss is that the practical realities lead to better academic, too. It goes both ways. It has to go both ways because theories are like painting a room. You know how we have this expression where you can paint yourself into a corner and it's just because you haven't had enough experience to realize that if you paint this way or that way, you're going to end up not being able to step out of the room without stepping on the paint? Well that's sort of the way it is in theology. People can think themselves into all kinds of corners and move themselves sort of logically to different conclusions that when you deal with it in real life you begin to realize, wait a minute, maybe that's not exactly the direction I should have gone. And so the academic side does lead us and should guide us insofar as it's true to the Bible, it should guide our lives. But living life in the light of the Bible also then comes back and informs the academic. And this is why these two orientations are so very important, that we not allow ourselves to sort of drift just into one or drift just into the other, but that both are important, both the academic orientation and the life orientation.

In some ways I think more recent theologians have been more toward the life application or the life orientation represented by Ames and John Frame, but they've done that more or less in reaction to sort of old ways of doing theology. And we also always have to remember that people like Charles Hodge and Aquinas, they had other writings, too, and they had life that was much bigger than what they did in the systematic theologies, or in Aquinas' case, "The Summa" or his other formal theological writings. In fact, many times people in the old days in very early Christianity, maybe even in the medieval period, they would do theology in the form of prayers and songs. They were theologians, they were academicians, they taught in schools, but they would write their theology in other styles. And what that reflects is the fact that they were getting their academic theology from more than just academic reflection; they were getting it from life experience. And the fact is that even the most academic person is going to get a lot of feedback from life into the academic pursuit.

Now that feedback may not be good, it may not be wholesome, it may not be very rich because academic people tend to be withdrawn from real life issues and from especially larger ones and more challenging ones. I mean, what kind of person normally spends the amount of time you have to studying ancient languages and sitting in the library, except what we pejoratively call a bookworm? You know, a bookworm is a person that often tends to be inadequate in social interaction and tends not to be very well prepared for dealing with the larger scope of life, and so they sort of retreat — that was me — you sort of retreat to books. You still have life but it's a very narrow vision of life that then feeds into academy. So what you want is a broad life experience, broad life orientation in theology that can feed up into the academy.

Question 12:
How can we broaden our orientation toward theology?

Student: Well, how do you break out of that? Because I have many friends who are like you who are very academic and have this very narrow life experience. How do you break out of that and broaden your life experience?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question because I think that in many respects I think it's a matter of becoming self-conscious first, and that's why we even set it up in this lesson this way, that there's this academic orientation and life orientation, just to sort of raise the issue that people do this. And well-known and gifted theologians go in both directions. And what that does then is it sort of calls each individual to say, well, what's my natural propensity? Honestly, most people that are watching Third Millennium videos like this one are probably more toward the academic, at least at this stage in their lives. They may not be there their whole lives but at this moment they are. So it's a call to them to reassess that and to say, "Am I over-emphasizing the academic side of theology?" And you do that simply by becoming aware of who you are, and then in some respects, working against what your natural propensities are.

I know sometimes we tell people a lot, you know, find your passion and then do it for God, find your gifts and do it for God. And all that's true and that's good and nothing wrong with that. But there's a sense in which we also have to discover our weaknesses and strengthen ourselves. When people do weightlifting they don't just strengthen the strong muscles they have. They work very hard to get the weak muscles up to par. And that's kind of the way it is in theology, too. So if a person tends to be very practical in their orientation — I don't have time for those theological books, I don't have time for systematic theology, I don't have time for reading those highfaluting books with all those big words in it because I love Jesus too much to be involved in that — well they need to understand loving Jesus, at least to their students, involves getting into that kind of thing, because it's a rich heritage of academic theology.

But if your natural propensity is the other way, then you've got to push yourself, you have to push yourself to do the other things, and that means doing things that are hard and risky. And it might be even psychologically challenging to a person that's academic in his or her orientation, like exposing yourself to real pain and suffering in the world, like working with poor people, like traveling to other countries and becoming involved in short-term missions, to force yourself into risky and difficult environments so that you can begin to see the need for theology to be life-giving and not just intellectually satisfying. I mean, have you known people that just look at theology as intellectually satisfying and that's it?

Student: When I look in the mirror every day.

Dr. Pratt: Oops. I wouldn't have asked you that question if I'd thought that. But yeah, I think that's a serious issue. And so if that really is who you are, then it's very important as you prepare for Christian leadership not to allow that propensity to continue. I mean, it's my orientation, too. The last thing I want to do is be uncomfortable, but that's the first thing I need to do. And I can't tell you how when I finished school and I began to do mission trips a lot and go to different parts of the world and see real seriously difficult places — like in communist countries and things like that in the old days when communists were still communists and Christians were still Christians in those parts of the world — I found that extremely challenging. But I also found it extremely life-giving, and it changed the way I looked at all theology. The academic didn't become less important to me, but the life application, the practical orientation, the life orientation, became much more important to me. And it did have that kind of feedback effect as we were talking about, that it began to challenge what I was emphasizing.

You know, we all have our favorite drums to beat, right? And branches of the church have their favorite drums to beat, and usually those drums that we constantly beat just sort of fit nicely with our corporate personality, because "birds of a feather flock together," and so you tend to have people with the same kind of personality gathering in churches and so get this sort of corporate mentality, and it's really a monster by that time when everybody you're around is just like you in their personality and their orientations, and so then it becomes, as it were, codified and authorized by your community, your local church let's say, or your denomination. That's when it gets very serious and when we have to as Christian leaders break out of that and not be people who completely comply with the norm of our community, because that usually does little more than just confirm us in our own myopic views of the world.

Question 13:
Is formal theology the best way to discover truth?

Student: So I understand the value of seeking truth and trying to know rightly, but is formal theology really the best way to go about doing this? I mean, can't we find truth and these sort of things through prayer and devotion?

Dr. Pratt: Yes we can, and in fact, we must. How's that for a short answer? There is a danger when we overemphasize the sort of intellectual side of theology. It's a very serious danger. Because what we tend to do is look at the Bible, which is God's special revelation, and then start drawing all of these implications from it and creating this really closed system where we are relying — and it's possible to do this — relying too much on the intellect. Now I say that with hesitation because we live in a day today, at least in Western culture, where the intellect is sort of demoted and emotions and the like, passions, are raised up higher than they used to be. If I were saying this 25 years ago I wouldn't even have had to say that, but now I do. I have to say there's a value in what's happening in what we call the postmodern world where passion and emotion are raised up more on par with the intellectual.

But at the same time, when people begin to study theology and when they go to school and things like that for theology, they tend to be told that's really not what's important, what's important is the intellectual. So let me just talk about what the danger of the intellectual is. The danger of the intellectual approach is that you look at the Bible and you begin to then use your logical reasoning powers to sort of figure everything out. And the fact is the Bible really only gives us very broad parameters of what we're to believe and what we're to do with our lives as Christians. And in order to get more than just broad parameters, what we tend to do in an intellectual model is sort of fill in the space between the parameters with logic, with logical conclusions, with inferences. And that's where the arguments start happening. By in large, evangelical Christians don't disagree over that many parameters that the Bible sets. I mean, they do some but basically we don't. But we start disagreeing over how you work this out in life because some people are working it this way logically and other people are working it this way logically, and they end up at cross-purposes, and that's where the struggles come.

And I think a lot of that comes from the fact that we're not willing to draw from the other resources that God has given us. He has given us the Bible, his special revelation which is authoritative in all things, and he has given us our intellect to work our way through the Bible by good and necessary deduction, we're told, is the way to do this. And that's fine. But the Bible also tells us that God reveals himself in what we call general revelation, and that's the revelation of God in everything including what you're talking about: prayer, and devotion, being quiet with God, all those kinds of things; to use psychological terms, intuitions, your premonitions, all those kinds of things. They also involve us in the ways of God and help, as it were, fill in those parameters. So rather than thinking in terms of rigorous logic doing that

all the time, sometimes it does have to be the intuitional, it has to be the feelings you have about things; we sometimes will say, the leading of God, or we might sometimes say, the convictions that we have. And you may not even be able to logically analyze all those convictions. They just may be there by the work of Holy Spirit in your life and they come from being connected to God by devotion and by prayer and by worship, those kinds of things. And that's a part of general revelation that helps us a lot.

I know that there are friends of mine — and I used to be this way a lot more than I am now, although I still tend to be this way at times — who just thought that they could figure out exactly what the Bible said about almost every single issue and what practical implications that had by simply reasoning, reasoning, reasoning, reasoning. Now you can imagine what those people were like. They were very cold, they were very dogmatic, they were very sure of themselves, they didn't have many questions left, and they weren't very sensitive to the fact that other people might be being called by God to other directions and other paths and other ways. And so you'll often get this say in missions programs You'll get groups and they come to me sometimes , missions committees and they say, "Look, we have these hundreds and hundreds of applications for support for missions. How do we decide which ones to support?" They're looking for a rule. They're looking for a principle. And they say, you know, "Jesus tells us to do this, and he tells us to do this, and now, help us figure out the logical way of analyzing and vetting out all these different things so we can throw these applications away and pick the right ones." And I just have to look at them and say, now look, the Bible gives you big parameters here and you don't want to support a missionary who's a known axe murderer. That would be against the Bible.

And sort of moving in a little bit, you can also see that God has brought these applications to you so that should give them some priority since they're in your pot here that you're talking about. But ultimately it's going to mean your committee has got to come to the point that you're on your knees before God and you're seeking the conviction or the leaning, or the intuition, of Holy Spirit as to which of these has priority, because most of the time when you examine one mission or another mission, it's six of one and a half-dozen of the other. I mean, you can see that this is a very valuable thing, and this is a very valuable thing, and how in the world are we going to decide this apart from us feeling called by God to have this focus, so we're going to take this one and not take that one? And that can only come as we devote ourselves to prayer and to solitude and fasting with the Lord.

Question 14:
Should we evaluate general revelation in terms of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

Student: Now you mention general revelation as something that's sort of a parameter or something that helps fill in the gaps. Now don't people go overboard

and start to do everything rationally and intellectually even when it comes to general revelation? Because that's a really entirely different category when it comes to what God has given us.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. Because sometimes when people hear the word general revelation they're thinking only in terms of what you can see in nature around you, like going out into the woods and seeing a big tree and saying, "Oh, this makes me feel close to God," or seeing a mountain and saying, "Isn't God great since he made a great mountain." And that's true. Looking at the clouds, not seeing images of Jesus, but looking at the clouds and being amazed at their beauty, things like that, that's all true. So nothing wrong with that. And then you get other groups — and this would be my tradition, too — that say things like even scientific reflection on nature is a part of general revelation, which it is. And that if we're understanding the world properly through science, computers, technologies, those kinds of things, then we are learning more about the ways of God, the ways God wants us to live, and to think, and to believe, and to feel, and things like that. But once again, even in those areas, even in nature, you can highly over-intellectualize it to the point that you paint yourself into an intellectual corner.

And you can do things like… Well, here's a great example of this; the recent church growth movement. The recent church growth movement has basically taken the science of sociology and has said, look, we can do all these statistical surveys, we can do all this reporting, and on the basis of this we can fill in the gaps of what the Bible tells us about church planting. So the Bible tells us we should start churches. I don't of anyone who would disagree with that, okay? But what kind of churches? And where? And what should they be like? And how big should they be? And what should be your priorities? Well then the natural tendency for the intellectual Christian is to do that in scientific ways. Well, the principle of homogeneity is one of them. If you want a growing church then you've got to have people who are alike. Okay? So then you adopt that — you over analyze and you adopt that principle, and then you go for it with the sense that this is what God wants us to do. Just because homogeneous churches grow doesn't mean that homogeneity is the way that God wants it to be necessarily. Homogenous churches are not necessarily the right way to do it, especially if you end up excluding people on the basis of that principle of homogeneity. But it's all based on this sort of intellectualized, scientific approach.

And so we do have to be very careful that even when it comes to looking at general revelation, the intuitional, the convictional, the leading of the Holy Spirit, the personal ministry of Holy Spirit, is extremely important, and, as you were saying, the devotional side of this is extremely important. Because I think that when you start analyzing, how does God want us to make our local church look — what does he want it to look like — there's nothing wrong with it being specialized, but the answer to that question can't come simply from the Bible, because it just sets broad parameters, nor can it come simply from intellectual analysis of scientific data like sociological data and things like that. It also has to come from, again, that leading of Holy Spirit, which comes only through prayer and devotion.

Question 15:
Do you have to be smart to do theology?

Student: Now Richard I get the impression that to do any kind of theology, whether it be more academic or more life-oriented, that you just have to be smart. You know, that a lot of people think, well, that just leaves me out because I just can't do it. How do we help those kinds of people?

Dr. Pratt: Well, it's sad that that's the impression people get, because it is the impression people get, honestly, that many times people who study theology the way that we're doing it here in this curriculum, they often get the impression that they can't use fifty-dollar words, they can't use six syllable words and quote Latin phrases and things like that, that they're not going to be able to get true theology. And there's just nothing that could be further from the truth than that. In fact, I guess what I would want to say to a person that raised that question is this: first, don't be impressed. Don't be impressed by people who use big words and who quote Latin phrases and things like that, because often that's just a façade that's hiding a great deal of insecurity, and that people learn how to use and play this theological game among academics. Typically academic theologians have one audience and one audience in mind, and that is other academics. And they want to practice and they want to be respected within their peer community, and so they work according to certain genres, and they work according to certain standards of living and of speaking and of handling materials. And that's simply not the case. I mean, I'm sure that the apostle Peter was a very gifted theologian, but he was terribly uneducated. Now we'd have to say that the apostle Paul, on the other hand, was highly educated. So there's nothing wrong with being intellectual. But notice how the apostle Paul is, as Peter had to admit it as he wrote in his epistles that some things that Paul says are very hard to understand. Well that's the illustration there, you see. Here's poor Peter sitting over here going, "Well, oh look at me, I'm no academician. But Paul was a great rabbi trained up in the great schools of Jerusalem, so, you know, who am I?" But that's not what he did. Instead, when he had his epistles written, he said, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ" just like Paul did, because he had authority and he was understanding the truth, too.

So Christian theology is for people of all kinds of different backgrounds, and some of it can be more academic, and some of it can be nonacademic. But what I have found is that those that tend to succeed in more formal theology with an academic background often tend to be inadequate, and they're unable to do theology well. They may sound as if they're doing it well, but they're not. And the way you can tell that is by looking to see what kind of fruit their theology produces in their lives as well as in the lives of people that follow them. Because sometimes academic theologians are protected from view, they're not put in fishbowls, and so you sort of don't know the dark side of a professional theologian, and so they seem so impressive. They're saying the right things and they're saying it so well, and they're saying it so forcefully, and those kinds of things. If you knew their lives you might not be so

impressed. But if you can't see the fruit in their lives because they're sort of kept away often in the academic closet, then look at the lives of the people that follow their teachings. And what I think you often find is that some of what we would call the best theologians, the followers of some of the best theologians are just flat out hard to live with, and their lives are not full of joy, you don't find the fruit of Holy Spirit in their lives, you don't find them serving people. Instead, what you find is they're taking again — what I put in quotes — "good theology" and being terrible people. But the reality is that good theology produces good people, and so when you find so-called good theology turning out bad people consistently — there are always exceptions — but consistently, if it happens consistently, then you need to question whether or not that theology is really good, maybe there's something messed up about this.

I can give you an example. In my own branch of the church there's a lot of talk about the need to focus on God, and this is in reaction to humanism, so we sort of understand that; you know, we need to be theocentric and we need to exalt God up and make him bigger and higher and help people to understand how great he is and those kinds of things, none of which is wrong. That's absolutely true. And if you think humanity is on top of the heap, well then you need to understand God is on top of the heap and not humanity. But what often comes with that is this exaltation of God in a way that the Bible doesn't exalt God, by denigrating people. You see, the Bible does not denigrate the image of God to exalt God. Now it denigrates sinners, no doubt about that, and especially vile sinners, but it does not denigrate people in order to exalt God. But what you often find with academic theologians, — sort of again painting themselves in a corner here — to exalt God, we have to denigrate, and ignore, and not think about, and not honor people. And so what kind of people do you find them to be? Unloving, uncaring, unthoughtful, not servants, but rather boisterous, and prevailing, and pushy and those kinds of things, and uncaring about their neighbors and those sorts of things. So that's not good theology gone bad in practice. That's bad theology. Because the Bible tells us that you exalt God by properly exalting people, or to put it the way Jesus put it, you can't love God without loving people. They go hand in hand. They're a photo finish. Now, loving people second place to a loving God, but they're a photo finish. And that's why often I'll tell people things like these, I'll say "Proper theocentricism without anthropocentrism is not proper theism at all." So to be theocentric in a way that's not also human-centric — second place but nevertheless centered — is not to be properly theocentric. I mean, that's just the reality of it. And when you find then that theologians are hailed as being great theologians because of their ability to communicate, or they write lots of books, or they have all these great deep, heavy thoughts, and yet you see their lives with the lives of their students not bringing forth the fruit of love for people, then it's not misapplication, it's bad theology to begin with.

Student: Yeah, I mean I can even think of having studied theology for a while now, even talking with people who would classify themselves as not as smart, say, that they sometimes just have this depth of insight that sometimes I don't even have because I focus so much on the books, that that intuition that we talked about, Holy

Spirit leading, has given them almost a greater understanding of who God is than I have.

Dr. Pratt: Absolutely. I mean, you know, it's always true — I've found this to be so true — that when you go out into the church and you find people who are godly, who are living holy lives, especially older people, they often have better insights into the Bible than the academically trained young person. Now they may not have the big words to stick on it, they may not have the fifty-dollar tags to put on it, they may not be very articulate about it, but they sort of sit there very quietly and then every once in a while open their mouths and say something that calms the whole room, straightens everything out. And it's really the ones that are all wrapped up in the academic that have entered into the artifice; they're entered into this artificial world that they think is the real world but it's not. This is why medical internships are so important. It's one thing to study the books of medicine. It's another thing to practice medicine. And you know how in the fables of medical school where as soon as doctors begin to study different diseases, they suddenly get all those diseases because their world is so oriented toward the books that they're studying, the data that they're studying, that they can't look at real life again. They're afraid to touch door handles. Every time they have a pain in their back they think they're having cancer. Or every time they have a chest pain they think it's a heart attack or a brain aneurysm or something. And the fact is, maybe they are having a brain aneurysm, but probably not at the numbers that they think they are. And so you realize that this paranoid medical student is actually not in reality. That's the point. They've got all this information and they can't juggle the information well enough with real life, they can't bring it to bear yet. And life has not influenced them enough yet to sort of calm them down about these things so they go sort of crazy about the data that they have.

Well theologians do the same thing, especially young ones. They do exactly the same thing. They get all these patterns of thought and they start working on them, and they start looking around themselves and over-analyzing life, thinking that they can figure out what's actually out there from the book out. But the fact is that just like a doctor goes into practice and it takes years to figure out if somebody comes with a headache you give them an aspirin, that's what you do. You don't go do an MRI on their head unless it's a serious headache and has gone on for quite a while and the aspirin doesn't take care of it. Go figure, okay? And the same kind of thing is true with theologians. We want to pull out the MRI machine and start opening skulls up and things like that on the basis of a couple of years of study in a school. And that's seriously dangerous. So I think we have to be very clear that just because a person can make good grades in a school, just because they can memorize a lot of data doesn't make them good theologians. In fact, people often who can't memorize or articulate lots of data are the better theologians.

Question 16:
How do biblical studies, history and theology, and practical theology interrelate?

Student: Now Richard, you divide doing theology into three main divisions: biblical theology, then you have historical theology, and then you also have practical theology. Now doesn't it seem like biblical theology should be the premier, the primary one, and then the other two undergird and help us to understand but still are secondary?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, what value do they have? Well, let's remember what they are. They are biblical studies; biblical theology is a more technical thing, so it's Bible study basically, including Old Testament and New Testament. And then the second big category is history and theology, so that would include things like church history and systematic theology, doctrines of the church. And then the third category is the practical theology and, you know, whatever comes under that; there are lots of different things. And there is, of course, a sense in which, because we are Protestants we want our theology, all of it, to come from and be in accord with the Bible. So I guess there's a sense in which we want to say yes, because the Bible is our ultimate authority, we want that biblical studies should have a lot of attention. And in fact, they do. Studying the Old Testament and New Testament, traditionally speaking, has been sort of the heartbeat of what you do in a seminary. And then that historical and doctrines should flow from that, and then practical should flow from the doctrines and the history. Alright, so let's just admit that yes, in this sort of artificial ideal world, that might actually be possible, that you come into a school or you start studying theology as a blank slate, and the first thing you do is you learn the Bible, and then the next thing you do is you learn some church history and theology, and then the next thing you do is you learn how to apply it. Now that's a sort of blank slate approach. In fact, I was involved in a seminary where they had revised their whole curriculum to be just like that, that the first year was Bible only, second year was theology and church history only, and the third year was practical studies only, because they had that kind of Cartesian building model of one block on top of another on top of another. So let me ask you, what's wrong with that approach?

Student: Nobody comes as a blank slate.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, exactly. Everybody, before they ever start studying the Bible, has already come with a lot of practical Christianity and a lot of tradition and a lot of history and doctrine whether they realize it or not, right? I mean, if you were brought up in the West, you've got all kinds of theological doctrines floating around in your brain because you grew up in the West. Or if you grew up somewhere else you got another set of them. And if you've been a Christian for more than a day or two, you've got all kinds of practical theology going on in you. And if you were brought up in the church then you've got a ton of practical theology in you. And all of that is not simply derived from the Bible studies that you're doing — the biblical studies

department, as it were — but rather it feeds into it. And this was my objection when this curriculum was brought up. I said people don't learn this way. Let's just get the Bible straight and then let's move to theology and history and then let's move to practicality. Nobody does that. And to have a curriculum integrate all three of these along the way so they kind of bounce off each other constantly is very important, too, because it reflects the way we actually live. I mean, does anybody study car mechanics without ever having seen a car? Usually not. They usually have experienced cars in many ways and they have all these presuppositions that they bring to the study of the car. And the same kind of thing is true with the Bible. We have all these things that we have practiced and believed. Are they all bad or are they all good, those things that we practiced and believed that we bring to the Bible?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Pratt: Yes. That's right. Some are bad and some are good, and they're all kind of bad and they're all kind of good, probably, in some way or another. And so it's not as if we should walk into this formal study of theology and now let's just get rid of everything we've ever believed so we can really get it the way it actually is from the Bible. But rather, we've got to bring what God has given because some of the things that we learn from practical experience and from history of the church and doctrines and things, they're gifts from God, and they actually enable us to understand the Bible better. So why would you ever want to get rid of those? I mean, those are gifts from the Lord. I am glad that I was brought up in the church. Now, it twisted me in some ways, but I am glad that I as a little child memorized Bible verses and got theology. I tell people this all the time, even though I was school until I was thirty years old studying theology and studying the Bible, I can tell you quite frankly that I learned much more about the Bible from my childhood Sunday school, from my vacation Bible school days than I've ever learned studying as an adult. Much more. And all of that background work that I did in my church and practical Christian living as well as, you know, this is what we believe in our church, these are our doctrines, all those things equipped me to do what I do now which is biblical studies primarily. And so it's not bad. It's good. So yes, there's a sense in which we do want to give priority to the Bible department or biblical studies areas, but we must never allow ourselves to be fooled into thinking that we simply derive the others from that. These all integrate with each other. And we've already talked about that — webs of multiple reciprocities. And these three are web of multiple reciprocities, too. So when you study theology it's good always to sort of be moving from one to the other and never allowing one to have utter priority over the others.

Question 17:
Why do seminaries have a hard time teaching practical theology?

Student: Now Richard, I've been a seminary student, and from what I've learned from the practical side of things, being preaching or theology of ministry or

whatever, it actually turns into more of an academic, intellectual pursuit which would fit more in the biblical studies side of things.

Dr. Pratt: Or the theology side, whatever.

Student: Right. People just tend to run away from that. Why is that?

Dr. Pratt: I think it's because we have a basic model of education that is classroom oriented. What are you going to do if all you do is come in and you have this medieval model of what education is where you have the expert professor, doctor, come into the room, and he functions as a human data transfer unit, which is what we're talking about here, where he or she stands up and reads from notes, and then the students are human Xerox machines from the medieval period writing their notes from the lecture as fast as they can and then regurgitating that onto an exam. I mean, apart from the fact that we have some people that are doing it differently, that basic model has not changed yet. And so when you have nothing more or little more than a medieval classroom, that now uses perhaps other media and things like that to add to or distract a little bit from the boring professor, when the professor is still functioning in the classroom basically and fundamentally as a data transfer unit then nothing else can happen in the class without taking away from what you think ought to be done.

And so what I'm convinced of is this, that the value-added feature of a learning community, like living people in a seminary together or a Bible school together where they actually meet together with human beings, is that human element. It's the meeting together. The basic data of a solid theological education can be transferred much more effectively by many other means: multimedia, books, whatever, you name it. The transfer of data can happen by other means. The value-added feature of being in a school is that you have a human being in front of you who allows his or her humanness to be shown, and they get out from behind the podium and enter into the lives of the students. Now so long as the requirement of the classroom is data transfer, that professor will never be able to get out from behind that podium very much without everyone feeling as if they're getting cheated. Well you've been in classes like that, right? Well, you say to yourself, why isn't he giving us anything? He's just talking about his life and things like that. That's because you're still depending on that event in the classroom as the data transfer time. And especially in practical theology where you do practicums, where you actually take class time to discuss real issues of life, or you actually take field trips and things like that, so rather than talking about Islam, you go meet Muslims. You have Muslims come to the class. Or rather than talking about a funeral, you actually go to funerals. You go to the funeral home and you talk to the morticians there and ask them what goes on in here so you can understand what goes on. Now a lot of people in an academic setting would say, well that's a waste of time. And why do they call it a waste of time?

Student: Because it's not data transfer.

Dr. Pratt: It's not data-heavy. That's right.

Student: It's experiential.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, exactly. But we all know from life that life experiences are very formative. David, you have a child. You have two girls, right?

Student: Mm Hmm.

Dr. Pratt: And so you've had babies — well not you, but your wife, you and your wife. Did you read any books before you had the first baby? You didn't? Well you should have. Most people do. You didn't read any books about birth and babies?

Student: No, it was all from people that I knew. I learned…

Dr. Pratt: Well I'll bet she read a book or two.

Student: Yes. Well . . . right.

Dr. Pratt: That's the difference between you having the baby and her having the baby.

Student: Right.

Dr. Pratt: Okay, but if your wife were here, though, I would guarantee that she would say that the book learning was good, but it was the experience of it that really formed her. And I would more than guess that for the second child she probably didn't read a book, unless there was some special need or some special problem.

Student: Right.

Dr. Pratt: And the reason for that is because once you go through the experience of it, you begin to realize that other things, not heavy data transfer events like reading a book, are really very heavily laden with data. See, that's the deception. We don't think that going to visit a funeral home would be heavily laden with data. It is heavily laden with data. It's just different kind of data. And we would not think that going to a hospital and being a chaplain and spending hours and hours and hours walking the halls of the hospital would really be informing us and shaping us, but the fact is that it does and much more powerfully and much more effectively than sitting in a classroom talking what it means to minister to people in the hospital. See, that's the reality. And so we have this kind of artificial model of thinking that classroom is the data transfer event and that other things outside of class are not really important enough to be brought into the academy. But happily, that model is being broken.

The other thing I think that's even more important to me, frankly, because I think that part of the model is being increased is — remember how we talked earlier in the lesson the difference between orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos? Well,

becoming a classroom that's more practical usually means a focus on skill developments, which is praxis — orthopraxis, how can I preach better? So we have to have labs for that. How can I counsel better? We have to have to have a few labs for that. So you're trying to learn skills. What's ignored in a typical theological education is the emotional development — the orthopathos. And I can tell you this, that's not ignored in military training. I often liken theological education to boot camp, the initial training session of a young soldier. And you know how much — I don't know if maybe you've been through it, or if you haven't you've seen videos of it or movies of it — you know how highly emotional it is and how they work very hard to effect or affect the person's emotions by breaking them down, then giving them a sense of pride and accomplishment and a willingness to obey and that sort of reflex emotions to obey the commands, and those kinds of things. All of this is working on the affect, it's all working on the orthopathos in the military environment.

Well, we don't do that much in theological education. We are focused on the orthodoxy, and then when you break the traditional mold you go over to skill development, orthopraxis, but orthopathos still remains largely outside of the view. And so students are not given the opportunity to have their hearts broken by the suffering that goes on in hospitals. And lots of students come to theological education and go through all three years of their academic programs and they become ordained ministers without ever seeing, without ever being with one single person who dies in their presence. Now I don't know how a person could become a minister of the gospel and never have held the hand of a dying person at the last moment when they go from this life into the next. I don't know how you could do that, because that's what it's all about. How you minister to people as their children are dying, as their children are in such pain and suffering that they're screaming and writhing in agony, how can you deal with that if your has not already been broken by that? And that's why in counseling programs they often do these kinds of sort of overload stimulation on the emotional level where they get you to the point that you are emotionally broken and then rebuilt up. But that doesn't happen normally in a theological education. You've been to seminary. Has it happened to you there? Purposefully? Maybe it happened but did it happen purposefully?

Student: No, never purposefully. Now I've been thinking, as we go through these series then, as we learn how to build our theology, what would you recommend experientially, "orthopathetically", if you will, that we should do as we listen to these lectures, as we get that data transfer?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, because in a multimedia program like what we're doing here, there are some emotional elements and we're trying to bring that to bear as much as we possibly can, but it's largely data transfer. In fact, what we're hoping is that the things we do are going to allow teachers in schools to be free from the data transfer responsibility. See, that's kind of the goal. It's to sort of enable them to do that more easily so they can spend their time on other sorts of things. And for students to do those kinds of things less intensively, maybe on their own free time or at their own schedule or own pace, so that they can be involved in other things as well.

I guess the word that comes to my mind — at least it's been very important to me — is that we don't find ourselves really developing orthopathically, orthopathetically, unless we are risking. I really do believe that's true. You know, pain causes growth and growth causes pain. Okay, that's sort of the way it is. Tension causes growth — psychological growth, spiritual growth — and spiritual growth causes tension. And so you have to put yourself, you have to voluntarily step into situations where life is a mess. Now, you know, often our lives can be messes without having to look for it. Let's admit that. But at the same time, when you're a student sometimes you're sort of isolated from all that. And so rather than waiting until the end of an academic career, I want to start suggesting to people that they put themselves in risky, tension-filled, horrifying, shocking, as well as elating and wondrous and magnificent and just overwhelmingly joyful environments and that they seek to minister in those environments. What does it mean to be a minister of the gospel if you cannot weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice? And now if you've never done it, you can't. What does it mean to say that our religion, the pure form of our religion is visiting widows and orphans and prisoners when we've never done it? And I can't tell you how many people that I know go through theological education and go into the ministry and have never been in one prison their whole lives.

Now I can also tell you from my experience that prison life can be very shocking; not that I've been in prison but I've visited many. And one of the most dramatic examples of that was visiting a prison in Siberia. Now you can imagine prisons in the Western world are very nice compared to a prison in outer Siberia near Yakutsk, Siberia. And just to walk into that place with another Christian minister who led chapel and just to see how those men lived, what their lives were actually like, brought to me a life transformation on the orthopathetic level that I could never have gotten from reading a book, I don't care how carefully I read it. And it's very important for people who are preparing themselves for gospel ministry to be people who have risked their lives. And if they have not risked their lives for the sake of the gospel, they have no business being out there proclaiming it as a well-informed and well-taught and mature Christian. That's why in many places like in China they don't allow you to be a pastor unless you've already been to prison. It's not that you have to go to seminary. You have to do that, too, but you have to go to seminary and you have to have been in prison. And they do this largely because — I'm not suggesting you make that a requirement — but they do that because they understand, because they're have enough prison experience in the church to know that this is what really forms people. It's the nonacademic, it's the non-classroom experience that really brings perspective to all the things that we do in a classroom. And so my suggestion practically, if that's what you're asking me, is get out of the classroom. There's plenty of ways to risk your life for Jesus and to lose it so you can find it and then minister the gospel to people around the world.

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 Your Theology

Lesson 2

Exploring Christian

Manuscript

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Lesson Two

Exploring Christian Theology

INTRODUCTION

When young couples marry, they often have to deal with differences that stem from their family backgrounds. They may love each other deeply, but they also need to acknowledge how much their families have shaped their priorities and expectations. If they don't recognize this fact, it can be difficult to build the kind of loving and respectful marital relationship to which Christ has called us.

In many ways, the same is true as followers of Christ explore theology. Christians have different priorities and expectations that stem from the influences of their cultures, their sub-cultures and from the traditions of various branches of the church. These backgrounds deeply shape the priorities and expectations we have as we study and live Christian theology. But if we don't acknowledge how much these influences impact us, it will be difficult to build the kinds of loving and respectful theological outlooks to which Christ has called us.

This is the second lesson in our series on *Building Your Theology*. In this lesson, we'll lay out the basic orientations that will guide this entire study. We've entitled this lesson, "Exploring Christian Theology," and we'll set forth some of the more important presuppositions that will guide us as we explore how to develop a distinctively Christian theology.

We'll look at this subject in three ways, moving from broader to narrower concerns. First, we'll define our perspective on Christian theology — what kind of theology is Christian? Second, we'll explore how specific Christian traditions give shape to Christian theology. And third, we'll look into some of the basic tenets of the Reformed tradition — the specific branch of Christian faith that undergirds these lessons. Let's turn first to the general idea of a Christian theology. What will we mean in these lessons when we use this terminology?

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Although we often speak of "Christian theology," the meaning of this expression isn't altogether clear. Some people refer to Christian theology as what Christians *actually* believe. But we all know that many Christians believe things that are not genuinely Christian. Others speak of Christian theology as what Christians *ought* to believe. But we have to admit that we don't always agree on what we ought to believe. Because of these and similar complexities, we need to clarify what *we'll* mean in this series when we use the term "Christian theology."

We'll touch on three matters: First, we'll look at some of the problems with creating definitions for Christian theology. Second, we'll propose a working definition of

Christian theology. And third, we'll note the unity and diversity that Christian theology entails. Let's look first at some of the difficulties we encounter as we try to define Christian theology.

PROBLEMS WITH DEFINITIONS

One of the greatest problems we have is finding ways to distinguish Christian theology from non-Christian theology. Sometimes the differences aren't hard to see, but many times it's extremely difficult to separate Christian theology from other theologies. When we consider Christianity alongside other major religions of the world, there are a number of theologies that are easily distinguished from Christian beliefs. For example, although some people have tried to combine Christianity and Hinduism, the polytheism of Hinduism makes it very different from Christian faith. The worship of many gods rather than the worship of one God makes it hard to confuse the two.

Islam, on the other hand, is much closer to Christianity. Like Christianity, Islam traces its heritage back to Abraham. And more than this, the prophet of Islam interacted with Christian teachings as he and his followers composed the Quran. So, there are a number of similarities between Christianity and Islam. Still, for the most part, we don't have great difficulty distinguishing Islam from Christian faith because there are pronounced and fundamental differences between them. For instance, Christianity affirms the deity and supremacy of Christ, in contrast to Islam's denial of these truths.

And what about Judaism? Judaism is even more closely connected and similar to Christianity because Christianity grew out of Judaism. Nevertheless, because Judaism denies that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, very few people confuse it with Christian faith. The theological perspectives of these and other major world religions are so different from Christian theology that most people have little difficulty separating them. We can erect fairly solid boundaries between our theology and theirs.

> **Well, what distinguishes Christianity from Judaism and Islam in terms of theology, of course, is about the person of Christ, the focus. All religions are about some sort of faith belief. Those other religions, of course — Judaism and Islam — are about a belief in God here, just as we have in Christianity… And the story, I think, that's different for us, growing out of Judaism, is that God keeps his promises… Christ in Christianity becomes the fulfillment of all of those previous promises. He becomes the fulfillment of that Messiah, who does, in fact, save people from their sins. He becomes that person who does, in fact, not just give his life as a martyr, but someone who actually provides a way for us to be redeemed, to be justified, to be forgiven.**
>
> **— Dr. Oliver L. Trimiew, Jr.**

At the same time, many schools of theology blend Christian and non-Christian thought, making it difficult at times to separate genuine Christianity from other faiths. We'll see such syncretism in our day in popular Christian cults, such as Jehovah's

Witnesses, Mormonism, and Christian Science. It can even be found in many churches and denominations that have abandoned the theological stances of their forebearers in favor of modern liberalism. Now, some aspects of these syncretistic religions are easily distinguished as non-Christian, but other elements are very close to true Christianity. For this reason, in these cases, we have difficulty drawing sharp lines between Christian and non-Christian theologies.

To make matters worse, think about the theological landscape among faithful believers in Christ. Even within the realm of genuine Christianity, it's often easier to speak of Christian *theologies* — in the plural — than Christian *theology*. There are so many different forms of Christianity that it's impossible to identify to everyone's satisfaction which forms of Christianity should be considered genuine. Does true Christian theology include the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox churches? How about Roman Catholic doctrines? Which is the purest form of Protestant faith: Anglican? Baptist? Lutheran? Methodist? Presbyterian? Nearly every segment of the church evaluates the purity of the various branches of Christianity in its own way. And almost every branch believes that its theology is the purest version of all. When we think about it in terms of these Christian intramural disagreements, it becomes even more difficult to define "Christian theology" precisely.

Think about it this way: What if you were asked to distinguish Christian theology from all other theological systems in the world by writing all the doctrines that people must believe in order to be counted as Christians. You may say: Jesus is the Lord; Jesus is the Savior; Jesus is the only way of salvation; Jesus died for our sins; Jesus was resurrected from the dead; God is Triune; Jesus is fully God and fully man; all people are sinners; justification is by faith alone; Christians must be holy; the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Well, when we look at all of these concepts, it becomes pretty clear that a person would have to be very well-educated and informed even to understand all of them, much less believe them all.

Now, of course, the doctrines we listed are important Christian teachings. But it should be evident that a person may have genuine Christian faith and Christian theology without hearing about some of these doctrines, much less understanding or believing all of them. So, which doctrines are absolutely essential for Christian faith? What is the bare minimum of Christian theology? In truth, only God knows for certain exactly where that line is drawn.

These are the kinds of problems we face as we try to define Christian theology. In relation to some other religions, it's not difficult to distinguish ourselves, but it's very difficult to know precisely what elements are essential for a theology to be genuinely Christian.

These and other problems with defining Christian theology lead us to propose a working definition that will guide our discussions in these lessons. This definition won't answer every question that may be raised, but it will provide us with a significant and helpful measure of clarity. It won't be a perfect definition, but it will be sufficient to use as we proceed.

WORKING DEFINITION

In these lessons, we'll orient our definition of Christian theology to the well-known and ancient expression of Christian faith called the *Apostles' Creed*. This creed existed substantially in its current form by about 200 A.D. and came to its present form around 700 A.D. Christians from all over the world have recited this creed for centuries as a summation of their Christian faith:

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,
And 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.

This worldwide expression of Christian faith summarizes Christianity in very simple and essential ways. And it will serve as our basic definition of Christian theology. For our purposes, all theology that accords with this creed will be counted as Christian theology.

Adopting the *Apostles' Creed* as our basic definition of what constitutes Christian theology is very important because it's important to distinguish true Christianity from so-called "Christian" cults and even other religions that may be similar to Christianity in some ways or another. But at the same time we always have to remember that it's not as clean-cut as we might want to say. I mean, for instance, does anyone really want to say that the fact that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate is *critical* to the Christian faith? Now, we may want to say, yes, it's important that we believe that Jesus actually lived on this planet, but Pontius Pilate himself? Probably not. And so there are things like that in the creed that we might quibble over this detail or that detail. And in addition to that, some of us would want to add other things to those essentials of the Christian faith. For example, the *Apostles' Creed* does not mention the Bible. It

doesn't mention the inerrancy of the Bible or the infallibility of Scriptures or *sola Scriptura* or anything like that… So, when we think about adopting the *Apostles' Creed* as our standard, our operating definition of what orthodox Christianity is, we have to keep those subtleties in mind. But at the same time, the *Apostles' Creed* connects us to the church through the centuries, and it connects us broadly to the true body of Christ even today around the world. So, it's a helpful way of summarizing Christianity and distinguishing it from Christian cults and from other religions.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The *Apostles' Creed* is central to our understanding of the Christian faith. It reflects the core beliefs of what it means to be Christian. And you see that outlined in the various statements that are there. It defines, in many ways, what I would argue to be the perimeter of orthodoxy. It talks about how the Father and the Son relate to one another, how we relate to God, and how God relates to creation. And those three elements are central to our understanding of this life, salvation, our relationship with God… And what the *Apostles' Creed* does is it helps set that as a perimeter, defining how each of those relationships ought to be conceived as we understand it through the Word of God.

— Dr. Scott Manor

For example, the creed mentions creation. It mentions all three persons of the Trinity: the Father, Jesus Christ his only Son, and the Holy Spirit. It refers to the incarnation, death, resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus. It also speaks of the forgiveness of sins, the general resurrection, the final judgment, and the hope of everlasting life. Because it provides such a strong and broad foundation, we'll use the *Apostles' Creed* as our working definition of Christian theology. Although we'll speak of doctrines that go far beyond this short list, for our purposes, we can be satisfied that a theology is Christian if it accords with this creed.

To overcome our problems with definitions of Christian theology, we've used as our working definition the text of the *Apostles' Creed*. In doing so, it immediately becomes apparent that there is both unity and diversity within the theology of the Christian faith.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

When students begin to study theology, they often speak confidently of "Christian theology," as if it's just one thing. But as they become more keenly aware of the many different perspectives theologians have held throughout the millennia, they often begin to

wonder if we should speak instead of "Christian theolo*gies*" — in the plural. As we mentioned earlier, even within the realm of genuine Christianity, faithful believers hold many diverse views. So, which is it: Christian theology or theologies? Is there one, unified Christian theology? Or are there many, diverse Christian theologies? In the end, the answer is that both are true.

We may speak of a single, unified Christian theology because there are many common beliefs, practices, and feelings among Christians. But we must also be ready to speak of multiple Christian theologies that differ from one another. Let's consider first the theological unity among Christians.

Unified Theology

When we consider all the different churches and denominations in existence, it seems hard to speak meaningfully of theological unity among Christians. How many times have you heard unbelievers say, "You Christians can't even agree on what you believe. Why do you expect me to become a Christian?" And sometimes we have to admit that it does seem like followers of Christ can hardly agree on anything. But disunity is only part of the picture.

As the *Apostles' Creed* puts it, true Christians throughout the world form one "holy catholic church." Despite our divisions, the body of Christ is theologically unified because Christians agree on a number of core beliefs that distinguish them from cults and other world religions. As we explore Christian theology in these lessons, we'll need to acknowledge the unity of faith that joins all Christians together. The apostle Paul spoke of the unity of the church in this way in Ephesians 4:4-5:

> There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-5).

In fact, the doctrinal unity of the church should be a goal that all Christians have. Jesus himself prayed toward this end in John 17:22-23:

> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:22-23).

When we look more closely at the church, we see that Christians have varying degrees of theological unity with each other. In the broadest sense, according to our definition, all Christians are unified theologically by their belief in the tenets expressed in the *Apostles' Creed*. This fundamental unity calls on us to show respect, patience and love for all who affirm the creed, no matter what branch of the church they represent,

because everyone who affirms the creed is a fellow believer. In this environment, we must learn to speak the truth in love, as we're told in Ephesians 4:15.

In addition, theological unity among Christians increases when we share beliefs that go beyond those mentioned in the creed. For instance, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants hold in common such beliefs as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. But Protestant denominations that have remained true to their heritage have much more theological unity with each other than they do with non-Protestant churches.

Although we tend to seek unity with those with whom we have the most in common, and then to treat as adversaries those with whom we have little in common, our Lord exhorts us all toward unity. For this reason, we must never allow the differences among Christians to distract us from the vast common ground we have in Christ. Rather than despairing because Christians aren't able to agree on every single doctrine, we need to recognize that, to one degree or another, Christians agree on the central tenets of the faith. In this sense, Christian theology is a unified reality. And more than this, it is our responsibility to promote ever-increasing theological unity within the body of Christ. As the apostle Paul put it in Ephesians 4:13-16, we are to:

> Attain to the unity of the faith … so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine … Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:13-16).

God's desire for his church and the goal he has established for us to pursue is not theological fragmentation, but increasing theological unity according to the teachings of Scripture.

> **It's interesting. One of the challenges for us as Christians is to take Jesus' prayer seriously where he says, "I pray that my church, my people, would be one as I and the Father are one." And there's a tension in that because, on the one hand, we can be drawn to say, "What really matters is truth and not unity." And when people do that, they don't care about other Christians with which they disagree with. The call to unity doesn't have any grip on them and on their churches. But if we take Jesus seriously and what's on his heart and in his prayer, then that's not an option for us. Unity must really matter… And one of the things we have to wrestle through is how do we value one another? How do we show unity without being the same? And I think one of the things we struggle with is we confuse unity with sameness. Unity is not the same thing as sameness. So we can be united even as we have disagreements, different perspectives on things, and one of the things that can help that unity is to say, "You know, brothers and sisters from other traditions can really help us**

> **discover things that we've missed." … And so we can seek unity, allowing distinction and trying to be faithful in the midst of it.**
>
> **— Dr. Kelly M. Kapic**

While Christians are unified to varying degrees, it's important also to acknowledge and accept degrees of diversity among us. In this sense, we rightly speak of multiple Christian *theologies*, rather than simply one Christian theology.

Multiple Theologies

Protestants easily recognize that when they extend their associations to churches other than their own, diversity increases. When different denominations encounter each other, they almost always face diversity. For example, when Eastern Orthodox and Western churches come together, the differences are profound.

Now, as we face the diversity within the church, we have to ask a serious question: Why are there differences among us? We all have the same Spirit. We all believe in the same Christ. We all share many central beliefs in common. So, what causes diversity among Christians? In addressing this issue, it helps to distinguish at least two kinds of differences among Christian theologies.

In the first place, some differences exist simply because we cannot represent every theological truth with equal force. The limitations we face as humans make it inevitable that we'll select and emphasize some aspects of the Christian faith more than others.

Limitations. We simply can't give equal attention to all dimensions of our faith at the same time. This limitation on theologians and theology often explains much of the doctrinal diversity among Christians. This kind of diversity from selection and emphasis is wholesome and approved by God. We know God approves of such diversity because even biblical authors differed in what they wrote down and emphasized.

For instance, we have four different gospels because God led Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to concentrate on different aspects of the truth about Jesus' life. Since Christians under the infallible inspiration of the Holy Spirit differed in their emphases, we should be happy that the same is true for Christians today. Just as God loves different kinds of flowers and trees, delights in mountains as well as valleys, and enjoys making different kinds of people, he also enjoys seeing his children develop their theologies in different ways.

> **The notion that unity that we have in Christ is somehow challenged by doctrinal diversity, I think, is not the case. I think, in other words, that within Christ there is both breadth and parameters; that faith in Christ involves certain common convictions, and along with that a recognition that certain understandings, certain ideas, certain teaching lie outside those boundaries, and therefore, in a sense, outside of Christ as he has been revealed to us on the pages of the New**

> **Testament. But the Christ of the New Testament is not narrow, and there is then room within these boundaries, these parameters, for some differences in terms of the articulation of Christian faith… There is, therefore, the possibility of the great denominations or theological traditions of the church differing on certain matters but still maintaining a core conviction with regard to Christ.**
>
> **— Dr. David R. Bauer**

We should more than expect Christian theology in rural Africa to select and emphasize different truths than Christian theology in New York City. We should expect South American Christian theology to be different from Christian theology in Beijing. This diversity results from the Lord leading his redeemed people to express different aspects of their faith in accordance with their own cultural settings and in response to their own particular needs.

In the second place, other forms of diversity are not so innocuous and require much more caution. These are differences driven by sinfulness and error. Rather than being matters of emphasis or selectivity, these differences result when groups or persons stray into false doctrines, practices and pathos.

Sin and error. When diversity of this sort arises in the church, at least one person or group holds an erroneous viewpoint. And in some situations, everyone may be in error. In these cases, we must humbly and sincerely seek to discern where the error lies.

> **So, there's this really interesting puzzle that we have as Christians because we believe that the Bible is God's authoritative word, we believe that that's what should govern our faith, our life, our commitment to him — the way we live in community, the way we speak of the gospel, the way we present it to other people — and yet what Scripture is teaching is not always immediately clear to everyone all the time. And so we want to follow and be under the authority of what it teaches, and yet we know that we won't always be right, that what we think it's teaching is what it's actually teaching. But if we knew we were wrong at any one point, we would just stop thinking that and start thinking the right thing; so it's not like it's right there for us. I think a very helpful piece of advice, or a very helpful way to approach this is something that, to use the fancy language, we would call "epistemological humility." And what that just means is that we have a sense, an awareness, of our flaws, of our failures. Residing with our picture of what Scripture says is an awareness that, I could be wrong; I could be wrong about this. And so the saying, "I could be wrong about this," in and of itself, we stay committed to it, and when we're convinced of Scripture's message, we let it be an authority over us. And yet that, "but I could be wrong about this" should make us motivated to go learn. It should make us motivated to listen to other people who disagree. And rather than being scared and even angry**

because, "That's not what Scripture says," it can make us interested and even feel a sense of importance to listen to other interpretations, because we understand, we could be wrong, and even if they're wrong too, by listening to each other we may end up a little closer to what's right.

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

To discern error, we need, on the one hand, to be self-critical, ready to forsake any false beliefs that have entered into our theology. And on the other hand, we need to be ready to help other believers improve their understandings as well. Sometimes this will be fairly easy, but other times this process will be extremely difficult. And we can be sure of this: We'll never rid ourselves or others of *all* error until Christ returns in glory. Yet, it's still our responsibility as followers of Christ to work hard at keeping ourselves true to the teachings of Scripture and helping others to do the same. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:16. He said:

> Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).

In our work in the field, we encounter different missionaries from different denominational backgrounds, different traditions, and I think it important that we work together with them. We have so much in common across the board in the evangelical community. Now, we do have issues where we disagree. There will always be divisions over end times and baptism and spiritual gifts, some of those being maybe the three biggest ones where churches are divided. But there is so much that we have in common. And I think that our theologians and our pastors all need to be concerned, first and foremost, for recognizing those areas that we have in common. And the more we do that, the more that we cultivate a sense of unity and commonality around those core essential elements of the faith, the more we are likely to treat those areas where we disagree with a spirit of grace rather than a spirit of judgment or condemnation.

— Dr. Steve Curtis

Now that we've seen what we'll mean in these lessons by the term "Christian theology," we should turn to our second topic: Christian traditions.

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

It's only natural for Protestants to be suspicious of Christian tradition. We see ourselves as deeply rooted in the Reformation, and the Protestant Reformers reaffirmed the authority of Scripture over all human traditions. Still, not all human traditions contradict the Scriptures. And, as we're about to see, the Scriptures themselves teach that when Christian traditions represent wisdom that the Holy Spirit has given the church, there is much value in them. So, what place do theological traditions have as we build a Christian theology?

To answer this question we'll touch on three topics. First, we'll define the term "theological tradition." Second, we'll examine some of the tendencies of theological traditions. And third, we'll investigate the importance of theological traditions in our lives. Let's look first at what we mean when we speak of a Christian theological tradition.

DEFINING TRADITION

Evangelical Christians employ the term "tradition" in so many ways that we need to specify how we'll use it here. We'll clarify the issue first by providing a negative definition — explaining what we *don't* mean — and then by offering a positive definition — stating what we *do* mean. In the first place, in many evangelical circles today the term "tradition" has very negative connotations because it is closely associated with what we'll call "traditionalism."

Negative Definition

As American theologian John Frame put it:

> **"Traditionalism" exists where *sola Scriptura* is violated.**

In other words, traditionalism bases theological beliefs on human preferences, usually longstanding traditional preferences, rather than on the Scriptures. In Mark 7:8-13, Jesus said these words to the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees:

> You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men… making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down (Mark 7:8-13).

Followers of Christ should reject traditionalism because it gives to mere human opinion the authority that rightly belongs only to Scripture. Since human folly rather than divine revelation can easily guide our faith, we should oppose traditionalism in all of its forms, just as Jesus did in his day.

Well, first of all, tradition is a good aspect, I think, for Christians. It's where we can get our doctrines summarized for us. But we need to also be careful about the dangers associated with tradition. Some of us know of Mark 7 where Jesus actually rebukes the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law by obeying the traditions of man and actually set aside the things of God… One of the stories that comes to mind is one church I once visited. So this church was very formal and loved prayer books in the mornings. And there were old people who struggled when the youngsters who were from down the universities coming to church because they felt these young people were actually not respecting the traditions. And the church actually barred them from coming in instead of actually seeing these young people as people who were lost, who were seeking the Lord, and that they could reach out to them. So that's what can be one of the ways where our traditions can get in the way of the gospel.

— Dr. Vuyani Sindo

In the second place, although "traditionalism" has very negative connotations, we should have a different outlook on "tradition." As strange as it may sound to our modern evangelical ears, the apostle Paul actually affirmed a positive role for tradition in the body of Christ.

Positive Definition

Listen to what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:3:

> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The expression "delivered" in Greek is *paradidome* (παραδίδωμι) and "received" is *paralambano (*παραλαμβάνω*).* These terms appear several times in Paul's writings to describe his transfer of Christian teachings. This fact is important to our discussion because these were the same terms used in first century Jewish circles to describe the teachings of Jewish traditions.

In effect, Paul viewed Christian faith as a tradition to be passed down from person to person, from generation to generation. Even though we may be using the term "tradition" in ways slightly different from Paul's use, we need not be put off by the terminology of "Christian tradition" or "Christian traditions." Clearly, Paul himself employed the language of tradition in a positive way.

Scripture itself speaks positively of both oral and written apostolic tradition. As evangelicals, when we say we want to pass on Scripture, we can freely say, we also want to preserve apostolic tradition… So,

for instance, when the Protestant Reformers were evaluating church traditions according to Scripture, they felt free to dismiss and set aside those traditions where they didn't agree with Scripture. But where church tradition agreed with apostolic tradition, *in Scripture*, the Reformers defended those church traditions.

— Dr. Andrew Parlee

There are many benefits to our traditions, what we sometimes call rituals. People need to remember who they are, to constantly remember who God is and what God has done, and many traditions and rituals help us to remember. When you give that place to traditions and rituals and use them merely as a reminder of who God is, what God did, who humanity is, and what humanity's position is, it helps us to strengthen the faith we have in God. They should never take the place of God; they should never take the place of Jesus and his merits. They are only a reminder; they represent what our relationship with God means and how we develop it, how God allows us to have that relationship with him, and those rituals and traditions help us to remember him.

— Rev. Pablo Torres, translation

For our purposes, we'll define a theological tradition as:

A relatively longstanding theological doctrine, practice or pathos that distinguishes branches of the church from each other.

Let's break down this definition into two main parts. First, it's "a relatively longstanding doctrine, practice or pathos." That is to say, when we speak of a theological tradition in these lessons, we do not have in mind something that started recently. Rather, a system of beliefs becomes a theological tradition in our terms only when it has existed for quite a while. According to our definition, only beliefs enjoying years of acceptance in the church rightly qualify as traditions.

And second, a theological tradition "distinguishes branches of the church from each other." In other words, we have in mind those features of particular denominations or associations of believers that are identifying characteristics. What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The Baptist tradition. What makes a Methodist a Methodist? The Methodist tradition. When groups of believers share common outlooks over a long period of time, these outlooks become their distinctive theological paths. They find their hearts are more at home in one branch of the church than another.

When it comes to Christian traditions or branches of the church and the various things that different branches of the church emphasize and the paths that they have followed over the years, it's easy to go to extremes. One extreme is to reject any such influence on your life —

you emphasize your individual life, your individual walk with Christ and your individual reading of the Bible. And people that overemphasize that extreme end up being a lot like a homeless person. And maybe you've seen a homeless person that walks down the street and he'll notice this, and he'll pick it up and put it in his bag or in his cart, and he'll notice something else that was left by the way or another thing left by the way. And so, the bag is just full of things that really don't fit together, and his life is sort of disintegrating. It has no unity. He has no home to go to. So that's one extreme, is that heightened individualism, sort of, rejection of Christian traditions or branches of the church and the wisdom that they have.

Now, the other extreme is to take tradition, a branch of the church, the paths that various portions of the church have followed for years, to take that more or less like a prison… And you can find long-term traditions that have been handed down from generation to generation and you can lock yourself into them as if you're in a building without any windows at all; no door to get out of. Why do you do this? Why do you believe that? Why do you feel this way? "Well, it's because that's what my church tells me to believe and to feel and to do." And that's like making a Christian tradition as if it were a prison. And we don't want tradition to be either the extreme of rejection, where you are an individual that has no home, and you also don't want to make a branch of the church your prison either, because there's so much to be learned from other branches of the church other than the one that you may identify with.

So, I often think of a denomination, or a branch of the church, or the paths that they have followed for years — a tradition, a Christian tradition — as a home. Now, you know what a home is like. It's the place you go to sleep. It's the place you go and feel comfortable. It's where you are. You do certain things inside your home in ways that may be different from what other people do. But it's your home… And that's the way I think it's very helpful to think about branches of the church, and the rules that they give us, the policies they give us, even their doctrinal summaries, and the ways that they tell us to feel and to behave in our Christian faith. It's great to have that as your home because we have to depend a lot on the body of Christ to sort of fill in the gaps that are in our lives, to help us think through things more carefully, and to live in ways that are pleasing to God. But at the same time, we can go outside of our branch of the church — our tradition — make friends, learn from them, and come back to our own branch of the church — our own home — and change things in ways that accord more with the Bible.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Now that we've defined what we mean by Christian theological traditions, we should also note some tendencies of theological traditions.

TENDENCIES OF TRADITIONS

We all realize that many branches of the Christian church are distinguished by theological tendencies that have characterized them over time. Many followers of Christ explicitly and self-consciously identify with one theological tradition or another. Others do not. But whether we realize it or not, we're all deeply influenced by our theological traditions. These theological tendencies are represented by the books we read, the sermons we hear, the churches we attend and the Christian friends we keep. If we hope to keep these traditions from overly influencing us, we need to become aware of these influences and their strengths and weaknesses.

In the preceding lesson, we noted that theology involves orthodoxy — right or true doctrines, orthopraxis — right behavior or practice, and orthopathos — right feelings or emotions. For this reason, it's helpful to note that different theological traditions within Christianity tend to fall into one, or possibly two, of these three categories.

Some theological traditions have a tendency to emphasize orthodoxy, some tend toward orthopraxis, and some accentuate orthopathos. First, let's consider how some branches of the church are distinguished from others by their traditional emphasis on orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy

We all know of denominations that see their identity primarily in terms of what doctrines they hold. Their teaching ministries and doctrinal stances form the heart of their Christian faith. Unfortunately, these branches of the church can be rather doctrinaire. That is, they can be heavily preoccupied with doctrinal controversies, and they usually insist on a large measure of doctrinal uniformity. This preoccupation with doctrines often leads to intellectualism, where learning and understanding the data of the faith becomes an end in itself.

> **When we emphasize the doctrinal or conceptual dimensions of Scripture, we want to avoid what people call "intellectualism." But that's not the same thing as avoiding intellect or avoiding the mind… Paul speaks of not just the Spirit bearing witness together with our Spirit, but he speaks of the mind of the Spirit. He also speaks of the renewing of the mind, that the mind plays an important role. It's part of who we are, it's part of God's gift to us, and we can use that when we approach Scripture… But it's not a mind that says, you know, "I am intellectual, I can look down on everybody else." It's not a mind even that when we are listening to a sermon, and we hear a Scripture**

> **out of context we say, "Ah, I'm smarter than they are," which was a temptation I had as a younger Christian. Because sometimes there's still something of value that's being said there, we need to have a mind that's humble, that's willing to learn what God has to teach us, but we use that mind in service.**
>
> **— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

Second, rather than emphasizing orthodoxy, other traditions in the church tend to distinguish themselves more by their orthopraxis.

Orthopraxis

There are many churches that find their distinctive identity in what they *do*, as opposed to what they teach. Their Christian service and programs of action are their greatest strengths. They often have long lists of dos and don'ts for their members. Sadly, these branches of the church often reduce the Christian faith to mere activity. Christianity becomes a matter of *doing something*. And this preoccupation with activity often leads to legalism.

> **In my own Christian life I've seen how an emphasis on obedience is important, for certain. I mean, Christ said that we were to go and make disciples teaching them to obey all that I've commanded you. And when I first became a believer, I was in a group of believers or Christians that really emphasized obeying what Christ taught and especially obeying the Great Commission. But over time that really kind of overshadowed that sense of grace and love and the freedom that we have that the gospel provides… I mean, I would have run out of steam a long time ago if it was just on the basis of obeying what God had told me to do. The sense of love, the sense of grace, the sense of freedom to fail is also important… So, I think we need obedience. We need to be concerned about how we live our lives, but the gospel frees you in a way and empowers you in a way that that legalism just never will.**
>
> **— Rev. Frank Sindler**

Third, other theological traditions distinguish themselves, not by their focus on orthodoxy or orthopraxis, but more by their orthopathos.

Orthopathos

The emotional dimension of the Christian faith is center stage in these churches. Religious affections are so highly valued that many times little else matters. These Christians don't want to be bothered with doctrine. And they don't want to be called to certain kinds of behaviors, unless those behaviors make them feel better. For this reason, it's not uncommon for these branches of the church to be characterized by emotionalism.

> **I grew up in the Assemblies of God tradition, and the Assemblies of God is a tradition that in many ways rightly values the emotional side of who we are, created as God's image. But when certain traditions that value one thing go awry, they can often do that by overvaluing it. And it was in university where I started to realize a little bit more of who we are as whole beings created in God's image. And that's whole beings that are not just emotional but are cognitive and that have a volitional dimension to who we are. When I started realizing that, and when I realized the way the Bible speaks about these three dimensions of who we are, the way the Bible talks about the relationship between our minds and our wills and our emotions as being mutually dependent, as being symbiotic. Symbiotic, of course, means the relationship can flow both ways. Sometimes our emotions arise out of right thinking. But actually, sometimes right thinking arises out of emotions, out of right emotions, right feeling. Sometimes our emotions inform how we act. Sometimes how we act informs our emotions. So, all three of these dimensions of who we are, they mutually inform one another, and that helped balance me out in terms of how I look at who I am and who others are as emotional beings.**
>
> **— Dr. M. B.**

Needless to say, everyone will have to evaluate the tendencies of Christian traditions in different ways. But it's fair to say that theological traditions generally find their identities by stressing one or two of these orientations.

Now that we've defined the idea of Christian traditions and seen the kinds of tendencies such traditions usually exhibit, we should recognize the importance theological traditions have for these lessons on building theology.

IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONS

Put simply, an awareness of the importance of traditions plays two critical roles: first, it helps us understand more about ourselves; and second, it helps us understand more about others. Let's think for a moment about how we need to see ourselves in the light of theological traditions.

Awareness of Ourselves

Until recent decades, leading secular philosophers insisted that the pursuit of truth requires us to free ourselves from the shackles of tradition, especially religious tradition. This outlook became so influential in western cultures, that well-meaning evangelical Christians have often adopted it for themselves. Rather than affirming the value of drawing from a well-established theological tradition, we act as if we should cast aside all traditions as we pursue the truth God has disclosed in Scripture.

The idea that traditions shouldn't influence our theology was very popular and supported by many of the perspectives of Enlightenment modernism. The goal of serious academic study of the Bible from the Enlightenment forward was to divorce oneself from theological prejudices and traditions. You'll recall that this was Descartes' method in his attempt to defend the rationality of the Christian faith. Descartes doubted everything so that he could clearly distinguish knowledge from mere belief. Beliefs, such as superstition and mere religious tradition, were to be discarded in the pursuit of objective, rational truth.

Now, in many ways, students who seek to divorce themselves from their religious heritage or their particular Christian theological tradition are applying Enlightenment and Cartesian standards to theology. Sadly, this approach to theology is responsible for much of the apostasy that we've seen in the Western church in recent centuries. Modern liberalism is the result of applying these modernist Enlightenment agenda to theology. But there's a better way to deal with theological traditions. Rather than trying to divorce ourselves from our theological orientations, it's much more helpful to strive for self-awareness. In other words, it's beneficial for us to know more and more about the heritage that constantly influences us as we build a theology. Self-awareness enables us to evaluate and manage some of these influences.

> **We exist within a world of cultures, of worldviews. We're not a *tabula rasa*; we're not a blank slate. We bring a lot of our own presuppositions, our own pre-thoughts to Scripture… But understanding that we are influenced by multiple factors, in that, whether it's my denominational, non-denominational, my previous teachings, my parents, my friends, the world as a whole, we are bombarded with information from all ways, shapes, forms and fashions, and all those things can infect how it is that I interpret Scripture. So when I go there, again, I must go with humility, I must go with reverence, and understanding my own sin nature and the desires of my heart to maybe want to change some things. So now, how do I discern between my thoughts and then what I perceive to be the Holy Spirit? So I must adhere to the tools of interpretation, and, more than anything, the reverence and respect of our holy Father.**
>
> **— Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.**

It's very helpful to ask ourselves a few questions. First, what branch of the church do you call home? You may think in terms of a denomination or a movement of some sort. It could be a formal or informal association. Perhaps you adhere to more than one tradition or a combination of traditions.

Beyond this, what are the general tendencies of your tradition? Does your branch of the church primarily emphasize orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos? In other words, are you most concerned with doctrine, behavior or emotions? What motivates you in your faith? What energizes your life in Christ? After you've identified these basic tendencies, then you can begin to identify the character of your tradition even further by asking questions like: What kinds of doctrines are most important? What behaviors are most emphasized? What emotions are considered acceptable or unacceptable? When you can answer these kinds of questions, you'll be in a position to manage the influences of your own background as you develop your own Christian theology.

Now when considering the importance of theological traditions, an awareness of ourselves and the effects our traditions have on us is essential, but we should also have an awareness of how traditions influence others.

Awareness of Others

Whenever we discuss theology with other believers, we must always remember that their associations and their traditions heavily influence them, just like ours influence us. The theological stream to which they belong can explain many of their convictions as well. This means that other Christians may have agenda very different from our own. They may have different priorities, strengths and weaknesses. And the more we recognize this about others, the more fruitful our interactions can be and the more we can avoid unnecessary divisions.

> **Having an awareness of theological tradition of other believers or other churches is very, very important because, as we can see today, the church is divided, in most cases, along denominational barriers, and most of the time it doesn't have to do with what all denominations agree upon, but it has to do with setting traditions that we have in our churches. And it is very, very important that if we want to have a fruitful interaction between Christians and between denominations, we know each other's tradition and also respect that tradition. It's not also just knowing their tradition, but at times it's important to know why they believe what and why they have those traditions… Just to respect what they are doing, in a way, can pave the way for both sides to have meaningful interactions that will benefit both of them and also will enhance them doing God's work together and also doing work in God's kingdom together as well.**
>
> **— Rev. Dr. Humphrey Akogyeram**

Having defined our perspective on Christian theology and considered the importance of how particular theological traditions influence the process of building a theology, we should turn to our third topic: the Reformed tradition. We need to deal with this subject because these lessons will be deeply influenced by the theological perspectives often identified as Reformed or Reformation theology.

REFORMED TRADITION

I'm convinced that authors and teachers of theology need to be as open as possible about the orientation of their theological points of view. It does no one any good to act as if we simply go to the Scriptures as blank slates. To be sure, we shouldn't just obediently adhere to a particular Christian tradition. We must always strive to submit ourselves to the full authority of Scripture. Still, at a minimum, we have priorities and emphases that align us more or less with this or that branch of the church. When teachers admit that this is true, then their students are better equipped to evaluate what they read or hear from them.

To explore the contours of the Reformed tradition, we'll look into three matters: first, the historical origins and developments of this branch of the church; second, the tendencies of Reformed theology; and third, some of its theological distinctives. Let's look first at the origins and developments of the Reformed tradition.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The term "Reformed theology" comes from the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, but many different theological movements comprised the Protestant Reformation. Among the more significant groups were the Lutherans in Germany, the Zwinglians in Zurich and the Calvinists in Geneva. Although in a broad sense we may speak of all three of these movements as Reformational, the term "Reformed" came to apply primarily to the third group — those Protestants who were deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin.

Now this branch of the church was not restricted to Geneva by any means. In the days of the Reformation, Reformed churches were very evangelistic and spread throughout and beyond Western Europe. Calvin himself was a Frenchman, and many of his students helped lead the French Huguenot movement. These young ministers suffered much persecution in the early decades of their work. But the theology of Geneva was so strong that more and more young men kept going into France to build the church of Christ there.

The Reformed movement continued to grow throughout Europe. In Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Hungary and other nations, churches sprang up by the thousands. Several highpoints of the early continental Reformed theology should be mentioned. For instance, the Belgic Confession in 1561 and the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563 have great significance in the Reformed branch of the church. These were some of

the earliest presentations of the theological system taught in Geneva. In addition, one strong arm of the Reformed tradition in continental Europe was the Dutch Reformed church. It's perhaps best known for the Synod of Dort, which met from 1618 to 1619 to deal with the Arminian controversy — a divergence from Calvinism based on the teachings of Arminius.

> **One of the earliest catechisms of the Reformed branch of the church is the Heidelberg Catechism. And I just love that catechism because it reveals something about Reformed theology that often isn't emphasized. Reformed theology is sometimes considered a highly doctrinal set of beliefs and really not concerned with practical life and the daily experience of Christians. But the Heidelberg Catechism begins this way: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" What is your only comfort in life and in death? Now, you have to know that when that catechism was written, it was written in a context where Reformed Christians were being persecuted. They were dying for their faith in large numbers. And the expectation was that they would continue to be persecuted and that they would continue to die in large numbers because of their beliefs, because of the things they stood for. And so, it's just wonderful to realize that the opening of that catechism — again one of the earliest ones in this branch of the church — asked the question, "Where do you find comfort in life and in death?" And of course, the answer is in Jesus and in the fact that the Father knows even the hairs on your head and that nothing can happen to you apart from his care and his providence over your life. But it's a wonderful thing to realize that, at least in its earliest phases, and then even true later on, that this branch of the church was very much concerned with orthopathos, or the role of emotions in our faith.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

The Reformed tradition also grew significantly on the British Isles. John Knox, who lived from 1505 to 1572, studied in Geneva and returned to establish Reformed or Presbyterian churches in Scotland. The Scots Confession of 1560 is a well-known document from that time. The Reformation also took root in England, where the Puritans, along with other groups, drafted the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1646 and published it and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms in 1647. Scripture citations were added in 1648. These documents, known as *The Westminster Standards*, are still used in many Reformed churches today. Many different Baptist groups in the British Isles also considered themselves part of the Reformed tradition and expressed their faith in documents like the London Baptist Confession, first published in 1644.

The Reformed tradition spread to many other parts of the world as well. The English Puritans, and later Scottish Presbyterians, brought it to North America in force. And missionary efforts carried it to many parts of Africa, Indonesia, Southeast Asia and South America as well.

Now, at each step of the way in its history, there were many developments that gave Reformed theology its distinctive characteristics. And, as in all other branches of the church, there have been serious failures and apostasy in Reformed churches. Difficulties still plague this part of the body of Christ. But today, vibrant, biblically-sound Reformed theology is taught and lived out in nearly every part of the world.

Now that we know a little bit about the historical origins and developments of the Reformed branch of the church, let's look at its theological tendencies.

TENDENCIES

Earlier in this lesson, we pointed out that while Christian traditions have strengths, they have weaknesses too. In fact, it's often been the case that our greatest strength becomes our greatest weakness. As we know, even great leaders and advocates in the past have had human weaknesses. And the same is true in our contemporary context. So, what are some of the positive and negative tendencies of the theological stream that guides this series?

In terms of our earlier discussion about tendencies in Christian traditions, we should ask what Reformed theologians value the most: orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos? Throughout the centuries, it's been evident that, with some rare exceptions, the Reformed tradition has primarily stressed orthodoxy, with a secondary emphasis on orthopraxis. Except for some Puritan writings, orthopathos has not received much attention.

When doctrine and duty are emphasized to the practical exclusion of orthopathos, our emphasis on doctrine tends toward intellectualism and our emphasis on duty toward legalism. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis are the natural tendencies of Reformed theology, and both are strengths and weaknesses for this part of the body of Christ. So, for better or for worse, because these lessons have been influenced by this tradition, these tendencies will likely appear over and over in these lessons, both as strengths and weaknesses.

Having considered the origins and tendencies of the Reformed tradition, we should look at some of its more prominent doctrinal distinctives — especially since this tradition stresses doctrine over other aspects of theology. Understanding these features will help you evaluate more thoroughly the viewpoints presented in these lessons.

DISTINCTIVES

We'll mention four doctrinal positions that characterize this branch of the church: first, what has come to be known in English as the "Five *Sola*s" of the Reformation; second, the unity of Scripture; third, the doctrine of God; and fourth, a distinctive approach to the relationship between Christianity and human culture. Let's look first at the Five *Sola*s of Reformed theology.

Five *Solas*

Since the 20th century, it's become common to speak of the Five *Sola*s, or *Solae* in Latin. These doctrines have traditionally been summarized in statements that all contain forms of the term "*sola*," which means "alone" or "only." Most evangelicals have heard of at least some of these: *Sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone"; *Solo Christo*, "Christ alone"; *Sola fide*, "faith alone"; *Sola gratia*, "grace alone"; and *Soli Deo gloria*, "glory to God alone."

Sola Scriptura is the doctrine that Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and life. It stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic belief that the church itself possesses an infallible tradition, apart from the Scriptures, that may be expressed through the ecumenical councils or through the Pope.

Solo Christo affirms that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man. It stands in contrast to those who look to the saints or to Mary for mediation. Christ is the only Savior, the only one to whom sinners may turn in order to receive pardon from sin, and thereby, escape the wrath of God.

Sola fide, or "faith alone," is the doctrine that God justifies believers through the instrumentality of faith alone, and not by any other means, such as human effort or human works.

Sola gratia, "grace alone," describes the way God grants us the blessings of salvation. God grants grace to his chosen people from all eternity. He freely justifies us on the basis of Christ's merit and graciously credits that merit to our account.

Sola gratia asserts that we have no personal merit that contributes to our salvation. The entire process of salvation from eternal election to eternal glorification is based solely on the grace of God.

Soli Deo gloria, meaning "glory to God alone," is the doctrine that all creation and acts within creation should be, and ultimately are, designed to bring glory to God alone. The Reformers used this slogan because they opposed all doctrines that attributed some measure of merit to human beings, and therefore, detracted from the honor that rightly belongs to God alone.

In addition to the *Sola*s, it's important to note that another distinctive of the Reformed tradition is its outlook on the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

Unity of Scripture

In recent history, it's become common for many evangelicals in North America, and for those who come under their influence, to believe that there is a fundamental separation between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is generally seen as law, while the New Testament is viewed as gospel. The Old Testament is thought to stress works, but the New Testament emphasizes grace. The Old Testament is perceived as bringing only judgment, whereas the New Testament brings salvation.

By contrast, the Reformed tradition looks at the whole Bible as presenting a unified theology. Law is in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Gospel is in both Testaments. Good works are required in both Testaments. Divine grace brings

salvation in both Testaments. There is judgment in both the Old and the New Testament, and salvation comes in both the New and the Old Testament. Now, of course, there are differences between the Testaments, but these differences are simply developmental. That is, they represent developments of biblical faith from earlier stages to later stages. But there is still a fundamental theological unity between the Old and New Testaments.

> **Often when I speak to Christians they act as if the Old Testament and New Testaments are completely different in the way they speak about God and the gospel, but the longer I spend reading the Bible, the clearer it becomes to me, and to many others, that actually the Old Testament and New Testament speak with one voice. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus made clear to the disciples that the whole of the Old Testament, the law, the prophets, the writings, they all speak clearly of him, of the gospel and of the implications of the gospel. So the whole structure of the Bible is based on God acting towards humanity in grace, and then, in the light of that grace, calling people like us to live in response to him in obedience to his commands and to live in a life which reflects what is ultimately the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ. So increasingly, as I read the Old Testament and the New Testament, I hear them speaking with one voice. Whilst the commands that God gives are shaped and tailored to time and space before and after Christ, they are based on the same indicatives and essentially ask the same of his people.**
>
> **— Dr. J. Gary Millar**

When we properly consider the differences between the Old and New Testaments, we conclude with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in chapter 7, section 6 that:

> **There are not two covenants of grace differing in substance, but only one, under various administrations.**

Now to be sure, this emphasis on the unity of Scripture has led to some errors in Reformed theology. Sometimes not enough distinction is made between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Yet, this emphasis on the unity of the Bible is one of the greatest strengths of Reformed theology. You'll notice that in these lessons we'll use the Old Testament as much, if not more, than the New Testament as we explore how to build our theology. Our goal will be to construct theology that accords with the *whole* Bible, not just with the New Testament. The influence of the Reformed tradition on these studies will be evident in this way at nearly every turn.

In the third place, in addition to its focus on the *Solas* and the unity of Scripture, Reformed theology has a distinctive emphasis when dealing with the doctrine of God.

Doctrine of God

> **Protestants have stressed for 500 years now that the doctrine of God is**

> **important not only in and of itself, but because all other doctrines have to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. The Protestant doctrine of God is not substantially different from the Eastern Orthodox or the Roman Catholic doctrine of God. And at the same time it's the most unique Protestant doctrine because Protestants believe that every other doctrine of the Bible has to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. So, theology proper — it's what theologians call the doctrine of God — is vital for every believer, and every believer has a doctrine of God whether they think of themselves as theologians or not. And that doctrine of God is vital for the way they live the Christian life.**
>
> **— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III**

Historically, Reformed theology has given attention to both the transcendence and the immanence of God. Reformed standards like the *Westminster Confession of Faith* speak strongly about both the eternal transcendent decrees of God and the immanent providence of God. This historical balance in Reformed theology reflects the fact that the Bible describes God as both transcendent and immanent. In some passages, he is portrayed as lofty, distant, beyond and above everything. And in other passages, the Scriptures speak of him as immanent, close and intimately involved with history, especially present with his people.

Even so, when compared to other Christian traditions, the tendency of Reformed theology has been to emphasize the transcendence of God over his immanence. Other Christian traditions often stress divine attributes that are more readily associated with God's nearness, such as his kindness, his mercy, his love and tenderness, his patience, and his presence. Now, Reformed theology affirms these divine attributes, but it has *tended* to emphasize others that are more closely associated with transcendence, such as his eternality, his immutability, his sovereignty, his aseity or self-existence, his omnipotence, and his omnipresence. Listen, for instance, to the Westminster Shorter Catechism's characteristically Reformed definition of God. In response to question number 4:

> **What is God?**

The Catechism answers this way:

> **God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.**

This answer is true and in accordance with the Scriptures. But it obviously stresses God's transcendent qualities — those attributes that make him above and over all — rather than his immanence.

Although an emphasis on the transcendence of God can be taken to extremes, a proper understanding of God's transcendence rightly undergirds many elements of

Christian theology. Therefore, this tendency will guide these lessons in particular directions.

Along with the *Solas*, unity of Scripture and the doctrine of God, we should mention one final distinctive of the Reformed branch of the church. How does Reformed theology view the relationship between Christianity and human culture?

Human Culture

> **I believe that Reformed theology sees an intimate relationship between God and human culture. In other words … you can always find that God is manifest in any culture, in any age. God's presence in human life, in human culture, is essential and has always been evident. A great example is when the apostle Paul goes and preaches in Athens and sees the "unknown God" that the Athenians worship, and he takes advantage of that opportunity to tell them, "This is the God that I preach to you." You can see God reflected even in cultures that say they don't believe in God, because in their moral principles you can sometimes see God's presence, you can see God's love, you can see God's creation. Even if they deny it, there is always an intimate relationship between God and human culture.**
>
> **— Rev. Pablo Torres, translation**

From the days of Calvin's ministry in Geneva, the Reformed tradition has taken a fairly consistent approach to these matters. One way to summarize this distinctive point of view is to follow the well-known typology created by Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture*. In his book, Niebuhr gathers various Christian approaches to culture into five major groups.

"Christ against culture" is Niebuhr's label for the view that culture is evil and to be avoided by Christians. Separatist movements such as medieval monastic orders and modern Amish and Mennonite communities are well-known forms of this view.

Niebuhr uses the expression "Christ of culture" to describe those views that primarily affirm culture and attempt to accommodate Christ to what they find in the world. This approach can be seen in many modern liberal Protestant churches.

Between the two extremes of Christ *against* culture and Christ *of* culture, Niebuhr describes three views that attempt various ways of reconciling Christ and human culture. "Christ above culture" is a view that attempts a synthesis between Christ and the world. "Christ and culture in paradox" describes views that see a dualism between Christ and the world. And "Christ the transformer of culture" pertains to the opinion that Christianity should influence, and in some ways "convert" cultures to biblical norms. In Niebuhr's view, the Reformed position fits within this last category.

Now, at different times, the Reformed tradition has put this point of view into effect in a variety of ways. Sadly, some of these efforts were closely associated with European colonialism. But there have also been some generally positive examples of the transformation model in the past. Usually, we point to Puritan England and Puritan

America, as well as to Abraham Kuyper's efforts in Holland, as more positive examples of the attempt to have Christ transform human culture. In all events, the general Reformed position on culture may be summed up in this way: When God first made humanity and placed us in the Garden of Eden, he gave humanity a cultural mandate. Listen to the familiar words of Genesis 1:28:

> Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Genesis 1:28).

Adam and Eve were called to serve as God's vice-regents over the world, managing the earth and its potentials for the glory of God. From the Reformed point of view, this cultural mandate has not been set aside. Instead, it is affirmed by the rest of Scripture. In fact, the gospel mandate that Christ gave his church was designed to redeem God's people from sin so that this cultural mandate might be fulfilled.

Because of this, Reformed theology has insisted that every dimension of life must be brought under the lordship of Christ. Reformed theology rejects the idea that some aspects of life are religious and others are secular. From this point of view, all of life is religious, governed either by true or false religion. The arts, sciences, law, politics, business, family, school; every aspect of human culture should be accomplished in ways that honor the Word of God and bring glory to God.

> **In many, many places in Scripture it's very clear that the kingdom of God is to affect every part of who we are and what we do, and that our very role as image bearers, to reflect God's kingship, is an essential part of our discipleship. In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul talks about what it means to "learn Christ." And in talking about discipleship, he doesn't begin with worship practices. Instead, he begins with the way that we speak to our neighbors, that we should stop speaking lies and start speaking the truth to our neighbors. And then he goes from that — the role of being a citizen — to our work life, and he says, "The one who stole should stop stealing and should work with his hands in order that he might have something to give to others." And so, what we can see in terms of "learning Christ" or being a disciple of Christ, for Paul, affects every part of our life. And later in that chapter and on into chapters 5 and 6, he'll talk about family life, parents and children, husbands and wives. He'll talk about our worship life and that we should sing songs to each other and encourage one another. And he'll also talk about how we should respond to the principalities and the authorities. Jesus did this as well when he told his parables. He would just point to a particular part of life — look at this rich man and a poor man — and he would talk about what the kingdom of God looks like. How should the rich relate to the poor? So every part of our lives is under the reign of God.**
>
> **— Dr. Gregory R. Perry**

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on exploring Christian theology, we've set forth some of the important outlooks that will guide this entire study. We first defined Christian theology as that which accords with the *Apostles' Creed*. We also saw that there are a variety of Christian traditions within theology that shape and characterize the various branches of the church. And finally, we pointed out that these lessons will be guided by the orientations of the Reformed tradition, including its origins and developments, tendencies and theological distinctives.

Every follower of Christ has been given the privilege of exploring Christian theology. As we do, we'll find that we have much in common with other believers in the ways we think, behave and feel — in our orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. But we'll also find that Christian theology is not without variety. Throughout the millennia different branches of the church have developed their own traditional priorities and emphases. And we benefit in countless ways as we interact with these traditions. Exploring Christian theology is a lifelong endeavor that we share with every believer as we seek to build theology that honors Christ in every dimension of life.

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Building Your Theology

LESSON TWO

Exploring Christian Theology

Faculty Forum

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Question 1:
What is tradition?

Student: Richard, we use the term "tradition" often in our lessons. What do you mean by that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that word tradition is kind of a slippery thing, isn't it, because sometimes people mean good things by that and sometimes they mean bad. If you think of a Christmas tradition that's a good thing usually, but if you're thinking about tradition in a church that's usually bad. And, in fact, the New Testament uses that term that way, too. It uses it sometimes to refer to bad things like which Jesus says that the Pharisees prefer their traditions over the Word of God, you know, and that's a negative. You shouldn't be that way. But then also the New Testament does use the word tradition or traditional terms for good things. Like when the apostle Paul says, "That which I received from the Lord I have delivered to you," he is actually using terminology there in I Corinthians 15 that was used by the rabbis to talk about their traditions. So there's a plus and there's a minus to it. Now the way I'm using it in this lesson is pretty much in that positive vein. It's just to talk about a set of beliefs, a set of practices, even a set of feelings that can be identified with groups of Christians as they sort of move from one generation to another. So that's more or less what all I mean by the word tradition.

Question 2:
Which traditions are good?

Student: So how do you know if a tradition falls into that positive or the negative realm?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's a great issue. Bottom line: is it in the Bible or not? Because you can end up with traditions that bring more clarity or bring more practicality to what the Bible says that can be very good, but those can also end up becoming bad if people give them the authority that they give to the Bible. For example, every church I know of has ways in which they serve the Lord's Supper, or serve Holy Communion, and those are traditions. It's not as if the Bible tells you exactly what to

do at each step when you serve the Lord's Supper. But if you allow those traditions to become so engrained in a group that they think that somehow they're violating the Bible when they break with the ways their mothers did it or the way they've done it for the last six years, or whatever it may be, then it becomes very negative, then it starts to become equal to the Bible. And so I'm using the word "tradition" to include beliefs, but also practices like liturgies and the like, and attitudes that we have, that we must always keep in submission to the Bible. The Bible's not going to answer every question we have. It has implications for every question we have, but it's not going to give us specific answers to even theological questions, or practice questions, or questions about our emotions. So traditions are often ways in which Christians narrow the margin. They give definition to what they think the Bible means for them at that time, but then over time they start becoming traditions or paths that we walk, and that's where the danger point becomes. If we don't remember that it's just the Bible — even if it has broad parameters — it's just the Bible that has absolute authority.

Question 3:
Why is theology a form of tradition?

Student: Wouldn't most Christians be offended if you called their beliefs just traditions when they believe that they're getting it from Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: Oh yeah, of course. In fact, that's part of the point. Because most Christians who care about the Bible believe that every single thing they believe just comes straight from the Bible, and that is part of the point of calling what we believe tradition, because what it does is it sort of drops it down a level. Because there is a problem here and that is that every time we base our beliefs on the Bible, we're not just using the Bible; we are using our interpretations of the Bible. Now a tradition is formed when a group of Christians follow a particular interpretation. But whether it's an individual, or a group, or a whole denomination, or even major groups of denominations, we still have to face the fact that we're always interpreting the Bible.

When people do theology, they're not just simply bringing the Bible wholesale into life. They're actually putting a piece of themselves into it, too. And there's a number of ways that happens. In the first place, generally speaking, the Bible has broad parameters that it draws for us. When it defines the right way to live or the right way to do things, it usually doesn't give pinpoint directives. It just sort of gives broad directives. And we have to be careful to realize then that what we do when we tend to pinpoint things sometimes — which we have to do, we have to make decisions on what to do with our lives, how to run a church, how to formulate this teaching or that teaching — we tend to pinpoint things that the Bible doesn't quite pinpoint, at least that specifically or precisely. And it's tradition that tends to help us with that; that's sort of a group dynamic that helps us to do that. And the difficulty is that many people make the mistake of identifying their pinpoint notions just with what the Bible

says. And so it is an attempt to drop what we believe down a notch or two. And in fact, the only way to maintain the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, that the Scripture alone is our absolute authority, the only way to maintain that is to make sure that we keep everything that we believe about the Bible a half step below the Bible, because otherwise your beliefs get identified with the Bible, and that's when it really gets serious. I mean, it's one thing to say, "I think that this is biblical, I believe this is biblical, I think it's so biblical that I'm ready to die for it," but it's another thing for us to say that what I believe that the Bible teaches is equal to the Bible's teaching, because then it starts becoming something that everybody needs to affirm and everybody needs to follow. And that's the really serious problem that we've had in the Christian church.

Question 4:
How can we distinguish what the Bible teaches from what we believe it teaches?

Student: Well, where do we draw these lines then?

Dr. Pratt: Wow. Well, you really can't draw the line. There is no line to be drawn. It's better, rather than thinking of them as two blocks where you have the Bible here and theology here, it's better to think of it as a line, as a continuum. Because as a continuum, what you can realize is, well, what's I'm believing and what I'm practicing and what I'm feeling — my theology — is I'm convinced it's closer to the Bible here in this area and I'm not so sure here, and maybe really right up there and down here, that kind of thing. And so there's no place really to draw the line except that every individual has to come to the Bible submissively and say this is the best I can understand the Bible today. But I would bet, Eric, that you have changed the way you've understood the Bible before. Is that true?

Student: That's definitely true.

Dr. Pratt: So things that you were absolutely sure were just right there in the Bible ten years ago, would you say there are some things today that you don't feel that way about anymore?

Student: Yeah, of course. I guess from ten years ago I would have to say that probably my beliefs in the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist for me when I was Catholic. Those beliefs have changed in the sense that I used to believe that I needed to be forgiven by a priest or given absolution by a priest. I don't believe that anymore.

Dr. Pratt: And you probably believed that the body and blood of Christ were actually there physically, if you were traditional in your views anyway.

Student: Yes, I did.

Dr. Pratt: Is there any evidence in the Bible at all for believing that? Not in your opinion now, but back in those days you would have thought so, yeah?

Student: Yeah.

Dr. Pratt: Because the Bible says, "this is my body," right? And so you would have thought that this was biblical in those days. And so if you had identified that with the authority of the Bible itself then you could never have reexamined that, because that's the difference. See? You can reexamine traditions. You can reexamine personal beliefs and even longstanding traditions, but you can't criticize the Bible. You can reassess your understanding of the Bible, but if the Bible is *sola Scriptura*, if it's our only unquestionable authority, then we're not to be going to it and criticizing it. Always our goal is to understand it better, and the only way to do that is to distinguish between the Bible itself and our traditions or the things that we believe.

Question 5:
Should churches try to balance orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

Student: Richard, you've discussed about orthopraxis, orthodoxy and orthopathos, and a lot of churches do that. So I wanted you to talk about whether it's necessary for the churches to strive to have a balance between all these three.

Dr. Pratt: Good, yeah, because in this lesson we do talk about those three things that in the previous lesson we talked about as the goal of theology, that we want right thinking — that's orthodoxy, right practice — that's orthopraxis, and right feelings. And then under this rubric of traditions, what I was trying to say was that different churches tend to emphasize different ones of these. Sometimes they'll get two that are their primary emphases, but they just do tend to focus in on one or two of them rather than trying to find some balance point among them all. And it's a problem, because as Christians, what we tend to do is we tend to gather with people that are of like mind. And so if you have the personality that emphasizes, "Well, I'm going to get my doctrine straight," then you tend to be with the person that wants to get the doctrine straight. Or if you're more of an activist, then you want to be with people that are more activistic. If not, then you end up with tensions in the church, and that's the last thing we want in churches is tension, right? Because we all look to church as something that is supposed to be peaceful and helpful and positive and that sort of thing. But I do think it is true that we need to find a way of coming together, balancing these things.

Now there are different ways to think of balance. In the last lesson you'll remember we said that because the deck of life is always shifting back and forth, back and forth,

that balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity, meaning these things come together in different ways at different times, in different combinations, with different emphases. Unfortunately, what often happens in a church is they'll think that the thing that they're emphasizing, say, at this moment, or at this year of their history, is what ought to always be emphasized. And this is especially the problem for pastors who lead their churches, because they will have their own preferences and their own tendencies in certain directions, and they'll think that that's what everybody in their church needs. And so they'll hit that theme over and over and over and over again until the whole church, as it were, becomes flattened out and everybody is unanimous in their lopsidedness, and so then the deck shifts, and everybody falls overboard. It's a serious problem.

So learning how to balance dynamically as life changes, as people change, that's the goal that I have. That's my hope, that we can realize, okay, I'm a part of this branch of the church, and my branch of the church tends to emphasize orthopathos, let's say. Okay, well that's my church. That's where I feel most comfortable, this is my family, this is the part of the body of Christ with which I identify myself. And that's fine. That's wonderful. In fact, that's one of the reasons why we ought to do that, because we have likeness with others. But knowing that tendency of a tradition, or a branch of the church, lets us then critique it and say but we need something else, too. And that's the problem when you don't have people with different personal emphases in the same church, because then you have no voice for the other things. I mean, I just know churches that go way off into social services and things and don't every worry about whether what they're doing is true or not. Then you know other groups that go off into issues that are very emotional, very concerned about their therapeutic well-being and things like that, and ecstatic religious experiences and things. And then you have other groups that are very concerned about let's get our doctrine straight, let's make sure we do everything in just the right way, and the tendency then is to move in from orthodoxy to intellectualism — that's the extreme of orthodoxy, is intellectualism. Or to move from orthopraxis into legalism, because if you're emphasizing what you ought to do all the time, then you're your tendency is for your church to be very legalistic. Or if you're emphasizing orthopathos, good feelings in faith, or right feelings in your faith, then your tendency is to move toward emotionalism. And so to pull back from those "isms" back into something that's a little more balanced is absolutely the right thing to do.

Question 6:
Should orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos all be emphasized in the local church?

Student: When we're thinking about the church worldwide and thinking about this balance, there are Christians over different cultures and in different circumstances. How does that factor in to this balance?

Dr. Pratt: That's great, that's great, because this is one of the problems with Protestants. Protestants tend to think of the Church — and put a capital "C" on that — as their local church. And they tend to think that everything that church ought to be ought to be right here in my local setting. So every local church has got to have a strong teaching ministry; every local church has got to have a strong mercy-service ministry — orthopraxis — every church has got to have vigorous, thriving, wonderful worship services that get you all worked up and excited about the Lord — orthopathos. Well, one time I remember going to a Roman Catholic convent and the head sister there at the convent talking to us Protestant seminary students, and she said this is the difference between you and us — because I asked her the question. I said to her, "Don't you feel strange that all of you are here cloistered away in this convent and that all you do all day is you pray and make wafers for communion?" which is what these people did every single day every day of their lives. And she said, "This is the difference: You don't look at the body of Christ beyond the local church. We look at it as universal."

Now I thought to myself at that time, maybe we need to begin to think that way, too. Because in a given city, let's just say a city, if you are a Presbyterian then you have an organization called the presbytery. Well why not have different kinds of churches with different kinds of emphases within that larger body? Or if you're a Baptist you'll have your local conference, or Methodists have their conferences in a local area or geographical area? Why not go ahead and let people of different emphases emphasize what they emphasize rightly to some degree, because it is their gifting and perhaps even their calling and then learn how to work together in a larger way? That might be one way to resolve some of this. But I think you're right. We have to admit that a lot of that diversity comes simply from the fact that God wants that kind of diversity in the body of Christ.

Question 7:
What's wrong with theology being bound by tradition?

Student: You mentioned that the goal of the Enlightenment and people like Descartes was to create theology that was free of traditional prejudice. What's wrong with that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, what was obviously wrong to Descartes and others in the enlightenment was that tradition had destroyed people, and it had done it in a number of ways. In his case he felt that primarily the issues was that philosophy was so restrained by the traditions of the church that philosophers couldn't think good thoughts. And so he just wanted to clear to board and start off with what was self-evident and not what was governed and determined by the church. Scientists felt the same way, didn't they, about the heliocentric solar system versus the geo-centrism that was believed earlier on in the church? You know, this was the church talking about this, and so the church had great authority. It even worked in practical areas

where people were taxed heavily by the church and their lives destroyed by the traditions of the church. So what he wanted to do was build a theology, a philosophy, — a sort of philosophical theology — that was rooted in rational structures of the universe, of real life, and that was logical, and was not something that was dominated by a bunch of powerful men in Rome. And of course, a lot of that was the French spirit of the day, too.

But that was what the concern was. And how could we say that anything other than that was true of the Protestant Reformation as a whole? In many respects, that's what they were trying to do was trying to get out of the stranglehold that tradition in the Roman Catholic Church especially had on people's lives. Remember what made Martin Luther so angry that he did the thesis on the doors was that it was actually robbing the poor. They were robbing the poor telling them they could by indulgences for themselves and for their relatives who had passed away by giving more money for the building of more cathedrals in Rome. And so the Reformation was based on that to a large extent, too. But there is a serious problem with it, and that is that the Reformation, unlike Descartes, was not a sort of throwing off a tradition for what was rational. The Reformation was a throwing off of tradition as unquestionable, and it was it a reaching back into Christian tradition deeper than what was being done at the day. So rather than thinking of just what was currently supported by the church, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zwingli, and others went back to St. Augustine to see what he said and how the church had developed through the years, through the centuries, to show that the church was not just what was existing in their day. That was one big difference. Then the second big difference was, of course, that rather than exalting rationality like Descartes did or like the Enlightenment did as a whole, the Reformers exalted the Bible as the standard. So if you were looking for a way to critique tradition, the way you did it was with the Bible primarily, not with what seemed to be rational.

Question 8:
Should we avoid rationalism?

Student: So should we do away with rationalism altogether or the mentality behind rationalism?

Dr. Pratt: Well, rationality can't be avoided. God made us that way, right? And so you wouldn't even want to avoid it. It's a gift. It's something that God's given us that we can to one degree or another think clearly about things. And so while we don't want to reject that completely, we always want to be sure that we're using it in submission. Somebody is always using it in submission to somebody. Your mind is never really totally free; you're being boxed in, directed, you're being guided, you're being influenced by — even if you don't realize it — some authority or another. And what Christians want to do is approach the use of reason under the authority that Jesus had. And, of course, as we know, the authority for his own life was the

Scriptures, and so we want an imitation of him to make our authority for our reason that way. So we use logic, we use reason as carefully as we possibly can, but always returning back to the Bible to say is this biblical? Is this what the Bible says? And doing the best we can possibly do, though never perfectly, always re-judging, always reevaluating what God has given us by reason in submission to the Bible.

Question 9:
Why do we need to be aware of ourselves if the goal of theology is objective truth?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you talk about how we need to become more aware of ourselves, but isn't the goal of theology to seek objective truth?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, it is. This is a hard one because people take this as being either/or; either we're going for objective truth, or we need to get to know ourselves and the tradition we're a part of and become more self-aware of it. It's really not either/or. Let me see if I can put it to you this way: The goal as a Christian of theology is to know the truth that God has revealed, primarily the revelation of God in the Bible. Okay, so that's sort of our target and we're aiming for it. But let me just ask you this question, Eric. Have you ever been purely objective about anything in your life?

Student: No, no I haven't.

Dr. Pratt: Sometimes you feel that way?

Student: I do, yes.

Dr. Pratt: Like I'm just stating the facts, right? Like when you say this dinner was good. That may be taken as an objective fact, but if you say the dinner is bad, it's probably not going to be taken as an objective fact by the person that cooked it. The fact is that as much as we may try to be objective about things, we can't be utterly objective because only God can do that. Only God has all knowledge and has all perspectives in his mind at once and knows all things about a subject of a topic. We only get bits and pieces, and we only see them from angles, and we only understand and remember certain things at certain times. And so everything we do has an element of the subjective in it, and that's why it's important to get to know the subject — you — and what branch of the church you come from and how those things have influenced you.

Now we know the difference between people who are being just sort of arbitrary and saying that things are this way or that way just because they want to. In fact, that's kind of a common thing these days. People will say, "Well, this is a good thing to do." Why? "Well, because I think it's good to do." No reasoning, no objectivity about it all. We know the difference between that kind of arbitrary subjectivism

versus someone who is trying to understand the facts as much as they can but can never get completely out of their skin to understand it perfectly or perfectly objectively. And so as Christians, we're not supposed to yield to the sort of subjective element by simply saying, "Well, God isn't that way." Why? "Well, because I don't want him to be, or I refuse to take him to be that way. Or that verse can't say that because I don't want it to say that." That's just arbitrary. But at the same time, we can't say, and we shouldn't say — though people do it all the time — but they shouldn't say to themselves, "Well, all I'm doing is looking at the objective facts." Because every time we look even at the facts of the Bible, we're always looking at it with the vantage point of who we are and what we've become all of our lives: the things that our parents taught us, the things we've learned on our own, the things our churches have told us to emphasize and deemphasize, to make central and marginalize. All those things influence us always and we can never escape that.

And so this goal of objectivity that the Enlightenment had, and that, unfortunately, even many evangelicals have today, of pure objectivity where you take yourself out of the equation, where your influences, and your prejudices, and your beliefs have nothing to do with your task at this moment. Instead you're just going after the facts, say, of the Bible, what this verse meant. It's impossible. It cannot be reached. And so when people think they have reached it, that's when it really becomes dangerous, because at that point they stop evaluating what they think the verse says. If it's just the truth, if it's just objective, then why ever evaluate it again? But as we said earlier, we always change our views on verses in the Bible, right? And so nothing is ever purely objective from a human point of view. That doesn't mean it's not true. It just means it's not purely objective, and those are two very different kinds of things.

Student: So we may continually struggle with this balance between objectivity and subjectivity?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, of course. Always. I mean, this is the way life is. It's always a matter of becoming more aware of who we are as well as what the facts are out there. If I can put it to you this way: You can't eliminate, you can't erase who you are. But you can, if you become more self-conscious of it — what am I a part of? What part of the body of Christ has influenced me? What systems of thought have influenced me? If you become more aware of it, then at least you can begin to manage it, and you can say to yourself, "You know, I probably read this verse this way because of what I've been taught all my life. Now I need to look at it again and see if that's really what I believe, if I think that's what that passage actually says."

I mean, I can think of my own life because I've come from several different Christian churches, several different denominations in my Christian experience, and I can tell you that at each stage of shifting from one group to another to another, it wasn't just small things that changed, they were large things that changed and I had to get over a lot of my prejudices as I moved — in my opinion — closer to what the objective truth is. Now what's funny about this is that I feel as if I've moved toward the more objective point of view through my life going from this denomination to that

denomination to that denomination, but what's interesting is when you meet people that have taken just the opposite path of you and they feel like they're moving more toward objective truth, but they've gone from the group that you ended up with to the other group and to the one you started with. And that's when it becomes very obvious that nobody is just giving the facts. Nobody is just getting what's out there. We're all looking at what's out there in terms of who we are. And that's why in this lesson then as we think about how it is that branches of the church influence us, the more we can become aware of that, how traditions do this to us, the better off we'll be as we try to serve Christ as faithfully as we possibly can.

Question 10:
Are these lessons designed to convert students to a particular tradition?

Student: Now Richard, you say in these lessons that you're not trying to convince people to align themselves with your particular tradition, but I'm not sure I believe you on that.

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's fair enough. Okay, let's go ahead and say it, because we talk about this in the lesson, and I don't like to sort of bring myself like that to a lesson like this, but I think it's often helpful to do that, just to go ahead and say it. There's a sense in which what you're saying is true: I am trying to present what my branch of the church, my branch of the Protestant church, believes about certain things because I think it has value to be considered by others. But what I'm not doing — and this is what makes it a little bit different — is I'm not trying to hide that. I'm trying to say take a look of this. If you are a part of this piece of the church then you already know this probably, you probably already feel at home in it, and so that's okay. Remember, we're talking about things like the emphasis of theology and we're talking about the cultural dimensions of Christianity, things like that that sort of create a tradition that I'm a part of. And what I'm saying to people that are outside of that is not, "Become like me." The very last thing I want the body of Christian to do is to become like me. That would be my last hope.

I remember a student many years ago saying to me, "I'm sure you're so proud of your daughter when she grows up because she'll be just like you and then she'll be able to go even further than you." And I looked at him and said, "The last thing I want is for my daughter to be like me. I know what my problems are. I want her to have her own problems." And I would say that about every student I've ever taught or every denomination. Do I think that I want all denominations in the body of Christ to look like mine? Boy, that would be boring for one thing, but besides that it would not even be a good thing. And so I'm convinced that the way we deal with this between one branch of the church and another is to be up front about it and say, "Now look, the way I'm summarizing this teaching of the Bible is the way my church does it, and this is my theological perspective, and I realize it's not equal to the Bible. But now let me just give you my package and then you look at it. If it helps you, great. If it doesn't,

then okay. Get rid of it or take pieces of it." And I would hope someone else would do the same thing to me. I happen to be the main teacher here in this particular lesson, and so it's important for me to go ahead and just be up front with it. I really am not trying to convince anyone to become like me. My goal is much more basic than that, much more general Protestant than that. I would say I'm trying to convince people to affirm general Christian Protestant religion and theology. That I could say very plainly, but not in terms of my own particular branch.

Question 11:
Is it possible for different denominations to benefit from each other?

Student: Your view seems kind of optimistic. How real do you think, or how realistic do you think that perspective is today? Is it succeeding?

Dr. Pratt: To offer your tradition as something to think about? Or what do you mean?

Student: The view that you're explaining right now, that is it actually taking hold within the evangelical church?

Dr. Pratt: I've been trying to convince people of this for a long time. It's one of the problems we have in this so-called postmodern world that we're a part of where you can see it — you can see it in many ways — that evangelicalism and even liberalism, for that matter, among Christians, there's a realignment that's happening. If you can think of it this way: Vertically you have these old traditions of old denominations, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Mennonite, whatever it may be, and you have them all sort of stacked up like this through the centuries. But what's happening is that you're finding people affiliating with each other not this way anymore so much, but this way. What they're affiliating around is common beliefs if their emphasis is orthodoxy, or common practices if their emphasis is on orthopraxis, or common religious emotional experience if their emphasis is orthopathos. So it's cutting across denominational lines.

Well, in my opinion that's probably a good thing because denominations tend to after a time, after time goes on, they tend to petrify and they tend to become very closed to influence from the outside. And so to have this kind of cross-pollination I think is good, but I also believe that reaching deeply into your branch of the church's past and its history and understanding where it came from, where these views came from, is also valuable. So what I'm hoping is that we'll never lose that vertical denominational distinctives among us, but at the same time be able to join hands across those lines so we can actually talk to each other about things and learn from each other. I mean, is it fair to say that Methodists have something to learn from Baptists and that Baptists have something to learn from Methodists, and that Lutherans have something to learn from Presbyterians and Presbyterians have something to learn from the Anglicans? Is

that a fair thing to say? I don't know we could say anything else. And in that spirit, we don't have to neglect who we are or where we find our home, but we can, in fact, live our home.

I often think of Christians today as people who are like a homeless person that's pushing a shopping cart along, and what they do is they watch television or they read a book or they read the Bible or something, and they go walk around the neighborhood just sort of picking up things that they find in the neighborhood that they want to collect into their shopping basket. And they go on. They have no home, they have nowhere to stay, they have no sense of family or belonging. They're just kind of walking around picking up whatever they can pick up. Other people look at their branch of the church or their tradition more like a prison. I know in generations past that's the way it was in my life. I was raised Baptist, and as far as my family was concerned, if you weren't a Baptist you were basically not even a Christian, and you certainly didn't want to talk to any other denominations or let them come in and talk to your young people. That would really be destructive. And so it became like a prison for me. Well, rather than thinking of ourselves as homeless — no family, no home, no orientation — and rather than thinking of ourselves as imprisoned in a tradition, why not look at a tradition or a branch of the church like a home? And you know what you do in a home. You're in a neighborhood, your house is not exactly like everybody else's unless you live in one of these manufactured neighborhoods, but there are still differences on the inside. And so you visit your next-door neighbor and you notice that they put their couch in front of the window and yours is not in front of the window, and you look at it and say, "Well, I think I like it in from of the window." And you go home and you move your couch in front of the window. That doesn't mean you're taking dynamite and blowing up your house. It's not that you're changing families or changing traditions. It just you're adjusting things and nudging things around, changing the color of the paint or the arrangement of the furniture based on what you learn from other groups. I just find that to be a healthy way to do it, and it acknowledges the fact that Christ has given us these things as gifts. He's given us on the one hand our own home, our own tradition, but he's also given us contact with other Christian traditions. And these are gifts and we ought to delight in them and find our way through them.

Question 12:
What are the five *solas* of the Reformation?

Student: Richard, you talked a lot about the *solas*. Can we talk about them a little more?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, the *solas* of the Reformation, right? Like *sola Scriptura* and *solo Christo, sola fide, sola gratia,* and *soli Deo gloria,* right? Those are the ones we mentioned. Those are just slogans that come out of the Reformation. Some of them come from the Lutherans, some of them come from the Calvinists, and they both

mixed up different ones. They basically summarized stances that Protestants took in contradiction to the Roman Catholic Church. So the first one — say, *sola Scriptura* — basically what that means is only the Bible is our unquestionable authority, and so everything that we believe in theology ought to be derived from the Bible, and we should not go to the church to tell us what to believe.

Question 13:
How do creeds and confessions relate to the *solas*?

Student: Now in the lesson we talked about the Apostles' Creed which is an uninspired human document. How does that and other things like that…

Dr. Pratt: Like creeds and confessions and things?

Student: Yeah.

Dr. Pratt: Well, let me see if I can shape it this way: *sola Scriptura* does not mean the only thing you ever want to use is the Bible, or the only thing you need in theology is the Bible. Obviously not. You need books, you need your brain, you need the guidance of Holy Spirit, all kinds of things. And you also need the guidance of the church, and you also need the guidance of general revelation in general everywhere, how God reveals himself in everything. But *sola Scriptura* says that the only unquestionable authority of all authorities is the Bible itself. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* actually talks about other kinds of authorities. It talks about private spirits, which basically means what's going on inside of you, your opinions, your personal opinions. It talks about the doctrines of the church or the teachings of men, meaning just sort of longstanding traditions, teachings and doctrines. And it moves up another step and says the creeds and the councils of the church. And then finally, on top of all that, the Scriptures alone stand as unquestionable. So we must question our private spirits, we must question the doctrines of men, we must question the councils of the church, but we can't doubt, shouldn't doubt, the Bible itself. So *sola Scriptura* means it's the only absolute authority, not the only authority. There are plenty of authorities. Parents are authorities over their children; pastors are authorities over their congregations, so on and so on. So there are lots of authorities. Something like the Apostles' Creed has a lot of authority because it's so old and it's so widespread throughout the body of Christ as summarizing what Christians have believed through the centuries. And there are others like Nicea, the Chalcedonian Creed, those sorts of things, and various confessions like the Formula of Concord for the Lutherans and the Westminster tradition for the Presbyterians, Heidelberg; those kinds of things. So there are lots of them out there, and they do have authority but always in submission to the unquestionable authority of *sola Scriptura*.

Then we go on to *solo Christo*. *Solo Christo* says that salvation is accomplished for people only by the work of Christ himself, both his active obedience to the law of

God, which he did perfectly, and then his passive obedience, which was his death on the cross. So that's the only way of salvation. Now Jesus said it himself: "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." Well, unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Church by the time of the Reformation had other doors that you had to walk through to be saved, and the Protestants were saying, no, there's only one door you have to walk through and that is what Christ has done. So there's not the door of the sacraments, there's not the door of the church, there's not the door of this, there's not the door of that, but rather just one door that if it's opened to you and you walk through — which is Christ — then you are saved. Put a period at the end of the sentence. And that's a very previous truth to Protestants and something that I think that we need to affirm even in our own day, because today, of course, people aren't thinking in terms of different doors in the church, but they're thinking of different churches, different doors in different buildings. And we have to affirm today in new ways that there really is only one way of salvation and that's the death and the resurrection of Christ.

Question 14:
Do the *solas* of the Reformation ignore the Father and the Holy Spirit?

Student: Everything you've said is good, but what about the Father, God the Father? Or God the Holy Spirit? *Solo Christo* seems to kind of ignore those aspects.

Dr. Pratt: Well it does emphasize Christ over the other persons of the Trinity, that's true. I mean you just sort of have to admit that. And I think you have to think of it as, the old word is, a synecdoche. It's a part standing for the whole, it's what God the Father did through Christ, it's what the Holy Spirit applies from Christ to us, but the key salvific event is Jesus. The key saving event in history is Jesus. The Father didn't die on the cross. Jesus did that. The Holy Spirit didn't die on the cross. Jesus did that. And so the sort of hinge event is the life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Christ, the one who is fully God and fully human, and because of that humanity as well as his divinity, he was able to accomplish salvation for the fallen human race. But all of that came from the Father, and all of that is applied to people through Holy Spirit. So it's not an attempt to get rid of the other persons of the Trinity. Thank you for saying that. Because there are denominations in our day that are so-called "Jesus only" denominations, and they think that rather there being the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that these are just ways in which you talk about God with different names, and so Jesus is now his name, they say, and so everything is Jesus. Well, that's not what we're saying.

Sola fide, there's another one — *sola fide*, by faith alone — and if I could sort of line that out, justification is by faith alone. It's a very technical thing, the difference between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Remember, that was the controversy at the Reformation even though there were other churches out there. The Roman Catholics say that you're saved by faith. That's never been the debated thing among people that

are in Christianity even in the broadest sense of the word. We know the Bible talks too much about faith being the way you're saved. The issue had to do with how are you justified? That is, how are you made right before God? How are you given right standing and get the verdict of not guilty from God? The Catholics were saying that you were justified not just by your faith, but also by your works. And by that they mean that justification, or getting right with God, was something that went on and on and on through time so that it was infused into you little by little by little as you participated in the sacraments, as you participated in the life of the church, as you received the orders of the church, those kinds of things. You get more justification sort of put into you. Well the Protestants said that's really not the right model for what justification is. That's more like what we would call sanctification, getting more and more of it sort of put into you. They said justification is a legal term and so it's like entering into a courtroom where the judge says, "Not guilty." And so it's a once for all event — that once-for-all event that happens at the beginning of the Christian life, after a person is born again and has faith in Christ, then they are justified before God. That's a once and for all event that only comes by faith, not by works. And that's what the Protestants were saying.

Question 15:
If justification is by faith alone, why does the Bible emphasize good works?

Student: So when we're talking faith alone, how do we make sense of the places in Scripture that emphasize good works, especially in James? It's just so important there.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it's funny, isn't it, because James actually says in James 2 that Abraham was not saved by his faith alone. It's sort of odd, isn't it? In fact, that's the verse that Roman Catholics use to argue against the Protestant view. And they knew this. I mean, they weren't ignorant of James. They understood that James was emphasizing something else, though, and it's this: faith is the source of good works, that justification by faith is the source of good works so that if a person is right standing before God, if they have that right standing or justification that happens once and for all as a forensic, judicial declaration, then it starts bearing fruit in their lives. And in some ways, it's a quibbling over terminology. It really is, because the New Testament uses the work justified and sanctified in both ways, to tell you the truth. But in terms of technical theology, they really did mean something very different. The Protestants were saying no, you're justified once and for all and then you bear the fruit of that. And it's your justification that gets you eternal life, and that the bearing of fruit is the by-product of that rather than it being a part of being justified. And so that distinction, though it's a technical one, is what the Protestants were saying against the Catholic doctrine at that time.

Let's take *sola gratia*, by grace alone. I think we all know that God saves us by his mercy. But it's important to realize though, that while God's mercy is what saves us, it is not just his mercy that saves us. It's also works that save us. But can you imagine, Eric, whose works those are?

Student: My works?

Dr. Pratt: No, not your works. Whose are they?

Student: The works of Christ.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Exactly. Now you got it. So you see it's a little deceptive to say that salvation is all by grace if we forget that it's the good works of the man Jesus, the man Jesus, in his humanity that actually earned our salvation. Because in the beginning, God said that salvation must come to the world through the image of God, and God didn't set that aside and say, "Get out the way, I'll just do it myself by my grace." No, humanity had to earn salvation, but how did we do at that? What you say? Well? Fifty-percent?

Student: Not so well.

Dr. Pratt: Not so well. Right. So we're not earning our salvation all through the history of the Bible — fail, fail, fail, fail — but when Jesus comes as the man, as incarnate God, as fully human, Jesus in his human nature actually earned salvation. Now that was a merciful thing that God did, sending his eternal son to become one of us, but we mustn't be deceived into thinking like Muslims think of this. See, Muslims think of divine grace, or the grace of Allah — Allah the Merciful One, which is one of his attributes in Islam — they think of God as someone who can simply wipe the slate clean just like you and I do. In fact, I had one Muslim say to me one time, he said, "Hey, do you have to kill one of your children in order to forgive the second child?" And I said, "Well, of course not." He said, "Well, God does that, too. He can forgive you without killing Jesus in your place." At first it shocked me because I hadn't had any experience with Muslims. This was 20 years ago. It shocked me and I went, "Oh my. I never really thought about it that way," because I had sort of been brainwashed into thinking about this the way Christians think about it, that Jesus had to pay for the sins of his people, otherwise God's holiness is not satisfied. And then I realized that the problem with Islam in this case — and there are many others of course — is that while they're trying to have a very high view of God, that he can have mercy and he can just forgive freely if he wants to without any payment for sin, sounds high.

It sounds like he's not so particular like our God is, that he's got to somehow get satisfied and things like that. It sounds kind of lofty. But the reality is it's a denial of how holy God is. The Christian view is that God is so holy that people with sin cannot enter into his presence and get away with it, that sin is unacceptable to him. That's how high and lofty he is, that's how holy or separate he is, so that someone

had to earn the right to get in there with him by perfect obedience — perfect obedience. And that's where the good works of Jesus become a gracious gift to us, because what he earned, God in his mercy then applies to us by grace. And so the Reformers were saying it's not by you having a little faith and then having some more works you can add to that, but it's by the work of Jesus, which is all by grace, applied to you, which is a wonderful thing. And so, *sola gratia* is a good one, too.

Then that last one, *soli Deo gloria* — for God's glory alone — hmm, there's a good one. I think in some ways that was probably the most political statement that the Reformers made — Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, others — because what they were saying was that the church was taking glory for itself, that Christians were finding their own self-aggrandizement through this Christian faith. And you can imagine with the pomp and splendor, the armies they had at their whim, the gold they had, the riches and the wealth they had, that it did look like Christianity was a human-glorifying religion. What the Reformers were saying was, no, everything from the beginning to the end, everything about creation is for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is the honor and the glory of God.

Now, unfortunately, that's become such a slogan among Christians, evangelical Christians, that we sometimes don't know what that means. So let me roll back and say what it means as plainly as I can, okay? What does it mean to say, "From him and through him and for him are all things, to him be the glory forever?" Well, let's just state it plainly as the Bible does? God made this planet to be the place where he was going to prove for his own fame and for his own delight that he is the only supreme creator God. This planet was made for that purpose. And so the way he was going to do that was by letting evil rise in the world and then, through his image, destroy evil in the world and, in fact, turn the world into God's kingdom. And it would become so beautified and so wonderful and so holy and so sanctified that God himself would come here in his glory and fill up this entire planet with the brilliance of his radiant light. And at that point, as Paul put it, "every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father." And so what this planet's history is all about is only for the glory of God. In that sense, ultimately, it's all for him.

Question 16:
If everything should be done for God's glory, where does our glorification fit?

Student: Now earlier we talked about some of the stages that all believers go through — justification and sanctification. Well the third is glorification. So how does that fit in with the *solas*?

Dr. Pratt: That's great, because a lot of people will think that if you affirm *soli Deo gloria* — for God's glory only — then that means we get no glory. In fact, to think of

you trying to get glory would be a bad thing. Well the answer of the Bible is to get glory the wrong way is a bad thing. But to get glory the right way is the right thing, and the good thing. And you're right to say that the end of the process of salvation is not just God's glory but our glory, our glorification, that we become like him. As Paul said, he was moving in his own life from glory to glory to glory, to ever-increasing glory. So the reality is that we are going to be glorious one day. If an angel were to appear here, we would fall down because that angel would be so glorious. But in the resurrection life in the new world, we are going to be so glorious ourselves that angels will do our bidding. Now that's how glorious we will be one day. Now that's pretty fantastic if you ask me. It's unthinkable, actually, because I have never seen an angel, but I'm sure if I did I would fall down on my face. But the reality is that the glory of the human being is for one main purpose. The glorification of the human being is for the purpose of giving you something then to give back to God. When we worship in the new heavens and new earth, it will not be empty-handed worship. We will have crowns that we give to the great King. And so our glory will be handed over to him so that he will be honored. Just as Christ is glorified and then he hands it over to the Father, we hand all of our glory to Christ who then hands it to the Father. And then it starts all over again.

Question 17:
How can the Old and New Testaments be unified when they look so different?

Student: Now in this lesson you talk about the unity of Scripture, but how can we call it unified when the Old Testament and the New Testament seem so different from one another?

Dr. Pratt: Wow. That's a big one. They are different, aren't they? I mean, would that be fair to say? You know, it is true that sometimes when you have a branch of the church like mine that emphasizes the unity of the Bible, that sometimes we say more than is real. We overestimate it. I think part of that is because so many other Christian groups talk about the diversity of the Bible and how especially the Old Testament and the New Testament are so different from each other. In fact, they want to sort of segment the old and say we don't need that anymore, get it away, because it's so different from our New Testament faith. In reaction to that, I think there is this emphasis on the unity of the Bible, but in some respects I think it's a fair thing to say that the Bible is unified because it does all come from God, and it is all about one basic story of the kingdom of God from the beginning to the end, and what came prior to Christ was anticipating what he did, and then what came after Christ was reflecting on what he did. So there are all kinds of ways of talking about the unity.

But I think that it's helpful to think about the unity of the Bible as sort of underneath the surface. Think about it this way. If you were to take a seed and you were to plant it, and you were to walk away and years later come back and a forest has grown all

around where you had put this little seed. You could not tell by looking at the trees of that forest which tree came from that little seed. You just couldn't tell because they're so different. You could say, well, I think one of them did come from it, but I'm really not sure because the seed is so different from a full-grown tree. But there is a way to discover which tree came from the original seed, and that is back when you first had a seed to do a little clip of that seed, a little sliver of that seed, and do a genetic code of that seed, do a karyotyping of that seed. Then you would know what all the different genetic codes are and so on and so on and so on. Then later on, twenty years later, you could do the same to the trees of the forest and you could identify — with high probability anyway — which of those trees came from that seed. Well in some ways, that's the way it is with the Bible. It's true that on the surface the New Testament does look very different from the Old Testament. But if you get to the genetic code of the Bible, that is, what its basic functionalities are, what it's talking about, how it operates both in the Old and the New Testaments, then you can see that it's the same faith. It's the same religion, only it has grown over time; it's developed over time. And so if you look beneath the surface you can see that these things are very similar and unified. The difficulty is, I'm afraid, that many Christians just look at the surface. I mean, if someone walked into your church this Sunday and said, "God told me to sacrifice my son last night," what would you do with that person?

Student: I'd put him in an insane asylum.

Dr. Pratt: Right. You'd call the police at least, right? Get the child safe, make sure the child is safe, and call the police. That's what you'd do. But remember, that's exactly what God did to Father Abraham. So there are differences between our day and back in the Old Testament days. There's no doubt that that's true. We must not deemphasize those or ignore those at all otherwise we'll be living our lives as Christians as if we were Old Testament people. And you know the book of Hebrews says don't do that; don't try to turn the clock back. Something's happened and the new stage of history is this New Testament that we call it — the new covenant, the New Testament. So we must look at things from that point of view. But it's interesting, isn't it, that the same book, the book of Hebrews, that says don't go back also uses the Old Testament more than any other book in the New Testament. And so while you don't go back, you don't ignore what's happened in the past, either. Because it's the same faith, just having grown, just having matured. And that's the way we can speak of that unity of the Bible.

Question 18:
Is the New Testament more relevant to us than the Old Testament?

Student: Well, wouldn't you say then that the New Testament is better or more relevant than the Old Testament?

Dr. Pratt: Well, in some ways it is more relevant. In some ways it is, because it's revelation of God in our age. It's for our time. And while it has that kind of relevance, and in fact the New Testament even calls it better, it calls itself better, meaning fuller and more mature revelation from God. But at the same time, we have to remember something about that New Testament. It's tiny. It's very small. If you took a normal Bible that's this big, only about that much of it is the New Testament. The rest of it is the Old Testament. So while the New Testament is more relevant in the sense that it comes from our period of history, the New Testament was never given to us to replace the Old. The Old Testament talks about all kinds of things that the New Testament just barely touches on. If you were to look in the New Testament for explicit teaching or extensive teaching on prayer, you might find five or six passages where we're told how to pray, like the Lord's Prayer, a few others, you know, example of prayer, things like that. So where do you find the rich and deep teaching about prayer? Where do you find that?

Student: In the Psalms.

Dr. Pratt: In the Psalms, that's right. And the New Testament believers did not discount the Psalms. They were building on the Psalms rather than getting rid of them, not replacing them but building on them. And so the same kind of thing would be true when it comes to politics. The New Testament really only tells us basically live quiet lives, don't be revolutionaries, a few things like that — Romans 13 and the like. So where do you find the kinds of definitions of justice and righteousness for society that we need so desperately in our day? It's really not from the New Testament; it's from the Old Testament again. The New Testament doesn't tell us much about music. In fact, there are some Christians that believe that you should not use musical instruments because they're not mentioned in the New Testament. Well, why not? The answer is because the New Testament wasn't given to replace the Old, but rather to build on the Old. So the New Testament is, as it were, a lens that allows us to interpret previous or earlier revelation properly for our day. It gives us principles by which we can take the Old Testament and bring it into our day. We don't want to go back, that's for sure, to the previous times. But we don't want to ignore the previous times either. And the New Testament gives us the lens by which we can accept it and understand it and apply it to our lives. And so that's the sense in which we want to speak of the unity of the Bible.

Question 19:
Does the Bible emphasize God's transcendence over his immanence?

Student: Richard, in the video lesson you said that your tradition emphasizes the transcendence of God. Well doesn't it do that because the Bible does it?

Dr. Pratt: I don't know historically exactly why. I have some ideas why my branch of the church emphasizes the transcendence of God over his immanence, his nearness,

but I don't think it's because the Bible does. Now people get the impression that it does, but I think a lot of the reason why we think the Bible emphasizes the transcendence, or the bigness of God, his distance, more than his immanence is because of the influence of Neo-Platonism early in the church and Aristotelianism later on in the medieval church. And in fact, the Reformation was still a part of that emphasis or stress on Aristotle's philosophy as a way of thinking about God and about life. And in Aristotle's philosophy, just like in Plato's philosophy, the emphasis was that God is above everything and not connected to what's down here, not immanently involved in things down here.

But in the Bible itself, if you think about it, if you could sort of take those glasses off for a moment, those Aristotelian glasses off for just a moment, you can realize that the Bible really doesn't talk that much about God being far away — now it does — or him being distant, or super, above everything. It does do that. But by and large, the Bible emphasizes and talks a lot about God's involvement in the world. It doesn't say in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning was God." That's not what it says. If Aristotle had written the Bible that's what he would say. But it says, "In the beginning God created" — there's immanence, you see — "created the heavens and the earth." And so from the beginning of the Bible all the way to the end, it's a story of God's involvement in history. I understand that people tend to feel as if they have to choose between these two, that you have to somehow choose between God being absolutely transcendent, above everything, or they choose that he is immanent, close, near, involved. And the wonderful thing about the Bible is that it doesn't make that choice. It says both are true. God is transcendent, which means he's above time, he's above space, he's above all limitations except his own character, and at the same time the Bible says that he is immanently involved right here in the creation constantly.

You know, other religions have God very high and lifted up like Islam does. Other philosophies like Deism and those sorts of things, perversions of Christianity, have God way up there in the heavens and not really involved down here. Other religions have God — like pantheism — have God is so immanent that he can't be distinguished from the creation. He is the creation. You know, there's a lot of New Age movements and things like that in my own country where that's the vision, that God is nature and nature is God, the universe is God. Well the Bible doesn't go to either of those extremes. The Bible goes to the extreme of saying God is above everything, but it also goes down to this extreme of saying he's also immanently involved. So which is more important to you in your personal life, that God is transcendent or that he's immanent?

Student: I think that God is immanent.

Dr. Pratt: Really? Well, that's good, because I think that's where most of us are, usually. You know, we don't want a distant God who can't hear our prayers and who can't respond and who can't be involved. We want him to be very involved. But I would venture to say there are times when you're grateful that he's not so involved that he's not out of the picture, too because we're obviously involved and our

problem is we're involved down here so much we can't get any perspective, and we don't have control over everything, and we don't have an angle for looking at things in the larger picture. Well, God does, which is what makes him so trustworthy. It's that he's not just down here with us, but he's up there in control of everything from a distant realm, too.

But I have to say that the opposite is bad. If you think that what you really get from God is transcendence then you get no answers to prayer, you get no personal involvement of Jesus. You know my basic philosophy on these kinds of things, and it is that you tend to emphasize what's needed. And I think that's what the Bible does. At any particular moment or any particular verse or passage in the Bible, they're emphasizing either the transcendence of God or his immanence based upon what the people hearing that part of the Bible or writing that part of the Bible need to hear, need to see, need to understand. And sometimes in our lives we need to stress that God is transcendent. Other times we need to stress that he's very immanent. And that balance point is a matter of a momentary synchronicity. Remember? Because that deck of life is always shifting, balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity.

Question 20:
Does the modern church need to hear more about God's transcendence or his immanence?

Student: Which tip of the scale do you feel we're at now in this moment in time?

Dr. Pratt: I guess I would say it all depends on what you're taking into view. I think a lot of people in my branch of the church today would say that most Christians, and in fact they would probably even say most religious people of almost every religion, are emphasizing the immanence of God. They're making God too small. I'm sure that's true. I'm sure that there are lots and lots of people that are making God too small. Evangelical Christians tend to do that now. In fact, there is a whole movement called "open theism" that has the notion that the God of the Bible — this is a Christian movement — that the God of the Bible doesn't even know the future much less control it. And so they have him very immanent so that God is surprised by things just like you and I are. There are all kinds of books about God risking the future and things like that. And so against that viewpoint I want to stress the transcendence of God.

But I know a lot of Christians that are also on the opposite end, not only in my own country but around the world, too, and that is that God has grown cold. He's died on them. He's no longer what the Bible calls the living God. You see, the Bible does have God as the great sovereign King over everything, but one of the frequent ways the Bible describes God is he's the living God, and what makes him different is that it's a contrast between him as the living God and the dead idols who can't do

anything, who can't answer prayers, who can't speak, see, hear, smell, feel or walk — the way the Psalms put it — but God can do those things. It's funny how the psalmist does that. He says their idols can't speak, hear, see, smell, feel or walk, and those who make them will become just like them. But then he goes on and says but our God is in heaven — transcendence — and he does whatever he pleases. So he's not limited to be out of the world; he does whatever he pleases down here on the earth as the great sovereign King.

So we have got to constantly remind ourselves of both of those truths. It is sad in some respects that my branch of the church, at least in recent history, has overemphasized the transcendence of God, because that has led to the practical death of God in many of my churches so that people don't see any reason for prayer. I mean, if God knows everything, if God's in control of everything, if he's sovereign over everything, why should I pray? It's not going to make any difference. But that's not the logic of the Bible. The logic of the Bible is, because he's sovereign, because he's in charge, because he does whatever he pleases, that's why you turn to him for help. You see how you can take the same concepts and relate them in different ways logically? And we have to pattern not just the concepts but the logical connections the Bible patterns it for us, and that's a great example of that. So just depending on whatever extreme you find in your way, that's what you need to emphasize is the opposite of that.

Question 21:
How much of the world's culture should the church try to transform?

Student: Now your branch of the church emphasizes Christ transforming culture. Now how much of the culture of the world are you trying to transform?

Dr. Pratt: How much are we trying to do? I think the answer basically is everything. I know this sounds strange to lots of Christians because in current Christian culture, Christian church theology, we often get the impression that what we need to do is just sort of hold on and try to survive because the world is getting so terrible and hope to escape one day and go to heaven. Well, there's sense in which that is true, of course. If things are really terrible for you where you are, that's what you do; you hold on and wait for death so you can go to be with Christ. But that's not the vision of my branch of the church. That's right. We see that when Christ came to this earth, he came to bring, as he put it in the Lord's Prayer, "the will of God to earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom coming is God's will coming to earth as it is in heaven, because God wants this planet to be made into a particular way so that it would be appropriate for his glory to come here and for him to dwell here in holiness and righteousness. And that has to be done by somebody. And as we know, that was done ultimately by Christ and will be done when he comes back in the end. He'll make all things new and fix everything. But in the meanwhile, just like in the Great Commission when Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me," he didn't say,

"Okay now, guys, just sit back and watch. All authority has been given to me, now you sit back and watch me do it." Instead what he said was, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations and make disciples of everyone." I think that what Jesus is giving us there in that Great Commission in Matthew 28 is he is in charge, he is the God-man who is in charge, and he will one day make all things new. But in the meanwhile, while we wait for him to return, our destiny and our responsibility is to move his kingdom forward as hard and as wonderfully as we possibly can.

Now, if you could think of it like the head of a spear, the tip of the spear is what most Christians would call the gospel message. I mean, you have to see people's lives transformed. We're not talking about changing things from the outside, we're talking about changing things from the inside so that people come to Christ by faith, they become a new creation, they begin to live in new ways, and as they begin to live in those new ways, they don't just live in Christ or live in new ways in Christ in their private lives, but also at their work, at the club, at any social event they're involved in, the country they're a part of, their external lives, their outside life is also transformed. And that's why Jesus called us the light of the world, a city set on a hill. It's because the world is supposed to be looking at us and saying, "Oh, that's the way it's supposed to be done."

Unfortunately, they can't do that very often. They usually look at us and say, "Why would you ever want to do it that way?" But that was the goal for Israel, that the nations would see how wonderfully they were blessed by God when they obeyed his law, and they would say we want to be like that, we want a God like that, we want to be like them. That's what the world ought to be doing to us as Christians. They ought to be able to look at us and say, "They have love in their hearts, they understand things, life is working for them, their families are working, their churches are working," and for this reason then they start imitating. And as Jeremiah told the exiles when they were off in exile, he said to work hard, plant your gardens, start being successful where you are here in exile, and you'll bring blessing to all the people around you, too. And that in many respects is the goal here. We're not trying to create the kingdom of God by our own efforts, but we are trying to live faithfully for Christ in everything we do, and then you begin to see the blessings of God reach out. You know, I think sometimes we always have to remind ourselves of how our faith began, thinking about it just in the New Testament phase. It was one man, Jesus, with twelve disciples, and one of those twelve was the devil. So you've got one man and eleven disciples, eleven faithful disciples, in one small place. Now where is Christianity today?

Student: Everywhere.

Dr. Pratt: Everywhere. And it's in every corner of the earth. And you know the reality is — I think we would agree — that everything we like about this planet whether it's our own country or some other country, or our own society or some other society, everything we like is either coming from Christianity or accords with it. It may not have come from Christians, but it accords with Christian values and stresses

and emphases. And that reality is what we see as the influence of the kingdom of God throughout the world. Where you find justice, you're seeing the kingdom of God being established in the world. When you see music done in ways that are honorable and dignify the image of God and dignify and honor God, too, then you're seeing art being done in ways that are honoring to God. That's the kingdom of God going forward. When business is done honestly and rightfully and with a soft, tender heart toward the poor and the oppressed, when governments are being ruled that way, these are things that accord with and even come from Christianity. That's not insignificant, because God does not want us to sit back and wait for Jesus to fix everything. He does want us to take up our cross and follow after him and to serve this world the way Jesus served the world. Have you known churches that don't do that kind of thing, who really think that they're supposed to retreat from the world? You've never seen such a thing as that?

Student: Yes, I have.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, of course you have. It's just a sad thing when you see that. In my own country it's the retreat of Christians that has allowed things to become so corrupted. And I think we could say that's true in many parts of the world, that Christians tend, when they get a certain amount of success in a culture, they tend to have too short of a list of things they want to see changed, and so they start becoming complacent when they see a few things change, and they become so much a part of the culture they don't want to change it any more. They don't want more righteousness; they don't want more justice because then that would make their lives uncomfortable. But we always have to be reforming, always be transforming the earth in every way we can possibly imagine. That is what I mean when I say that we are a transforming-culture branch of the church. And my branch of the church has worked very hard to bring to bear the implications of the gospel in society at large, and I think Christians need to be doing that in a variety of ways all over the globe.

Question 22:
Why does the modern church have a hard time trying to transform culture?

Student: Why do you think Christians have such a hard time? I mean, what you're explaining to me sounds wonderful. Why do you think that today we're still having such a hard time trying to follow that path?

Dr. Pratt: Honestly, I think it's because it's costly. That's it. I mean, it costs money, but it also costs time and it also costs your life. If we were just to make our Christianity completely privatized so that it becomes my spirituality, your spirituality, your spirituality, there would be places in the world where they would persecute that but not very many. So long as you kept quiet about it and didn't bother anyone, didn't want to see things changed, didn't care what was happening to orphans, you don't

care what's happening to women, you don't care about justice and war and things like that, people would leave you alone; they would be fine. But as soon as you start messing with the power structures of the world, as soon as you start putting yourself out there and bringing to bear the implications of the gospel in human society, the people who have control don't like that, and so it starts to cost. That's why Jesus died. It was because he was threatening their power structures. It's why the apostles, most if not all of them, were martyred. It's because the message of Christianity doesn't sit still. It really does have effects on people's lives and they change, and their allegiances shift to where God's word is more important than any human word.

And unfortunately, at least in my culture, in my part of the world, Christians are so franchised, they're so a part of human society, they're so enmeshed in it, that they're unable to break free from it, and so they're unwilling to make the sacrifices that are necessarily. Christianity has never moved forward with great strides without Christians dying for it in large numbers. Now that just historically has been the case. And where you see the church growing today, you find a positive correlation to Christians being willing to suffer and go to prison and to die, and to suffer ostracization, and suffer social denials because of their Christianity. It's just the reality that if we're not willing to do that, we're not going to see the kingdom of God move forward. It's just not going to happen. And so I think we have to get to where we understand that when Jesus says that the cost is great and that we need to count the cost of being a follower of him, that it really does mean inconvenience at the very least, and it could actually mean your life.

And see, this is why doing theology is not just an academic thing, because if your theology is not moving you toward those kinds of dreams and those kinds of visions and those kinds of loyalties and those kinds of actions, then it's not Bible theology, it's not genuine Christian theology. It's just a pale reflection of what Christian theology is. Christianity is costly. Transforming the world into the kingdom of God costs Christians a lot.

Question 23:
Is Christian theology defined as what Christians believe?

Student: Richard, is it proper to distinguish Christian theology from non-Christian theology by distinguishing what saved people believe versus what unsaved people believe?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's the way a lot of people would do it. They would say Christian theology is what Christians believe, and non-Christian theology is what non-Christians believe. That's pretty simple and there's nothing evil about that definition. I don't think it's quite adequate. It might be better to say Christian theology is what Christians ought to believe, because the fact is Christians believe lots of things that are not Christian. By that I mean they're not true to the Bible. And since that's a final

judge, our highest standard, Christian theology is what Christians ought to believe. And we come close to that and we drift away from it, just sort of depending on what subject we're in and what part of the church we're in, and who we are at any particular time in our lives.

And also it's a little bit deceptive, too, when you realize that sometimes non-Christians have Christian theology. You know, the reality is that non-Christians could not live in this world without borrowing concepts that really belong to Christianity. It's what many theologians used to call "borrowed capital." that they somehow, because of general revelation, the revelation of God in all things, they know many truths about God and they live on the basis of those; they work their lives out on those bases, even though they don't acknowledge it or maybe formulate it the way we do. So the sense is then that Christian theology would be that which we ought to believe. That raises the question then on a sort of practical level, how do you distinguish between Christian and non-Christian theology, because nobody believes everything they ought to believe? There you go. You see? That's the problem. And that's why in this lesson I talk in terms of "closer" and "further away." It's not as if you're in or out. Where that line is exactly, I don't know. But you're not in or out particularly. It's more, we're closer to the truth and we're further away from the truth.

Question 24:
Is there a core set of beliefs that all Christians can affirm?

Student: With Christian theology, is there something at the core of Christian theology of what we ought to believe that we can all agree on and be confident of?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, of course. And I'm trying to say that in this lesson, that there is a core, a core set of beliefs that Christians ought to — though they don't all do it — ought to share, and they ought not quibble over it. I suppose the simplest confession that Christians have is Jesus is Lord. Now on the one had that's simple, but on the other hand there's a lot packed into those three words "Jesus is Lord." You know, there's a lot said in that. So you do have to come to sort of a practical resolve of what groups or what people can I associate with believing that they are followers of Christ? It's not as easy as coming up with a list, but you almost have to have a list to be able to sort of define who you are. Well, it's funny because many times students in my classes, I'll ask them that question what do you have to believe to be a Christian? And they'll come up with a million answers. Then I'll look at them and say, "Well, did you believe all those things when you first became a Christian?" Of course their answer is "no."

So when I try to boil it down to a set of beliefs and practices and feelings that we ought to have as Christians, I just draw upon the Apostles' Creed. And I do that more or less out of convenience, because I don't know of any Christian group that would disagree with those beliefs, and if they did disagree with those beliefs, then you

would probably wonder whether they're really Christian or not, or at least mature Christians. I believe that people can be saved without knowing everything in the Apostles' Creed, but how mature is that theology if they don't affirm those things in the Apostles' Creed? So we do have to, for the sake of just deciding with whom we fellowship, how deeply we fellowship with them, things like that, how you distinguish cults from the true church, that kind of thing, you have to come up with some kind of standard. And so in these lessons we're operating on the assumption that if a person affirms the Apostles' Creed then their theology is a Christian theology, and that's sort of the direction we're taking here.

Question 25:
How much theological diversity is acceptable?

Student: Now Scripture instructs believers to be likeminded, so what amount of theological diversity is acceptable?

Dr. Pratt: Wow, that's a big one. Because if there's one thing that's true in the Christian church, it's that we are diverse. You can't find two people that believe everything the same. I mean, my wife and I don't; my best friends and I don't; you two don't. I don't know anybody that believes everything exactly the same, so we literally cannot expect Christians to be likeminded in the sense that all of their beliefs line up with everybody else's beliefs. I think that's something that comes from, well one, sin, but it also comes from being finite and just not being able to know everything and getting everything right, because we just can't get our arms around everything.

I think that we do need to distinguish, make a sharp distinction, as sharp as we can, between diversity among us that comes from our being creatures and diversity that comes among us from our being sinners. Let's start with sinners, for example. The fact is that Eric here is a sinner, and I'm not much of a sinner. No. Of course we're both sinners. What that means is, of course, we're going to get it wrong. You're going to get some things wrong, too. And part of the reason we won't always agree with each other is because, well, somebody's got it wrong. And when you have two Christians and you have differences between them on something, then you have at least three options: the first person's wrong, or the second person's wrong, or they're both wrong. And that happens because we're sinners. If we weren't sinful, then we would be thinking God's thoughts after him, and we would be doing that naturally like Adam and Eve did in the garden until they chose to go the wrong way. And so we're at this stage in history where we're still sinners, and so there's diversity among us. And of course we would disagree of what those sinful effects are, wouldn't we? Otherwise we wound conform. So you'll find some denominations or some groups that would say, "Well that group is wrong, they're sinful in that, they're failing over there." And then you'll get the finger pointing the other direction, too.

Now that was one kind of diversity that we have, but there's another kind of diversity that comes from the fact that we're just creatures. When you look out at a field of flowers or at a garden of flowers, you notice something immediately. What do you notice about the flowers?

Student: They're different.

Dr. Pratt: They're different. Yeah, some are red, some are yellow, some are blue, purple. And that's not because some of them are the wrong color. It's because they're just different colors. I don't know how to read that except to say apparently God likes diversity. He likes variety. He certainly made that true in the world, didn't he? Are there any two human beings in this world that are alike physically? No. We all have unique fingerprints. Even identical twins are different from each other. And so when you think about the fact that you have creaturely differences that come just from the fact that God loves diversity and variety, it has all kinds of implications — even the Bible. Now we believe that the Bible is without error. We believe that sin did not creep in and corrupt any part of the Bible, but surely we also see that the Bible is diverse. It's not all the same. Why do we have four gospels? It's because we have four different accounts of the life of Jesus that are not exactly the same. They're quite diverse. And why are they diverse? It's because Matthew wasn't the same person as Luke was, and Luke wasn't the same as Mark, and Mark was not the same as John. And why do Paul's letters look a particular way and Peter's letters look different than that? It's because Peter and Paul were two different people. Why is Isaiah different from the book of Revelation? It's because Isaiah is different from the apostle John. And so that variety that I'm talking about, of "creatureliness," is reflected in the Bible itself.

Now if you had that kind of variety in the Bible — in the Bible — inspired, apostolic writings, surely we should consider and we should embrace some level of variety in the body of Christ after the apostles. We should not expect each other to use the same words exactly the same way. We shouldn't expect each other to agree on a set form for how we're going to formulate this doctrine or that doctrine. We should allow each other to do this in slightly different ways. We should not expect everybody in the world to worship the same way even though they love Christ. This is one of the great problems, of course, that missionaries had in the past centuries, where they would come into a society, usually a primitive society, and try to make them become like Westerners, like Europeans, or like Americans, and it practically destroyed the Christian faith in those countries when they insisted on that. And so we need to realize that the New Testament itself is diverse because of creatureliness, and therefore, the body of Christ will be diverse. Some cultures and the Christians in them are really good at certain kinds of things. Other cultures are really good, and the Christians in them, are really good at other kinds of things. That texture, that kaleidoscope of diversity is something apparently that God welcomes. And so all diversity isn't wrong. Eric, you didn't grow up in the United States. You grew up in Panama, right?

Student: Yep.

Dr. Pratt: Are things different in Panama than in the United States?

Student: Quite a bit.

Dr. Pratt: Can you tell us one?

Student: Just the way we worship. We don't have fancy buildings. A lot of times the churches are very simple. Air conditioning.

Dr. Pratt: No air conditioning, right?

Student: No air conditioning, just a lot of fans. That's part of the architecture in churches.

Dr. Pratt: And lots of noise?

Student: Lots of noise. You hear the road.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. If you're in the city, the windows are open. If you were in a typical church in North America today and you had the windows open in front of a highway and the cars and the trucks are banging around and zooming around in front, everybody would say, "I can't worship, I can't worship." Why? Because I don't have the solemnity of a sealed-off building with the air conditioner running, right? And in fact, in many of our churches, we don't even want the children in worship because they're distracting — "I can't worship if the children are there." "If some child's crying, I can't preach." So we get the kids out, so we sanitize the whole thing to make it for adults only, and for quiet adults only, well-behaved adults only. And, well, you can't really say that opening the windows or closing the windows is a good thing or a bad thing. And you certainly can't say, and ought not say, that a sealed church building with silencing features, acoustics all around it to keep any kind of noise out, is the right way to worship. And a lot of that just comes from the creaturely diversity that's out there, and it's just the kind of thing we have got to acknowledge. And it's not a small matter. It really does not just affect the circumstances of something like worship, but it affects the heart of worship. Because when you have to be loud in order to even know what's going on in a worship service, you're loud. You speak up. People are very dramatic and very strong in the ways they pray and do certain things, and they have large-scale physical activity that goes into it in ways that you don't have to if you're off in some quiet little corner worshipping in a tiny little place with air conditioning surrounding you. And so it does really get down to the heart of things. But these would be the kinds of things people would fight over. "Our way is the right way." "No, our way is the right way." "What do you mean your way is the right way?" or "my way is the right way?" This is like roses and carnations, which is better? I think the answer is diversity is here because God made the world to be diverse. And sin is not the only reason we have diversity among us.

Question 26:
Why are some religions closer to Christianity than others are?

Student: Richard, why are some religions closer to Christianity than others?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question because it's true. I mean, I hope we can say that. We say in the video lesson, of course, that you can take some extremes, like paganism would be an extreme, and maybe move in a little closer to Buddhism which really doesn't even have a god, to Hinduism that has many gods and many idols, and then move more toward Islam let's say, then Judaism out of which Christianity grew, then you have so-called Christian cults, and then you have true Christianity in the center. Of course, other religions wouldn't agree we're in the center, but we think we are. And in many ways we are closer to some world religions than others. We have more common beliefs partly because of history and just the fact that we come from the same regions of the world. One reason Buddhism is different from Christianity is because Buddhism comes from the Far East, or from Asia, versus the Middle East. Islam comes from the Middle East, and so you would expect there to be more connections.

But in general terms, I think we can say it this way. The Bible tells us in Romans 1, Psalm 19, and a few other places, Acts 17, that God has revealed himself to everyone, and that everyone has the revelation of God, the general revelation of God deep within them. That's what the old theologians used to call "the seed of religion" in them, this divine sense, this sense of divinity within them. And we have this within us, but as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1, non-Christians will suppress this truth in unrighteousness. Now what that means, of course, is that very few non-Christians, or unbelievers, would acknowledge that they know that God is there, that the God of the Bible is there and that his law is good, and his law is holy and they ought to obey it, things like that. Why do they not acknowledge it? Well, it's because they're suppressing it; they're holding it down. But this is the thing that we don't often get. Different non-Christians suppress the truth in different ways at different times. So at one period of life, a person might suppress this aspect of the truth that they know from general revelation, but at another point they might not. They might suppress something else. And as they get together and form human societies, then their societies tend to do that, too, the sort of variegated suppression of truth and unrighteousness. And as religions grown within those cultures, then those religions have those kinds of effects as well on them where they'll emphasize this or emphasize that, and part of it may be true and then this part's not true, and so on and so on. And so you find in many respects diversity of religions in the world as they acknowledge the truth and then suppress the truth in different ways at different times.

And the fact is that different religions in the world do come closer to the truth so that in certain key and central concerns they will allow those truths to come out. Like we often speak of the three great monotheistic religions of the world: Islam, Judaism and Christianity. They're not the only monotheistic, but they are nevertheless. Are there

more commonalities among those than other religions, say like Buddhism or Hinduism? The answer is yes, there are. Why? Well, because they're not suppressing the truth that God is one. They're acknowledging that part of the truth. Now, Islam suppresses all other kinds of truths, like that Jesus is the Son and that Jesus is the only way of salvation and all the long list of things that they would suppress. And Judaism is even closer to us. After all, Christianity was birthed out of Judaism, and so you would expect them to have a whole lot of things in common with us. But then again, they suppress the truth also. They reject the gospel of Christ, they don't accept him as the Lord of life and as their Messiah, and so even they are distant from the truth in that sense. So I think it's general revelation and the ways people react to general revelation that gives us this diversity of religions in the world.

Question 27:
Do believers sometimes suppress the truth that God has revealed?

Student: We've talked about Christian theology and how it's difficult for all Christians to agree on exactly what that means. Do you think that that same kind of suppression of truth can happen even within true believers' lives?

Dr. Pratt: Oh yeah, of course. Exactly. That is one of the reasons why we are different from each other is because of sin. And this certainly is true when it comes to the cults who suppress what we call essential truths. I've just mentioned general revelation, but the same thing is true of special revelation, the Bible. Even if you have a group that says we believe what the Bible teaches, well we all tend to marginalize certain parts and make more central other parts, and what you want to make sure you do, though, is to get the essentials of Christianity centralized in your thinking, and make sure you've got those at least halfway right rather than emphasizing things on the edges and taking them as replacements for what's in the center, or even bringing in false views. But that's absolutely right. We suppress the truth in unrighteousness, too, to some degree, because we are not perfect yet. We'll only know the truth, as Jeremiah said, so that no one has to teach his neighbor "know the Lord." We are only going to know that when Jesus returns. And when he does return, then we'll all have perfect theology, and all religion will be the same. But until then, we're going to have that kind of diversity.

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 Your Theology

Lesson 3

Relying on Revelation

Manuscript

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever given someone a gift only to learn later that they never used it? An artist once gave his friend a beautiful painting. His friend was extremely busy at the time, so he stuck it in a closet until he could decide where to put it. About a year later, the artist visited his friend again. Looking around, he asked about the painting, but his friend had forgotten all about it. His friend felt terrible as he tried to explain what had happened. But no matter what he said, the artist still assumed that he hadn't liked the gift.

Something like this is true as we build our Christian theology. As followers of Christ, we believe that God has given us his gift of revelation in countless ways. But we show how much we appreciate his gift by how much we actually use it in our lives. When we fail to rely on God's revelation, we demonstrate how little it matters to us, and we foolishly try to build our theology without it.

This is the third lesson in our series *Building Your Theology*, and we've entitled it "Relying on Revelation." In this lesson, we'll explore how to make use of God's gift of revelation as we develop our theology.

This lesson will divide into three main parts. First, we'll explore what the Scriptures teach us about finding revelation. Second, we'll examine some of the more important dynamics involved in understanding God's revelation. And third, we'll consider ways of developing confidence in the theological conclusions we draw from God's revelation. Let's begin by looking at where we find God's revelation.

FINDING REVELATION

Theologians have often spoken of God as the "hidden God," or in theological terms, the "*Deus Absconditus.*" And God would be entirely hidden from us if it were not for the fact that he's revealed himself. All genuine believers should acknowledge our need for divine revelation. After all, Old Testament prophets, Jesus and New Testament authors spoke with one voice on this issue. And faithful Christians throughout church history have done the same. We simply can't build reliable theology on human speculation. We must build on the solid foundation of divine revelation. But all of this raises a crucial question. Where do we find God's revelation?

As we explore the subject of finding revelation, we'll touch on three issues. First, we'll look at the doctrine of general revelation. Second, we'll consider the doctrine of special revelation. And third, we'll examine the interconnections between these two forms of revelation. Let's begin with general revelation.

GENERAL REVELATION

One of the principal ways God has revealed himself to humanity is what we often call "general revelation." We use the term "general" to indicate that God reveals himself through *all* created things in general and to all people in general. It's sometimes also called "natural revelation" because this revelation comes through the medium of nature or creation.

A number of biblical passages teach us about general revelation. For instance, we find the concept mentioned in Psalm 19:1-6; Acts 14:15-17; and Acts 17:26, 27. But perhaps the fullest description of general revelation in the Bible appears in the familiar verses of Romans 1:18-32.

> **General revelation is what God reveals to us about himself or tells us about himself through creation and through providence, that is to say, through nature and also through the course of history. It's revelatory; it tells us about God as we see in, for example, Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God." So, contemplating the heavens, the heavenly bodies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars and so on, we can contemplate that there is a Creator who is glorious. And in Romans 1, also, Paul talks about that we can know about God, about his power and his wisdom through what we perceive in creation.**
>
> **— Dr. Larry Trotter**

To look into this biblical teaching on general revelation, we should touch on two matters: the medium — instrument or conduit of general revelation — and the content of general revelation. In the first place, the Scriptures teach that the medium of general revelation is all of creation.

Medium

Listen to the way Paul put the matter in Romans 1:18-20:

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven … God has shown it to [human beings]… in the things that have been made (Romans 1:18-20).

These words tell us that God reveals himself to us through the creation, or as it says here, "in the things that have been made."

Revelation comes through massive galaxies in space and through microscopic units of matter. The physical, the abstract, and the spiritual dimensions of creation — even our own existence as human beings — everything in creation mediates God's revelation. Unfortunately, Christians often assume that the words in Romans 1 only refer to creation in its natural state. We all know how forests, lakes, mountains, and wilderness

can turn our thoughts to God. But we often fail to realize that civilization, technology, and human culture as a whole also reveal God.

> **In Scripture, God tells us, and Paul gives us argument in Romans 1, that it doesn't matter who it is or of what culture, every human being who has ever existed has known about the existence of God… Paul said that every man knows that God exists by conscience. Man has a reason, he has a conscience, and through what has been created in the world, God's divine nature has been clearly seen. So, all men know that God exists by creation and conscience. And if you look in Romans 1, it also says that God's righteous nature and his holiness is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men, and it is seen in that men denied that. They suppressed the truth of God in their unrighteousness.**
>
> **— Rev. Clete Hux**

As we read in Romans 1:32:

> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such [perversions] deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:32).

These words indicate that general revelation comes through what people do with nature, not just through creation in its natural state. Human technologies, science, architecture, politics, family life, art, medicine, music, and the countless products of human culture also facilitate God's revelation. We simply cannot escape the revelation of God.

In addition to the medium of general revelation, we should note that in Romans 1 Paul also indicated the basic content of general revelation.

Content

Now, from one perspective, Paul was not very precise about what people know through general revelation. His lack of specificity probably results from the fact that different people in different places and times encounter and acknowledge different aspects of general revelation. Nevertheless, Paul made it clear that general revelation reveals at least two kinds of information to human beings: God's attributes and our corresponding moral responsibilities.

On the one hand, as Paul put it in Romans 1:20, creation reveals:

> [God's] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20).

Here, Paul made it clear that the attributes of God that cannot be viewed directly are seen indirectly in his creation. Every person, no matter who they are, knows some

dimension of God's character because, as we read earlier in Romans 1:19, "God has shown it to them" in general revelation. For example, the beauty of creation points to God's astounding beauty. Nature's provision for human life demonstrates God's goodness. The mere size of creation reveals his enormity. The complexity of creation shows his unmatched wisdom. And the power of nature reveals his divine power.

> **If we look at the human body, it's part of general revelation. God gave us a very complex body. It's exquisite and marvelous. For instance, scientists estimate the number of cells in the human body to be thirty-seven trillion. Thirty-seven trillion! And each cell is complex and has a certain structure and function… If we think about space around us, we see marvelous things. We have the solar system, and planet earth is just one of the planets that revolves around the sun, and we call this the solar system… We are just one solar system within countless solar systems in our galaxy. What is more astonishing than all of this is that scientists estimate that there are hundreds of billions of galaxies! So, the question is: Why all of this? Who made all of this? Is it reasonable that all of this came about by itself? Or is it that a wise and great God, who is full of majesty and power, with no beginning or end, created these things?**
>
> **— Rev. Dr. Emad A. Mikhail, translation**

On the other hand, in addition to displaying God's invisible attributes, general revelation communicates aspects of our moral responsibilities before God. Listen again to Romans 1:32 where Paul spoke of the sinfulness of the human race:

> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such [perversions] deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:32).

In other words, various aspects of creation reveal moral responsibilities that we bear before God. For instance, the biological distinctions between male and female reveal our obligation to practice heterosexuality. Children's dependence on parental care reveals both parents' obligation to care for their children and children's responsibility to honor their parents. The suffering of human beings in famine and war reveals our obligation to show mercy. Everywhere we look, the creation calls out to us, demanding that we conform our lives to the moral standards God exhibits in and through the creation.

Now that we've examined finding revelation by touching on the doctrine of general revelation, we should turn to the doctrine of special revelation.

SPECIAL REVELATION

In traditional Christian theology, it's common to distinguish between general revelation — how God has revealed himself to all people through all things — and

special revelation. This distinction is helpful in many ways, but we have to be careful. When evangelical Protestants speak of special revelation, they often think exclusively of the Scriptures. To be sure, the Bible is a crucial dimension of God's special revelation, but special revelation includes much more than the Bible.

Special revelation has been called "special" largely because it's not given to all people in all places, but it's given to specific or special segments of humanity. This type of revelation has taken many forms throughout history, but from the Christian point of view, God revealed himself most clearly and fully in his Son Jesus. Hebrews 1:1-3 offers a succinct summary of the Christian outlook on special revelation:

> Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Prior to the coming of Christ, God revealed himself and his will in many special ways. He spoke directly to people, gave them supernatural dreams, opened their eyes to visions, and spoke through prophets, priests, kings, and sages. But none of these revelations compares to the fullness and supremely glorious revelation in Christ, the Son of God. Jesus' life and teachings are the premier special revelation of God. And for this reason, it's quite appropriate to say that the standard for Christian theology is God's revelation in Christ. Now, this commitment to Christ as God's supreme revelation leads to a number of important implications. But for our purposes, one of the most important and practical implications is that we should also be committed to Scripture as God's revelation.

> **When we think of why we should submit to the Old and New Testaments as God's revelation, we can think of how Jesus Christ treated the Scriptures. When Jesus read Scripture, where did his authority come from? He claimed that he was from the Father, but a lot of times when he referred to the Father's authority, his words were based on the Old Testament. That means, the Bible that Jesus read was the entirety of the Old Testament; the Old Testament was his canon. Then, he also told us that he gave us apostles and prophets. As Ephesians 2, 4 repeatedly emphasize, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, with the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church. To us, the Old and New Testaments together are the revelation that we have received.**
>
> **— Dr. Biao Chen, translation**

Those who look to Christ as the supreme revelation of God must follow his example and submit to his teaching by receiving the Old and New Testaments as God's special revelation for his people today.

> **It is vital for us to love the Scripture as having come from the mind, from the heart of God. God is our heavenly Father in Christ, and he's speaking to us. And when Scripture speaks to us, we need to love what he's saying. And probably, there's no part of Scripture that displays this love for Scripture as much as Psalm 119. The psalmist over and over says, "Oh how I love your law and meditate on it day and night. I eat your words; I ponder them; they are my food." And he just delights, verse after verse — 176 verses of delighting in the law of God. And I think to myself, how much more should I, as a New Testament believer, delight in the whole counsel of God? We have "better promises," the book of Hebrews tells us. We have the fulfillment of the life of Christ, and so I can love whatever the writer of Psalm 119 loved, plus a whole lot more.**
>
> **— Dr. Andrew Davis**

We've seen that, in our day, finding God's revelation involves both general revelation in creation and special revelation in Scripture. Now, let's turn our attention to the interconnections between these doctrines. Understanding these interconnections will help us see that we can't neglect either form of revelation.

INTERCONNECTIONS

The last thing we want to do as we build Christian theology is to ignore anything that God has revealed in either general or special revelation. Jesus pointed to the importance of general revelation in his parables and also every time he drew from common life experiences in his teaching. He also pointed to the importance of special revelation every time he referred to the Scriptures. But for you and me to rely on both of these forms of revelation as Jesus did, we must come to grips with how they are deeply interconnected. Special revelation of the Scriptures guides us as we reflect on general revelation. And general revelation helps us as we seek to grasp God's special revelation in the Scriptures. At every step along the way, the two go hand in hand.

We'll touch on two aspects of the interconnections between these types of revelation: the overlap between general and special revelation and the need for both forms of revelation. Let's look first at the overlap between general and special revelation.

Overlap

Although we often speak of general and special revelation under separate headings, we need to recognize that these two forms of revelation overlap significantly. To see this, we must acknowledge the variety of content found in both forms of revelation.

On the one side, special revelation in the Scriptures touches on many subjects that form a continuum between extraordinary insights and very common insights. Some portions of the Bible are so extraordinary that no one could have written them through normal observations or experiences, even with divine guidance. These portions of the Bible were given in extraordinary, supernatural ways. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this kind of material in the Bible are portions of books like Daniel, Joel and Revelation. The men who wrote these materials received their information through visions and other supernatural means given particularly to them. In this sense, we may call these portions of Scripture "very special revelation."

Along this continuum, a sort of middle ground appears in Scripture where we find mixed elements of esoteric or extraordinary insights and insights granted by the Spirit through ordinary means. Take, for example, the biblical books of Kings and the Gospel of Luke. The writers of these books explicitly mentioned that they collected much of their data from ordinary human sources. Kings refers to the royal annals of Israel and Judah. Luke mentions that he gathered his material from eyewitnesses of Christ's life. Special supernatural insights were certainly added as the Spirit of God guided these biblical writers. They had insights into the accuracy of the information they found in their sources, insights into how to interpret their sources, and insights into information not found through ordinary means. So, in this sense, these portions of the Bible mix the esoteric and the ordinary.

Beyond this, large portions of Scripture consist of rather common but inspired insights. This is because the Holy Spirit often guided biblical authors to make correct observations about ordinary experiences. For example, in Proverbs 30:25 we read:

> Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer (Proverbs 30:25, NIV).

This statement is inspired and true, but it resulted from observing nature, not from receiving an esoteric vision.

So, in this sense, special revelation contains materials that we often commonly associate with general revelation. These are the kinds of things that practically anyone can notice about the world. We may even say that these portions of the Bible are "generalized special revelation."

> **In Proverbs 14:20, it says, "Even a poor man is hated by his neighbors, but everyone loves the one who is rich." That's not making necessarily a positive or a negative evaluation, that's just the skill of observation, of being able to understand what has happened there… It's dealing with the kinds of things we run across all the time, whether it's relationships, dealing with authority, thinking about our use of money, thinking about relationship to our parents, in thinking about our job, and even table manners, all kinds of really practical issues like that. And then, in a broader way … being able to understand life and the world correctly so that we can live skillfully. We know the kinds of pitfalls to avoid. We know the ways to get ahead in life. And it's the Bible that begins to help us understand that**

> **if we really want to live life skillfully, we have to do that in terms of the fear of the Lord.**
>
> **— Dr. Eric J. Tully**

On the other side, just like special revelation, general revelation also includes a wide variety of content that can be characterized from common to extraordinary. On one end of this continuum, general revelation contains very common elements, things that are known to most, if not all, people who have ever lived. Nearly everyone knows that the world is immense, covered by a vast expanse of sky. And nearly everyone can remember times when they have experienced their moral conscience. These almost universal experiences have always revealed God and his will for humanity. We may speak of them as "very general revelation."

Toward the center of the range of general revelation are mixed elements of common and extraordinary general revelation. These are experiences of creation that are given only to some people because they are limited in some way, such as by space or time. For instance, the winds of a terrible hurricane display the mighty power of God. But many people have never experienced a hurricane. The heights of the Himalayan Mountains reveal the glory of God, but most of the human race has not seen the Himalayas first-hand. Because we all face many limitations, not all general revelation goes to all people all the time.

On the other end of the spectrum are rather extraordinary elements of general revelation. These involve times when people explicitly acknowledge, even without knowing the one, true God, some of the truths that God has revealed. The fact is that general revelation includes things we often associate more closely with special revelation.

For instance, some non-Christian religions believe that there is only one God. Many religions distinguish between the ordinary and sacred in ways that parallel the true Christian faith. Murder is condemned in most religions. Basic social justice is extolled by many different faiths. In the ancient world of the Bible, other religions often closely resembled true biblical faith in some remarkable ways. And even today, missionaries report that some unreached peoples have beliefs similar to the Christian faith. In such cases, we may speak of "specialized general revelation."

So, as we reflect on the roles of special and general revelation in theology, we need to remember two things that are often forgotten. On the one hand, we need to remember that special revelation teaches us about things that are relatively common and can also be discerned through general revelation. This is why we look to the Scriptures as our authority, not only in purely religious and moral matters, but also as they touch on history and science.

On the other hand, we also need to realize that general revelation has much to teach us about matters that we normally reserve for Scripture. In fact, as we'll see in these lessons, many theological truths addressed by Scripture are also disclosed in general revelation. This is why we must look carefully at general revelation for divine guidance, even in matters that are highly religious.

As we've considered the interconnections between general and special revelation, we've seen the many ways they overlap. But now we should turn to our second concern. Why do we need both forms of revelation for theology? What does each one contribute?

Need

On the one hand, we need special revelation because it exceeds general revelation in a number of ways. Special revelation is designed to specify, clarify, and reveal God and his will beyond what general revelation presents.

For example, think of Adam and Eve. A number of theologians have observed in recent decades that God provided both special and general revelation to Adam and Eve while they were still in the state of innocence, before their fall into sin. Because Adam and Eve were without sin, we can be confident that they knew much about God and his will for them as they looked at creation. Yet, even before sin, theology was not to be derived by observing creation without the guidance of special revelation. God also gave his special word to Adam with specific instructions regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, keeping the Garden, multiplying, moving beyond the borders of the Garden, and exercising dominion over the whole earth.

Of course, once sin came into the world, special revelation also focused on God's plan of redemption. Although general revelation reveals that we are under God's judgment, only special revelation discloses salvation in Christ. Especially since the fall into sin, the process of building theology out of general revelation — what has sometimes been called "natural theology" — must be guided by special revelation. Otherwise, it's more than likely that we'll mishandle what God has revealed in creation.

> **I would want to be very careful about what we can learn about God through the label or through the category of natural theology. I would want to hang my hat upon a statement like Romans 1:20 that does talk about his majesty, his power. I think those are things you can hang your hat on in terms of what you can learn. But I would want to say immediately that we are in desperate need of special revelation to have a proper perspective… Therefore, you are in need of special revelation to check human reasoning — autonomous, or I should say *independent* human reasoning — because the created realm yields some things that can also be read and understood problematically. Special revelation of the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ fills in accurately who God is.**
>
> **— Dr. Bruce L. Fields**

Keeping our need for special revelation in mind, we should also look at our need for general revelation. Why isn't it enough simply to build our theology from the Bible? What does general revelation contribute that we don't find in Scripture?

As we've emphasized here, we should never approach general revelation without the authoritative guidance of Scripture. But at the same time, the Scriptures only address a limited number of things directly, and they speak of relatively few things compared to the breadth of general revelation. In fact, every time biblical authors wrote their inspired texts, they built on knowledge that they and their audiences acquired from general

revelation. General revelation provided the context within which special revelation could be communicated. And it does the same for us today.

The need for general revelation appears in at least two ways. On the one hand, what we learn from general revelation enables us to understand special revelation. Think about it this way: We all know that a person must be able to read, or at least understand language to some degree, to access the revelation of Scripture. But how many of us learned how to read or understand language by poring over the words of the Bible without help from other sources? Almost certainly the answer is "none." Most of us learned language from a parent or caregiver, with the aid of objects and actions involving other elements of creation. And we later learned to read by similar means. Only by building on what we'd learned from these aspects of general revelation were we then able to approach the Bible.

Our dependence on general revelation is even deeper as we come to the Scriptures. We wouldn't even have Bibles to read if it were not for what people learned from general revelation. Bible translators learned how to translate, printers learned how to print, and publishers learned how to publish, largely from general revelation. In these very basic senses, we must give attention to general revelation because it equips us to study special revelation.

On the other hand, general revelation is also necessary for applying the Bible successfully to our lives. For example, the Bible touches on many different subjects and gives infallible principles to follow. Yet, to apply these principles we have to know something about the creation to which we are applying them.

The Bible tells us that husbands are to love their wives, but to apply this biblical principle we have to know some things from general revelation. What is a husband? What is a wife? We also have to know what it means to show love to a particular wife in her specific situation. In this sense, the faithful application of Scripture is always dependent on the general revelation of God.

So, we see that God has revealed himself in both general and special revelation, and that he expects us to find his revelation both in creation and in the Scriptures. Neither form of revelation was designed to stand on its own. God has ordained that we must hold fast to both as we build our theology.

> **Just as our knowledge of special revelation can help us to understand general revelation, our life experiences from general revelation can actually help us understand special revelation too. In other words, our life experiences can help us understand the Bible. One way in which this is apparent frequently throughout the Bible is how the Bible appeals to creation in order to communicate things about God. Psalm 19 says, "the heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament … his handiwork." What it's saying there is when we look out at the world, we see certain things, and then when we come to the Bible, we see how those things communicate to us about God… It's not as if God said, "Let me see how I can illustrate myself. Oh, there's a rock. I'm like a rock." But as the Creator, God made the rock so he could turn around and say, "I'm like the rock." God made the waters so that he could turn around and say "I am living water." You see, because God**

> **is the Lord of creation, the creation is God's poem that then the skillful interpreter, the scientist, under the lordship of Christ, interprets. But you see that creation, therefore, is intentional by God in order to give the context in which the Bible describes God using creation as a metaphor or imagery.**
>
> **— Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

Having seen that finding God's revelation requires looking to both his special and general revelation, we should turn to our second topic: understanding revelation. How are we to understand revelation so that we may derive theology from it?

UNDERSTANDING REVELATION

It's one thing for us to acknowledge how God has revealed himself and his will to us, but it's quite another thing for us to formulate proper theological responses to it. Even sincere Christians who are fully committed to relying on God's general and special revelations go in different directions as they form their theologies. In fact, the history of formal and informal Christian theology can be written in terms of our disagreements over a host of issues related to orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. Why is this true? It's because grasping how divine revelation should impact our theology is a complex process.

To see how this process of understanding revelation takes place, we'll focus our attention in three directions. First, we'll explore the hindrance of sin. Second, we'll explore the illumination of the Holy Spirit. And third, we'll touch on the results of these dynamics on our theology. Let's look first at how sin hinders us as we seek to understand God's revelation.

HINDRANCE OF SIN

Every follower of Christ knows that sin is a powerful force, not only in the lives of others, but in our lives as well. True believers have been set free from the tyranny of sin and from God's eternal judgment against sin. But sin continues to impact us in every area of our lives. Sin corrupts and leaves us building our theology as fallen creatures living in a fallen world.

As sad as it is, we must acknowledge that sin has had a severe affect on human beings. In fact, it's so severe that if God were to leave the influence of sin unchecked, we would reject his revelation with all of our strength. Apart from God's common and special grace, every attempt to acknowledge and develop our theology from God's revelation would be in vain. In traditional theological terms, this problem is often called the "noetic effects of sin," a term deriving from the Greek word *nous* (νοῦς), meaning "mind." It refers to the ways sin has negatively affected our intellect and understanding.

To explore the hindrance of these noetic effects of sin, we'll look first at how sin darkens our minds to general revelation, and then at how it does the same to special revelation. Let's begin with general revelation.

General Revelation

As we've said, every person on earth knows some dimensions of general revelation. But sin causes us to suppress much of what we know and blinds us to much of what general revelation has to offer. In Romans 1:18, Paul said that sinful Gentiles, who know the truth of general revelation, "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." In other words, sin compels us to suppress the truth that is clearly revealed through creation. We deny and turn away from general revelation. In this same chapter, Paul also wrote, in verses 24-28, that as unbelievers violate the moral principles revealed in general revelation, God gives them over to "the lusts of their hearts," to "dishonorable passions," and to "a debased mind."

Lust and depravity guide our hearts so that we have, as it were, skewed or damaged vision. It's not that we can't see *any* of the truth of general revelation, because we can. Rather, to the degree that we are removed from God's grace, we twist the facts of general revelation into conformity with our depraved desires. We call the truth lies and lies the truth. We call good evil and evil good.

> **I just don't see how anyone can think for a moment that sin has not affected the human mind — what we often call the "noetic effects of sin" — because it seems to me that it should be plain that we just sometimes don't think in the right ways. Now, let's be truthful. Some people think better than others in different situations, and the same person can change and be good in one situation and bad in another. But the truth is that human beings make mistakes. Human beings even purposefully pervert the truth that they see around them for various reasons… It's easy for people to be mistaken as to what is good and what is evil. I mean, how many of us don't have situations that we've assessed as being good that we find out later from the Bible really weren't good? They may feel good, they may appear to be good, they maybe appear to be beneficial by every standard you can imagine, but the Bible says, "No it's not." Well, that's an effect of sin on our minds. We also find that we cannot even draw out the right implications by arguments and by logical thinking sometimes because sin has affected our minds. So, the reality that we always have to grapple with is that even our most refined and careful and cogent ways of thinking have been impacted by sin.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

> **Romans 1 speaks of the external revelation of God, in a general sense, through the attributes being clearly seen, and then Romans 2 speaks about the internal aspect of general revelation, which is a sense of right and wrong. In order to discern particularly that sense of right and wrong, we have to go to the Scriptures. We are fallen, and our interpretation of our sense of right and wrong is a fallen interpretation, and the only objective standard that we have, then, is the Word of God. So, the Scripture is absolutely necessary for clarity when it comes to ethical standards.**
>
> **— Dr. Jeff Lowman**

Having seen the hindrance of sin in our ability to make appropriate use of general revelation, we should now turn our attention to special revelation. How does sin affect our use of special revelation, especially the revelation of God in Scripture?

Special Revelation

> **Sin is more than an external hindrance to our understanding of Scripture. It's also an internal hindrance. For instance, Romans 7 describes sin as an internal alien power that overpowers our ability to even desire truth. And so we can't just assume that when we pick up a Bible we are naturally going to interpret it correctly. If we do, we're making a grave mistake. This explains a lot of our disagreements about the meaning of Scripture. We simply underestimate the power of sin within us… That's why Ephesians 1 says that Paul prays desperately that the Ephesians will be illuminated by the Holy Spirit to understand the teachings that he's passing on to them… So, as believers, if we want to be unified and work toward unity in our understanding of what Scripture teaches, we have to be to face the magnitude of sin's power within *us*, pray for the power of the Spirit to overcome it, and to work towards unity in our interpretation of Scripture and the doctrines that come out of it.**
>
> **— Dr. Andrew Parlee**

The Bible itself shows that sinful human beings resist the teaching of Scripture if left without the mercy of God. Jesus commented on this in John 5:39, 40 when he said that the Pharisees misused the Old Testament. Peter commented in much the same way in 2 Peter 3:15, 16 when he said that people distort Paul's writings as they do other Scriptures. Apart from God's grace, sinful human beings tend to mishandle and to misappropriate the Scriptures.

This problem of sinful misinterpretation of the Bible is not limited to unbelievers. It infects believers as well. One example that comes to mind easily is how many European and American theologians believed that the Scriptures supported the African

slave trade of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. How did this happen? How could Christians so misconstrue the Scriptures? The answer is that sin hinders even believers' ability to handle the Scriptures. No matter the strength of our intellect or the depth of our biblical knowledge, we should be utterly convinced that we are all twisting and perverting special revelation in some way. The more we are aware of our shortcomings and biases, the more we can prevent this type of misreading. But sadly, we'll all go to the grave unaware of some of the ways we have misread the Bible.

> **Our interpretations of Scripture are accountable to the authority of Scripture in a way that Scripture is not accountable to the authority of our interpretation. Now, we want to be careful how we understand that. We don't want to indicate that we cannot understand Scripture accurately… But we always have to allow our interpretation to be accountable to the Scriptures themselves. It is possible to misinterpret. It's possible to not consider all of the relevant data. It's possible that there is some piece of information that we're missing about the historical situation of the original text itself. And so we always want to understand that our interpretations are revisable in light of what Scripture teaches, and we come back to that authority again and again and again.**
>
> **— Dr. Robert G. Lister**

Now that we've seen how the hindrance of sin deeply affects our ability to handle general and special revelation properly, we should turn to our best hope for understanding revelation: the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

ILLUMINATION OF HOLY SPIRIT

Students and scholars alike often act as if they can build sound Christian theology, based on God's revelation, simply by working hard at it. They believe that adherence to rigorously logical methods will enable them to reach the goals of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. But this simply isn't the case. Now, we must certainly apply ourselves as faithful servants to our task, but to overcome the impact of sin, we have to go much further. We have to get personal — personal with the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. He illumines our minds so that we may grasp and properly apply God's revelation in our theology.

All too often, Christians do not understand the extent to which deriving true theology from God's revelation results from the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Instead, we put our confidence in the natural abilities we possess as human beings. In the spirit of Enlightenment modernism, we think we can build a true theology if we are rational and apply well-defined methods to God's revelation. But in reality, our rational abilities do not exist in isolation from the fallen condition of creation. In our fallen state, sin darkens our minds, including our linguistic and logical abilities, so that we often fail to understand revelation properly. Something more is needed — something

that empowers our rational, linguistic and, for that matter, empirical capacities. We need something that enables us to understand general and special revelation as they actually are and thus to form true theology. Only illumination from the Spirit of God can bring such light to our blind eyes.

To explore the illumination of the Holy Spirit, let's look at how he grants insight into special revelation and then how he opens our eyes to see general revelation as well. We'll start with special revelation.

Special Revelation

In traditional Protestant theology, the term "illumination" is frequently applied to the Spirit's work of giving insight into special revelation. The Holy Spirit works within us, renewing our minds, so that we can apprehend, accept and apply the Word of God. Listen to the way Paul stated this truth in Ephesians 1:17-18:

> [I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you (Ephesians 1:17-18).

Now, it's important to realize that the Spirit's illumination of special revelation works in different ways. On the one hand, the Scriptures make it clear that the Spirit of God operates in non-redemptive ways so that even unbelievers understand many aspects of special revelation.

For instance, according to Numbers 24:2, the Spirit of God came upon Balaam, a pagan prophet, granting him insight. And in John 11:49-51, Caiaphas, the high priest who played a significant role in Jesus' crucifixion, prophesied truly concerning the meaning of Jesus' death. In Matthew 21:45, 46, the Pharisees understood that Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants applied to them, but they responded with a murderous plot rather than genuine repentance. In a similar way, the writer of Hebrews, in 6:4, spoke specifically of the illumination of the Spirit for people whose salvation he later questioned.

We may call these examples the "common operations of the Spirit," in the context of common grace. These are some of the many non-redemptive roles that the Spirit performs in this world. This is why even unbelievers can understand and teach theology that accords with the Scriptures. It's the result of the Spirit's work on them, even though they aren't redeemed.

At the same time, it's important to remember that the church is the temple of the Spirit. The church is the repository of his special presence and ministry in the world. He gives his redeemed people saving knowledge of the Word of God. So, it would be right to expect the Spirit's illuminating work to be greater among believers than unbelievers. In fact, we'd be right to expect that believing theologians always learn from the Spirit in ways that far exceed unbelievers.

The vital role of the Spirit's illumination of our minds toward special revelation raises a very important matter for every Christian theologian. Because the Spirit of God alone illumines us, Christian theologians must consciously and sincerely devote

themselves to keeping in step with the Spirit. Christian theology is not an impersonal project that we accomplish in our own strength. Highly personal contact with and sanctified sensitivity to the work of the Holy Spirit is required if we hope to derive true theology from special revelation. We have grounds to hope that our theological conclusions are properly derived from the Scriptures only as we give ourselves wholeheartedly to seeking the lead of the Spirit of grace.

> **The unbeliever at one level may be able to do a better job with any one piece of Scripture than a believer would do in understanding the context, or understanding the author's intent, or understanding the language in which it's written to be able to translate. So there are these isolated ways in which you could say an unbeliever would read it and get as much as a believer from it, in a way, from a fact standpoint or understanding these pieces about the language there… But the work of the Holy Spirit is such that we should be more and more sanctified, and the Holy Spirit should be more and more active over time in opening up what God intends the Scripture to say. So that's, I think, one of the fundamental places in which the unbeliever and the believer are going to approach things differently.**
>
> **— Dr. Tim Sansbury**

With the Spirit's illumination of special revelation in mind, let's turn to illumination and general revelation.

General Revelation

Most Christians would readily agree that we need the illumination of the Holy Spirit as we approach God's special revelation in Scripture. Many of us regularly pray just before we begin to read from the Scriptures because we know how much we need the Spirit's help. But we also need the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit when we reflect on general revelation. The revelation of God through creation is so vast and complex that it takes much more than our natural abilities when we study and live Christian theology. We need wisdom. And who gives this kind of wisdom? The Spirit of God.

In Daniel 5:14, the pagan king Belshazzar recognized that Daniel's wisdom was of divine origin. In Proverbs 2:6, we read that all wisdom comes from God. Similarly, according to Exodus 31:3, the artisans Bezalel and Oholiab performed craftsmanship well because they were filled with the Holy Spirit. These and other similar passages teach us that the Spirit's illumination is not necessary only for special revelation but for general revelation as well. Listen to what John Calvin said in book 2, chapter 2 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Here he spoke about the work of the Spirit as people discover truth in general revelation:

> **Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of**

> **man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God… But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance.**

As Calvin explained, the Spirit of God teaches both believers and unbelievers the truth of general revelation. He is "the sole fountain of truth." For this reason, attempting to build Christian theology in the power of the flesh, even with regard to matters related to general revelation, is as foolish as seeking salvation in the power of the flesh.

All of this is to say that successfully deriving theology from God's revelation is not something that happens automatically or something you and I can do in our own strength. When done properly, understanding revelation is a humbling, religious experience in which we constantly crash into the limits of our natural abilities and find ourselves constantly renewing our dependence on the Spirit of God.

> **So, when Calvin talks about not despising the truth wherever it may be found, it's important to remember the context in which he's saying this… What his purpose is in saying this is that humankind is predisposed to searching after the truth. This is one of the things that distinguishes us from, for example, the animals, is that we have an inclination, an inherent inclination towards pursuing the truth. And as such, God, who is ultimately the fount of all truth, speaks truth through his human creatures. But he does so in a way that's up to him. It's not up to us. Truth does not reside in the human being itself, it resides in God… And so, when Calvin talks about not rejecting truth wherever it may be found, or condemning it if it's outside of the Christian circle, he's doing so in a way that, I think, recognizes that truth is ultimately God's and not the product of some sort of human contribution.**
>
> **— Dr. Scott Manor**

The dynamics of the hindrance of sin and the illumination of the Holy Spirit in our understanding of general and special revelation prepare us to expect certain results in the process of forming our theology. Often the tension between sin and the Spirit causes us to face situations where the findings of special and general revelation seem incompatible.

RESULTS

Building theology is relatively simple so long as everything we believe the Scriptures teach fits easily with our understanding of general revelation. It's not difficult to believe that the Bible's historical record is true so long as archeological evidence

supports it. It's not hard to uphold the standards of behavior taught in the Bible so long as our cultural mores concur. We easily affirm what the Scriptures teach about our emotions, so long as they fit easily with our daily experiences. But let's face it, often we read one thing in the Bible and find something that seems to contradict it in our broader experience of life. As we've seen, Christ's followers must build theology both on God's general *and* special revelations. So what should we do when they seem incompatible with each other?

In the first place, we should enter such situations with the firm conviction that general and special revelation never actually contradict each other. In both general and special revelation, the same God is speaking — the God who only tells truth because he cannot lie. Moreover, we should also realize that God has no difficulty reconciling what he reveals in creation with what he reveals in Scripture. No matter how at odds these two sources of revelation may appear to us, we know from God's point of view, and thus in reality, that they are both true and quite compatible.

In the second place, we must remember that what we know from special and general revelation is never dealing with revelation per se, but with our *understandings* of revelation. These understandings always fall short of perfection. Although general and special revelation never actually conflict because they are both from God, our understandings of them certainly can conflict because they are from us.

When we encounter apparent discrepancies between special and general revelation, there are four main ways to evaluate the situation. First, it's always possible that we have misunderstood special revelation and that we must change our interpretation of Scripture without rejecting the Bible itself.

Second, conflict may arise because we have misunderstood general revelation. Frequently, we draw conclusions from experience that must be corrected by Scripture.

Third, we may have misunderstood both special and general revelation. It's always feasible that our experiences of the world don't seem to match up with biblical teaching because we've failed to grasp Scripture correctly, *and* we've failed to assess our experiences correctly.

Fourth, we may have encountered a mystery that is simply beyond our human comprehension. For example, think of the Trinity. Our experience of general revelation certainly doesn't lead us to expect three persons to be one being. Yet, this is what the Bible teaches us about God. How can we reconcile these two viewpoints? We can't. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery beyond our grasp.

Now, as a practical matter, we can't always tell which of these four situations we're facing. Many times we must simply act on the basis of where we put the burden of proof. Do we place a heavier burden of proof on our interpretation of Scripture or our interpretation of general revelation? Well, Christians go in different directions in this matter.

On the one hand, Christians who are considered more liberal tend to accept their understanding of general revelation more readily than their understanding of Scripture. But Christians who are considered more conservative tend to accept their understanding of special revelation over general revelation when a conflict arises.

The second strategy is the better part of wisdom. Unless the evidence of our reflections on general revelation is overwhelming, we should follow what we understand

the Scriptures to teach. Christ and his apostles endorsed the Scriptures as our guide for understanding life. So, we must be ready to submit to them when apparent conflicts arise.

> **I've found it helpful to think about three possible solutions whenever we see an apparent contradiction between general and special revelation. The first is that we've not adequately understood general revelation. This is very common, you know, as we go about the disciplines of science or history or archeology or various things. Just over the course of time, we're oftentimes discovering that previous ideas or things that were just accepted for truth, we find to be in error. It happens all the time. Just wait long enough and you'll learn that. So, we know that always our observation of the world is only partial… And oftentimes our interpretation of Scripture can be off. We can misunderstand it. In fact, we often do. And so that's also a possible solution. And then there's a third particular option there, and that's that there's some combination of both. That is, we have not adequately understood general revelation, and at the same time are not fully understanding the truth of Scripture in a particular area. And so I think that is a helpful way, at least for me, as I try to resolve what sometimes seem to be apparent contradictions, and yet at the same time allow us to affirm both the inerrancy and the infallibility of Scripture.**
>
> **— Rev. Hutch Garmany**

As Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable … that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

> **Second Timothy 3:16 and following are very much in line with what you find in a lot of parts of the Bible. On the night that he is betrayed, for example, the Lord Jesus prays to his Father, "Sanctify them [through] Your truth. Your word is truth." In other words, what believers require for sanctification is the Word of God. And so, here we're reminded that all Scripture really is God-breathed. It's breathed out by God. But that's not merely a raw fact in itself. It has a purpose connected with it. It's useful, because of the fact that it is God-breathed, to do a variety of things — to correct Christians when they go astray, to rebuke them when they really need to repent, to instruct in all of the ways of the mind of God that breed righteousness within us, and so on, so on. So, our entire shaping of life and thought and priorities and conduct and ethic and belief systems, worldview and so on, all comes finally from the Word of God, mediated by the Spirit. This Spirit-breathed Word, this God-breathed Word is then**

> **used by the Spirit to shape us and build us up into increasing conformity to Christ.**
>
> **— Dr. D.A. Carson**

At the same time, however, we must always remember that because our understandings of Scripture are flawed by sin, we may need to revisit issues time and again. The practice of faithful believers through the ages has been to yield their judgments to what they believe the Bible teaches, while still knowing that they may need to correct their flawed understandings of the Bible later. This way of wisdom and submission calls upon us to construct theology out of what we sincerely believe the Bible teaches.

As we've seen, relying on revelation to develop our theology is riddled with difficulties resulting from the dynamics of sin and the Spirit. The complexities involved in both finding revelation and understanding revelation lead us to our third main topic: developing confidence in our theological positions in the face of so many obstacles.

DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE

At one time or another, many of us have met theologians who are far too confident about far too many things they believe. They act as if they have mastered theological reflection. They have answers for every question, and they think their answers are unquestionable. Then again, most of us have also met theologians who have far too little confidence about far too many things they believe. They often realize the complexities of theology and end up answering lots of questions with, "I don't know." These kinds of people represent extremes. But these extremes raise some important questions as we build our theology. How confident should we be about what we believe? And is there a way to come to some sort of balance in these matters?

To explore developing confidence in theology, we'll touch on three considerations. First, we'll see that confidence in theological positions has an analog quality. Second, we'll explore how confidence results from a process of deference. And third, we'll examine how we should establish the appropriate alignment of our levels of confidence on different theological subjects. Let's look first at the idea that confidence in theological conclusions has an analog quality.

ANALOG QUALITY

To understand what we mean by an analog quality of confidence in theology, it helps to draw on an analogy. Consider a simple on-off light switch. This kind of switch is similar to the way many evangelicals think about their beliefs. They often think simply of things that they know and things that they don't know. "I know Christ is the Son of God." "I know God is Triune." These affirmations are firm beliefs. Yet, evangelicals have lists

of things they consider unknowable or unknown. "I don't know how a good God allows evil." "I don't know when Christ will return." These kinds of statements indicate that we do not know what to think. We have no confidence in positions taken on these subjects. This approach to theological convictions is adequate in many circumstances. It says simply, "I know about this, but I don't know about that."

Yet, when we look more closely at the whole range of things that we know and don't know as Christians, we see rather quickly that the situation is more complex than this model suggests. Most of us are familiar with a dimmer light switch that has a range of lower and higher settings. In this kind of switch, the electrical current is not simply on or off, but flows with more or less strength depending on the position of the switch. At the extremes, the current is fully off and fully on, but the entire range in between is important as well, because it provides softer to brighter light. In many respects, these analog light switches provide a very helpful model for assessing the confidence we should have in different theological positions. We don't simply have confidence in some beliefs and no confidence in others. We have a whole range of more or less confidence in theological positions.

Consider the ways we think about things outside of theology. Every human being holds to many beliefs. For example, you may believe that it will not rain today. You may also believe that you have a job. And, if you're a parent, you almost certainly believe that you have a child. Now, even though you can say you believe all of these things are true, you don't hold these beliefs with the same level of confidence.

One way to test your level of confidence is by asking how much pressure it would take to give up each of these beliefs. It probably wouldn't take much to change your belief that it will not rain today. A few drops of rain falling on your head would instantly change your mind. Even a weather report predicting high probability of rain would make you carry an umbrella. You don't have much confidence in that belief.

But, if you go to work every day, you probably believe that you have a job. You'd be heavily invested in that belief. It would take much more than a news report or article to change your mind. Even if you received a letter telling you that you were not employed, you'd want it confirmed in person.

But consider, for instance, that you're a parent. What would it take for you to stop believing that you have a child? There is so much confirming this belief that it would take an unimaginable amount of evidence to make you believe otherwise, a lot more than anything else on this list.

Now, in many respects what is true in common experience is also true in theology. We hold our theological beliefs with varying degrees of confidence. In an earlier lesson we spoke of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathos as forming webs of multiple reciprocities. At this point we need to expand this model slightly. It helps to think of this web of multiple reciprocities as suspended in a sphere. When this sphere is cross-sectioned and its interior is exposed, we see that our web of beliefs is arranged in concentric layers.

In the outer layer, our beliefs are configured loosely. The outer layer represents the many theological positions that belong on the periphery of our web of beliefs. We have little confidence about them; we have little commitment to them. And we find ourselves changing, removing, and adding to these configurations of beliefs with ease nearly all the time.

In the center, or core of the sphere, our web of beliefs is so tightly interwoven that it appears to be nearly one unified solid. The center of our web consists of our core beliefs, the central theological configurations of our faith which we hold with high levels of confidence. It's very difficult to modify, remove or add to these core beliefs. Because when we do, there's a dramatic ripple effect that reconfigures large portions of everything else we believe.

Finally, between the core and the outer layer is a series of layers made up of more or less tightly-woven webs of belief. The layers closer to the center are more densely configured and are more difficult to modify. The layers further from the center are less densely configured and are less difficult to change.

> **It's really important for us to distinguish between things that are really clear and certain in Scripture and things that are much less certain, mainly because the Bible does that. In the Gospels, in the Epistles, in every part of the New Testament, it is really clear that Jesus Christ is our Savior and our Lord, the Son of God who is fully God and fully man. And yet, when it comes to something like the millennium, our eschatological views, only once in Scripture is a thousand years mentioned — in Revelation 20. And so there's a lot of debate among Christians about what this thousand year reign of Christ means and what it looks like. And because of the fact that it's not emphasized in Scripture, we should respect the fact that Christians at different times have had different views on that matter. Some things are really clear, and some things are less certain. We need to know the difference.**
>
> **— Dr. Gregory R. Perry**

Put simply, developing confidence in our theology not only has an analog quality, but it also requires a process of deference. In this process, we submit ourselves to ways the Holy Spirit teaches and convinces us of our theological positions.

PROCESS OF DEFERENCE

The Holy Spirit illumines us so that we may believe the truth of God's revelation. But he teaches and convinces God's people in different ways. As many examples in Scriptures indicate, the Spirit of God is free to shape our theological convictions in extraordinary ways. Still, it's also fair to say that there are ordinary ways in which the Spirit of God grants us theological convictions. This variety of the Spirit's work is akin to the many ways God providentially directs every dimension of history.

Chapter 5, section 3 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarizes the teaching of Scripture on God's providence nicely. It says:

> **God in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.**

This statement describes how God uses "means" — second causes, or created instruments — to carry out his will on earth. He works out his plan ordinarily *through* second causes, using created instruments to accomplish his goals. But at the same time, God is not locked into this ordinary way. He is also free to accomplish his will "without, above, and against" created instruments.

> **God is sovereign. We all live, move and have our being through him, but there are secondary causes. So, if I want to walk across the room, I can't walk across the room outside of God's sustaining power. And yet, if I want to walk across the room, I don't just float. I actually get up. My muscles start to move. I take one step in front of the other. And so, the secondary causes of me getting from here to there is the leg movements, the muscle contractions. All of that that's going on are secondary causes. And it allows us to not pit primary and secondary cause against one another. So, the reality is, if I went to the other side of this room and the way I got there was not by walking, but instead all of a sudden I started to float, and I flew over there, in the medieval period, what we would call that is a miracle, because a miracle is the absence of secondary causes. So, God can do miracles, but the normal way God works is in and through secondary causes.**
>
> **— Dr. Kelly M. Kapic**

In much the same way, it's helpful to distinguish between the extraordinary and ordinary ways that the Holy Spirit illumines us and confirms our theological position. From time to time, all Christians have experienced insights and strong convictions from the Holy Spirit, even when we weren't looking for them. Something comes to mind when we don't expect it. Commitments swell within us with no explanation. In many situations like these, the Spirit of God is working without, above, and against the second causes he normally uses. While these kinds of extraordinary works of the Spirit are important, formal theology is much more concerned with the *ordinary* processes that the Spirit uses.

As we saw in an earlier lesson, the church has acknowledged three primary areas for formal theological training found in traditional seminaries: the biblical division, which concerns the exegesis of Scripture; the doctrinal and historical division, which concerns interaction in community; and the practical theology division which concerns Christian living.

In line with this wisdom, it's very helpful to describe the ordinary ways in which the Spirit grants theological confidence as a process of deferring to the influences of the exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and Christian living. We won't explore all three of these influences in detail, but it will help to introduce them here. First, the Spirit of God illumines and confirms us as we learn how to defer to the influence of proper biblical exegesis or interpretation.

Exegesis of Scripture

> **The word "exegesis" is simply a word meaning "to explain; to draw out," and we're drawing out meaning from the text. It's not from the author independently of the text, it's not from the reader independently, or even in conjunction with the text, but we say the text says something.**
>
> **— Dr. Guy Waters**

The field of exegesis — learning the skills by which we may discern the teaching of Scripture — is one of the most important, common and effective means of illumination and confidence building. Do you want to know what God has revealed in Scripture? Do you want to be sure of this? Ordinarily, we must employ exegetical skills that equip us to handle the Bible responsibly. Deference to the exegesis of Scripture is vital to the process of developing Christian theology.

> **When we develop Christian theology, we must carefully examine the Scriptures in order to be able to fulfill the principles in the right way — in our culture, in our time — in order to apply the principles that were taught in a different culture and in a different time, to our present culture and our present time. This helps us to live Christian theology the way Jesus revealed it and taught it. Failure to do so may lead us to develop a different theology from the one Jesus taught. So we must carefully analyze the Scriptures in order to follow the same steps that Jesus taught us.**
>
> **— Rev. Pablo Torres, translation**

Second, our process of deference not only includes the exegesis of Scripture, but the Spirit of God commonly uses interaction in community to illumine our minds and confirm our convictions.

Interaction in Community

Direct biblical exegesis is not the only influence we need in theology. We also need the help of general revelation, especially interaction with other people. In fact, direct exegesis without community is very dangerous. As we see time and again, the first step toward heresy is often exegesis. Interacting with others, learning and evaluating their opinions of what God has revealed, should be crucial in our theology. In the broadest sense, God has ordained interaction with the entire human race to help us.

But interaction among believers, where the Spirit dwells in his fullness, is especially important to the process. When interacting in community we ask questions such as, "What has the church of the past believed about these matters? What do godly believers around me today say about this or that issue? How do my personal opinions

compare to the opinions of others?" Deference to community interaction is vital to the process of deriving theology from God's revelation.

> **We, as Protestants, depend on the interpretive community, the interpretive community, because Scripture does say that we as saints must evaluate every declaration whether it be true or not true. So we do not rely on the fact that someone would say, "Look, the Holy Spirit has revealed this to me." As we know in Africa there are so many "revelations" that people get from the Holy Spirit. So our duty as brothers, we say, "Hold on brother. Do we affirm and confirm your interpretation or not?" … So we also depend on the interpretation of the community.**
>
> **— Prof. Jorum Mugari**

> **The Scripture is given to the church, and therefore, when you read Scripture you have to read Scripture, you have to study Scripture, you have to learn to pray Scripture, and if you're going to learn to live Scripture, you have to do it within the fellowship of the body of Christ… But not only that, where pastors and elders and those who are spiritually mature are able to help us discover in our lives what really are the issues that keep me from experiencing the transforming power of God through my encounter with the Word of God. Therefore, when we read Scripture, we have to understand we always are to read Scripture in fellowship with God's church.**
>
> **— Dr. Steve Blakemore**

Third, in addition to deferring to exegesis and interaction in community, we must also acknowledge that Christian living plays a very important role in granting us confidence as we follow the Spirit's lead.

Christian Living

Living for Christ prepares us for good biblical exegesis and interaction with others. And a faithful walk is also the arena within which we test our theological positions. Things like experiences of success and failure, prayers, worship, and service to God are dimensions of general revelation that are also instruments the Spirit ordinarily uses to illumine and to convince us of theological positions. Who we are and what we experience as we live for Christ is a third major influence to which we must defer. The Spirit uses Christian living to illumine our minds and to give us confidence that we have understood God's revelation correctly.

> **There's something very different going on when we read the Bible in that it's not just a matter of interpreting what the author intended in**

> **the historical sense. It's not just a matter of trying to figure out the background of a text. It is really a matter of engaging with God, because we believe the Scriptures are inspired by God, breathed out by God, and are the one of the main places of revelation where God speaks of himself and also meets with his people, and with the individual as well as the corporate gathering of God's people. And so one's spiritual condition is actually part of that whole interpretive process.**
>
> **— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

Up to this point, we've seen that developing theological confidence has an analog quality, or is a matter of degree, and that the Spirit of God ordinarily uses a process of deference to give us confidence. Now we're in a position to see how we should bring appropriate alignment to the levels of confidence we have in our various beliefs.

APPROPRIATE ALIGNMENT

When we speak about aligning our levels of confidence in theology, we have in mind how important it is to determine the strength of our many theological convictions in responsible ways. We need to avoid making this or that belief more central than another simply according to our own judgment. Rather, we are wise to consider how exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community and individual Christian living work together to support what we believe. The concept of how to appropriately align the confidence we have in our theological positions can be rather complex. But there's a helpful model for understanding how appropriate alignment of convictions works. We'll call this model the "cone of certainty."

Imagine that we remove a section from the sphere of our beliefs and create a cone that extends from the outer edge to the core. Setting this cone upright, the layers display a scale of confidence on which we hold our various beliefs. The top of the cone is our core beliefs. The bottom of the cone is the outer edge of our beliefs. In between the top and bottom are beliefs that we hold with different levels of conviction.

One of our major responsibilities as Christian theologians is to determine at what level to place particular beliefs. Once we've decided that a theological position belongs in the Christian faith, we want to know where we should put it in the cone of certainty. Should it be toward the top — held with higher levels of confidence? Or should it be toward the bottom — held with lower levels of confidence?

Now, there's no doubt that the Holy Spirit will at times create levels of confidence within us in extraordinary ways. We may find ourselves utterly convinced of something with little justification. We may doubt a point of view with little ability to explain why. At times, we simply sense or feel that something is true or false. We should be cautious about these kinds of experiences and submit them to the evaluation of God's Word, but these extraordinary works of the Spirit should not be ignored.

Still, how does the Spirit *ordinarily* lead us to determine where to place our beliefs in the cone of certainty? In general terms, we may say that, with rare exceptions,

we should align our levels of confidence with the results of faithful deference to the influences of exegesis, interaction in community and Christian living. As we seek to come under their influences, the Spirit brings many of our convictions into appropriate alignment.

On a practical level, deferring to the influences of exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living requires us to ask at least two basic questions. First, how much harmony exists among exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living on a particular subject? The more harmony there is, the more confidence we should have that we've understood a particular matter correctly. Second, when there is significant disharmony, is one or more influence clearer than the others? When one or two influences are more well-defined than the other or others, we tend to place the belief supported by the clear influence higher in the cone of certainty. But, when the influence of exegesis, interaction, and Christian living are disharmonious and nearly equal in their lack of clarity, we tend to place this belief lower in the cone of certainty.

> **The influences that cause us to set different beliefs at different places, well, they're varied. But you can summarize them in terms of what we think the Scriptures teach because the Scriptures are very clear about some things and not so clear about others. And that tends to make this go up and down. You can also see the influence of the Christian church or the community, our interactions with other Christians. Because as you see the body of Christ over the centuries affirming this belief over and over and over again, it ought to give us an expectation that even if, personally, we're not that confident, it's probably very confident that we should believe in those sorts of those things, or very certain that we should believe in those sorts of things. And then the third element would be, I guess, our individual Christian experience, our Christian living, our experiences of life. Now, keep in mind that the exegesis of the Bible has to do with the special revelation of God, and the life in community with other Christians and our individual living has to do with the general revelation of God. So, we're still depending on God to teach us things, no matter what is influencing us here, and we're seeking Holy Spirit to help us discern what God is teaching. But as these three elements, these three influences impact us — interpreting the Bible, interacting with other Christians, living our Christian lives — as they influence us, sometimes they'll push up how much confidence we should have in certain beliefs and certain practices and certain feelings that we have. And sometimes they'll push us down. And generally speaking, though it's not always the case, but generally speaking, the more harmonious our interpretation of the Bible, and what the body of Christ is saying as a whole in our interacting with them, and our individual experiences are, the more harmonious they are, the more we tend to have confidence that we've put a belief in the right place.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored how relying on God's revelation helps us build our Christian theology. We saw that in the process of finding revelation, God has given us special and general revelation, and we must depend on his revelation in creation and in Scripture together. We also noted that understanding revelation is harmed by the effects of sin, but is furthered by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. And finally, we saw that developing confidence in our theological beliefs depends to a large degree on deferring to the influences of biblical exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living.

When we build Christian theology we must rely on God's revelation everywhere it's found. But understanding and applying divine revelation can be difficult. So, every step of the way, we need to refresh our commitment to the processes that enable us to draw from his revelation. Only then can we hope to formulate our doctrines, the standards of our practices, and the conditions of our hearts in ways that please God.

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Building Your Theology

LESSON THREE

Relying on Revelation

Faculty Forum

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Building Your Theology

Lesson Three: Relying on Revelation

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Michael Aitcheson
John Tomberlin III

Question 1:
What is general revelation?

Student: Richard, I've heard of general revelation before, but you're using it in ways that I haven't quite heard. Could you further clarify what you are saying about general revelation?

Dr. Pratt: I guess there probably are ways that we talk about in that lesson that are a little unusual and have to think about what other people have said. I think this is probably the best way to go at it. Most of the time when you hear the words "general revelation" in theological education, people are talking about the way God reveals himself in nature, and usually they mean raw nature like big trees in the forest, or big mountains, or the clouds in the sky, things like that. You sit back and go, "Oh God must be great because he made big mountains, and he must be strong because he holds the sun in his hand" — things like that. And that's true. That is certainly a part of general revelation. But the reason we use the word "general" for general revelation rather than natural revelation, which is sort of the older term, is to avoid that problem of identifying it just with nature in the raw. Because general revelation means God reveals himself generally through everything to everybody in general — in everything in general and to everybody in general. So that means that, oddly as it sounds that general revelation also includes the things not just that God has made but then that people have made with God's creation. And the key for this is Romans 1, because in Romans 1 Paul says that what has been made from the time of creation has revealed God to everyone, but then he goes on to say that the things that people do — and he starts listing off even perversions like homosexuality and murder and hating parents and things like that, the things that we do with the world around us — he says even that reveals God's will to people. So as they experience those things, it's even further general revelation.

So the way that we tend to think about general revelation should not be so narrow. It should include things even beyond nature in the raw like automobiles, or paper, or books, or televisions, or satellites, whatever it may be. Whatever we experience in life, whether it's natural state or manmade, as we say, it is a part of the general revelation of God. And what we mean by that is that it reveals something of the character of God, some dimension of God's character, and his moral will for us with

respect to that thing. And that's basically all we mean when we say general revelation. But it is different than what I think you probably hear most of the time, say, in Sunday school, or maybe even in churches, because they do tend to focus on nature as it sits there rather than nature as it's been shaped by humanity.

Student: Having said that, Richard, my father is from Jamaica and he makes a mean jerk chicken. What does that tell me about God?

Dr. Pratt: How mean is it?

Student: It's bad.

Dr. Pratt: Does that mean like it's hot?

Student: It's hot, and it's good. Hot and spicy.

Dr. Pratt: Well, there a million things that we could say about it. If you were looking at your father's jerk chicken through the eyeglasses of Scripture, which is really the best way to discover what these things mean, you could say a number of things. One, you could see that you father is doing something that is creative, and he is obeying the law of God when God tells us to have dominion over all the earth including the animals on the earth. And so watching your father make his jerk chicken from the time he cuts off the head of the chicken, and pulls the feathers out, and cuts it up into pieces, and figures out how to make it taste good — Does it taste good? — Okay. Now you know, if you took a chicken in the raw and took a bite out of it, it wouldn't taste good. But what your father does is he takes something that in raw natural state doesn't taste all that good and he turns it into something that I want to taste. It's magnificent. Well, what this demonstrates is that the image of God, humanity, really has been given dominion over the earth. And that, of course, is one of the most fundamental teachings of the Bible, and it's illustrated there by your father using it for the purpose of honoring humanity, feeding humanity, equipping humanity to do the will of God.

Now I don't know your dad, but if he's a Christian, then he's doing that even self-consciously but if he's not a believer… Let's just say somebody else makes good jerk chicken and they're not a believer, and let's say they create a restaurant and they are very careless in the way they handle the chicken and so it becomes corrupted, it becomes spoiled, but they go on and serve it anyway and they make a bunch of people sick. Well that event reveals God, too, because that restaurateur is not doing things according to the will of God. He's hurting people. He's killing people. And when we look at that general revelation, we realize that's an immoral thing to do, so it's revealing God's character as a good God and a loving and kind God by contrast with what the human race is doing. And that's the way it is with every single thing we do. When we build buildings it shows that we are fulfilling the call to subdue the earth. God has called us to do that. And when those building are put to good use, well then we can honor God for that, and we say that's a good thing because that's what

it's for. When they're put to bad use then we can say that's not what it's for, it's against the will of God. And these things, according to the apostle Paul in Romans 1, to one degree or another, are evident in the general revelation itself and that you don't have to be a Christian at least in your subconscious to know that this is true.

And that's why it would be that even in a country that doesn't claim to be Christian, if your father runs a restaurant and serves spoiled meat and lots of people die, he's going to be in trouble, because there is an immorality to that. And even though it doesn't come straight from the Bible in, say, a pagan culture or a non-Christian culture, they don't root that morality in the Bible, they know it's true. See, this is the odd thing. It's that there is no justification in a non-Christian culture, no ultimate justification for saying that it would be bad to serve spoiled jerk chicken, no justification at all. So why do they do it? Why, say for example, in communist China where there is no Christian basis for the laws, why is it that when they serve bad meat in China in restaurants that those people are taken off and sent to prison? Why don't they just say well, you know, what moral basis do you have? Well the reality is there is this consciousness of the revelation of God that the chicken or the beef or whatever meat it is has been given to humanity to be used for the betterment of humanity and for the honor of God. And so there are remnants of that even in a pagan culture. And so it is true what the apostle Paul says that when people use and then even abuse the creation, it reveals God's will to us, it reveals his moral character to us. That's what I mean when I say that every single thing, every single thing, whether it's nature in the raw or nature developed by human beings, reveals the will of God and the character of God in general revelation.

Question 2:
What are very general revelation and specialized general revelation?

Student: Richard, you made a distinction between very general revelation and specialized general revelation. Could you explain further what you mean?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's also different than what most people say I have to admit. There are a few people that I'm drawing on for those distinctions, but let me see if I can just sort of lay them out. Normally we think you have special revelation and then you have general revelation. That's the normal way you think. And that's okay, there's nothing wrong with that. The problem, though, is that people want to put a wall between those two like there's nothing shared between them, there's no overlap, and what I arguing for is that there really is an overlap between special and general revelation. One way to see that is think about what's in the Bible.

Let's just deal with special revelation first. The Bible has things in it that we would sort of say are super special, that you could never have dreamed — in fact, the only way you could have gotten them was a dream — you could never have figured these things out. I mean, when you think about the revelation to John in the book of

Revelation with all the fantastic visions he had and that sort of thing, he didn't just sit around one day and say, "Well, this would be a great idea, let's do this, let's think this thought and have that vision." That's very super-esoteric, supernatural, super-special revelation. On the other end of the Bible, though, you do have things that are not so super, not so specialized. You'll have things like where Paul is writing to the Corinthians and he's talking about things that he knows that's going on there because he's gotten letters from them. Now that's still special revelation of God because it's in Scripture, what he is writing is Scripture, but he didn't get that information from a vision. He got it from a letter that he had received. Or, if you take Luke, when Luke tells Theophilus that I'm writing this account for you by going to all these eyewitnesses, well he's gotten information and is writing a special revelation because it's Scripture, but his information came from eyewitnesses. And so you have a range of things in the Bible from extraordinary special revelation to rather ordinary special revelation, or what we say in the lesson "very special revelation" to "generalized revelation." So it kind of lowers it down. It doesn't mean it's less authoritative. It just means it not so supernatural.

Well, take that range and now let's talk about the range of general revelation. In general revelation you have very similar things in the sense that some things in general revelation are so well known and so common that practically any mentally competent person in this world would be able to acknowledge it, like the universe is big. Or there's power in the universe. Or the universe is beautiful. Or the universe is harsh — those kinds of things. That's so common that you'd have to put it way over here on this very common end, very sort of low end of general revelation. But we also know that there are ways in which God reveals himself in nature that are rather specialized. Not everybody has all these general experiences. You have your experiences, you have yours, I have mine, and that means then that it's still general revelation because it's not the Bible, but it's still God revealing himself to you as an individual. So for example, if you become sick, that is going to be a form of general revelation. You're going to learn things about God, about yourself, about your moral responsibilities from the flu that you have. As strange as that sounds, that's true, and I think we all know we do learn when we get sick. A lot of people tell me that all the time. "I got so sick I was in the hospital for six weeks and it was a great time of blessing; I couldn't even read the Bible but it was a great time of blessing because I was learning so much about God from being sick, from being helpless, from being worn down" — those kinds of things. So that's a very specialized form of — individualized form — of general revelation.

So you have a range in general revelation that sort of parallels the range of special revelation. And that's what causes the overlap, so that the Bible sometimes talks about things that you can also learn from general revelation. Like when the Proverbs talk about ants are busy, they make lots of things. Well, it didn't take a vision to get that. All you had to do was go out and look at an ant hole. And you can do that, too. You don't need a Bible to find out that ants are busy and that they store up food for the winter and things like that. All you have to do is look and see. So there are things like that in the Bible, but also there are things in general revelation that we often

don't quite get as specialized when we don't realize that they are, "hey, this is my part of general revelation at this moment for me." And so we really are saying that God has revealed himself and continues to reveal himself in everything. Everything reveals God, the Bible in a special authoritative way and then general revelation every single thing else.

Question 3:
Does God reveal things in dreams and intuitions?

Student: Given that everything in general revelation says something to us about God, what would you say to someone who struggles or has a dream where he thinks, or she thinks, that God is talking directly to them? How would you deal with that dream as far as in light of special or general revelation?

Dr. Pratt: That's great, because I think that what this doctrine teaches, what this approach teaches, is that it's quite contrary to the way it often happens, especially when people become theologically educated. What they start doing is they start discounting things like premonitions, or dreams, or intuitions, or just that kind of, you know, that feeling you have. And if you go around, especially students of theology, talking about, "I feel the Lord is leading me to do this," and that kind of thing, everybody just sort of rolls their eyes and they intellectualize it. "Yeah, whatever. What did you eat for breakfast this morning!" Well, the fact is that what you ate for breakfast this morning is general revelation. And those premonitions you have, even when they're wrong is general revelation, because if it exists, it is revealing God. See, that's what's so strange about this.

It's sort of like when you think about murder, for example, which is wrong. The apostle Paul says in Romans 1 that's one of the things that reveals God to people; they know that the people who do such things deserve to die. So a premonition, an intuition, a dream, any kind of psychological experience, all of this is part of what happens in life and therefore has the implications of revealing God to us and God's will for us. Now what we don't want to do is to cross the line and to start giving a dream, or giving a premonition or an intuition the role of special revelation. You don't want to write a dream in the back of your Bible, and unfortunately, there are Christian groups that do that. You know, they'll call it a prophecy, maybe, that someone prophesies over them. And I've been in circles like that. I've been there, I've even done that to people much less received it. But when someone prophesies over someone, to use that kind of common term that people use today, and they say things that are not contrary to the Bible, they'll say things like, "The Lord is going to bless you, he's going to use you, one day you will be known as a servant of God around the world," and things like that. Well, that is something that should be taken as part of general revelation. And that means that insofar as it is true, and even insofar as it is false, it's going to say something to me about God and God's will for me. And if that kind of word comes from Christians over and over and over and over again, or

perhaps in the case of a dream, if you keep having the same dream over and over, and it's so powerful on you and you pray about it and you ask the Lord to give you guidance about how to evaluate it and what to think about it, if it continues to rest in your heart and continues to impress upon your soul, then you need to take it more and more and more seriously as guidance from God.

Now let me see if I can sort of lower the intensity of this a little bit by saying this. Even in my own tradition, my own branch of the church that tends not to think very highly of dreams and premonitions and intuitions and things like that, when people are asked, "Why do you feel you're called to the ministry?" If someone is seeking ordination, they'll ask that question, "why do you feel called to the ministry?" And there are two answers, and if you don't give both answers, they'll pull the trap door on you and you're gone. So you have to give the two answers. And the two answers are: I have an inward call and I have an outward call. Now the outward call basically means the body of Christ has seen my gifts and they are calling me, they're offering me a job. Put it that way, okay? That's fine. But if that's all you've got to give to this ordination group, if that's all you can say about your calling to ministry that other people have told me I ought to be a minister, well then you're out, because they're also looking for you to say I have an inward call. Now what is an inward call?

Student: Well my understanding has just been that there is a desire to serve in that capacity that actually is in your heart.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. It's a desire, a passion inside of you. It can go a step further, can't it? What other kinds of things could an inward call be? How might you articulate it?

Student: Holy Spirit tugging at your heart.

Dr. Pratt: There, Holy Spirit tugging at your heart; God leading me in this; I have this conviction; I've tried to refuse it; I've tried to go to Tarsus but I just can't do it; God keeps me pulling me back to it. That's what I'm talking about. You see? That's specialized general revelation. Now that's the one place in our day where my branch of the church still acknowledges that the Holy Spirit works in us psychologically, works in us emotionally, works in us in our premonitions, in our convictions, our intuitions, even our dreams, and that it ought to be taken very seriously. All I'm suggesting is that we need to spread that out a little more.

Question 4:
Is modern prophecy special or general revelation?

Student: I have a question about the specificity of the prophecies, if you will. So if someone prophesies over you and it's very specific, and that thing comes to pass,

whatever it is, do we still consider that just general? Or do we put it under the bracket of special?

Dr. Pratt: That's great. In the categories that we affirm, you'd have to say a specialized general revelation. Okay? If you say it's special revelation you're going to get that trap door. Because special revelation is reserved for something that is infallible and, in our day, written down already by apostles and prophets, the foundation of the church. The reason that we have this category of special revelation is to give us a standard, a written standard by which we can judge all other candidates — the canon. It's not as if God spoke one day, "Okay everybody, make a canon," but the church found out they needed one. They needed something they could use a standard to judge all these other things that Christians were saying. And so everything that other people say to us, or we get in dreams, premonitions, etc., needs to be judged by that. But there reality is that the Bible, New Testament included, doesn't give us a lot of information about what you're supposed to do with your life tomorrow, and what you're supposed to do. It just kind of gives parameters. And then the question is how do you fill in the space between the parameters? If you get a premonition that you're supposed to be an axe murderer, you're not supposed to be. I can tell you, it didn't come from God, okay? But if you're given a premonition that you should serve in Miami — that's your home city isn't it? Or are you going to get a premonition that you're supposed to serve in New York? See, now, both of those are fine in the Bible, right? This is where we're talking about the leading of Holy Spirit and the providence of God being general revelation, and the stronger it is for you, the more specific it is for you, the more specialized it is.

Our tendency, unfortunately, is to try to turn that filling in the gap into sort of a scientific thing, a purely rational thing. And that is what I'm arguing against here. I'm saying rationality, science, even sociology and things like that that we would use to sort of fill in those holes, that's legitimate. It's part of general revelation, but so is your dream. And so is what your next door neighbor said to you, and especially when they're authorities in your life like you pastor, or an elder of some sort. Or you've had this just pull in your heart that I have to go to Uzbekistan, I have to go, I just can't get it out of me; that's the leading of Holy Spirit that fills in those gaps in what the Bible has taught us. And so I'm saying that these are not special revelations in the sense that you must obey it no matter what. I mean, you must always submit it to the Bible and it's not special revelation in the sense that everybody else has to do it. It's not part of the canon of the church. But it is God speaking; it is God revealing himself, because God reveals himself in everything including those psychological experiences.

This really is a matter of what we often call vocation. And that's a big problem, especially for theological students these days. Theological students these day, in America anyway, they think of vocation as sort of a more-or-less business decision; I've been called to be a minister, now which church do I go to? Well, what I do is I send out a resume, I contact them, and I see which one is going to give me the best package, which one's going to pay me to most money, which one's going to give me the best schools for my kids, which one's going to be the kind of culture I belong to.

So we evaluate it sort of rationally. Well, there's nothing wrong with that, but we always need to remember that God may actually be calling a person to a place where they'll pay you less money and where you won't fit into the culture, where you won't be able to have a nice house. Can you imagine if Jesus had used those criteria for his ministry? Or the apostle Paul? Or 90 percent of the ministers of Christ in years past? If that had been the case, then none of us would have been Christians. They would have stayed in comfortable places. That's what I call the "yellow brick road to ministry" and they would have had a good professional life, but they would never had sacrificed the ways that they did that then resulted in you and me being Christians.

And so it's very important for us to get that notion that we must listen to that intuitional, that quiet voice, that premonition, that dream, that specialized general revelation, to get vocation, to know what I'm supposed to do with my life now, at this time and this place, because that is a form of general revelation.

Question 5:
Why do we need general revelation to interpret special revelation?

Student: Now Richard, you said we needed general revelation to interpret special revelation, but isn't that what liberal theologians do?

Dr. Pratt: Yep. That's exactly what they do. I guess you could think about it that way and just sort of say that would be a dead-wrong thing to do. The fact is that what we call liberal Christians — let's just put it that way for lack of a better term — what they tend to do is they take things from science and archeology and even philosophy and things like that which are aspects of general revelation, and they read the Bible in the light of that. So they say, well, we can only read the Bible so far as it passes those tests. And what they're in effect doing is they're taking their understanding of general revelation and putting it on top of the Bible. That's really what they're doing. That's not what I'm suggesting. What I'm suggesting is that the revelation of God in the Bible and the revelation of God in everything else work together, and actually they work together perfectly because God's revelation in both sides are from him. And because of the character of God himself, they are harmonious. Now the problem is that they don't always look harmonious to us. What the Bible says and what science says ought to fit. If the Bible really is God's Word and if we're knowing science correctly, they ought to fit. What the Bible says and what philosophy says, they ought to fit if they're both saying the true thing. And the same thing would be true of any experience we have of the world. They ought to fit if the Bible is true and if we're getting the right vision of general revelation. But the problem is this: We never deal with the Bible itself and general revelation itself. We never get to that pure, we never get to that "in-itself-ness." Instead, what you've got is a wrapping around these two things. We have a wrapping around the Bible, and that wrapping around the Bible is our understanding of the Bible. Now is your understanding of the Bible as perfect as the Bible?

Student: Not yet.

Dr. Pratt: Not yet. Okay, good. So you're understanding of the Bible is different from the Bible itself. Now here's general revelation in and of itself — God speaking through everything — but it has a wrapping around it, too, that we deal with. We don't get to that thing; we get to the wrapping, and that means, in other words, we're dealing with our interpretation of the world around us, too. Now have you ever made a mistake?

Student: Of course.

Dr. Pratt: Okay. So, you ever lost your keys, things like that? Turned in the wrong lane in the car? That's the wrapping around general revelation. So we're not dealing with the things themselves. They do match up. But what we're actually dealing with is the wrapping around it, our interpretations around these two things. The unfortunate thing is that liberals often have the attitude of, "I'm understanding this correctly. I've got it right. And I'm understanding the Bible correctly. I've got *it* right. Now, they disagree. Now, what I'm going to do is force my vision of what the world around me says onto it and critique the Bible that way." And they forget that they're really just living with the wrappings. They're living with their understanding of the world around them and their understanding of the Bible around them.

Take archeology for example. Archeology is not a pure science. It's an interpretation of facts and data by schemes, and by philosophies, and by different approaches. That's why archeologists differ with each other. You can't get two archeologists to agree on six things, and that's because they're always interpreting the facts. Well, if you're interpreting the facts of archeology and you're interpreting the Bible, too, the reason conflict comes up is for at least three different reasons. One, we've misunderstood the facts. Or, we've misunderstood the Bible. That happens a lot, both of those. Or, we've misunderstood both. Now those are three different possibilities there, that I've misunderstood the facts of archeology, or I've misunderstood the Bible, or I've misunderstood both, and that's why they don't seem compatible. And for the most part, what we can discover is that sometimes our understanding of archeology, just taking that as an example, can actually help us understand the Bible better. It's not to discredit the Bible, it's to help us understand the Bible better, and archeology can help us, and science can help us, and all kinds of things can help us so long as they're used in submission to the Bible.

Now there is a fourth possibility when apparent conflicts come up — and sometimes we just have to admit this — and that is that we may never know how to reconcile science, general revelation and special revelation. We may be running into a mystery. One of the greatest mysteries in the Bible, of course, is the Trinity. Or even go beyond that, how Jesus can be fully divine and fully human. Most scientists, I think, would tell us that's not possible. It's not possible for someone to be fully God and fully man — two natures that don't mix together and don't change and don't form

composition or anything like that, in one person. But that's what we believe Jesus is — fully divine, fully human. Now anytime you take something that's as mysterious as that from the Bible and you bring it to science, science is going to collapse, because they have no way of handling that. So sometimes these apparent differences between special and general revelation are the fact that we're running into something that's beyond human comprehension. So there really are these four things: we could be wrong about general revelation, we could be wrong about the Bible, we could be wrong about both, or we could be bumping into a mystery that we just can't fathom.

I think one of the most helpful ways, then, to distinguish between what we mean usually when we say a liberal and a conservative Christian is this: It's the practical issue, it's the propensity we have of, on which understanding are we going to lean? When there's an apparent conflict and we can't resolve it quickly, where are we going to stand? Are we going to tend to stand on our understanding of general revelation? Or are we going to tend to stand on our understanding of special revelation, the Bible? Knowing that we might have to change that later on, is that where we're going to stand today, our interpretation? More liberal Christians tend to stand more on their understanding of general revelation — science, philosophy, logic, those kinds of things. The more conservative you are, the more you tend to hold onto your understanding of the Bible. Now that's not a choice of holding the Bible versus general revelation, it's just holding onto my understanding at this moment of what the Bible says. I mean, let's face it. There have been all kinds of things that Christians have believed that the Bible teaches that have been proven wrong, but it took general revelation to push us to the point that we could begin to see that we had mishandled the Bible. Can you think of an example of such a thing as that?

Student: The earth being flat would be one.

Dr. Pratt: Alright, the earth being flat is the obvious one, right?

Student: Or a geocentric system.

Dr. Pratt: A geocentric system? Exactly. It was obvious it seemed early on that the earth was flat, and anytime you read the Bible with that in mind, it looks like the Bible is affirming that. Now, how do you know that the earth is not flat?

Student: We've gone to space.

Dr. Pratt: Right, good. You can look at a picture of it now, right? I mean, it is so sure that you can take a photograph of the thing now. Just go up in a space shuttle and take a movie. It's not that hard. So our tendency then is not to throw the Bible out because of that, but to let general revelation with its weightiness, in this case, help us reinterpret the Bible. And so we say things like, well, the Bible's not trying to give a scientific description of the world. It's describing the world as it appeared to them. Okay? We call that a phenomenological understanding of the world and expression of the world. Alright, so that's good. Now a lot of Christians would tell us these days

that we should do the same thing with evolution, that everybody comes from the same species — the origin of the species, that we all come from one living thing. What would you say about that? Is that different from what we find in the roundness of the earth?

Student: Well, as our interpretation now stands as we hold the Scripture, I do think there would be a difference there.

Dr. Pratt: Why? What would be the difference?

Student: Well, God creates species, generally speaking, separately unto themselves. So as far as a common origin, that could be negated.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. And do you have a photograph of the common origin?

Student: I do not.

Dr. Pratt: Do we have a video of the origins of the world and how the different species developed? We don't. Okay? It's still very theoretical, and for this reason, rather weak. You see what I'm saying? Even if one day it were proven to be true, at this stage it is not proven to be true. Not like the roundness of the earth. If you were a more liberal Christian what you would say is, well, I don't need much evidence from general revelation. I've got enough, so now I'm going to reinterpret the Bible. But as a more conservative Christian what you say is, "Uh-uh, I have to have a lot of weight. There's a heavy burden of proof on the scientists to make me change what the church has always believed the Bible has said." And so we have to wait for that. Now I personally don't believe in theistic evolution, I don't believe in a common origin of the species. I can understand why some true believers could, but I think there's a heavy burden of proof on their side, that this is not an obvious thing, not like the roundness of the earth. And there's the difference, see. The weight of evidence has to be very heavy when it comes to general revelation, influencing our interpretation of the Scriptures.

Question 6:
Do we need the Holy Spirit to help us understand even simple truths?

Student: According to the video, you say we need the Holy Spirit in everything. I mean, do we need the Holy Spirit in things as simple as learning how to drive a car or even brushing my teeth?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it does kind of get silly, doesn't it, at some point. This is where my branch of the church is different from many others. I can just put it to you that way. I do believe that the Bible teaches that God is the source of all truth and that, because he is truth, that anything that is true in some sense comes from him, and that the

person of the Trinity who teaches the truth is Holy Spirit. That's why we gave that long quote in the lesson from Calvin where Calvin said that for the common good the Holy Spirit actually teaches people things like mathematics and dialectic and chemistry and science and psychology and all those kinds of things. The Holy Spirit works in common says — that means not saving ways, but common ways — in everybody every time they do anything that's good or even speak of things that are true. That's a fairly radical point of view. It has not been the common view among Christians of other branches of the church. For example, Thomas Aquinas believed that you did not really have to have the work of the Holy Spirit to have natural knowledge, knowledge of coffee cups, or knowledge of lights, or knowledge driving a car or brushing your teeth. That was just something that sort of happened on its own, but to have religious truth or to understand higher religious truths, you had to have illumination from the Holy Spirit.

Well this is a little different view. The different view is that our minds are so corrupted, that if God did not show mercy to us in our sinful state that we would not be able to understand anything correctly. And so it is what we call common grace or the common operations of the Spirit of God that illuminates even unbelievers so that when unbelievers say it's 4 o'clock in the afternoon and it's 4 o'clock in the afternoon, this is a gift from God to them. Or when an unbeliever says murder is wrong, this is a gift from the Holy Spirit to them. Now it comes directly and indirectly sometimes, sometimes extraordinarily, sometimes not so extraordinarily. But nevertheless, it's a gift from God the Holy Spirit. The reason for saying this is so important is this: we don't have to run from those gifts ourselves. When Holy Spirit teaches a scientist something that's true, then we can embrace that truth because it has actually come from God and not from the pagan scientist. The pagan scientist has just been the instrument through which God has worked. Most of us did not learn two times two is four from a Christian person or from a solely Christian source. We learned it usually from someone maybe whose religious commitments are very questionable, or maybe they're even anti-Christian. But non-Christians can teach two times two equals four. Why? Common grace, common operations of Holy Spirit. And in some ways that enlivens the universe around us so that we don't think of the natural world as sort of a dead and material world and then we take our Christian faith and make that the supernatural world where God is at work, but everything, from the bottom up, is all work of Holy Spirit and sin, so that sin either corrupts or Holy Spirit restrains corruption and brings life out of the dead. I like that point of view. It's really very helpful.

Question 7:
Does the Holy Spirit really work in unbelievers?

Student: Richard, when you say the Holy Spirit doing the work in nonbelievers, when we think of what the Bible says of the Holy Spirit being a gift, to some extent, to the church, then we also embrace the idea that people in the image of God have

the capacity to create, to find out things. So how do you resolve that tension as far as it's a Holy Spirit operation versus just a common grace? Like it's part of they still have the image of God.

Dr. Pratt: Right. What it does is basically it's a sort of personalizing. It's putting God involved in the process in a personal way. Once the image of God was corrupted by sin, all the capacities were not lost, but all the capacities were corrupted by sin. And then it takes God's personal attention through Holy Spirit to enable sinful images of God to do the right thing, to be creative, to do all the sorts of things you're saying in holy ways. So to whatever extent we see non-Christians doing what old theologians used to call "civic good," where they restrained sin, where they agree that stealing is wrong, where they agree murder is wrong, they agree that you should not be an axe murderer or something like that. That's the common operation of Holy Spirit rather than just a natural factor that comes out of their lives. It is re-personalizing, it's bringing God back into the picture. In fact, you know, one of the things that I think theological students often face is the fact that some of the best work, some of the best tools they have available to them for studying the Bible — even the Bible — don't come from Christians. You know, when you look at a Greek or a Hebrew lexicon, when you look at a dictionary to understand what the meanings of words are in the original languages, those lexicons were not written by evangelical Christians. Evangelical Christians don't know enough about those things to write such books. They don't devote themselves to those kinds of things. It's usually people that are even anti-Christian that are doing that. And yet we can use that because we see this as the sort of overflow of the gifts of Holy Spirit to the world.

The difference between the Holy Spirit's presence with the church, with the body of Christ and his common operations of the world has to do usually, when we think about this, in terms of salvation. The Holy Spirit is at work in the world restraining sin but not saving people apart from Christ. Now when he's given to us in large measure, and that's the way the Bible talks about it — pouring out, coming upon — it's quantitative. That's the way the Bible describes it. I don't like that because I don't know what exactly that means to say you get more of the Holy Spirit, but it's what the Bible does. The church is given more of Holy Spirit, and his work in the church is a saving work. He sanctifies us in saving ways. But you know that the Bible talks about people that are not believers being sanctified, too, like the children of unbelievers in 1 Corinthians 7:14. They're said to be holy. Now that doesn't mean they're saved. It just means they're set apart. And we also know that even the unbelieving spouse of a believer is sanctified. Well, how does sanctification take place? It's Holy Spirit work, non-saving but nevertheless Holy Spirit work. And so you can imagine what's true in the nuclear family, the children, the unbelieving spouse, to a lesser degree is true of people who live in a culture that has lots of Christians in it. They're also sanctified to some degree, and it sort of drips out and moves out, less and less and less I would suppose, as you move away from the influence of the Christian church, but nevertheless it's there.

So why is it then that we find so many good gifts like books and those sorts of things that help us in Bible study in cultures that were influenced by Christianity? Well, that's where the Bible is. You don't usually find biblical scholars writings lexicons in Greek and Hebrew from Hindu culture, right? So they're not going to be such a help to us, they're not going to so useful to us. But if you find someone in the Jewish community writing a commentary on the Old Testament, let's say, that could be very helpful to us. And if it's a Christian who may be liberal — you have to be careful with this — but a very liberal Christian then they also can be helpful to us because, again, these are degrees of the Holy Spirit's non-saving, non-salvific work out there in the world.

So it is important I think for us to sort of re-personalize the process of knowing. Knowing is not something that just simply happens naturally. It's not a mechanical sort of thing that happens. It's a personal work of God. And this is one of the wonderful things I think about Protestantism as a whole and that is that we look at the presence of God in the world as a dynamic force, that his Holy Spirit, and the angels in this world are actually doing things in the world and that we don't have to become like modern people where we think of God as very distant and now the world just sort of works on its own. That's deism, not Christianity. And even in the realm of epistemology, even in the realm of knowing, Holy Spirit is at work in the neural synapses that take place, the neuron paths of your brain, and he's shaping them, he's moving them, he's causing those charges and those chemicals to react in certain ways. And he does that according to his pleasure both in Christians and in non-Christians. That's why I think it's really important to understand that work of Holy Spirit both in the church and outside.

Question 8:
How do we come into personal contact with the Holy Spirit?

Student: Richard, how do we come into personal contact with the Holy Spirit so that we can actually understand the revelation?

Dr. Pratt: Wow, that's a big one, because there are some groups that do very well at this and some groups that don't. Let's just face it. I think that what I'm saying in the video is that understanding both general revelation and special revelation involves Holy Spirit. So what you want to do is learn how to depend more on him and how to have him lead you more faithfully and more thoroughly. That's really the goal. So it's not a matter just of thinking harder about things, or being more careful about things. There's a real sense in which when people begin to take the study of theology and the Bible seriously, when they become committed to the more academic approach, then they begin to substitute what was once a very dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit, they begin to push that out and substitute for that hard academic work. And there's a problem. I mean, when people first become Christians, generally speaking they don't know much about the Bible, they don't know much about theology, and

they just sort of listen and they may read a book or two, but every step along the way they're finding the Holy Spirit ministering to them and teaching them, and they feel this emotionally, and they are very conscious of it. But it isn't long before you start doing formal training in theology that the Holy Spirit becomes a sideline. And then if you're in a school or if you're in a learning community, they are constantly telling you now don't forget God, don't forget the Holy Spirit, don't forget your devotional life and things like that, but then they never give you time for it. And they never help you develop that.

It's really funny to me, actually very sad to me, that in a typical seminary, a typical Protestant Bible school, you are calling people to become ministers of the Word, and sometimes we'll even say the Word and Sacraments. Sometimes we'll even quote the Bible and say ministers of prayer and the Word from Acts 6. But it's very strange, isn't it, that if a school is devoting itself to that, that the school would not have a required class — not one required class — on prayer. Not one. I don't know of a single seminary in my whole country that has a required class on prayer. Now they'll have chapel that's usually optional once or twice a week. They may have a little class that talks about personal devotions, maybe. But not a class that teaches people how to be prayer people and that actually leads them into maturing their prayer lives. I'm convinced that's the missing piece in theological education, that we don't alongside of developing the skills that are necessary like the hard thinking, the intellectual skills, the academic skills, we don't also develop the ways in which the Bible teaches us to be sensitive to the moving and leading of Holy Spirit.

The fact is you don't find people in the Bible who are the godly men and women of the Bible saying things like, "Well I read it in this book and anybody that's logical can see that they ought to be thinking this way." That's not what they do. What they do is, "The Holy Spirit is showing us." Now they'll often quote the Bible in the middle of that because the Holy Spirit is showing them this through the Bible. But for us it's very depersonalized; it's all a matter of, here, we've got the book. Now if you want a religion that's just of a book and hard thinking, you've got the wrong one. You should become a Muslim because that's what that's all about. We've got the book that tells us everything we need to know, and anybody that just thinks hard about it can get it; anybody that's rational about the Qur'an can then get it. Well, that is not Christianity. Christianity is, we've got the book, but Jesus also said, we've got the teacher, and it's not him. Okay? The teacher is the Holy Spirit whom he gave to us when he ascended into heaven. And yet we will take the Holy Spirit and push him over here and act as if our religion is like Islam — just a book religion. And that's detrimental to say the very least.

The way the apostle Paul described it was you have to keep in step with the Spirit, you have to follow the Spirit, you have to lean on the Spirit, you have to be filled with Holy Spirit, and when you do those kinds of things then the fruit of Holy Spirit becomes a part of your life. It's fascinating to me when you look at the qualifications for church leaders in say Thessalonians and Timothy that there's hardly anything about how much they've learned, how may Greek verbs they can parse, or how many

Hebrew verbs they can parse. There's nothing about that kind of thing. It does say "apt to teach," and then we take that and turn it into this highfaluting academic thing. Instead, the qualifications for being a church leader are by and large personality issues: you can't be pugnacious, you don't like to fight and argue, you're temperate in all things. These are characteristics, and many of them are emotional characteristics. And yet those are the things that we ignore the most, the work of Holy Spirit on our character. And so I think it's time for us to begin to learn and even begin to seek how to follow the leading of Holy Spirit.

We mentioned that earlier when we started talking about how Holy Spirit will give us anticipations of things, or premonitions and intuitions about things, and convictions in our hearts and things like that. What we tend to do is say I can't trust those things; I can't trust those, those are like my feelings, and feelings would be very bad things to trust — as if your reasoning is better than your feelings and that somehow you think better than you feel. Well, that's certainly not the case if you believe that reasoning is also affected by sin. So what we want are Holy-Spirit-influenced reasoning and Holy-Spirit-influenced feelings and premonitions and leadings and convictions. And so bottom line is we have to become people of prayer. We cannot ignore spending long seasons of prayer. I don't mean five minutes, ten minutes. I mean long seasons in prayer and fasting as leaders of the church, and humbling ourselves before God, finding our way to solitude where we back away from other people and we get alone with God. Think about Jesus, how he did it. At the beginning of his ministry what did he do?

Student: He went off into the desert.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, he went off in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights.

Student: Lead by the Spirit.

Dr. Pratt: That's the way he began his ministry, led by the Spirit into the desert. Now how do we usually begin our ministries now? We don't spend 40 days in the wilderness, we send out 40 resumes, and prepare 40 sermons. You know, that's what it means to be a minister now, to get ready for ministry now. Not spending time alone with God. And I'll tell you, if you were to spend 40 days and 40 nights not eating, only drinking water, you would begin to hear to the Lord speak. Funny things happen when people fast. Funny things happen when people are alone and actually seeking the face of God. You would know the leading of Holy Spirit in a situation like that. And so if your life or the lives of anyone else, if it's dry and it feels as if Holy Spirit is not personally involved in this, it's not because he is far away. It's because we have pulled ourselves away. You can quench Holy Spirit. It can be done. Obviously. Paul told the Thessalonians not to do this — quoting from the Old Testament, by the way — of quenching the Holy Spirit. And we need to be the kinds of the people that don't quench the Spirit, but rather are seeking the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He is what's so special to us now. He's the one. It's his personal ministry, but haven't you noticed that the more academic you become in your Christian theology, the more your Trinity

becomes just two persons — God the Father and God the Son? And then we will in our seminaries put up sealed windows that you can't open. We'll even put shutters on the windows to make sure that the Holy Spirit doesn't sneak in. What would the Holy Spirit do if he sneaked in to a normal seminary? He'd mess things up, wouldn't he?

Student: Yeah. It's fascinating in the sense like, in Reformed theology, one of the first things to go is prayer, born out of sovereignty God — a growing epidemic among reformed students you can tell.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. When people buy into certain branches of the church, certain theologies, they end up pushing aside the Holy Spirit. Well somehow we have got to get Holy Spirit back in here in a very dynamic and real and wonderful way so that God doesn't die on us. Jesus isn't here. Jesus is in heaven. The Father is not here. He has given us Holy Spirit. That is the person of the Trinity who fills us and leads us and moves us, and that's where we find our life.

Question 9:
Why is truth analog rather than binary?

Student: Richard, what does it mean that truth is not binary; it's analog? Could you explain?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. I tried. It's not an easy concept, but I think it's an important one. So let me see if I can fill it out a little bit. When you think about truth, normally the way we have thought in the past is we've thought as if you have just two options; either something is true or it's false, plain and simple. That's the way we live most of our lives. We live in terms of that's right and that's wrong; the light is on, the light is off; the car is running or the car is not running; I'm breathing, I'm not breathing; I'm alive, I'm not alive. Okay? It's sort of the way we talk about life. We talk about it in binary terms. In fact we live now in the digital age, and so we even get this very strong impression because a CD, a digital CD, has better sound quality than an old tape, which was analog where things were put out in streams rather than in bits and pieces. We think somehow that binary, or digital, is probably closer to reality. The same is true with digital TV now because everything in the world is going to digital TV and has a better picture than the binary or the digital. On, off, on, off — that's got to be the way life really is. But as strange as it sounds, the so-called digital is what's artificial. And in fact, a CD that you get is really not a digital binary unit. It's actually just clusters of analog units. Everything in life is really more like that old sine wave that you see on the computer sometimes or on the screen at the hospital. That's what life is. It's not that. It's just not the case. In fact you can tell that by… Watch this. When I do that — that (points finger in rapid horizontal succession) you can see what's happening here, that what looks like I'm going one–two–three–four is actually one and then a fast movement to two, and then from two a fast movement to three. And that's the way it is even with a light switch. When you flip a light on, it doesn't

happen instantaneously. It's just faster than your eyes can see. It's actually moving up slowly and the current starts to flow through very slowly and up into the light.

So when we think of things in ordinary life as binary, we're in many ways sort of summarizing or simplifying much more complicated realities. Okay, well that kind of thing is true in theology. There's nothing wrong with talking, "This is true and this is false." There's nothing wrong with that so long as you are satisfied with the level of precision at that moment. For example, if I were to say to you, "The Bible is the Word of God," is that true or false?

Students: True.

Dr. Pratt: True, right? Practically anyone that would walk in here and say the Bible is the Word of God, we'd say, "that's good, that's true." But suppose I had a Muslim come in here and say, "The Bible is the Word of God," what would be your reaction?

Student: Hmm.

Dr. Pratt: At least a "hmm," right? You would have to start asking what exactly do you mean by that, okay? Or suppose we had a Mormon come in here and say, "I believe the Bible is the Word of God." You'd still go, "I'm not really sure we're saying the same thing." Right? Because Mormons will tell you that the original Bible was the Word of God, but what we have now is corrupted so it's no longer the Word of God. Even the old King James is corrupted and therefore not the Word of God, because that's the way they get out of the Book of Mormon contradicting the Bible. They say, what looks like a contradiction wasn't really there to begin with. So at the level of our conversation, the level of precision that we are assuming in our conversion of just the three of us, it's fine just simply to say the Bible's the Word of God. We agree. But when someone steps in that doesn't share our common assumptions, we have to start refining it a little bit. Well what exactly makes the Bible the Word of God? In what sense is that true? Is your understanding of that true? Therefore, is that statement you're making true? And what we discover then is that the more refinement we bring, the more precision we bring to practically any issue, what appeared to be at first a simple yes/no has fuzzy edges on it, because then you have to start asking questions like, "What exactly do you mean by that?" Let's just take this other example. The simplest Christian confession in the whole Bible is "Jesus is Lord." Is that a true statement or not?

Students: It's true.

Dr. Pratt: As far as we're concerned it is, right?

Students: Right.

Dr. Pratt: Okay, no problem. If somebody said, "Jesus is not Lord," then we would say that was a lie. But suppose we were talking to a group of people that use the word

"lord" — like say in the case of Mongolia — the word "Buddha," which is the way they have translated "lord." There is controversy right now in Mongolia over whether or not Jesus is the Buddha, the lord. And so you will find some Christians making this statement in Mongolia: "Jesus is Lord — Jesus is Buddha." And then other Christians who will say, "Jesus is not Buddha." All of a sudden we've got to crank up the refinement a little bit, right? We've got to zoom in a little bit and start asking, "What does that mean?"

And that's the way it is. There are truths out there, but our descriptions of them, and our understandings of them are always a little bit off, always a little bit off. Take that thing again: Jesus is Lord. Okay? Now let me ask you this question. You understood that probably five years ago, if you were a Christian five years ago, you would have said that Jesus is Lord. Of course he is. He's the Lord. The Bible says so. But now let me ask you this. It's been five years. Has your understanding of that statement changed?

Student: Absolutely, as far as the depth and the breadth of what all that means.

Dr. Pratt: Would you agree?

Student: Yeah, intensified.

Dr. Pratt: Yours has, too? Alright, so when was your understanding of that statement "Jesus is Lord," when was it true? Five years ago? Or today?

Student: Both.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. Uh huh and everywhere between. That's right. So not just the statement but even your understanding of it, right? It's always been true, but it's changed. How is that possible? Well, it's because we hope to understand it better, and in five years from now, unless you're dead, I hope you're going to understand it better. In fact, if you are dead you will understand it tremendously better, okay? So the idea here is that the truth that Jesus is the Lord, whatever that means, is a true statement; it has truth-value as God understand it. God understands that in a binary way. He knows exactly the full content of that statement and all that it means, and he has sharp edges in his understanding of it, because he understands everything. There's no mixture of error, there's no qualifications he needs to make because he knows all qualifications immediately. He knows them all comprehensively. But we don't. So five years ago you believed Jesus is Lord, and that was good enough at that time. But as things move on, as you've gone to school and you've matured as a Christian, what you believed five years ago isn't good enough anymore. Jesus is Lord now means something more than that. You may have even had to get rid of some ideas and then, five years from now, the same sort of thing.

And that's the way it is with theological statements we make. Our statements are descriptions of a truth, and they're either true enough to be counted as true at this

moment, or they're so far away from the truth, or they're false enough to be counted as false today. So we have to always think in terms of improving our understanding, and that's what the analog approach says, that every statement we make can be taken as true or false in shorthand, but always remember that even the best truths that we know, even the best doctrines that we know, even the best formulations of what the Bible says have to be refined and have to be improved. The Bible itself can't be improved upon. It is the truth of God revealed to us, but our understanding of it can. And theology, remember, is not the Bible. Theology is our understanding of the Bible with the work of Holy Spirit and the negative influence of sin. So rather than always talking in terms of, this is the right way to say it, this is the wrong way to say it, we need to start asking questions often more like: Is this the best way to say it? Is there a better way to do it? Is there a better way to think through this? Can you imagine what difference that might make in the relationships among Christians? What difference would it make? I mean, when we talk binary, "This is true and what you're saying is false," we draw the lines, some very big walls between us, right? But suppose you were to think more analog. What would that do to the relationships among us?

Student: Probably a little more unity in the church as far as the doctrinal lines not being so hard in the sand.

Dr. Pratt: That right. Let's take an example of that. Suppose someone comes up to you and says, "Jesus has promised to make his people prosperous." Okay? Now, what do you want to say about that? Do you want to say that's false or true?

Student: It depends on how you define prosperous for one.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly. That's the deal, you see. You're going to have to say to that person, "Well, let's see a little more, let's talk a little more, because I can agree with that statement, but we need to think through exactly what we mean. Is my understanding of that true enough to be counted as true? Is your understanding of that true enough to be counted as true?" Often what happens then in that kind of conversation is we start comparing and we start mixing our understandings together and sort of morphing together, and so a unity can develop that we could not have gotten before, because if someone had walked into the room before this conversation and said Jesus promised to make his people prosperous, we'd have said, "You liar." That's a falsehood. That's from the Devil." Well you don't know if it's from the Devil until you find out what the person means. And then often finding out what he or she means helps you then ask the question, well, would I want to say Jesus promises not to make his people prosperous? Because that's your option. In a binary system your option is Jesus promises to make us prosperous or Jesus does not promise to make us prosperous. But the truth is somewhere in between, and that's the analog quality. So the hope is that by having this attitude it will create some humility in us that even our very best — our very best — doctrinal formulations can be refined, and the worst ones can be refined even more. And I think we need a dose of that in Christian theology.

Student: Richard, but at some level on that analog scale, there has to be some bit of binary in there, correct?

Dr. Pratt: There is, and who decides that?

Student: You tell me.

Dr. Pratt: Uh huh. You see, there's the problem. There's the problem. We all know that somewhere you're going to have to, for practical purposes, sort of draw the line. But as you get closer to that line you're going to say, "Well, I really can't fellowship with you as a member of my church — for example — on this, but I'm not going to say you're not a Christian" or "I don't want that taught in my pulpit, but I'm not going to say that you can't teach it in your pulpit." You see, then, it starts becoming a matter of liberty of conscience. When you get close to that line, you start respecting each other's points of view and you just say, "I just don't agree with the way they put it in that detail, but he's my brother, she's my sister, and I can live with that, and we just have to go our separate ways." And that's often the way Christians have to handle those sorts of things.

Student: Do you think our posture of handling those differences is where we can resolve that tension as far as proposing a somewhat relative "the truth" in the sense of there are going to be degrees, we're going to have to try to get to it but literally our demeanor is going to be what should define us in the moment?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. Because you know the reality is the only way to keep the Bible as our absolute authority, unquestionable, always holding it as sola scriptura — the final ultimate standard — the only way to hold that is our ultimate standard is never to allow our theology to reach that level. Even our best interpretations of the Bible don't reach the level of being unquestionable. It's the only way you can keep the Bible above it. Because is even just one thing you believe equals, utterly equals, the Bible, then you're no longer believing in sola scriptura.

Question 10:
How does the Holy Spirit give us confidence in our theological conclusions?

Student: Richard, can you talk more about how the Holy Spirit through extraordinary and ordinary ways helps us to have confidence in our interpretation of Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: That's where we come to, isn't it. If you can accept that analog model for theology and for theological truths, that it's true enough to be counted as true but false enough to be counted as false, sometimes that makes people go, "Well, then I can't be sure about anything. I can't have confidence in anything I believe anymore."

Because it gets fuzzy, and it gets all clouded up with it's my interpretation not the Bible, and those kinds of things. And so how do we get confidence or get conviction that what we believe is true? I mention that I think that the Holy Spirit does this in one of two ways — and you can even put those on an analog scale — of extraordinary and ordinary, and you can write it down a little bit extraordinary, a little more, a little less, a little less, a little less on a little scale there.

But let's just take it as two. By extraordinary means I mean things like when the Holy Spirit just gives you a conviction and you just cannot let go of it. We all have those kinds of experiences where you're in the middle maybe of even an argument and you just feel that something is wrong, and you have this conviction that you're going to have to stand on this. And if somebody stopped you at that moment, you might not even be able to articulate why you think it's wrong. You just know it is. And that is one of the great gifts that Holy Spirit gives us that sometimes he just reaches into our hearts and clamps our conscience in his hand and holds onto it, and we're not even able to reason our way through it, or think our way through it, or find any support anywhere other than I just know this is wrong, or I know this is right. And unfortunately, that's often the case when people haven't studied the Bible very much.

I can remember my grandmother who didn't study the Bible very much, had all kinds of very strong convictions, and she knew that it was right, and she knew that it was wrong. So sometimes we can overboard on that, because some of the things she had strong convictions about I wouldn't agree with anymore. But as a child hearing her, I was often impressed by the fact that she had these strong convictions from God that this was the right way, and I had to listen to that. In fact, I can even remember that when I took my first job as a seminary professor I was sitting down with a very old professor at the seminary and he looked at me and he said, "Richard, I want you to know something." "What's that? " He said, "The Holy Spirit is calling you to come here." I didn't want to go there. It was in a part of this country I didn't want to go to. I said to him, "How often have you said that to people?" He said, "I've never said that before to anyone." "So why then did you say it to me?" He said, "Because I feel like this is really what God wants me to say to you, 'You must come here.'" And I said, "Well, because you don't do that every day, I'll listen." He didn't have any good reasons. He wasn't trying to argue me to come. This was a conviction, an extraordinary conviction he had. And that is fine, and that's good, and often we have to have those, especially on spur-of-the-moment decisions or things where you evaluate it and you end up with six of one and half a dozen of the other, you need the Holy Spirit to do something extraordinary. That's part of what I was saying earlier about the leading of Holy Spirit that comes through prayer and fasting and those kinds of things.

But there are also ordinary ways that Holy Spirit does things. And there are different ways you could describe it. Now in this lesson, and throughout this whole series in fact, we're going to be talking about the ordinary means that God uses to increase our level of conviction or lower our level of conviction on the things that we believe. Through the history of the church it's been very obvious that there are certain things

that have a strength in this, that God uses, and I summarize them in three ways. You could do it any number of ways if you wanted to, but the first on is the interpretation of the Bible, or the exegesis of Scripture. In other words, if you want to know what God's will is, if you want to know what the truth is, where do you go? To the Bible. And you work hard at understanding what the Bible says. So that's one of those resources. As your learning of the Bible affirms what your conviction is, and as you learn more of the Bible and it keeps affirming of it, then what would happen to your level of conviction? Up it goes, right? So that's a very important one.

But there's a second one as well and it's what I call interaction in community. The Bible itself talks about the importance of this, of consulting with leaders, consulting with elders, submitting yourself to elders, being in community with each other, learning from the fact that Holy Spirit is at work in the body of Christ. That would include church history. It would include the current church that you're a part of, those kinds of things. So interaction in community is another major part of what helps us get confidence in the things we believe. So for instance, you're reading the Bible and you think the Bible teaches you something. And then you start looking at what Christians have believed over the last two thousand years and you find out that almost every single Christian has believed that, too. What does that do to your confidence?

Student: Pretty strong.

Dr. Pratt: It raises it up again, right? This is why we love, for example, the Apostles Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Well, you find that in the Bible, but you also find that almost every Christian in the world forever has been saying that. Okay? So if you ever doubt if God the Father made heaven and earth, well, you shouldn't, because there is so much harmony between the exegesis of Scripture and interaction in community, so your confidence level goes up.

But then there's a third one, and that's what I call Christian living. And that has to do with the personal ministry of you walking with God, you and your life with God, experimenting with life, living life, trusting him, and failing him, those kinds of things, your prayer life, your worship life, your individual Christian life before God. Well, suppose you read something from the Bible, you believe it's there, and you find that every Christian has always believed this, and then as you're living your life you experience that God is your Father; You feel his tender care in your life, you see it all around you every day of your life, there's another way God has been like a father to me — there he is again, like a father to me! Now what's that going to do? You've got it coming from the Bible, you've got it coming from church history, the interaction in community, and you've got it coming from your own life. So now what happens to your confidence? It's out the roof! Right? Okay. That's what you want. That's the good scenario. It's when all three of these ordinary resources that Holy Spirit uses affirm each other. But do they always affirm each other?

Student: They do not.

Dr. Pratt: They do not. Sometimes these things are at odds with each other, right? Your understanding of the Bible is sometimes at odds with what the church has said. And sometimes what the church has said is at odds with your Christian living. And sometimes your Christian living is at odds with the Bible. And in fact, most theological issues are like that, and it's unfortunate. The core of Christian faith, something like the Apostles Creed — which is sort of what we have said in these lessons is the core of the Christian faith — that's affirmed very strongly by all three. But the reality is that most things other than that; there's a little bit of tension here. And so you might be reading the Bible and come up with this very strong conviction that a certain particular doctrine is true, but suppose then you start reading about the history of the church and you find out that nobody has every believed it before. What should that do to your confidence that you've understood the Bible correctly?

Student: Put the brakes on it.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it should start dropping it down, right? And that's where that cone of certainty thing comes in. You move up toward the top and you're more certain, and then things start dropping down, you're less certain. And when the church of Jesus Christ for two thousand years hasn't believed something and you've stumbled on it, and now you know it; when you realize the church has never said it, it doesn't mean it's false. It just means you'd better back off a little bit. Sometimes, in fact, when your own Christian experience is at odds with what you think the Bible teaches, sometimes that experience will be so strong that it will make you reconsider your understanding of the Bible. That's just parts of general revelation — interaction in community, Christian living — interacting with your understanding of special revelation — the Bible. That's all it is, just special aspects of it.

And so, when I talk about the ordinary ways that Holy Spirit works in our lives giving us stronger convictions and weaker convictions, that's what we want to do. We want to understand how these various resources that God has given us work together to help us either get stronger convictions or lesser convictions, weaker convictions. Have you ever known a Christian that every single thing he believes he believes just as strongly as he believes everything else?

Student: I've met plenty of them.

Dr. Pratt: I know people that believe in the resurrection of Christ, and they believe that firmly. And they also know with just as much firmness how long a woman's skirt needs to be. Okay? It can't be but this long, and they know exactly where that is. Well see, that person is unable to differentiate between levels of conviction. I know people that believe that Jesus is the Lord and who are just as dogmatic about their views on the millennium. Well, there's another example, see? I mean, we ought to be able to look at the history of the church and know that Christians have disagreed over the millennium for millennia. And for this reason we ought to drop the level down because very conservative or even fundamentalist Christians tend to take everything in the Christian faith and sort of flatten the cone of certainty up. They want to put

everything in the top echelon, you see, so that if everything is not sacred, if everything is not right up at the very top, well then they don't believe they can believe it all. So when they get a crack in that system, what happens? Often it collapses. And this is one reason why people who grew up in fundamentalist churches often reject the faith when they find out just one thing that their fundamentalist background said was not true.

Well, liberal Christians tend to flatten the cone of certainty, too, but they flatten it down. They tend to say you can't be sure about anything, so just kind of live and let live. Well, what I'm saying is no, we don't want that. What we want is different degrees of certainty, different levels of conviction that come, sometimes extraordinarily by the Holy Spirit, unexpectedly, without even any good reason, but then usually through the interaction of exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and personal Christian living. And as these work together in dynamic tension with each other, they help us adjudicate where to put our different beliefs. And that's what I mean when I say that the Holy Spirit can give us different levels of conviction.

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Building Your Theology

Lesson 4

Authority in Theology

Manuscript

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Authority in Theology

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how much of our lives we spend following authorities? I know it sounds strange to say this in the modern world, but it's true. When a car breaks down, we look for someone who knows a lot about cars. When we become sick, we look for an authority in medicine. We may not agree with everything these experts say, but we don't try to handle these and other complicated matters on our own. In nearly every area of life, if we are wise, we find the right authorities and listen carefully to what they have to say.

Something like this should be true in Christian theology as well. All too often, well-meaning Christians think that learning and living theology is such a personal matter that we don't need the help of authorities. After all, we have the Bible and we have a personal relationship with God. Isn't that enough? But as we'll see in this lesson, God has ordained a number of authorities to help us as we build our theology.

This fourth lesson in our series *Building Your Theology* is entitled "Authority in Theology." We'll be exploring some of the central issues involved in discovering and following authority as we build our theology.

We'll focus our attention on the ways Christians have handled authority in theology in three different periods of church history. First, we'll summarize the outlooks on theological authority in medieval Roman Catholicism. Second, we'll examine the approach to theological authority in early Protestantism. And third, we'll explore how we should deal with these matters in contemporary Protestantism. Let's begin by looking at the medieval Roman Catholic view on authority in Christian theology.

MEDIEVAL ROMAN CATHOLICISM

We said in an earlier lesson that this series is oriented toward evangelical Protestant theology. To understand how Protestant branches of the church view authority in theology, it's important to see how these traditions stem from the Protestant Reformation. Now, the Protestant Reformation took place for many reasons, but one of the chief causes was a dispute over the views on religious authority found in medieval Roman Catholicism. These outlooks and practices formed a crucial backdrop to Protestant views on authority in theology.

As we explore medieval Roman Catholicism, we'll touch on two topics: first, the authority of Scripture in the medieval church; and second, the resulting outlook on the authority of the church. Let's look first at the authority of Scripture in the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Even prior to the Reformation, different individuals and orders within the church handled the Scriptures in different ways. But it's fair to say that the vast majority of medieval theologians believed in the authority of Scripture, at least in theory. In practice, however, the medieval church took a posture toward the Bible that made it nearly impossible to act on this commitment to the authority of Scripture.

As we investigate the medieval church's problem as to the authority of Scripture, we'll touch on three matters. First, we'll consider the extreme view of biblical inspiration during the medieval period. Second, we'll look at the excessive views on the meaning of Scripture. And third, we'll examine exaggerated claims about the Bible's obscurity. Let's think first about the medieval outlook on the inspiration of Scripture.

Inspiration

By and large, medieval Catholic theologians affirmed both that the Bible was fully inspired by God and that it came through human instruments. Unfortunately, however, during this period of church history, many theologians went to extremes in the way they understood inspiration. They emphasized Scripture's divine origins to the neglect of Scripture's human and historical origins.

The medieval overemphasis on the divine origins of the Bible came about for a number of reasons. For one, medieval theologians depended heavily on Greek philosophies — such as Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism — that guided the categories and priorities of Christian theology in many ways. These philosophies valued eternal realities much more than temporal and historical realities. So, Christian theologians learned to think that Scripture's historical and human origins were far less essential than its heavenly origins.

Beyond this, medieval biblical scholars were so uninformed about the ancient history of Bible times that they couldn't make much practical use of the Bible's historical backgrounds in their theology. Instead, they stressed what they *did* know — namely that the Bible contained timeless truths that the eternal God of heaven had revealed — and they largely downplayed other considerations.

Medieval theologians' view of biblical inspiration wasn't the only matter that discouraged employing the full authority of Scripture. The medieval church's stress on the divine origins of the Bible also led to an unfortunate belief about the meaning of Scripture.

Meaning

It was widely assumed that, due to Scripture's celestial origins, the Bible didn't convey meaning in the same way that other books did. Rather, because God inspired it, Scripture *overflowed* with meanings. Many medieval theologians followed Augustine in believing that one proof of biblical inspiration was that texts of Scripture had manifold

meanings. Listen to the way Augustine put it in Book 3, chapter 27 of *On Christian Doctrine*:

> **When … two or more interpretations are put upon the same words of Scripture, even though the meaning the writer intended remain undiscovered, there is no danger … For what more liberal and more fruitful provision could God have made in regard to the Sacred Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several senses?**

In many ways, we can admire Augustine's high view of Scripture. The Bible is no ordinary book, and its extraordinary qualities point to its divine inspiration. We can also agree that many aspects of the Bible can be explained only in terms of God's supernatural supervision of its writing. But Augustine's outlook went much further than this. He believed that divine inspiration caused passages in the Bible to burst with multiple meanings. So, instead of concerning ourselves with what the Bible's human authors intended to convey, Augustine believed we should focus attention on the many meanings intended by God. For our purposes, we'll call Augustine's view, and related views, "classical polyvalence" — the belief that biblical texts have many levels of meaning or value because they come from God.

Perhaps the most widely known expression of classical polyvalence was the interpretive approach popularized by John Cassian, known as "the *Quadriga*." According to this approach, each biblical text should be viewed as having four distinct meanings. First, the literal sense was the plain or ordinary meaning of a text. Second, the allegorical sense interpreted texts as metaphors for doctrinal truth. Third, the tropological or moral sense produced ethical guidelines for Christian conduct. And fourth, the anagogical sense pointed to the future fulfillment of the divine promises in the eschaton, or in the last days.

The details of the *Quadriga* and other expressions of classical polyvalence are not important for our purposes — many writers have explained them elsewhere. We simply need to know that, by the time of the Reformation, most Catholic theologians believed that the meanings of biblical texts went far beyond the normal or ordinary meaning. And significantly, they tended to believe that these additional meanings were not rooted in the meaning the biblical authors intended to convey. In fact, the literal or plain sense of a passage was often considered too elementary for serious theological reflection. Instead, theologians were encouraged to value the deeper, hidden layers of meaning because they revealed the depths of God's mind to the church.

> **So this question of there being hidden meaning of the Scripture is a really interesting one because we have problems if we come down too hard on either side of that… One of them is it lends itself to valuing this deeper meaning over the Scripture on its face. And so, that can turn us away from what Scripture reveals directly, and lead us into, "Well, but what *else* does it mean?" … The deeper meaning is also very quickly a process by which we can elevate some of us within the church… We see it best in the medieval church where the clergy had become a fundamentally more important group of people. Scripture**

> **was to be kept from the commoners because the commoners could only see the superficial meaning. They didn't have the ability, the training, the skill to be able to see the deeper meaning. And if you go back and you look at medieval theology, it had gone a long way into these deep allegorical readings, and there were multiple meanings in every text, but most people couldn't get to the deep ones.**
>
> **— Dr. Tim Sansbury**

The medieval approaches to the inspiration and meaning of Scripture made it difficult to act on the authority of Scripture. And these approaches also led to an overemphasis on another characteristic of the Bible: its obscurity. The Bible came to be treated as a book that was remarkably unclear, except to those who had been given special supernatural insights.

Obscurity

It shouldn't surprise us that the content of the Bible would seem unclear to the average Christian prior to the Reformation. Literacy was low. Bibles were so scarce that hardly anyone had access to one. Moreover, Latin was the primary language of Scripture and theology, and for the most part, only the highly educated understood Latin well enough to make much use of it. So, it was rare indeed that people studied the Scriptures like we do today. The Bible was considered far too unavailable and obscure for the average Christian to rely directly on it in significant ways.

Not only were the Scriptures closed to the average Christian. They were also thought to be obscure even to those with the ability and opportunity to read the Bible. According to medieval theologians, God had placed multiple layers of meaning in the Scriptures that were hidden from plain view.

Imagine someone showing you a closed treasure box and asking you to describe what kinds of treasures were in the box. Of course, it would be impossible to know what was in the box because the treasures would be hidden. The same was true for the Bible in the medieval church.

By the time of the Reformation, belief in the obscurity of the Bible made it nearly impossible for the Bible to have much practical or real authority over the development of theology. In theory, the Bible remained God's inspired treasure box for Christian theology, but for all practical purposes, the Bible remained closed. It was so obscure that it was unable to guide theologians in their task.

> **In the medieval church, most believers affirmed that God's full intent in Scripture was known through a fourfold approach: the moral following the literal, the anagogical, and the allegorical. So the Reformers of the sixteenth century — called "Protestants" by most of us — objected to this, part in theory but especially because of what came out of that, which was a tradition of teaching that they felt was,**

> **in some cases, a corruption of Scripture, or it obscured the original intent or authorial intent of Scripture, in favor of church authority.**
>
> **— Dr. James D. Smith III**

With the medieval Roman Catholic view of the authority of Scripture in mind, we're ready to turn to our second consideration: the authority of ecclesiastical theology in the medieval church.

AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

The problems raised by the medieval doctrine of the inspiration, meaning and obscurity of Scripture led to a serious question. How could the Scriptures have any authority over believers when believers couldn't handle the Scriptures for themselves? The medieval church sought to deal with this problem by exalting ecclesiastical authorities as the interpreters of Scripture. As a result, church authority began to be treated as equal to the Bible.

To understand this special role for the authority of the church, we'll look in two directions. First, how did medieval theologians understand past ecclesiastical authorities? And second, how did they understand contemporary medieval church authorities? Let's look first at the authority of the church in the past.

Past Authorities

By the time of the Reformation, the Catholic Church had developed a rather elaborate approach to ecclesiastical authority from the past. Of course, the Scriptures themselves were considered part of the heritage of the church. Yet, as we've seen, by the medieval period, the teachings of the Scriptures themselves were thought to be so obscure that other sources of guidance were required. As a result, medieval theologians looked into the history of ecclesiastical theology to determine what they should believe. The vast majority of them saw the history of the church as the history of God leading and guiding his people in the ways of truth. For this reason, what the church taught in the past was of vital interest to medieval theologians in at least two ways.

On the one hand, much attention was given to the early church fathers. The writings of men like Polycarp, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Justin Martyr, and later fathers such as Augustine, Athanasius and Jerome, deeply influenced the beliefs of different orders in the church. Now, these fathers were not usually considered infallible, and different branches of the church tended to favor different streams of patristic tradition. Yet it was still assumed, for the most part, that God had given special insights to these great theologians of the past and that the church must give special attention to their teachings. Seldom did medieval theologians make theological assertions without some kind of support from the early fathers of the church.

On the other hand, the medieval church depended even more heavily on the ecumenical councils of the church, such as the Council of Nicea, the Council of Constantinople, and the Council of Chalcedon. The findings of these and other councils were taken very seriously. For all practical purposes, medieval theologians regarded these findings as unquestionable summations of the teaching of the Bible. To disagree with them was tantamount to disagreeing with the Scriptures and with Christ.

As the centuries passed, many teachings of the fathers and findings of the ecumenical councils developed into official ecclesiastical traditions. And as these traditions solidified, they helped to form the extensive dogma of the church. This ecclesiastical dogma was not thought to be a human, fallible theology, but theology that bore the same authority as the Scriptures. In fact, for all practical purposes, the dogma of the church *replaced* Scripture. Before the Reformation, faithful Christians were not expected to ask, "What does the Bible say?" but "What has the church said?"

As important as past ecclesiastical authorities were to understanding the authority of the medieval church, the doctrine of Scripture at that time also created a need for a high view of contemporary theological authorities.

Contemporary Authorities

To be sure, the church continued to affirm the authority of the Bible in theory. But the Bible itself was too obscure to guide the church in contemporary issues that had not been settled in the past. So, how was the church to find guidance in their current theological controversies? Put simply, medieval theologians believed that God had established a system of living authorities in the hierarchy of the church. And this hierarchy provided the body of Christ with unquestionable teaching. The authority to settle current controversies rested in the priests, the bishops, and the pope — who was thought by many to be the infallible head of the church. When a theological decision needed to be determined, believers were not encouraged to ask, "What does the Bible say?" Instead, they were encouraged to ask, "What does the hierarchy of the church say?"

> **In the medieval period, they were they were deeply concerned about the meaning of Scripture, but they were operating with a pre-critical hermeneutic. In other words, they were coming at the Bible with a basic conviction that church tradition *was* the teaching of the Bible. Now, it's kind of easy for us as twenty-first century Protestants to snicker at that, but we're not immune to that. There are plenty of our people who are running around who will say, the teaching of John Calvin is the teaching of Scripture, or John Wesley, or Martin Luther, or whoever. So, what is happening in the Middle Ages is they are doing an approach to interpreting Scripture that is grounded in the dynamic of the rule of faith. The question that medieval interpreters are asking is, "How is the faith handed down by the apostles emerging for us through the particulars of this passage?" … The problem that we have is that because of the way the early church saw tradition and the way that that sort of balloons in the medieval period and in the**

> **Byzantine tradition as well … the need, really, in the Reformation is to get back to a minimal construction of the rule of faith… The Reformers did not intend to get rid of the rule of faith in reading Scripture. They intended simply to get it back to its proper size. It had gotten kind of bloated.**
>
> **— Dr. Carey Vinzant**

If the only way to understand God's will is through ecclesiastical authorities, then there's no good reason for ordinary Christians to pay attention to the Bible at all. Thus, the official hierarchy of the church, not the Scriptures, became the infallible guide for contemporary theology.

With the views of medieval Roman Catholicism in mind, we're now in a position to appreciate the outlooks of early Protestantism. How did early Protestants understand biblical and ecclesiastical authority in theology?

EARLY PROTESTANTISM

Early Protestants — including those we often describe as pre-Reformation figures like Jan Hus, Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe and Girolamo Savonarola — saw many abuses committed by church authorities in their days. They addressed these abuses by reasserting the practical authority of Scripture over the church. They translated the Scriptures into the languages of the people. They published Bibles in large numbers. They promoted literacy so that people would be able to read the Scriptures. And they encouraged local pastors and the congregations that followed them to read the Scriptures for themselves. Protestants soon learned that these efforts would not solve every theological problem in the church. But following the example of Old and New Testament authors and Jesus himself, they rightly reaffirmed the authority of Scripture.

We'll look first at the early Protestant view of the authority of Scripture. Then we'll examine the Protestant view of the authority of the church. Let's consider first the Protestant outlooks on the authority of Scripture.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

As we've seen, the medieval Catholic outlook on the authority of Scripture was hindered by several extreme views. Early Protestant Reformers responded to these errors by recalibrating the doctrines of inspiration, meaning, and clarity of Scripture. Consider first the doctrine of inspiration.

Inspiration

From the outset we should say that, like medieval theologians, the Reformers understood that the Scriptures had both divine and human origins. On the one side, they

saw the Bible as a supernatural book from God. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin affirmed, in no uncertain terms, that the Scriptures had come to God's people through divine inspiration. They took very seriously the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 that says:

> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

As this passage teaches, the Scriptures are ultimately from God, and they are designed to provide God's people with fully-reliable special revelation.

> **The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is, in the broad sense, the Spirit guiding the human authors to write precisely what God wanted to communicate, in words. So, the theological term is "confluency," that is, you have both the human and yet the divine. And of course, that varies. Sometimes it's very obvious the divine. Other times the human seems very obvious… And yet, very exactly, God is using that human author, superintending that human author to write, in the words of the original manuscript, exactly what God wanted to communicate. And so, you have 2 Timothy 3:16, that God inspired, or that the word of God is "God-breathed," it's breathed out — "*theopneustos*"… In either sense this is what inspiration entails, this breadth of how it is done. And yet, it is authoritative; it is absolute; it is verbal. It is again this confluency, and it is without error. We can trust it in every way.**
>
> **— Dr. J. Scott Horrell**

The Reformers believed that God's hand protected the Scriptures from error. God supernaturally gave biblical writers information about the present, the past and the future, and he superintended their authorship so that everything they wrote was true. Most importantly, divine inspiration gave the Scriptures absolute, unquestionable authority.

But Protestant Reformers avoided the medieval church's mistakes by *also* acknowledging that Scripture's human authors made significant contributions to the content and meaning of the Bible. Rather than treating the Bible as if it had dropped down from heaven, early Protestants stressed that the Scriptures came through human instruments and historical processes. This concern with human authorship accords well with the way Jesus and biblical writers often approached the Bible. For example, in Matthew 22:41-44, we read this account:

> While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'?" (Matthew 22:41-44).

In this passage Jesus used Psalm 110:1 to confound the Pharisees by explicitly drawing attention to David, the human writer of this passage. Both Jesus and the Pharisees agreed that the Messiah would be David's descendant. But in first-century Palestine, David would not normally have called his descendant "Lord." So, Jesus asked the Pharisees to explain why David ascribed this title to his son.

Notice that Jesus' argument depended on the fact that Scripture's meaning relies partly on details in the lives of its human authors. Examples like this abound of biblical writers and characters referring to Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, Paul, and other human instruments of God's Word. These human instruments made significant personal contributions to the Scriptures.

From these and other examples, the Reformers rightly concluded that the Scriptures rose out of real human situations. And they were written by people for particular historical circumstances. If Christians were to understand the Scriptures properly, they must not only stress the divine origins of Scripture, but also their human, historical origins.

Early Protestants' view on the authority of Scripture gave weight to both the divine and human sides of biblical inspiration. And this outlook on inspiration significantly influenced the ways the Reformers conceived of the meaning of Scripture as well.

Meaning

We can summarize the early Protestant approach to the meaning of Scripture this way: Rather than following the model of medieval Roman Catholicism by searching for hidden divine meanings in the Bible, the Reformers sought to ground all of their interpretations in the literal sense of biblical texts. Put simply, they focused on the meaning the human writers intended to communicate to their original audiences.

Now, we should be aware that early Protestants didn't break with medieval approaches to the meaning of Scripture completely. At times, vestiges of classical polyvalence — the belief that the Scriptures have many levels of meaning — appeared in the writings of the Reformation. For example, Luther's commentary on the Psalms shows a continuing dependence on this method of interpretation. Still, it's fair to say that the Reformers consistently placed far greater emphasis on the human author's intended meaning than did most of their Catholic counterparts. And, for the most part, they grounded their many applications of scriptural passages in the original meaning of the text.

To understand the early Reformers' emphasis on the literal or plain meaning of biblical texts, it helps to recall some history. This hermeneutical, or interpretive, approach to Scripture had already taken root in Western Europe through the Renaissance of the 15th century. The Renaissance, or "rebirth," derives its name from the renewed interest in classical Roman and, especially, Greek literature and culture that took place in Western Europe prior to the Reformation. Before the Renaissance, scholars, by and large, knew the ancient writings of Greece only in translation. And the interpretations of these writings were, for the most part, under the supervision of the church. At different times, the church had interpreted Plato, Aristotle and other Greek writers in ways that

deliberately supported Christian doctrine. But during the Renaissance, many scholars found patrons who supported their desire to understand the texts of the classical period, free from ecclesiastical supervision. They began to interpret these writings as their authors first meant them to be understood. And as a result, interpretations of highly-valued classical literature began to focus on their historical meaning — a meaning which often stood in sharp contrast with the teachings of the church.

Now, also during the Renaissance, new editions of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles were published. This led to a significant shift in the interpretation of Scripture as well. As we've seen, prior to these days, biblical passages were largely interpreted under the guidance of the church and in support of church dogma. But following the principles of the Renaissance, many biblical scholars — especially Protestants — began to read Scripture free from the control of the church. They sought to ground their interpretations of Scripture in the original historical meaning. This Protestant orientation toward the original meaning — or "literal sense" — as the basis of all interpretation, led to a significant shift in understanding the meaning of Scripture. Protestants now spoke of one unified, coherent meaning for every biblical passage. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 9, puts it:

> **The true and full sense of any Scripture … is not manifold, but one.**

We may call this outlook a "univalent" view of meaning.

Of course, early Protestants realized that biblical passages often say much more than a simple assessment of the literal sense would indicate. They may have many implications and connections with Christian truths that go beyond the original human writers' comprehension. But all of these dimensions are still part of the single, true and full meaning because they coordinate with the literal or plain sense of the Scriptures.

> **When we do biblical interpretation, what we're really after is what's going on in the text literally. In other words, what did the biblical writer — whether we're talking Hosea or the apostle Paul — what did that writer generally want to intend? It's rather difficult to get into the mind of a writer in a comprehensive way to say, well, this is *exactly* what the person meant. And the one thing we have to keep track of too is, I believe, that all Scripture has dual authorship. It's both written by God and man. So, in this case, biblical writers may be writing something where the Holy Spirit is intending second, third, fourth layers of meaning that even the original writer wasn't fully aware of. But nevertheless, God uses that. I think what's really important is to come back to the literal meaning of the text. That's the anchor by which all other subsequent layers of meaning might be teased out.**
>
> **— Nicholas Perrin, Ph.D.**

In addition to emphasizing the human side of inspiration and the importance of the unified meaning of Scripture, early Protestants also sought to affirm the authority of Scripture by upholding Scripture's clarity.

Clarity

Rather than seeing the Scriptures as obscure and in need of authoritative ecclesiastical interpretation, the Reformers argued that the Bible was understandable. A number of factors contributed significantly to the Protestant doctrine of biblical clarity.

In the first place, the widespread use of the moveable-type printing press had made more and more Bibles available. And the availability of Bibles, in turn, made it possible for Christians to read the Bible for themselves. In doing so, they were able to evaluate whether the Catholic Church was correct when it declared that the Scriptures were obscure.

In the second place, bold pioneers had begun to translate the Scriptures into the languages of the common people. This also made it possible for people to examine the clarity of Scripture for themselves.

In the third place, the Reformers' focus on the literal sense — or *sensus literalis* in Latin — also enabled theologians to base their interpretations on something that could be examined and tested. They no longer simply needed to rely upon ecclesiastical authorities to tell them what the Bible meant. The examination of Scripture in these ways led to the widespread realization that, contrary to the Catholic view, the Bible was very clear.

These developments opened the way for Protestants to affirm the clarity of the Bible and to reinstate the Bible as the practical authority for Christianity. In this new environment, it became evident that many crucial passages that the Catholic Church had deemed obscure were actually relatively easy to understand. Protestant interpreters found that as they studied more of the Bible, more and more biblical teachings appeared to be remarkably clear.

> **Martin Luther at one point was teaching on the book of Romans in a university, and a verse that he came across during his lectures not only changed his life personally but really changed the face of Christianity as we know it. The verse that so impacted Martin Luther was Romans 1:17, and that verse simply says, "The just shall live by faith." At that time the church was teaching that there were sacraments that one had to perform throughout life, where grace would be received over time, and you might get to a point of being right before God. But this verse taught, and Luther understood, that when we receive Christ through faith, *immediately* we become right before Almighty God. Of course, we want to continue doing good works and doing things to serve God — not that we might be made right, but because we have been made right through faith in Christ alone.**
>
> **— Rev. George Shamblin**

Now, during the early decades of the Reformation, Protestants were extremely optimistic about the clarity of the Bible. It all seemed to be a rather simple matter: Read the Bible and conform theology to God's clear revelation found there. But as the

Protestant movement continued to work through the Scriptures, Protestants themselves became more realistic. They began to speak in terms of *degrees* of clarity in the Bible. It had become evident that some portions of the Bible were clearer than others. So, when Lutherans believed one thing about a passage of Scripture, Calvinists another, and Zwinglians still another, the early, overly-optimistic view of the Bible's clarity gave way to more qualified outlooks. This more mature Protestant view shouldn't surprise us. Even the apostle Peter admitted that some things in Scripture are difficult to grasp. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter wrote these words:

> There are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

Notice how Peter put it. He didn't say that *all* of Paul's writings were easy to understand. Nor did he say that they were *all* hard to understand. Rather, he said that *some* things in Paul's writings are hard to understand.

So then, in contrast with the medieval church, the Protestant Reformers exalted the Bible over the authority of the church. Protestants understood that they were not cut off from God's revelation in Scripture. They affirmed the clarity of Scripture, and as a result, the Bible was reinstated as the absolute authority over all ecclesiastical authority.

> **The Reformers understood that man is sinful and that, inherently, we are inclined to take those things of God and distort them, diminish them, and misapply them. And they had witnessed that in the Roman Catholic Church, and that's actually, of course, what precipitated much of their conflict with the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. And so, it was their conviction that the authority of God's Word *has* to be the ultimate authority. And while the Catholic Church would have said at the time, and still to this day, that they agree that the Bible is the supreme authority, they believe that the church is empowered to interpret that authority, which, followed logically, means that the church really has the ultimate authority. And the danger there is men are sinful. Just as the Reformers understood then, it is true now and anytime that we have an ecclesiastical structure that seeks to impose an interpretation of Scripture on Scripture, then we are making the Word of God submit to the interpretation of a sinful man or a sinful collection of men, and that's always dangerous. So, for the Reformers and for us today, it's critical that everything that we approach must agree with the Word of God and submit to the Word of God.**
>
> **— Dr. Steve Curtis**

Now that we've looked into the early Protestant view on the authority of Scripture, we're in a position to see how early Protestants also viewed the authority of the church.

AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

The Protestant views of the inspiration, meaning and clarity of Scripture allowed early Protestants to reinstate the Bible as the only unquestionable rule of faith and life over church authorities. And, as evangelicals today, we must do the same. Still, we need to add an important qualification. As much as early Protestants affirmed the authority of the Bible, they didn't utterly reject all ecclesiastical authority as they built their theology. On the contrary, Protestants believed that God had granted secondary, fallible authority to the church in submission to the infallible teachings of Scripture.

It will help to explore the Protestant view of the authority of the church by looking in two directions. First, how did early Protestants understand past ecclesiastical authorities? And second, how did they understand their contemporary Protestant authorities? Consider first early Protestant outlooks on ecclesiastical authority from the past.

Past Authorities

Even though it's hard for many of us to imagine, early Protestants recognized a great deal of authority in the teachings of church fathers and early church councils. The Reformers maintained a robust doctrine of the church. They believed strongly that the Holy Spirit had led the early church into many important truths that needed to be recognized by Christians in their day.

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the Reformers spoke of the authority of Scripture under the rubric of *Sola Scriptura* — "Scripture alone." Unfortunately, many evangelicals today have a serious misunderstanding of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. In our day, many evangelicals believe that the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* implies that we should have no authority but the Bible. But this wasn't the position of the Reformation, and it's not a true implication of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. The Reformers insisted on *Sola Scriptura*, not because they believed that the Bible was the only authority for believers. Rather, they meant that the Bible was the only *unquestionable* authority for believers. As strange as it may sound, Protestants didn't tenaciously defend the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* because they dismissed all other authorities out of hand. They defended it precisely *because* they held other theological authorities in high regard.

> **One of the things you see in the Reformers, especially in Calvin, is they don't see a fundamental conflict between their belief in *Sola Scriptura* — or their belief in the authority of Scripture as the foundation of the church — and their reverence for the church fathers. They saw themselves as restoring the church to an earlier, purer tradition that was represented in the Fathers… And they wanted to support their understanding of the Bible from church**

> **tradition, so they didn't really see them as fundamentally competing principles. But they also didn't place the authority of church tradition and the early church fathers at the same level as scriptural authority.**
>
> **— Dr. Jeff Dryden**

For the sake of convenience, it's helpful to refer to a summary of these matters in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 10:

> **The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.**

This paragraph strongly affirms the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures is "the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined." In other words, all judgments of the church are to be made according to the standard of Scripture. But notice the language here. The Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible is "the supreme judge." Now, if something is the *supreme* judge, it follows that there are other judges that are *not* supreme. In fact, the confession mentions a number of these other authorities in this passage. In what appears to be order of importance, it mentions councils; ancient writers, or church fathers; doctrines of men, referring to the teachings of others in the church in the past and present; and private spirits, that is, the inward sense or conviction regarding a particular matter. The *Westminster Confession* recognized these authorities, but gave them a secondary standing — authority under the *absolute* authority of Scripture.

Now, Catholic theologians often accused the Reformers of rejecting ecclesiastical authority. But the Reformers were careful not to reject the past as they maintained their doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. Early Protestants often supported their views with references to the early church fathers. In fact, with each revision of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin added more and more interaction with early church fathers — not less. In addition, one passage in Calvin's *Institutes* plainly reveals his outlook on the authority of church councils. Listen to what Calvin said in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4, chapter 9:

> **I am not arguing here either that all councils are to be condemned or the acts of all to be rescinded, and (as the saying goes) to be canceled at one stroke. But, you will say, you degrade everything, so that every man has the right to accept or reject what the councils decide. Not at all! But whenever a decree of any council is brought forward, I should like men first of all diligently to ponder at what time it was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present; then to examine by the standard of Scripture what it dealt with — and to do this in such a way that the definition of the council may have its weight and be like a provisional judgment, yet not hinder the examination which I have mentioned.**

Several important ideas stand out in Calvin's words here. First, he insisted that the councils of the church need to be understood historically. They were not timeless, direct revelation from God himself. The interpretative methods of the Renaissance — a focus on the literal-historical sense — should be applied to church councils. Believers should "ponder at what time [a council] was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present."

Second, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* led Calvin to insist that the teachings of the church should finally be evaluated in the light of Scripture. As he put it here, "the standard of Scripture" must be applied.

But third, and most importantly for our purposes here, Calvin claimed that the doctrines of the past should be accepted "like a provisional judgment." That is to say, the longstanding, ancient findings of the church should be accepted as our provisional or preliminary judgments. We should accept their teaching until the weight of careful, biblical exegesis proves them wrong.

Calvin's strategy reflected the wisdom that guided all but the most radical Protestants in his day. The vast majority of Protestants understood the high authority that should be acknowledged for the early church fathers and for the creeds of the church. They approached these past ecclesiastical authorities with provisional acceptance, tempered by a commitment to the supremacy of Scripture.

Having seen how early Protestants viewed the authority of the church in relation to past ecclesiastical authorities, we should turn to how Reformers understood their own contemporary Protestant authorities. What kind of authority did they acknowledge for themselves and others as they sought to answer current theological concerns?

Contemporary Authorities

As you'll recall, the medieval Catholic Church developed an elaborate system of living theological authorities, culminating in the infallible pope. The Protestant Reformation largely amounted to a rejection of this ecclesiastical authority. Only the authority of the Bible was to be accepted as unquestionable. The pope, church councils, and other ecclesiastical authorities were fallible and subject to error.

Now, it's important to understand that early Protestants highly respected the authority of duly-ordained teachers in the church. The individual scholars, or "Doctors of the Church," as they've been called, deserved high regard as Protestants developed Reformation theology further. In fact, Protestants of nearly every denomination created confessions, catechisms and creeds of their own that were acknowledged as secondary authorities in the church. These early Protestants had such high regard for duly-ordained contemporary theologians for a reason. They believed the Scriptures taught followers of Christ to honor the authorities God had placed in the church. Many portions of Scripture touch on this matter. For instance, in Titus 2:1,15, Paul instructed Titus with these words:

> Teach what accords with sound doctrine… exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you (Titus 2:1,15).

> **The heart of the Reformation was the question of authority because everything else, all the things that we believe in, stem from our choice about what our authority is… The New Testament tells us that we rest on Christ the chief cornerstone, the apostles and prophets of the first century as the foundation of the church, but then we have church authorities of evangelists, pastors and teachers. And so, church authorities are very important to us because presumably they're going to have wisdom and they're going to have experiences that help them submit themselves to the truth of God revealed in Scripture. But those authorities must always be in submission to the Lord Jesus and his affirmation of the unquestionable authority of the Bible.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

This balance between biblical and ecclesiastical authority may be summed up in an old slogan that is often repeated in Reformed circles: "The Reformed church is always reforming," or as it is often abbreviated in the Latin phrase, *semper reformanda* — "always reforming." These slogans indicate that the Reformed branch of the church fully recognized that, as important as ecclesiastical authorities may be, they must always be subject to the scrutiny of Scripture.

Now that we've looked at views on authority in theology during the periods of medieval Roman Catholicism and early Protestantism, we're in a position to consider the third topic of this lesson: contemporary Protestantism.

CONTEMPORARY PROTESTANTISM

"Authority" is a notion that evokes strong negative reactions among evangelical Protestants today in many parts of the world. Many of us see how authorities often abuse their power and we naturally resist them. As we've seen, through the millennia Christians have struggled with these matters even in theology. So, what should we learn from the ways our forebears dealt with theological authority? What are the values and dangers of authority for contemporary evangelicals as we build theology today?

We'll answer these questions about contemporary Protestantism first by addressing the kinds of outlooks we should have toward the authority of Scripture. Second, we'll suggest some important perspectives we should have toward the authority of the church. Let's turn first to the authority of Scripture.

AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

> **The Bible's authority over the Christian is an absolute authority in every part of their life. To do otherwise is really to set ourselves up as God. To look at the Bible and say, "Well, I'm not going to follow that part but I'm going to follow this part," or, "I'm going to obey this**

> **little verse and not this little verse," is, in one sense, to set ourselves over Scripture and to determine what is true and what is not, what we follow and what we won't, and when we do that, we've become little gods ourselves. We've set ourselves up as the god of the universe. And that is idolatry. So, to deny Scripture and not live by its authority in one sense is to try to supplant God and make ourselves that authority. So, it's very important that Scripture dominate the Christian's life in almost every area, or in every area, so that they really do give God his proper place as the ultimate authority.**
>
> **— Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

We'll explore contemporary views of the authority of Scripture by touching on three issues that have concerned us throughout this lesson: the inspiration of Scripture, the meaning of Scripture, and the clarity of Scripture. In our day, a number of different viewpoints on these subjects claim to follow the Reformation tradition. We'll look into these views and assess their value, beginning with modern perspectives on the inspiration of Scripture.

Inspiration

At least three views of inspiration are popular among contemporary Protestants. On one end of the spectrum is a view we often call romantic inspiration. On the other end of the spectrum is a similarly extreme view called mechanical inspiration. And between these extreme views is an outlook that has been called organic inspiration. Let's look briefly at all three of these views.

Romantic inspiration is widely endorsed by more liberal-leaning Protestants. In this view, the Bible is inspired in a "romantic" sense, much like great writers, artists, and composers — like Shakespeare, Rembrandt, or Bach — were "inspired." So, God motivated biblical writers, but he didn't superintend their writings. In this view, the Scriptures are just the opinions of men. The Scriptures are, therefore, fallible and lack absolute authority over the church. Now, needless to say, this outlook on inspiration must be rejected by those who adhere to the spirit of the Reformation. This view abandons the central Protestant commitment to *Sola Scriptura* by denying both the reliability and the ultimate authority of the Bible.

On the other end of the spectrum is mechanical inspiration, or as it's sometimes called "inspiration by dictation." To one degree or another, this outlook asserts that biblical authors were relatively passive as they wrote the Scriptures. In this view, God essentially authored the Bible himself, while human writers acted as his compliant secretaries. On the whole, this view leads away from the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* by denying the importance of the human author's historical context and the original meaning. As the Reformers were careful to note, denying the value of the literal sense of Scripture hinders the practical authority of Scripture. The meaning of the Bible can no longer be assessed and followed, and we're forced to read our own ideas into the Bible. As a result, the Bible itself no longer serves as our supreme authority in theology.

Contemporary Protestant theology must avoid the extremes of both romantic and mechanical inspiration by re-affirming the fully organic nature of inspiration. In organic inspiration, God moved biblical authors to write and superintended their writings so that they wrote infallibly and authoritatively. But he didn't circumvent their personal thoughts, their motivations, their feelings or their theology. On the contrary, the human *and* divine dimensions of inspiration were not at odds at all. Rather, all of the Bible presents God's timeless truths, but in highly-human, culturally-conditioned texts. All of the Bible's teachings are normative for all times, but its teachings are tied to the context of particular circumstances. The Protestant view of organic inspiration emphasizes both the human and the divine, the historical and the transcendent qualities of the whole Bible. In this view of inspiration, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is maintained. Without a doubt, of the three major ways Protestants think of biblical inspiration, the doctrine of organic inspiration most fully accords with the principles that gave rise to and led the Protestant Reformation.

> **One of the things I love about the Bible is the variety of the authors and how the Holy Spirit worked through each of those individual authors with their uniqueness of who they were, their experiences, their lives, in order to bring us a full picture of who God is and what that means for us. So, when we see how God used different authors, it seems that what the Holy Spirit does is internally works with them to give them the sense of what to write, of what to say, but through their own personality and through their own experiences. So, it's alive, it's rich, it's full. It allows lots of people to connect with it in different ways, as opposed to something being very mechanical. God, I think, appreciates the experiences we go through, and the Holy Spirit then indwells those authors in a way that gives them an inspiration of what to write and then works through who they are in their personalities.**
>
> **— Dr. Dan Lacich**

In addition to stressing the organic nature of inspiration, modern Protestant theologians must also evaluate the authority of Scripture by rightly assessing the meaning of Scripture.

Meaning

Once again, we have a spectrum of positions that represent Protestant thinking on the meaning of Scripture. But not all of the options further the ideals of the Reformation. On one end of the spectrum is a view that we'll call "contemporary polyvalence." On the other end is a view that we'll call "simplistic univalence." And in the middle is a view that we'll call "complex univalence." Let's touch first on contemporary polyvalence.

In recent decades, some Protestant theologians have spoken of the polyvalence of biblical texts because they believe that the Scriptures have different meanings. But

whereas classical polyvalence affirmed multiple meanings because of the Bible's divine origin, contemporary polyvalence is usually based on the ambiguities of human language.

In effect, contemporary polyvalence teaches that biblical passages are empty vessels for interpreters to fill with meaning. Now, those who adhere to this view recognize that, just as a vessel has a given shape, the grammar of biblical texts establishes some basic parameters of meaning. But, within these parameters, the specific meaning is supplied by biblical interpreters. On this basis, it's argued that we must reject the Reformation's stress on *sensus literalis*. Instead, we should pour our own interpretations into passages, giving little or no concern to the original or literal meaning of the text.

Unfortunately, this contemporary notion of polyvalence renders the authority of Scripture null. It gives human interpreters the right to pour their own ideas into the Scriptures. And for this reason, we must reject it.

On the other end of the spectrum is the concept of "simplistic univalence." This view rightly promotes the notion that every passage of Scripture has just one meaning. But it wrongly denies that a single meaning may be complex. Take for example John 3:16:

> For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

A Christian with simplistic univalence in mind might say something like this: "This verse is very simple. John 3:16 tells us that we must believe in Christ."

John 3:16 is a well-known verse that Christians often summarize in very simple ways. But in reality, this verse touches on all kinds of far-reaching topics. It speaks explicitly of God's love. It reminds us of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. It talks about the world, eternal punishment and eternal life. Each of these topics is complex in itself, and there are a myriad of logical connections among them. So, while we're right to say that John 3:16 has one, unified meaning, the complexity of that meaning exceeds any summary we're able to make of it. And different interpreters can rightly emphasize different facets of its one meaning.

When we fail to see that the meaning of Scripture is so complex that it always exceeds our interpretations, we run a serious risk. We risk identifying our *interpretation* of the Bible too closely with the Bible itself. Our interpretation takes on the authority of the Bible, and we reject *Sola Scriptura* — the belief that the Bible *always* stands above our interpretations.

In the center of the spectrum is "complex univalence," which accords with the early Reformation outlooks. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* describes complex univalence in Chapter 1, section 9, where it says these words:

> **When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.**

In this view, each passage has one meaning. But this one meaning is complex and multifaceted, revealed by the web of multiple reciprocities established by the whole teaching of Scripture.

> **People use a word like "univalence" in different ways. But in the best sense, the univalence of Scripture means it has one value, every portion of it has one unified significance. Now, that unity of significance is complicated. It's complex. It's not simple. It's not as if we're able to summarize the one meaning of a Bible passage by one phrase or one sentence that's ever so simple because every portion of the Bible is complicated. But every portion of the Bible coheres. That's what we mean when we say it's univalent — it holds together. Polyvalence, the opposite of univalence, supposes that, really, what the Bible has, any given passage in the Bible has multiple meanings so that you can just go on and on and on and on as to what this passage means and that passage means. And it doesn't matter whether these various values or significances of that passage have any coherence at all. But the truth is that univalence is what we believe in as evangelicals, but not a simplistic univalence. It's a complex univalence. So, we can recognize that the Bible, and any passage in the Bible, has a unified meaning, and in that sense it is univalent.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

The Reformation notion of complex univalence affirms that the Bible presents authoritative meaning rather than waiting for us to provide it. It also restrains us from lowering the Scriptures to the level of our simplified summaries of the Bible. Every Scripture text stands as authoritative above our very best efforts to interpret the text. This outlook of complex univalence provides a way of handling the meaning of Scripture that will enable us to further the theology of the Reformation in our day.

We've looked at the authority of Scripture by considering contemporary Protestant views on the inspiration and meaning of Scripture. We're now in a position to speak of modern Protestant views on the Bible's clarity.

Clarity

It will help us again to think in terms of three points along a spectrum. On one end, we face contemporary tendencies toward utter obscurity. On the other end we face contemporary tendencies toward utter clarity. But in the middle rests the Reformation doctrine of degrees of clarity.

> **Scripture has this quality, if you will, of clarity. Now, that doesn't mean it's always easy for us to understand, and of course, Peter famously says that some things Paul has written are hard to understand, and that we have to understand what the source of difficulty is when we interpret the Bible. One of the difficulties is we're finite creatures… And so, when we come to a subject that's inherently complex like God is, even though Scripture itself is clear in itself, it's sometimes challenging to understand. But the last thing that's important — and the Westminster Confession talks about this — that those things which are necessary for salvation are clear so that even the simple can understand them.**
>
> **— Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

It's not difficult to find Protestants today who treat the Bible as almost entirely obscure, or hidden from us. Often, in the spirit of deconstruction and post-modern hermeneutics, these Protestants think about Scripture in the same way that they think about all other literature. Like other literature, they consider the Scriptures obscure because they believe the Bible is self-contradictory and self-defeating. In their view, the history of biblical interpretation has revealed so many exegetical difficulties that it's nearly impossible to determine how we should understand the Bible today.

On the other end of the spectrum, some contemporary Protestants believe in the utter clarity of the Bible. They consider nearly all Scriptures so clear that they can understand them quickly and easily. More often than not, advocates of such views simply dismiss out of hand all interpretations that do not come from their very narrow Christian communities.

Exaggerating the clarity of Scripture is a great temptation to many theologians in the Protestant tradition today. We want desperately to keep the Scriptures removed from modern skepticism and cynicism. But to oversimplify the clarity of Scripture in this way doesn't represent the Reformation's outlook on the clarity of Scripture. As we've seen, the early Reformers admitted that some portions of the Bible are difficult, if not impossible, to understand.

In the middle of our spectrum on the clarity of Scripture is a position that acknowledges degrees of clarity. This is the position adopted in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, section 7.

> **All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.**

Notice that the confession distinguishes that which is "necessary … for salvation" as clear in one place or another. But it also admits that not everything else in Scripture is equally clear. In other words, the Bible is neither entirely unclear nor entirely clear.

You'll recall that in a previous lesson we distinguished among various levels of confidence that we have in different Christian doctrines. We used the model that we called the "cone of certainty." Toward the bottom of our cone of certainty, we have beliefs that we hold tenuously because we have low levels of confidence about them. At the top, we have those core beliefs that we hold tenaciously; to give them up is to give up the Christian faith. And between these extremes we have everything else that we believe with varying degrees of confidence.

In many respects, it helps to think of the clarity of Scripture in similar terms. In the first place, many aspects of biblical teaching — including the knowledge of what is required for salvation — need little or no scholarly effort to understand. As the *Westminster Confession* puts it, the "learned" and "unlearned" alike may understand these things. Other biblical information fits into this category, too. In fact, enormous portions of the Bible are fairly easy to understand. For example, it's not hard to see that God created the world, or that there were men named Abraham, Moses, and David, or that Israel went into Egypt and later into exile. The New Testament plainly teaches that Jesus grew up in Nazareth and that there were apostles. These and innumerable other features of Scripture are so clear that no one needs to put forth scholarly or academic effort to know them.

> **Do we need special methods to understand the most basic truths of the Bible? I believe the answer is "no" because most of the Bible is very clear… As Peter tells us, God has clearly revealed his power and being to us, as well as everything that pertains to life, godliness, and salvation, because he has called us by his goodness. Or, as the *Westminster Confession of Faith,* chapter 1, section 6 puts it, "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." So, any regular person, even though they aren't a biblical scholar, can still understand the Bible using the proper methods, according to the various genres and the most basic knowledge God has granted us… Someone once said that what surprised them about the Bible wasn't the difficult to understand portions, but the especially clear and obvious portions that proclaim truth and salvation, parts that are understandable to anyone. That's what they found shocking. So, I believe that the portions of the Bible that discuss salvation, the many verses discussing man's sinfulness, the salvation God offers in Christ, and his coming judgment, so long as someone can read, or can hear someone else read, they are capable of understanding.**
>
> **— Dr. Biao Chen, translation**

In the second place, some aspects of Scripture are known only by serious students who study subjects like ancient history, text criticism, biblical languages, interpretive methods, or theology. Among these matters we might count things such as Paul's eschatology, or the historical purpose of the book of Genesis. These and other aspects of Scripture require more scholarly attention. But with sufficient academic efforts, many things that initially appear to be obscure become clearer to us.

Finally, some portions of Scripture appear to remain unclear no matter how much effort we put forth. Some of the more obvious examples of these dimensions of Scripture arise when we try to harmonize parallel portions of Scripture like Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, or the New Testament gospels. Even though great strides have been made in these areas, many problems still appear to be unsolvable.

So, as we approach the Scriptures, we must always remember that some dimensions of the Bible are clearer than others. Only when we face this reality can we responsibly handle the authority of Scripture. It's true that every part of Scripture is unquestionably authoritative. But, on a practical level, we're able to grasp and use its authoritative guidance to varying degrees, depending on the relative clarity of the different parts of Scripture. So, to uphold the Reformation tradition in our day, we must avoid contemporary extremes on the clarity of Scripture and affirm that clarity is a matter of degree.

With these contemporary Protestant perspectives on the authority of Scripture in mind, we should turn our attention to the authority of the church in today's theology.

AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

We'll focus again in two directions: first, we'll look at how contemporary Protestant theologians should view past ecclesiastical authorities; and second, we'll address how they should view contemporary Protestant authorities. Let's look first at the authority of the church in the past.

Past Authorities

As we've seen, early Protestants understood that the Holy Spirit had taught the church many truths before their time. As a result, they sought to maintain proper respect for the teachings of the early church fathers, the creeds, and longstanding traditions of the church. In effect, early Protestants accepted the teachings of the church as provisional judgments. Yet, they also balanced this practice with a strong affirmation of the supremacy of Scripture over the teachings of the church. They relied on and built on the past, but they also subjected all teachings of the church to the unquestionable standard of Scripture.

Unfortunately, theologians today sometimes find it difficult to hold firmly to both sides of this early Protestant position. Some lean heavily toward traditionalism. Others move toward biblicism. But many in the Protestant tradition practice *semper reformanda*, between these extremes.

On one side, some contemporary theologians fall into the trap of "traditionalism." By traditionalism, we mean they stray toward practices that closely resemble medieval Roman Catholic traditionalism. Now, Protestant theologians affirm the authority of Scripture, and they certainly reject the traditions of Catholicism. But many times, traditionalists so highly treasure past expressions of their faith that, on a practical level, they fail to scrutinize the past adequately.

> **It's sort of ironic because we Protestants protest the idea of a magisterium or a church tradition that is on par with Scripture. And yet, in practice we do that as well sometimes. You probably know people who will emphasize a particular confession of the church — the Belgic, or the Heidelberg, or for many of us, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. It's really kind of got the same kind of authority as the Bible for many of us. And yet, right in the very first chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, it says that Scripture is the final authority on all church councils, on all church theological disputes… Tradition is a good guide, but it's a terrible master. We each have a role to play in God's mission, and we're to embody the story of Scripture in a unique way, benefitting from the example of others, the example of tradition, but not being mastered by it.**
>
> **— Dr. Gregory R. Perry**

On the other side, some modern theologians go to the opposite extreme as they deal with ecclesiastical authority from the past. In a Christian version of Enlightenment modernism, they fall into what may be called "biblicism." These theologians act as if each person must come to the Bible and decide every theological issue without the aid of past Protestant tradition.

> **For the Reformers and for Christians throughout the ages, they have understood the Scriptures to be the source and witness to divine revelation. But this has never meant for Christians that we don't need traditions, nor that we aren't standing in a particular tradition ourselves. So this idea that *Sola Scriptura* would mean a rejection of all creeds except for one's own reading the Bible, is simply not what the Reformers meant, nor is a wise way forward.**
>
> **— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

Time and again, Protestant theologians have reacted to traditionalism by saying things like, "It doesn't matter what the church has said. All I care about is what the Bible says." This kind of rhetoric goes far beyond submitting to the Scriptures as our final authority. It neglects the wisdom that God's Spirit has granted to the church. Instead, it grants theological judgment only to the individual or groups of individuals who are currently at work.

To continue in the spirit of the Reformation today, we must re-affirm the principle of *semper reformanda*. We must strive to affirm the supremacy of Scripture without ignoring the importance of Reformation tradition.

Semper reformanda today requires that we accept as provisional judgments not only the early church fathers and councils, but also our own confessions and traditions. But these authorities from the past should *always* be subject to the unquestionable teaching of Scripture. To further the Reformation today, we need to learn how to give this kind of weight to ecclesiastical authorities from the past under the authority of Scripture.

> **The idea of *semper reformanda* really is communicating that the church reformed is always reforming. And the reason why that matters is it's a way of communicating, the church always stands under the authority of Scripture. So, any time we discover that in our practices we're living outside of what we think the biblical witness calls us to, we must be willing to reform… And so the church's always being willing to reform is an important idea to say, we stand under Scripture; we need to be willing to test even our interpretations of Scripture. But we can't just go by whatever is trendy at any given time. And that is partly why, in order for the church to always be reforming, it means we have to be in conversation with the past. We have to figure out what people from different ages thought — how has God's Spirit worked in the past so that whatever we're saying today still falls within what God has always been teaching and how he's been leading his church through the ages? — so that we are willing to reform under the Scriptures, reform our lives, reform our thoughts, without ever starting a new religion, because we are the religion of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit — nothing new.**
>
> **— Dr. Kelly M. Kapic**

Having looked at the authority of the church and the way Protestant theologians today should relate to past authorities, we should turn to an equally important matter. How should today's theologians assess contemporary Protestant authorities? How should we understand the authority of theological formulations that are developing in our day?

Contemporary Authorities

Early Protestants affirmed the value of theology developed by duly ordained leaders in their day. But they also guarded against exalting contemporary authorities in the church over the teaching of Scripture. Unfortunately, once again, contemporary Protestant theologians often find it difficult to follow these early outlooks. They tend to go to extremes in the ways that they understand Protestant theologians living in their own day.

On the one side, some theologians tend to be skeptical about doctrinal formulations today. On the other side, many tend to be dogmatic about doctrinal

formulations in our times. But the way of authentic Reformation theology is to strive for faithful doctrinal formulations. Theologians who are severely skeptical about contemporary doctrinal formulations reject all sense of authority or need of submission to what the church says today. On the other end of the spectrum, theologians who are extremely dogmatic insist that contemporary formulations are perfect.

> **We have to be very careful about the ways we evaluate contemporary Christian beliefs. On the one side, there's a skepticism that often grows among evangelical Christians where we think that if it's something that's new … that it must be wrong because the truth is in the past. And unfortunately, this reveals the fact that they do not believe that Holy Spirit is still active and alive in the church today in ways he has been in the past… On the other side, you get people who go the other extreme and say things like, "Well, if it's old fashioned, if it comes from the past, it's irrelevant for today. What we need is some new ideas." And we mustn't go down that track either because Holy Spirit is not just working in the church today; he's been working in the church for millennia. And so, as we realize that there is truth in the past, we must build on that truth from the past. The interpretations of the church through the millennia should be very impactful on the ways we think and live in our day today. Theology, you see, is dependence on the Holy Spirit, helping us to learn the Scriptures and to apply them with the wisdom that he's given the church in the past but with relevance for the issues that we face today.**
>
> **— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

The severe skepticism and dogmatism that we face in our day exists in part because doctrinal statements are often thought to be simply true or false. In reality, it's much more helpful to create faithful doctrinal formulations by considering a range of possibilities between true and false. All theological statements are more or less true or false depending on how closely they mirror the infallible teaching of Scripture.

On the one side, in contrast to the skeptical view, we find that some theological positions describe the teaching of the Bible well enough that we may call them true and consider them valuable. Now, these statements are not perfect, of course. But they're close enough to be accepted as true, unless some qualification arises that reveals otherwise.

On the other side, some theological positions are so far from the teaching of Scripture that we're right to label them as false. Unlike those who cling dogmatically to the authority of contemporary formulations, we can reject these formulations unless some qualification later shows that they're acceptable.

Consider, for instance, a contemporary doctrinal formulation that states, "God is sovereign over all things." We normally should have no problem with saying that this is true. The Bible does teach that God is sovereign over all his creation. Yet, because this statement can be improved upon, it is, in some sense, imperfect. If, perhaps, we're distinguishing biblical faith from Deism, this statement could actually give a false

impression. Deism teaches that God, in his sovereignty, doesn't interact with historical events after his initial act of creation. So, the statement "God is sovereign over all things" could actually lead us away from the reality of divine providence — that God is intimately involved with his creation.

In the end, in regard to contemporary theological formulations, some theological statements are close enough to Scripture to be counted as true; others are far enough from Scripture to be counted as false. In either case, being dogmatic and assuming that all contemporary formulations are true, will not benefit us. But being skeptical and ignoring the value of contemporary ecclesiastical authority is also not helpful. All theological formulations can be improved, but we shouldn't disregard them simply because they've been formulated in our day. This is nothing more than the early Reformed maxim, *semper reformanda* — "always reforming."

This is what we mean when we say that the aim of contemporary Protestant theology is to produce faithful theological formulations. We humbly and responsibly use all the resources God has given us — exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and Christian living — to develop faithful doctrinal formulations. We seek to conform our teachings, as much as possible, to the teachings of Scripture. The closer our doctrines are to Scripture, the more authority they have. The further they are from Scripture, the less authority they have. But in all cases, the theology of the church must always be held in submission to the Scriptures.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored the relationship between biblical and ecclesiastical authority in theology. We've looked at a number of outlooks that developed during the period of medieval Roman Catholicism. We've also seen how the movement of early Protestantism corrected these views. And finally, we've explored the need to apply the outlooks of the Reformation to biblical and ecclesiastical authority in contemporary Protestantism.

Building a Christian theology requires us all to wrestle with authority, both the authority of Scripture and the authority of the church. As we've seen in this lesson, we're led astray from the truth unless we reaffirm in the strongest terms the absolute, unquestionable authority of Scripture. This is our safeguard, our sure anchor in theology. At the same time, we must never neglect what God has done in his church. Those who have gone before us were not perfect. The teachers of the church today are not perfect. Yet, as fallible as they may be, God has established authorities in the church that we are to honor. If we keep these principles in mind, we'll be able to avoid many problems that have plagued Christian theology in the past and in our own day. We'll be able to build theology that will serve the body of Christ and bring honor to God.

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Building Your Theology

LESSON FOUR

Authority in Theology

Faculty Forum

THIRD MILLENNIUM MINISTRIES

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

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Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

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Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Melanie Webb
Kevin Gladding

Question 1:
Does the modern church overemphasize the divine origin of Scripture?

Student: In this lesson you talk about how the medieval Catholic Church overemphasized the divine meaning of Scripture and minimized the human aspect of inspiration. I was wondering how you see that happening in the church today.

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question because it's not something new. In fact, the medieval Roman Catholic Church were not the first ones to do this either. You can trace it all the way back into early Jewish interpretations of the Bible and medieval Jewish interpretations of the Bible, especially in the Kabbalah and those sorts of groups, where they would look for hidden divine meanings in the Bible, formulas for this or statements about that. And unfortunately, that's true even in the Christian church today and not just among Catholics. It comes in different forms today. Sometimes people will do that in terms of the way they handle prophecies. They'll find a phrase, or a catch phrase in a prophecy and they'll say, "You see? Right here it says the word 'chernobyl.'" This is a great example of this because the Russian word for "chernobyl" means wormwood, so then they attach that to Chernobyl — in the last couple of decades when we had this crazy meltdown of the nuclear facility in Chernobyl —and see that as a sign of the end times. So you find these kinds of secret clues all through prophecies in some groups.

But I think probably the most extreme version of this today is when you find people using computers to analyze and try to find patterns. With computers, you know, once you enter in all the data of the Hebrew Scriptures into it, then you can start doing these random searches and come up with patterns. In fact, I've seen people do that even with an English text. There are articles written where they've taken a book like Moby Dick or something like that and they have actually done random computer searches for patterns of letters in those things as well. And so you'll find people, serious people, I mean people that are pastors of churches, large churches, saying that if you'll just count three letters forward and jump a line and go three letters back and do the same pattern over and over again, you'll find all kinds of secret meanings from God. And this takes the Bible right out of the hands of the original human writers and lifts it up into this realm of the secret, the mysterious, the divine. And that's widespread all around us.

Question 2:
Doesn't downplaying the human origins of Scripture make the Bible more exciting?

Student: Don't you feel, though, that this mindset of playing down the human side gives more excitement to the text, or more excitement to the people reading the text?

Dr. Pratt: Well it does. That's why these books sell a lot, because it excites people. The unfortunate thing, though, is that while it excites people it also allows that Bible to become the tool of whatever person wants to use it in whatever way they want to use it. And in some ways, that was part of the problem with the medieval church. They would find secret divine meanings in the Bible that supported their aberrant doctrines. And so today — usually they're not supporting the kinds of things that the medieval church did — but today they will so the same sort of thing. They'll have a particular need or a particular issue they want to talk about. They'll comment on the war in the Middle East, or they'll comment on China, or they'll comment on this event or that event, and they'll find a secret message in the Bible that talks about it. That's when it gets very dangerous, because if the Bible's not originally designed to talk about that event, then we should not pretend as if it is. And it takes the Bible out of the hands of the authoritative, inspired people who wrote it and puts it into the hands of pastors, or current church authorities, or great leaders, and then it becomes a tool of manipulation. And the only way to protect from manipulation by church leaders, both in the medieval period and today, is by putting the Bible back into the hands of the people who first wrote it. And that's the great danger of it.

Question 3:
When Christians are illiterate, is it helpful for the church to make authoritative decisions?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you talk about the lack of literacy during the medieval Catholic period. So isn't there a need for the church to be very authoritative in order to convey the Scriptures to the populace?

Dr. Pratt: I suppose a case could be made for that, yes. Because most people in medieval Europe did not read. If they did, they barely read. And, of course, remember the Bible was in Latin, so that was a big problem. And even if they could read, they couldn't read much in Latin, at least not enough to discuss theology and things like that. So I think we would have to admit that, yes, it was sort of a natural thing, maybe even a necessary thing, for the church to take its teaching and let it, as it were, almost substitute for the Bible. There weren't very many Bibles available. You were lucky to have a Bible in a cathedral. So people couldn't get ready access to Bibles like we

have today, and if they did, they couldn't read them. If they could read them, they couldn't understand them. So on and on it goes. So, yes, there was a serious need for it in many ways like there's still a serious need in our own day. As we find people having less and less biblical literacy in Western culture today, there is even more need for people to sort of shortcut the process and get the message out there.

I think, though, that the danger was this, and that is that they did not spend enough energy on, well, making sure that what they taught was what the Bible taught — I think that's the critical thing — and constantly making sure that they stuck with the teachings of the Bible as authoritative and explicitly submitting themselves to it. This is what the Reformers were concerned about; not so much that churches had strong teaching ministries or even authoritative ministries, but that they did not openly and they did not constantly and unquestionably keep their teachings in line with the Bible and keep their people thinking about the Bible, but rather sort of treated them in very paternalistic ways — It's okay, you can't understand that Bible but we can. And then they ended up telling them whatever they wanted to tell them.

Question 4:
Is it legitimate for the church to use images to teach illiterate Christians?

Student: But in that, wasn't the church conscientious about helping people who were illiterate understand the stories of the Bible in the artwork, such as the iconography, or what we think of as stained glass windows, that told the stories of the Bible?

Dr. Pratt: Like the Stations of the Cross?

Student: Right.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly. And in fact, we have contemporary examples of that, too. I know of ministries for illiterate or preliterate cultures where actually the evangelists are given sort of flip charts, and the flip charts have pictures on one side, but then you flip it over and it has on the back side written text, because the preacher can read but the people to whom he's speaking can't. So as he reads this little text, they're looking at these primitive, in many respects, pictures of the Bible story. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. In fact, I'm convinced that we ought not do that simply with children today. We do that still with children — have little Bible pictures and that sort of thing. I think that pictures are good even for adults because they give more life to it and keep it from being so abstracted.

But once again, I think that the issue is, if you look at the iconography, it's not very biblical. That's the problem. You know, you have images of patriarchs, and you have images of Mary, and you have images even of Jesus with halos glowing around their

heads. You have all kinds of bizarre angels and cupid dolls floating around doing things, shooting arrows at people and tickling people under the chin, and little babies lifting prophets up into the sky. I understand that was more or less artistic license, but at the same time, it gave people very false impressions, so that today you can find in traditions that are still very much attached to the iconography, they believe that that's the way it was done in the Bible, that that's what the Bible actually said about these things. And so they're shocked when they find out that Mary didn't glow when they read the Bible that it never says that she did. Or they read the Bible and find out that Moses didn't look like this particular kind of person, or Jesus didn't look like this iconographic example of him. And that's where it becoming seriously dangerous, when people take a teaching tool and either subconsciously or consciously start identifying it with what the Scriptures themselves actually teach. And I think that's what I, as a Protestant, am mostly concerned about, not the iconography per se. Though, of course, worshipping icons and the like, those bother me. But for educational purposes, when we do iconography, we need to do it as true to the Bible as we possibly can. Even if the style of art in the day is not realism, that's fine. It doesn't have to be that. It doesn't have to look like a photograph. But at the same time we should not be dressing biblical figures in medieval costumes, for example, which you find in many situations, and we should not be exalting them beyond the real so that Jesus and other saints look as if they're not real human beings. Because the Bible is an earthy, real thing, and the details of the Bible need to be reflected in the artwork that is designed to communicate the Bible.

Question 5:
Did classical polyvalence always ground the figurative meanings of Scripture in its literal meaning?

Student: In the lesson you introduce the idea of classical polyvalence. You talked about John Cassian's *Quadriga* with the allegorical, anagogical, tropological and literal meanings of Scripture. I was wondering, do you see these four as parallel ways of reading the Bible, or do you see maybe the literal meaning as being central with the other three as spokes coming off of that?

Dr. Pratt: Do you mean how do they conceive of it?

Student: Right.

Dr. Pratt: Well, it's very difficult to say because Cassian's fourfold meaning is just one example; it's sort of the pattern that won the day. There were many others that had twelve, thirteen, nineteen, seven, six, three, you know, those kinds of things. And so I'm really not trying to focus there so much on how that particular expression took place and how people worked it out, but simply to say that they did not look at the literal meaning as the basis of anything, and they found themselves going and finding meanings that went well beyond, and far beyond, in fact sometimes I guess we could

even say perhaps contradictory of the literal meaning. In fact, it's sort of like this. If you remember the background of the medieval period rising out of Neoplatonism — and there's where the root really actually is — that early medieval Christian theology was influenced by this notion that what we have to do as Christians is to move beyond the ordinary, beyond the physical world, beyond the spatial world or the temporal world we're a part of, and to use reason first to get us a little bit beyond the sort of fleshly passions. But then even reason was sort of limited to get you to where you really wanted to go, which was to reach the heights of God himself through mystical experience and mystical supra-rational experiences. And this is the way the Neoplatonist Christians actually thought of salvation, was that you would become one with God. In fact, you can still find some of those kinds of themes in Eastern Christianity today, because they didn't really go through a lot that we went through in Western Christianity.

So this idea of the higher you can go from the ordinary up into the divine is the background in many ways of this multiple meanings of the text. Because, as we know, God is far above us, far transcendent, so when he even uses human words, he means much more than what would appear to an ordinary bloke walking down the street. So what we do as human beings is, as we become filled with Spirit and we rise up out of that mush that we're part of down here in this physical world, we begin to get those divine insights, too. And it is very esoteric, it is very mind-expanding, and so it wasn't as if these folk typically would say, "This is the literal meaning, now let's draw implications from that to this topic, and let's draw implications to that topic, or that topic." Instead, the multiple readings were relatively free of the original meaning. And, in fact, the literal meaning was, for the most part, considered quite irrelevant. Anyone can read a text that says that the cow went down the street and realize it says, "the cow went down the street." Now who couldn't understand that? Right? Even the farmer could understand that is the way they would look at it — the sort of lowly farmer. Now the mystic could read "the cow went down the street" and understand that this is talking about the son of God walking down the streets of gold in heaven, and those kinds of things. They could see things that the ordinary person couldn't see. And so there wasn't this attempt to draw logical implications out of the literal meaning, to come up with these new more insightful meanings. It really was much more mysterious, much more mystical, much more ecstatic, that allowed them to do this. And then these themes, as it were, were codified by writing them down, by finding a hint here in the father, or this father saying it, that father saying it, using something sometimes by analogy that they would then say, "See, this is a great mystical insight." And then once the mystical insight was propagated enough, then it became the most important to way read that text.

Question 6:
How does a polyvalent approach differ from a search for literal meaning?

Student: Regardless of whether we're using the actual *Quadriga* or three or nineteen as you mention, how does that compare to or differ from the way we read the text now and try to get a literal interpretation?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question because I think it's very important to understand that when we read the Bible, we're not simply reading "the cow went the street" and leaving it at that. That's way over-simplifying even what we, as Christians, want to do today. What we want to do is to know "and so what?" Okay? What are the implications of that? What are the theological implications of that? What does it tell us about God? What does it tell us about life or us today? What does it tell us about Jesus coming back? What kind of expectations should it create? There have been books written in recent years that argue that there's a close analogy to what we do as Christians today with the Bible and to these kinds of mysterious, mystical readings of the medieval period. I don't think those books are entirely wrong, but there is something I think that is very important to distinguish here, and that is that Protestants work very hard to draw out those applications of the Bible from the original meaning, to show that there are logical connections, that there are implications or deductions from these passages. The Westminster Confession says that either things are expressly taught in Scripture or they are by good and necessary deduction to be brought out of the Bible. And so there's the sense in which if you read a text and it says something like, "the cow went down the street," well that does have all kinds of logical implications for other things, like God made it, and that one day there will be cows in the new world, and all kinds of things, okay? But it probably doesn't talk about Jesus going down the streets of gold, because it would be hard to draw that kind of theological connection. And that's the difference. We look at original meaning as sort of the foundational key understanding that sets a trajectory, and from that trajectory, then we build out and we add, as it were, or we draw out the implications of what that text originally said.

Question 7:
Were there good aspects of the medieval Roman Catholic Church?

Student: Richard, from some of the earlier questions that we've already asked, people might get the impression that the medieval Catholic Church was all bad, it was all evil, there was nothing redeeming about it. How would you respond to that?

Dr. Pratt: Well if people get that impression from me, let me just make it as clear as I can, I don't think that's true. The medieval Roman Catholic Church was a huge thing with all kinds of different variations and different kinds of people in it. There

are many firm, solid, and godly believers in the body of Christ from the beginning and to the end, and I think that's just something we're promised from God, that we will have good, well-intending Christians. The difficulty, of course, any time you talk about any period of history of the church is that sometimes you just have to make generalizations. And if you are wanting to make a generalization that sort of sets you up for the next generalization, then you go one way or the other, which is what this lesson is about. But, yeah, it's certainly true that there are pockets of Christians all over the medieval church right up to the time of the Reformation. It's not as if the great theologians of the church of the past were all evil or that they were all trying to deceive people, and that all of them were just trying to make the Bible say what they wanted it to say.

We've already mentioned that there were certain sorts of practical elements that almost made it necessary for them to substitute the teachings of the church for the teachings of the Bible. It's easy for us in our day to think that, well, why didn't they just let people read the Bible? Well the answer to that is there were no Bibles to be read, and that's why they didn't do it. And when they did have Bibles to be read, they had to protect them because they had to keep them out from the public because they would be destroyed and that sort of thing. I mean, can you imagine today if we lived in this country or some other modern country and you only had one Bible in a church, would you pass it around? I don't think so. What you'd do is stand in front maybe and read a little bit of it and hope that maybe somebody could memorize a phrase or two from it.

If you want to put the best spin on it, that's what the medieval church was trying to do. They were, again, with the best spirit — the ones that were honest and honorable — they were trying to minister to people who just were locked out of the possibility of having Bibles in their hands. And that's really not very different from the early church. The early first century church also did not have a proliferation of Bibles. And you know why? No printing press, no moveable type printing press. So here we are in the modern world where we can make books by the bazillions without even thinking about it, for pennies, and we think that's the way it always has been. Many Christians I know have multitudes of Bibles on their shelves — of course we don't read them, we just look at them — but we have them. And so we can't even imagine a church that doesn't have the Bible all over it. It's an odd thing. It's an oddity in history for people to go to church with Bible in hand, because people just didn't have it.

And when you also have a constituency, a congregation, that's uneducated, that can't understand the sorts of things that we talk about in church today, let's face it, even though many churches are very sort of low, or say, dumbing down the gospel, they're still by comparison talking to people who are highly literate and highly educated if they're in the West. Now that's not true everywhere in the world, but they are in the West. And so we have this sort of inability to connect to the realities of the medieval period, where magic was everywhere, where superstition was everywhere, and where the common folklore was everywhere, and that this was so prevalent among people that the church had to, in many respects, speak to that, and speak to it in ways that

people that were wrapped up in that kind of folk religion could understand. So it's not entirely evil, but now that we're past those days, we've got to be careful not to make mistakes like they made back then. I think that's the critical thing.

Question 8:
How does the modern Roman Catholic Church interpret the Bible?

Student: It sounds like you're saying that the danger is being anachronistic in our critique of the medieval church.

Dr. Pratt: That's right.

Student: So what you say today in the Roman Catholic Church… In your view, how does the Roman Catholic Church handle Scripture in relation to the original meaning of the authors if the medieval church failed to do that?

Dr. Pratt: That's very interesting, because when you think of the Roman Catholic Church today, worldwide, it is as broad on the theological spectrum as the Protestant faith is. You have people who we would call in circles liberal, who don't believe anything happened in the Bible that the Bible says because they've been influenced by higher criticism, and so they use all the techniques of liberal theologians that are Protestant. In fact, these people get together in societies and feel as if there is not big difference between them, because they're looking at the Bible scientifically now rather than looking at it is as a religious text. For instance, the Jesus Seminar has not only Protestants in it but Roman Catholics in it, and their job, of course, their goal is to figure out what Jesus really said and to strip the Bible of all the additions that Bible writers put on it. So you'll find extremes in that end.

But you'll also find across the spectrum extremes on the other end that look a whole lot like the medieval period, and this is where you'll find Roman Catholics ministering in, shall we call them, preliterate or sub-literate cultures where you still have in this world places where people are not reading, or if they're reading at all they're not reading very much. And even though most countries now have Bibles — even the Roman Catholic Church does — in the majority language of a country, with tribal peoples, they're often not speakers of the majority language. You can go to places like Central and South America where there are still tribal people that don't have a Bible in their language that's approved of by the Catholic Church. Now they may have a Spanish or a Portuguese Bible, but they can't understand that, and so what you find is as the priests minister in those arenas, they continue the practices of the medieval period. That question may be raised, why should we do this? The answer is because the church has always done this; the pope says we should do this; this is the way the body of Christ has always done it — appeal to the authority of the church rather than the authority of the Scriptures. And again, why? Largely because they have no option.

Now there are in the middle Roman Catholics who are a lot like Protestants who try to orient everything they do to what the Bible says. A lot of charismatic Catholics will be this way. They like Bible study, and in fact, Pope John Paul actually encouraged small group Bible studies in the Catholic Church during his reign. I don't know what's going on at this point, but he did. And this caused great revival movements. In fact, I was involved in some of those in Poland and the like where they would have small group Bible studies. And so it's a fascinating thing that the Catholic Church is all over the spectrum. But it is interesting, isn't it, that when you go to a place where they are preliterate you still have the same old techniques being used; you've got to have somebody explain these things that the Bible — which is unavailable to them — they think teaches. And you've got to speak with authority: I am the priest, I am representing the Church, I am representing apostolic authority, I am representing papal authority — and so it ends up in many respects becoming much like they had in the medieval period.

Question 9:
Did the Reformers really get their methods of interpretation from the Renaissance?

Student: You mention in the lesson that the early Reformers got their way of reading Scripture from the renaissance period. Can you tell me a little more about that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it's a little known fact actually and one that Protestants don't like to admit, because we want to say we got our way of reading the Bible from Jesus. That's what we want to say. But historically speaking, it's not quite that simple. The medieval church had such a hold on how to interpret the Bible — because again, the Bible wasn't much available — that it really wasn't as simple as people saying, "Okay, now we're doing to do it a different way. " Certain cracks had to be made in that hold, and the crack started happening when during the Renaissance, just prior to the Reformation, people began to discover old texts of the Greek writers, for example, and Latin texts of Roman writers, some of them religious texts, others of them just poetry, lyrical poetry and things like that. And in those days, wealthy people would often be sponsors or patrons of scholars unlike today where schools generally speaking sponsor scholars. In those days, wealthy people would. If you had lots of money, you always wanted some scholar attached to your manor or something like that. And prior to the days of the Renaissance, most of these scholars were paid by their patrons to work on biblical things, to work on theology, and to do that within the confines of the church because this was a way in which you actually got good standing in the church, you know, you'd pay for some priest to work on some text or something like that related to the Bible.

But then as these other texts began to be exposed, Greek texts and Latin texts, these wealthy patrons began to become very interested in that. Because during the medieval period in Europe, there was this sort of underground Christianity that was actually pagan, and they were discovering in these old texts different attitudes toward morality, toward sexuality, things like that, that they liked — to be perfectly frank — and they liked it more than what the official Catholic line was; the unofficial line was probably more like what they were doing. And so when they would find these pagan texts and they would read them, they wanted to know more, and so wealthy people began to support the translation of, and the commentary, on those kinds of passages.

Well, what's a scholar to do? The scholar who works on those kinds materials does not have the church canons to guide him. There's no right way to interpret; you don't lay the fourfold interpretation on it; you don't have any way of getting the church's authoritative stamp on it. So what you do is you begin to try to uncover what these texts meant, and the basic technique was you read it as it was originally intended to be read. So rather than reading in the light of the theology of the church, you began to read the Greek text as if it were Greek. Imagine that! As if it were written by pagans back in their day. And the Latin texts the same ways. And the Latin translations of the Greek texts the same ways. It wasn't until the Renaissance that we even began to have in Europe anything but Arabic translations of Aristotle. They began to uncover fragments here and libraries there that had old Greek translations or records of it, as well as Latin, but up to that point, basically it was Arabic and you had to read Arabic in order to even understand Aristotle. So it was very interesting how this happened. And it opens the door for the influence of Aristotelian philosophy in the church later on during the medieval period.

So you get this whole movement then that scholarship is no longer subservient to the church, subservient to the laws of interpretation and the ways that the esoteric interpretations of the church had laid out. But rather, it's much more realistic — it's what we would call realistic. You would start interpreting a passage like it was meant to be interpreted by the original writer as much as you possibly could.

Question 10:
How did the interpretive methods of the Reformers accord with Scripture?

Student: Richard, you seem to be saying that we got our ability to interpret and even read Scripture in sort of the modern way that we do now from the Renaissance, but why was that necessary as opposed to simply using the Bible as the Bible?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's good. That's a great question because you could get that impression from me that it simply came from the Renaissance. So what's better about the Renaissance than Neoplatonism for that matter? The Renaissance was the

historical cause of this in many respects in that it broke the stranglehold that the church had on the interpretation of text. Prior to that time Aristotle, Plato, all these texts were always interpreted by the church. But once that stranglehold was broken, a new method developed. But it wasn't a method that was entirely new. That's the point. It wasn't something that everyone said, "Well we must do this now because of the influence of neo-paganism in Europe now and the reading of these ancient pagan texts." Rather, it simply began to open the door.

Take Martin Luther as the example. We all know that Martin Luther read Romans 1 and this was his big conversion, you know, that justification comes by faith unto faith, righteousness from God as revealed in the gospel is from faith to faith, and that line "faith to faith," what did it mean? Well the Catholic Church during the medieval period, they had plenty of ideas of what that meant. Plenty! And it wasn't as if Martin Luther was without an interpretation of that passage. But his problem was he read the passage, and he read it as if he were a Renaissance scholar. In other words, he asked what did Paul mean by this? He didn't want to know what the church meant by it. They had dealt with it sufficiently in their minds, but he wanted to know what Paul meant by it. And historically that motif came largely, not entirely, but largely from the sort of momentum of the Renaissance, and then it made him realize that what the church had said this passage meant wasn't right because the church was in effect saying faith unto works. And he was saying, "No, no. What Paul says here from beginning to end is faith unto faith, faith by faith," and so on and so on as you variously translate the passage in Romans 1.

And so it's fascinating to see that and then to realize that people like John Calvin was trained in law, and by this time the study of law was also deeply influenced by the Renaissance. And so you were concerned with Roman law, and you were concerned with Greek law and how they organized their societies, and not just ecclesiastical law, not just what the pope said, not just what the church said. And so even he had that kind of mentality of the way to get at what a text means is by asking, what did it mean originally? What did it mean back when it was first written? And we give proper credence to what the church has said, but we don't give them absolute authority to interpret it for us. And so in many ways, the method of the Reformation goes back earlier than the Renaissance, and it never disappeared completely even in the medieval church, but it was highlighted; it was opened up; it was prepared for by the Renaissance movement.

Question 11:
How did first-century Christians interpret the Bible?

Student: Richard, there's a lot of talk nowadays about the possibility, or even the necessity of returning to a first century hermeneutical approach as being superior to the reformers. What is your take on that? How would you respond?

Dr. Pratt: Well, of course that would be a lovely thing to be able to do if in the first place we could do it. But there are lots of problems with all that talk that's going on these days about how to understand how Second Temple people, or first century Christians in fact, as well as Jews, were interpreting the Bible. Basically the story goes like this, that we can look at the ways that different Jewish communities in Palestine interpreted the Old Testament, and then we can see some parallels in the New Testament, and then we ought to see that as a Christian endorsement of those approaches, and therefore, that ought to be our standard. Well the difficulties in that scenario are enormous. In the first place, to say that there are certain ways to interpret the Bible among the Jews is a different thing to derive. The fact is that there were many different ways that Jewish people interpreted the Bible before Christianity came, and even after Christianity came. And it's almost as diverse as you could possibly imagine, almost like vegetable soup it's so diverse.

But then also, if you think about Christianity and the New Testament, what we have in the New Testament are things that do look at least superficially a little bit like the kinds of things that went on among the Jews in Palestine during the first century B.C. and before. And this is true, but they are very superficial. It would be like taking something that I wrote today and finding people a thousand years from now looking back on it and finding that something I said looked like something that some cult said in America during my day. And on the basis of the fact that I had said that thing and they had said that thing, that our theologies were the same, or that our approaches were the same. It's just tidbits that we have to begin with, and to reconstruct a whole method of interpretation on the basis of that is very weak to say the least. I think it's fair to say that groups like at Qumran, at the Dead Sea, in their book the *Pesher Habakkuk* — the commentary on Habakkuk — that was wild, crazy interpretations. It was very eisegetical. They were reading lots of things into the prophecies of Habakkuk to support their particular religious sect. There's no question that's the case. I mean, it's wild and crazy readings of it. But at the same time, I don't think we should say the same kind of thing about the New Testament.

The New Testament was very concerned about what we are calling the literal or the original meaning. They were very concerned about this. Now they didn't say things that are obviously in accord with the original meaning, but with a little bit of work, for the most part anyway, we can show why Matthew did what he did with the Old Testament, or what Paul did with the Old Testament, and how it does look a lot like — maybe not absolutely identical with, but a lot like — what the Protestant Reformers were trying to do, where you uphold the authority of the Bible itself and of the inspired writer himself, and you use that as your ground for other kinds of applications or implications that you draw from it. And that's what's critical, it seems to me, as we think about the Reformation hermeneutic versus the first century hermeneutic.

Question 12:
Was Matthew concerned with the original meaning of Hosea?

Student: So how, if they're drawing on prophecies of the Old Testament, say, in Matthew, drawing off of Hosea — "Out of Egypt I have called my son" — when he applies that to Jesus, how is that not assuming there's only one original meaning?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's one of those classic passages that people point to because Hosea 11:1 says, "Out of Egypt did I call my son," and clearly from reading Hosea 11, Hosea the prophet was talking about the nation of Israel coming out of Egypt. It wasn't even a prediction. Okay? But Matthew says that this statement, "Out of Egypt did I call my son," was fulfilled by Jesus when he as a child came out of Egypt and came back to Nazareth. Well the problem there is that in many respects what we're doing is reading our own ideas of what fulfillment is and those kinds of things into that passage. And what you have to do is set Hosea within its larger context of what Israel represented for him as the people of God, and then think of Matthew and what Jesus represented for him as the King of the Jews and how kings act on behalf of their nations and those kinds of things. And with just a little bit of understanding of what Matthew was intending there and what his audience would have understood him to be saying, we can tell that Matthew was now reading into the Hosea passage but rather simply drawing out an implication, applying the Hosea passage to the life of Jesus. He's saying Jesus is the King of the Jews, and so he notices that Jesus actually went through the kind of experience that the Jews themselves went through.

Question 13:
Did the Reformers believe that Scripture could have multiple meanings?

Student: You talked in the lesson about original meaning in Scripture. The Reformers, though, did seem to believe that Scripture could have multiple meanings, the way we talked about with the medieval Catholic Church. Could you comment further on that?

Dr. Pratt: Well they certainly did in some respects. We mustn't think of this as if people were looking at multiple meanings in the Bible and then suddenly one day there a reformation and nobody ever did that again. That's not the way it happens. We're overgeneralizing when we say this is more of a stream of movement that actually took place away from looking for esoteric meanings to reorienting ourselves back to the original meaning or the literal meaning. Because if you look, for example, at Luther's commentaries on the Psalms, he'll actually use the terminology of the medievalists to refer to various ways in which this passage has implications for the church. But I do think there was a genuine shift away from the notion that these are secret meanings that are hidden from the populace, from normal eyes, and only we

the priests understand it, to, these are implications of the original meaning even though they use the same terminologies. You don't find that as much, though, in Calvin. You don't find much reference to that kind of thing in Calvin at all. It's more or less Luther in his early days of his work. I think that it's an amazing thing, really, that they were able to break as free as they were from the stranglehold, in many respects, that that fourfold meaning or multiple meaning approach had on them.

Question 14:
Why did the church move away from a polyvalent view of Scripture?

Student: We seem, though, to have moved as a church and as a body of Christ to have moved even further away from that sort of multiple meaning set even than the Reformers did. What is the reason for that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's a good question because as you know, lots of times that's not the case, right? I mean there are, like we've even said, there are Christians that still sort of have their own versions of secret meanings in the Bible. But I would say that by and large it's the result of the influence of modern science. I don't what else you could say. The influence of modern science even on orthodox, conservative, Protestant believers is enormous. A scientific mentality basically says you've got this text and it must be read within its historical context, and it must be read according to its original meaning. And that's what is most important — getting back to the original, getting back to the origins, that kind of thing. And it's an important feature of contemporary approaches that really does downplay multi-meaningfulness, with some exceptions, though, not just in radical groups but in more mainline groups in fact. Like you were mentioning, prophecy. Many times people will resort to this with prophecy; they'll sort of make a special plea for prophecy being multi-meaningful. I personally don't think that's necessary. I think there are better ways to approach it, but that's just the way it is. Have you experienced Christians that do this, that still look for multiple meanings?

Student: Well I don't even know so much if it's Christians as much as with the shift culturally in the postmodern sort of era. It seems to have a tendency to try to open up texts to further meaning and deeper meaning. So I was curious.

Dr. Pratt: Good, good. That is another issue altogether. You're right. You're bringing up something that I didn't even think of. And that is that nowadays we are in this sort of what's called post-structuralist hermeneutic where people are looking at any text, not just the Bible but any text, apart from a sort of scientific model. I'm thinking about evangelicals who are sort of stuck back fifty years ago. They're still looking at the Bible from a more grammatico-historical or scientific approach. But now we're sort of in a post-structuralist or post-scientific approach to texts. And that, as you know, in the postmodern vein has to do with the fact that people are looking at any text including the Bible as a power play, as somebody's power play over you,

potentially. And the best way to resist the power or the influence that the text is trying to have over you is to discount the original meaning and to say, "Oh no, this text — whatever it is, a poem, a story, a riddle, whatever it may be — can have many, many, many meanings and I can show you that it can. In fact, I can even destroy the meaning that the original writer wanted it to have by deconstructing it and then by reconstructing it with my own frame of reference."

Now that's a much more contemporary way of doing things. Happily, that has not entered into evangelical hermeneutics very much yet. It probably will in the future, but it's really not there yet. But broadly speaking, you're right. We're in a post-scientific, post-structuralist, but it's a new kind of polyvalence. It's not classical polyvalence as based on God having given us the Bible and therefore it has this sort of overflow of meaning, of secret divine meanings, but it's rather a polyvalence that comes from the fact that every reader ought to be able to read this exactly as he or she wants to read it according to their approach. And no one reading has priority over another. And of course what I would say to that is you have to give priority to the original meaning. And it is true that the Bible is a will to power. Would you say that's true? Is the Bible a will to power over us?

Student: Probably. A little uncomfortable to admit, depending on what you mean by that. But not all power is bad.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly. Because the fact is that Bible writers were trying to influence their readers, and they were trying to influence us. The difference is, of course, that they speak on God's behalf; they're inspired by Holy Spirit and therefore they have a right to do that. That's the difference between us, say, and *Mein Kampf*. Okay? That's the difference. The Bible was given to us by God and so it's attempt to influence, or its will to power over the reader is not something we're supposed to resist, but it's something we're supposed to submit to, and rightfully so, because it's given to us by our creator. And so that makes a big difference. But you're right to say that contemporary Protestant evangelical hermeneutics has shifted further away from the early Reformers, away from the multi-meaningfulness but now with this added feature that you bring up of contemporary post-structuralist hermeneutics as well.

Question 15:
Is every passage of Scripture limited to one, unified meaning?

Student: Richard, there seems to be this line of thought that certain passages, or maybe even all passages of Scripture should have only one unified and coherent meaning. What is your particular stance on that?

Dr. Pratt: That's a traditional way of putting it, that every passage has one meaning. I like that. I think there's some truth in that. In fact, it's in the Westminster Confession of Faith and so I sort of affirm that that's true. There's a sense in which

every passage has one meaning. But I do want to argue that the coherent unitary meaning of a passage, of any substantial length anyway, is manifold. That is, it's multifaceted. It's like a ruby with many different sides to it. And so it's not simply to say that when you say that one passage has one meaning, it doesn't mean that it's a simple meaning or a noncomplex meaning, but that it can have great complexion. In addition to the complexity of the original meaning, you know we also need to make a distinction, as is very common, of the difference between the original meaning which is one and the fact that every passage has many applications to life. You've heard that kind of thing before, right, that every passage has many implications even though it has just one meaning?

Student: Right, maybe even thinking about the commandment to love God. That looks different for different people. For some people that'll look like — selling their possessions. We see that even in Jesus' ministry. He doesn't command everyone to sell everything and go and follow him in the same way. Some people follow him having their possessions, using their possessions to benefit the poor. Or even like maybe for contemporary Christians, for some Christians loving God might mean reading their Bibles more, learning more about him. For some Christians we get stuck assuming, okay, the daily devotion is the most important thing. Maybe some of us need to step back and say, okay, I need to get more involved in the community, I need to express my love for God through more acts or mercy, more acts of service. It's sort of that balancing you talked about elsewhere with our thinking, with our actions and with our emotions, and that loving God happens in all of those things.

Dr. Pratt: And you can't do them all at once.

Student: Right, right.

Dr. Pratt: And not every single person needs to do it in exactly the same way. The same principle that's derived from that one meaning can have many applications. Now when I talk about the original meaning being multifaceted, I want to make a slightly different approach to this, because it's very common to hear people saying today among Protestants, "one meaning, many applications." But I want to complicate that just a little bit, and that is to say, there is one meaning but there are many summaries of that meaning, many legitimate summaries of that one original meaning because no summary can embrace the entire thing, can be comprehensive of everything that that passage meant. So you'll get this summary, and that summary, and that summary, all of which many be perfectly legitimate, perfectly right, but then out of those multiple summaries of the original meaning come even more applications.

If you take a passage like John 3:16, I mean, how many ways could you summarize John 3:16 and still tell the truth? You could say John 3:16 teaches us that God loves. You could say that it teaches that Jesus died for sinners. You could say that anyone who believes in Jesus will be saved. That's at least three ways we could summarize John 3:16, all of which are true to the original meaning. But from those multiple

summaries of the original meaning then come even more manifold applications as you apply that to different people, because everybody needs to understand God's love different ways for their lives as they live their lives before Christ. And so it's true that confessionally we speak in terms of one meaning, a unitary meaning, but if we can remember that that doesn't mean it's simple or just the kind of thing you can put in one tiny little phrase, but rather that it's a manifold thing that has multiple legitimate summaries which then lead to even more applications in the modern world.

Question 16:
Did the Reformers base their theology entirely on their exegesis of Scripture?

Student: In an earlier lesson you referred to the resources used for forming archeology, the exegesis of Scripture, the interaction in community, and our personal experiences. How do you see the Reformers using those? Do you see the Reformers using those?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question because a lot of times what you get is the impression that what the Reformers did was they simply went to the exegesis of Scripture and ignored everything else, right? Let's get back to the Bible and that they rejected the church, and that they didn't care about their religious experience, their personal Christian living, that kind of thing. I don't think that's fair of them. It is true that there was an emphasis in the Reformation on, let's look at the Bible again, and we've said that. Let's look in fact at the original meaning of the Bible in its own context, its own history. Let's go for that. Let's do more careful exegesis than we did before. But the Reformers did not ignore their personal experience, that's for sure, because it was Luther's conversion experience that was so dramatic in propelling him forward. And so they did rely on their own sense of conscience, their own walk with God, the filling of Holy Spirit. In fact, John Calvin was known as the theologian of the Holy Spirit because he emphasized the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit so much. What do you think? Do you think that the Reformers ignored the church?

Student: I don't think so. Both Calvin and Luther appealed to St. Augustine at times.

Dr. Pratt: They did, that's right. Because the Reformers did not just go back to the Bible. It wasn't like many people today where they said, "All I need is the Bible and Jesus and me and I've got it all together." I mean, that's just not the way they thought about things. They did emphasize the authority of Scripture as the only infallible, the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and life. And so that's true, but they also appealed to the church. In fact, as different editions of Calvin's Institutes were made, there were increasing numbers of references to the patriarchal period of the church, the patristic period of the church, and the early Fathers were very important to him. And of course Christian living was as well. So it's all three of these resources that

we're to use — that the Holy Spirit normally uses to bring us to understand truth — were at the very heart of the Reformation. And they need to be again today.

This is part of the problem here. It's that we're in a situation where you have some people who say all I need is the Bible. No, that's not true. You do need the church. You do need the church of the past as well as the present. And many Christians are saying I don't really need my religious experience anymore. Well, yes you do. It's not an intellectual thing. It's an experiential thing. And so all three of these, exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and Christian living are essential to finding truth, and it was essential to the Reformation as well.

Question 17:
How clear are the teachings of Scripture?

Student: Richard, can you elaborate a little bit on the areas of clarity, I think you call it.

Dr. Pratt: The degrees of clarity.

Student: The degrees of clarity. Can you elaborate on that from the lesson a little bit?

Dr. Pratt: Well there are these extreme where some people would argue that nothing in the Bible is clear. Now that can be done traditionally, and then it can also be done in a contemporary way when people now say nothing is clear. That's one extreme: no clarity in the Bible. The other extreme is to say everything is crystal clear. What's wrong with you? Can't you see it the way I see it? Which is what it usually amounts to, because there are people that just go crazy over how much they think they understand about the Bible over here. So you've got those extremes. And the traditional Protestant view is that there are degrees of clarity in the Bible so that not all of the Bible is as clear as other parts of the Bible. And again, the sort of traditional way of thinking about that is that what's necessary or essential for salvation is clear in one part or another in the Bible. You see, that's saying a whole lot right there, because you're saying first that what a person needs to know to be saved to everlasting life is clear in the Bible but not clear everywhere; it's clear in one place or another. And so that's very interesting to me because it's the sort of thing where you end up sort of saying, okay, well then exactly what parts tell us what part of salvation.

Student: But aren't there areas though that are clear but don't really have to do with the dogmatic, if you will, tenants of salvation, for instance, the creation. Is it fairly clear that God created the world? Isaac is the son of Abraham?

Dr. Pratt: Those are good examples, yeah. And I think that's one way I wish we in many respects could sort of modify the traditional Protestant view. What's essential

for salvation is clear in one place or another, but then there is a ton of other things that are clear, too. Like you say, who was the son of Abraham? Well, that's pretty clear. And so I would want to argue like you're saying here that there are lots and lots of things in the Bible, but the focus has been on what's essential for salvation.

But let me say this because I think this is important. We do live in a day where people are going to these extremes. We run into people who say everything in the Bible is clear, and then you run into people who say that nothing in the Bible is clear. So let me talk about the people that say nothing in the Bible is clear for just a minute because I think it's important to realize this. You know, we have this little nursery rhyme that goes something like, "Mary had a little lamb whose fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go. It followed her to school one day which was against the rules." Okay? I don't know the rest of it, but that's basically what it says. Now there are parts of that little nursery rhyme that are unclear. They're problematic, because the last line I just quoted was, "It followed her to school one day." Well, I thought the lamb went everywhere that Mary went. So why did it follow her to school *one day*? That's a problem, right? I mean, was that the first day of school? Is that the reason? Had Mary never been to school before? Was the lamb a new purchase or something? There are all kinds of answers to it, but it's a difficulty. So there's a crack in that little nursery rhyme. It's something that's not real perfectly clear. But I think most of us would agree that the nursery rhyme is saying this to us: there was a little girl, and her name was Mary, and she had a little lamb. Now it wasn't that this lamb was large and that Mary was just a giant. Okay? She's a little girl whose name is Mary, a little schoolgirl, and she had a lamb. Now we might not know exactly how to take "It followed her to school one day," but we can get the core. We can get the core of what that nursery rhyme was telling us. And that's what Protestants mean when they say that there are degrees of clarity. You may not know the answer to every single thing in the Bible, but you can know the core issues of salvation and, as you added, other things as well. I mean, are there things in the Bible you can think of that are not clear?

Student: Well, even the imagery used in Revelation to communicate apocalyptically with what John writes there.

Dr. Pratt: Right. Exactly. If there's anything that's unclear, it's the book of Revelation. Though aren't we surprised at how many people think they know exactly what it means! But of course, over and over again, their interpretations of Revelation fail which is, I think, telling, isn't it? So we have to be careful not to go to these two extremes. Early Protestants sort of over-stated the amount of clarity there was in the Bible because they were resisting the Roman Catholics who were arguing nothing's clear, that's why you need the church to make it clear. And they resisted that by going sort of to the other extreme early on saying, "No, no, no, it's perfectly clear. Any fool, any farmer can read it." Of course the problem with that was that the Reformers started finding themselves disagreeing among themselves. It didn't take long, just a few years before they couldn't agree on what the Bible meant about certain things like the meaning of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. I mean, that's a

perfect example of how they disagreed with each other. And so eventually, certainly by the time you get to the Puritans, you get this notion that, okay, the Bible is clearer in some things than in other things so that the learned and the unlearned alike can understand the essentials of salvation. But then there are some things that can only be understood by the learned — to use the old term, the scholar. And then there are some things that even the scholars can't understand, can't fix, can't put together, like the book of Revelation. And so I just think we have to learn to live with that and not be thrown off by that.

A lot of times when young students hear that for the first time, they're concerned because they are afraid they are going to be thrown into this abyss of skepticism and cynicism and that they won't be able to say anything about the Bible anymore because it doesn't all just come at you crystal clear. But it's not the case. Even "Mary Had a Little Lamb" is not crystal clear. And yet we can get the core, the center of what it means without any problem. The competent reader of the Bible can also get the center that salvation comes in Christ and Christ alone. And that is what we mean when we talk about degrees of clarity in the Bible.

Question 18:
Should we use clear passages of Scripture to interpret unclear passages?

Student: Richard, I've heard the principle that when we come upon unclear passages of Scripture we should use clearer ones to interpret those. How do we decide in this principle — I've just been confused by this — how do we decide what qualifies as a clear passage of Scripture and what qualifies as an unclear passage? How do we do that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, because people disagree. That's right. They disagree over which one's clear and which one's not so clear. That's exactly why we have different denominations. Because everybody's going to latch on to the verses they thing are clear — perfectly clear, anybody can read it, anybody can see this. And then you have another group that says well that verse is not so clear. And so in some ways, while we can affirm the principle that the clear passages ought to be used to interpret the unclear passages, the reality is that you have to decide which ones you think are clear. Okay? And that's the problem, because we have to work very hard and be very responsible not to simply rely upon what we sort of have as an intuition of what's clear. My own experience anyway, and I'm sure you've had this, too, is that I've thought that certain verses were clear and then came to find out later that they weren't so clear after all. And that's just the reality of it.

Now what I suggest to people as a basic principle is you have to work at this using all three resources that we've talked about before. If you want to decide if a verse is really clear, then you have to do first very careful exegesis of it. You have to work at that, just looking at the text and working at its context and those kinds of things — so

doing exegesis of Scripture. But you also then have to rely on the body of Christ — interaction in community — to know whether or not a passage is clear. If we believe that the church is where Holy Spirit lives in his fullness, and Christians disagree over what the meaning of a passage is — and I don't just mean a little bit, but I mean a lot, and that this has been something that's been going on for thousands of years, that Holy Spirit-filled Christians have disagreed over what this verse means — it's very unlikely that your clear understanding is going to trump what the church has thought for two thousand years. But if there's a unanimity about it among Christians, then you can have more confidence that it's clear. And then the third thing — Christian living — is that when you start trying to apply your understanding of a verse to your Christian life, then perhaps that thing will clarify whether or not the passage is as clear as you thought it was. That's just the reality of it.

Question 19:
Is John 3:16 a clear passage?

Student: Now you had mentioned a couple of questions ago, John 3:16. Can you go back to that? Is that a clear passage for readers?

Dr. Pratt: Well that's great. Way to go. Because I think that's really important. It's how you define what a passage is. Okay? Any passage of substantial length, like a verse, will have aspects of it that are clearer than others. This also complicates it. It kind of messes it up a little bit here. I would say the three of us would probably agree that the passage does teach clearly, I mean crystal clearly, that those who believe in Jesus will not perish but have everlasting life. Okay, fine. But we know that Christians disagree over certain aspects of that verse, like what does it mean to say that God loves the world? Does that mean that he loves everybody the same way? Does it mean that he has the same affection for every single person that has ever walked on this planet? Some Christians say "yes" and some Christians say "no." I don't know how you can say that looking at the planet, but that's what they do. I don't' know how you can say that he does have the same love when he seems to treat some people better than others, but that's just my opinion. But that's the way people do it. They disagree over that aspect of it.

Here's another aspect of John 3:16 that they would disagree over, and that's the word "eternal life." What's the nature of eternal life? Some people, well-meaning Christians, believe that eternal life is living in heaven forever as a ghost-like figure playing a harp and singing in the choir. Well, I don't think that's what the Bible teaches, so when I hear the words "everlasting life" I think of the new heavens and the new earth, the physical earth that Christian is going to bring us, and not just for a thousand years but forever. So when I hear "everlasting life" it means something a little bit different to me. And then the reality is that Christians have disagreed over that aspect, and so we have to sort of lower our confidence about the clarity of it.

But do you remember that "Mary Had a Little Lamb" thing that I did? It's very important to realize that even in a verse as short as John 3:16, there are features of it that are clearer than others. And so, as you start interpreting one verse in light of another based upon its clarity, in the extreme cases that's fairly easy to do. Okay? In the extreme cases. Like we don't have to worry that James was telling us that we're saved by our works — and that would be, of course, a bad interpretation of James. Now let's admit that when James says that Abraham was not justified by his faith alone but also by his works that that could lead someone to be confused about that. So we tend to read that passage in James in light of the clearer passages about how works flow from saving faith rather than works being added to saving faith. Okay. So that's fine. In extreme cases that's okay. But then there are some things where you're going to find a relatively similar degree of clarity and unclarity in given passages, and then you have to be very careful not to just let you prejudices push you into thinking, "This verse is clear and this verse is clear," because then you're just sort of allowing your prejudices to run roughshod. So that's why I think that careful exegesis, interaction in the Christian community both in the past and present, and then your Christian living have to be factored in and brought together to help us understand which passages are clearer than others, and then to use that principle that you mentioned.

Question 20:
Should we hold all our beliefs with equal conviction?

Student: Richard, you were very clear in the lessons on the video, but as you spoke about these things and about the obscurity and the differences in clarity, I was starting to feel as though a lot of the things that I believed, and many of the things even that I believed, became less and less clear and less and less believable, if you will, due to the uncertainty factors involved.

Dr. Pratt: Right, right. That's often a reaction people have, especially at first, because sometimes, I think sometimes as evangelicals we're told that if you believe something, then you're going to have this sort of utter conviction that it's true, and that the way you're thinking about it right now is the way you should always think about it. And so it's this kind of extreme of dogmatism. And people often give you the impression that your choice is either that or skepticism — "I don't know anything. Ahh! I've lost everything." I think the reality is that we live in the middle and that a responsible way of dealing with ourselves and our knowledge and our convictions, our theological formulations, is somewhere in the middle; sometimes a little toward the skeptical, sometimes a little toward the dogmatic, but never out there in those extremes.

Think of the problem of saying that what I think about something is utterly dogmatic, and I'm going to be that way about it, and that means it cannot be improved upon. Now we believe that only the Bible has that status. Only the Bible is something that

cannot be improved upon. Okay? And so that means that every interpretation that I give to the Bible, even if I'm just quoting the Bible — even the meanings that I'm attaching to it in my mind — it doesn't equal the Bible in its status. It's slightly short of that. And so it's important for us to just sort of accept the fact that we're part of the human race, and this is part of what it means to be the human race. It's that we don't have everything that God has, and so we don't have utter knowledge of anything. We know that Jesus is our savior, but I am hoping that you have grown in your understanding of that, and I'm hoping that you'll continue to grow in your understanding of that.

So while it's true, you can't be utterly dogmatic as to what you mean when you say Jesus is your Savior. But knowing that doesn't throw you into the abyss of skepticism. This is the problem. You know, we have many things in life that we deal with that way. In fact almost every single thing every day our lives, we can't be absolutely sure we know everything that we need to know about something, but that doesn't throw us into skepticism and immobilize us. In fact, if you do, if you are immobilized by it, we would call it a psychological disorder. And I think we know that's true. Are there things in your life that you don't know everything about, you can be utterly dogmatic about, but you can still function?

Student: There are a lot of things in my life I don't know everything about, but as you sat there and said that, I was just thinking of the example of driving a car. To be honest with you, I know virtually nothing about auto mechanics or engine work or anything else, but I can drive one.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. Sometimes that funny noise starts happening and it doesn't make any difference. You sort of go, "Well, it's got a funny noise." Other times it's dramatic in effect and your car stops. But the reality is that most of the time in life that's the way it is. I mean, think of just a spark plug. You know, after about ten miles a spark plug is not functioning at 100 percent, but does that mean your care is not running anymore? No. Your car continues to run. Your body is not functioning at 100 percent and hasn't for many, many, many years — I could tell you that — but does that mean you're not alive anymore? No. How long have you been married?

Student: Almost four years.

Dr. Pratt: Four years. Okay. Do you know everything about your spouse?

Student: Absolutely not.

Dr. Pratt: How long have you been married?

Student: About three and a half.

Dr. Pratt: Three and a half. Do you know everything about your spouse?

Student: No.

Dr. Pratt: No. Okay. Does that mean you nothing about them?

Students: No.

Dr. Pratt: Now sometimes you are surprised. I've been married thirty-five years. I don't know everything about my spouse. And sometimes I'm still surprised. But that doesn't mean that I don't know anything. And that's just the way life is. That's being a human being. And we don't do something special when it comes to understanding the Bible or understanding theology. It's a similar thing. You don't have to be absolutely confident about every detail of something to believe it. And if you're unsure about something, it doesn't throw you into utter skepticism. We've got to begin to assess how confident we can be, how far we can go, whether we need to shave the edges or fuzz up the edges a little bit, that kind of thing. That's what we need to do.

Student: Well it seems like we would be able to do that with what you've talked about earlier with the different resources that we're given, like the exegesis of Scripture, the interaction in community, our Christian living, and see how what Scripture teaches works out in life in light of other Scripture passages, and as we were talking with the clarity and unclarity, using clear passages to exegete less clear passages, and also just historically. I think you mentioned at one point that Calvin and Luther relied on Augustine and we can follow that example in how we formulate our doctrines to see what the church believed before. And with what we believe about Jesus, that he was both God and man, we get that terminology from the early church.

Dr. Pratt: Right, not straight from the Bible.

Student: From early counsels, from the creeds, that those were theological formulations that throughout church history have been affirmed as true, as true summaries of what Scripture teaches.

Dr. Pratt: Right. And then our Christian living, too. Our personal Christian living is another resource that we have. You know, that's just the way you do things in life. We draw on many different resources. We kind of compile them together, and that helps us understand whether I can walk out on that ice on that lake or not. And sometimes you don't do it right. Sometimes you over-assess. Or sometimes you walk around the lake when you didn't have to. I mean, that's just the reality of living in this world. And until we're perfect, that's the way we're going to have to live with theology. But again, the danger, the fear that people have is what you expressed at the beginning, and that is, well, does that mean I can't know anything? No! You can know all kinds of things. This is the wonderful thing about it.

But as we tried to say in the lesson, the funny thing about learning more is that it exposes you to things that you don't know, and the more you learn about God from the Scriptures, the more you understand that you don't know things. What used to be very simple now becomes more complex. It's just like blowing up a balloon. As the balloon of knowledge grows, the surface area increases. Okay? It increases much faster than the volume inside, and so as you learn more things, you're awareness of your ignorance is also growing. Now that doesn't pop the balloon and mean that you don't know anything. It simply means you're more aware of how much you don't know. And in many respects, that's Christian growth. What I have found is that especially young students of theology, what they tend to do is they think of theology as something you get that gets bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and you're just going to cover everything and eventually know everything that you need to know. Well it's just not true. If your knowledge of the Bible and your knowledge of theology is growing, as I hope it is, then what it's going to do is expose you to the fact that you know even less than you thought you did. We're dealing with a big God here, and while it doesn't destroy what we know, it does expose us to what we don't know. And that's one of those great things about avoiding the extreme of dogmatism and avoiding the extreme of skepticism and living here in the middle with different degrees of certainty and different degrees of conviction about what we believe.

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.