

Building Your Theology

Lesson Guide

LESSON
TWO

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY



THIRD MILLENNIUM
MINISTRIES

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:28)

II. Christian Theology (2:11)

Terminology can refer to:

- what Christians *actually* believe
- what Christians *ought* to believe

A. Problems with Definitions (3:09)

One of the greatest problems: finding ways to distinguish Christian theology from non-Christian theology.

Many schools of theology blend Christian and non-Christian thought, making it difficult at times to separate genuine Christianity from other faiths.

It is very difficult to know precisely what elements are essential for a theology to be genuinely Christian.

B. Working Definition (9:25)

The Apostles Creed:

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.

For our purposes, all theology that accords with this creed will be counted as Christian theology.

C. Unity and Diversity (12:48)

Theology in the Christian faith is both unified and diverse.

1. Unified Theology (13:23)

Christians agree on a number of core beliefs that distinguish them from cults and other world religions.

The doctrinal unity of the church should be a goal that all Christians have.

It is our responsibility to promote ever-increasing theological unity within the body of Christ.

2. **Multiple Theologies (17:46)**

While Christian theology is unified to varying degrees, it is also important to acknowledge and accept degrees of diversity within it.

a. **Human limitations**

Some differences exist simply because we cannot represent every theological truth with equal force.

Redeemed people express different aspects of their faith:

- in accordance with their own cultural settings
- in response to their own particular needs

b. **Sinfulness and Error**

Differences result when persons or groups stray into false doctrines, practices and paths.

To discern error, we need to be:

- self-critical, ready to forsake any false beliefs that have entered our theology
- ready to help other believers improve their understandings as well

III. Christian Traditions (23:14)

A. Defining “Tradition” (23:54)

1. Negative Definition (24:20)

Today, the term “tradition” has very negative connotations because it is closely associated with what we will call “traditionalism.”

Traditionalism bases theological beliefs on human references, usually longstanding traditional preferences, rather than on the Scriptures.

Followers of Christ should reject traditionalism because it gives to mere human opinion the authority that rightly belongs only to Scripture.

2. **Positive Definition (25:47)**

Paul viewed Christian faith as a tradition to be passed from person to person, and from generation to generation.

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

- “a relatively longstanding doctrine, practice, or pathos”

Only beliefs enjoying years of acceptance rightly qualify as traditions.

- “distinguishes branches of the church from each other”

When believers share common outlooks over a long period of time, these outlooks become their distinctive theological paths.

B. Tendencies of Traditions (28:40)

Different theological traditions within Christianity tend to fall into one or two of three categories:

- those who emphasize doctrine
- those who stress practice
- those who accentuate pathos

1. Doctrine (29:16)

- Their teaching ministries and doctrinal stances form the heart of their Christian faith.
- Can be heavily preoccupied with doctrinal controversies.
- Usually insist on a large measure of doctrinal uniformity.
- Often leads to intellectualism.

2. Practice (29:58)

- Their Christian service and programs of action are their greatest strength.
- Often have long lists of dos and don'ts for their members.
- Often reduce the Christian faith to mere activity.
- Often leads to legalism.

3. Pathos (30:33)

- Religious affections are so highly valued that many times little else matters.
- Don't want to be bothered with doctrine or behaviors, unless they make them feel better.
- Often characterized by emotionalism.

C. Importance of Traditions (31:22)**1. Awareness of Ourselves (31:49)**

The goal of serious academic study of the Bible from the Enlightenment forward was to divorce oneself from theological prejudices and traditions.

Modern liberalism is the result of applying these modernist Enlightenment agenda to theology.

It is beneficial know more and more about the heritage that constantly influences us. Self-awareness enables us to evaluate and manage some of these influences.

2. Awareness of Others (34:47)

Whenever we discuss theology with other believers, we must always remember their associations and traditions heavily influence their:

- convictions
- agenda
- priorities
- strengths
- weaknesses

And the more we recognize this about others, the more fruitful our interactions can be.

IV. Reformed Tradition (35:39)

A. Origins and Developments (37:27)

The term “Reformed theology” comes from the Protestant Reformation. Broadly, “Reformational” churches include:

- Lutherans in Germany
- Zwinglians in Zurich
- Calvinists in Geneva

Narrowly, the term “Reformed” came to apply primarily to those Protestants who were deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin.

Several highpoints of early continental Reformed theology:

- The Belgic Confession, 1561
- Heidelberg Catechism, 1563
- Synod of Dort, 1618-1619
- The Canons of Dort
- John Knox, 1505-1572
- The Scots Confession, 1560
- Westminster Confession of Faith, 1646
- Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, 1647-1648
- London Baptist Confession, 1644

The Reformed tradition spread to many other parts of the world as well.

B. Tendencies (41:35)

The Reformed tradition has primarily stressed orthodoxy, with a secondary emphasis on orthopraxis. With the exception of some Puritan writers, 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.
- Our emphasis on duty tends toward legalism.

C. Distinctives (43:58)**1. Solas of the Reformation (44:40)**

These doctrines have traditionally been summarized in Latin statements that all contain forms of the word “*sola*,” which means “alone” or “only.”

- *Sola Scriptura* — Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and life.
- *Solo Christo* — Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man.
- *Sola fide* — God justifies believers through the instrumentality of faith alone, apart from works
- *Sola gratia* — We have no personal merit that contributes to our salvation.
- *Soli Deo Gloria* — All creation and acts within creation should be and ultimately are designed to bring glory to God alone.

2. Unity of Scripture (47:15)

The Reformed tradition emphasizes the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

In contrast to Reformed theology, Dispensationalism teaches a fundamental separation between the Old Testament and New Testament.

Reformed tradition looks at the whole Bible as presenting a unified theology.

The Old and New Testaments “are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 7.6)

3. **Doctrine of God (50:23)**

Reformed theology has a distinctive emphasis on the doctrine of God.

The tendency of Reformed theology has been to emphasize the transcendence of God over his immanence.

Since the 1920s there has been a revival of Reformed theology in many parts of North America and the United Kingdom.

4. **Human Culture (54:20)**

Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture* gathers various Christian approaches to culture into five major groups.

- *Christ against Culture* — Culture is evil and to be avoided by Christians.

- *Christ of Culture* — Affirm culture and attempt to accommodate Christ to what they find in the world.
- *Christ above Culture* — Attempts a synthesis between Christ and culture.
- *Christ and Culture in Paradox* — Dualism between Christ and the world.
- *Christ the Transformer of Culture* — Christianity should influence and in some ways “convert” cultures to biblical norms.

In Niebuhr’s view, the Reformed position sees Christ as the transformer of culture.

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.

Every dimension of life must be brought under the lordship of Christ. All of life is religious, governed either by true or false religion.

V. Conclusion (58:32)

Review Questions

1. Why can it be hard to define “Christian theology”?

2. Why should we be satisfied with a working definition that accords with the Apostle’s Creed?

3. What accounts for the unity of the body of Christ? Why it is our responsibility to promote theological unity within the body of Christ?

4. What accounts for the diversity within the body of Christ?

5. As we survey Christian theology, why is it important to maintain a balanced perspective regarding theological unity and diversity?

6. What is “tradition”?

9. Give a brief historical sketch of the development of Reformed theology, highlighting significant historical events.
10. What are the theological tendencies of the Reformed tradition?

11. Summarize each of the four distinctives of the Reformed tradition.

Application Questions

1. Should you believe all the doctrines in the Apostles' Creed? Why or why not?
2. What implications does the theological unity of all believers have for the way you view and interact with other branches of the church?
3. What positive influences has your theological tradition had on your theology? What negative influences has it had?
4. What are the emphases of your tradition? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these emphases? How might you change your emphases to counter these weaknesses without losing the strengths?
5. What are some of the strengths and dangers of Reformed theology? In what ways might your understanding of the tradition behind these lessons help you discern truth from error within them?
6. Reformed theology tends to insist that all life is religious. Do you agree or disagree with this idea? Why or why not?
7. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?