

# Building Your Theology

Lesson 2

Exploring Christian Theology?

Forum



thirdmill

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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	<b>What is tradition?</b> .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	<b>Which traditions are good?</b> .....	1
<b>Question 3:</b>	<b>Why is theology a form of tradition?</b> .....	2
<b>Question 4:</b>	<b>How can we distinguish what the Bible teaches from what we believe it teaches?</b> .....	3
<b>Question 5:</b>	<b>Should churches try to balance orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?</b> .....	4
<b>Question 6:</b>	<b>Should orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos all be emphasized in the local church?</b> .....	6
<b>Question 7:</b>	<b>What’s wrong with theology being bound by tradition?</b> .....	6
<b>Question 8:</b>	<b>Should we avoid rationalism?</b> .....	8
<b>Question 9:</b>	<b>Why do we need to be aware of ourselves if the goal of theology is objective truth?</b> .....	8
<b>Question 10:</b>	<b>Are these lessons designed to convert students to a particular tradition?</b> .....	10
<b>Question 11:</b>	<b>Is it possible for different denominations to benefit from each other?</b> .....	11
<b>Question 12:</b>	<b>What are the five <i>solas</i> of the Reformation?</b> .....	13
<b>Question 13:</b>	<b>How do creeds and confessions relate to the <i>solas</i>?</b> .....	13
<b>Question 14:</b>	<b>Do the <i>solas</i> of the Reformation ignore the Father and the Holy Spirit?</b> .....	14
<b>Question 15:</b>	<b>If justification is by faith alone, why does the Bible emphasize good works?</b> .....	15
<b>Question 16:</b>	<b>If everything should be done for God’s glory, where does our glorification fit?</b> .....	18
<b>Question 17:</b>	<b>How can the Old and New Testaments be unified when they look so different?</b> .....	18
<b>Question 18:</b>	<b>Is the New Testament more relevant to us than the Old Testament?</b> .....	20
<b>Question 19:</b>	<b>Does the Bible emphasize God’s transcendence over his immanence?</b> .....	21
<b>Question 20:</b>	<b>Does the modern church need to hear more about God’s transcendence or his immanence?</b> .....	22
<b>Question 21:</b>	<b>How much of the world’s culture should the church try to transform?</b> .....	23
<b>Question 22:</b>	<b>Why does the modern church have a hard time trying to transform culture?</b> .....	26
<b>Question 23:</b>	<b>Is Christian theology defined as what Christians believe?</b> .....	27
<b>Question 24:</b>	<b>Is there a core set of beliefs that all Christians can affirm?</b> .....	27
<b>Question 25:</b>	<b>How much theological diversity is acceptable?</b> .....	28
<b>Question 26:</b>	<b>Why are some religions closer to Christianity than others are?</b> .....	31
<b>Question 27:</b>	<b>Do believers sometimes suppress the truth that God has revealed?</b> .....	32

# Building Your Theology

## Lesson Two: Exploring Christian Theology?

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students  
Eric Linares  
Careth Turner

### 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 activist. 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 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 issue 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 the 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 front 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 *solus 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 precious 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, *solī 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 *solī 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 hand 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 would 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.

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