

# Building Your Theology

LESSON  
THREE

## Relying on Revelation Discussion Forum



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# Building Your Theology

## Lesson Three: Relying on Revelation

### Discussion Forum

With  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students  
Michael Aitcheson  
John Tomberlin III

#### Question 1: What is general revelation?

**Student:** Richard, I've heard of general revelation before, but you're using it in ways that I haven't quite heard. Could you further clarify what you are saying about general revelation?

**Dr. Pratt:** I guess there probably are ways that we talk about in that lesson that are a little unusual and have to think about what other people have said. I think this is probably the best way to go at it. Most of the time when you hear the words “general revelation” in theological education, people are talking about the way God reveals himself in nature, and usually they mean raw nature like big trees in the forest, or big mountains, or the clouds in the sky, things like that. You sit back and go, “Oh God must be great because he made big mountains, and he must be strong because he holds the sun in his hand” — things like that. And that's true. That is certainly a part of general revelation. But the reason we use the word “general” for general revelation rather than natural revelation, which is sort of the older term, is to avoid that problem of identifying it just with nature in the raw. Because general revelation means God reveals himself generally through everything to everybody in general — in everything in general and to everybody in general. So that means that, oddly as it sounds that general revelation also includes the things not just that God has made but then that people have made with God's creation. And the key for this is Romans 1, because in Romans 1 Paul says that what has been made from the time of creation has revealed God to everyone, but then he goes on to say that the things that people do — and he starts listing off even perversions like homosexuality and murder and hating parents and things like that, the things that we do with the world around us — he says even that reveals God's will to people. So as they experience those things, it's even further general revelation.

So the way that we tend to think about general revelation should not be so narrow. It should include things even beyond nature in the raw like automobiles, or paper, or books, or televisions, or satellites, whatever it may be. Whatever we experience in life, whether it's natural state or manmade, as we say, it is a part of the general revelation of God. And what we mean by that is that it reveals something of the character of God, some dimension of God's character, and his moral will for us with

respect to that thing. And that's basically all we mean when we say general revelation. But it is different than what I think you probably hear most of the time, say, in Sunday school, or maybe even in churches, because they do tend to focus on nature as it sits there rather than nature as it's been shaped by humanity.

**Student:** Having said that, Richard, my father is from Jamaica and he makes a mean jerk chicken. What does that tell me about God?

**Dr. Pratt:** How mean is it?

**Student:** It's bad.

**Dr. Pratt:** Does that mean like it's hot?

**Student:** It's hot, and it's good. Hot and spicy.

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, there a million things that we could say about it. If you were looking at your father's jerk chicken through the eyeglasses of Scripture, which is really the best way to discover what these things mean, you could say a number of things. One, you could see that you father is doing something that is creative, and he is obeying the law of God when God tells us to have dominion over all the earth including the animals on the earth. And so watching your father make his jerk chicken from the time he cuts off the head of the chicken, and pulls the feathers out, and cuts it up into pieces, and figures out how to make it taste good — Does it taste good? — Okay. Now you know, if you took a chicken in the raw and took a bite out of it, it wouldn't taste good. But what your father does is he takes something that in raw natural state doesn't taste all that good and he turns it into something that I want to taste. It's magnificent. Well, what this demonstrates is that the image of God, humanity, really has been given dominion over the earth. And that, of course, is one of the most fundamental teachings of the Bible, and it's illustrated there by your father using it for the purpose of honoring humanity, feeding humanity, equipping humanity to do the will of God.

Now I don't know your dad, but if he's a Christian, then he's doing that even self-consciously but if he's not a believer... Let's just say somebody else makes good jerk chicken and they're not a believer, and let's say they create a restaurant and they are very careless in the way they handle the chicken and so it becomes corrupted, it becomes spoiled, but they go on and serve it anyway and they make a bunch of people sick. Well that event reveals God, too, because that restaurateur is not doing things according to the will of God. He's hurting people. He's killing people. And when we look at that general revelation, we realize that's an immoral thing to do, so it's revealing God's character as a good God and a loving and kind God by contrast with what the human race is doing. And that's the way it is with every single thing we do. When we build buildings it shows that we are fulfilling the call to subdue the earth. God has called us to do that. And when those building are put to good use, well then we can honor God for that, and we say that's a good thing because that's what

it's for. When they're put to bad use then we can say that's not what it's for, it's against the will of God. And these things, according to the apostle Paul in Romans 1, to one degree or another, are evident in the general revelation itself and that you don't have to be a Christian at least in your subconscious to know that this is true.

And that's why it would be that even in a country that doesn't claim to be Christian, if your father runs a restaurant and serves spoiled meat and lots of people die, he's going to be in trouble, because there is an immorality to that. And even though it doesn't come straight from the Bible in, say, a pagan culture or a non-Christian culture, they don't root that morality in the Bible, they know it's true. See, this is the odd thing. It's that there is no justification in a non-Christian culture, no ultimate justification for saying that it would be bad to serve spoiled jerk chicken, no justification at all. So why do they do it? Why, say for example, in communist China where there is no Christian basis for the laws, why is it that when they serve bad meat in China in restaurants that those people are taken off and sent to prison? Why don't they just say well, you know, what moral basis do you have? Well the reality is there is this consciousness of the revelation of God that the chicken or the beef or whatever meat it is has been given to humanity to be used for the betterment of humanity and for the honor of God. And so there are remnants of that even in a pagan culture. And so it is true what the apostle Paul says that when people use and then even abuse the creation, it reveals God's will to us, it reveals his moral character to us. That's what I mean when I say that every single thing, every single thing, whether it's nature in the raw or nature developed by human beings, reveals the will of God and the character of God in general revelation.

## Question 2:

### What are very general revelation and specialized general revelation?

**Student:** Richard, you made a distinction between very general revelation and specialized general revelation. Could you explain further what you mean?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's also different than what most people say I have to admit. There are a few people that I'm drawing on for those distinctions, but let me see if I can just sort of lay them out. Normally we think you have special revelation and then you have general revelation. That's the normal way you think. And that's okay, there's nothing wrong with that. The problem, though, is that people want to put a wall between those two like there's nothing shared between them, there's no overlap, and what I arguing for is that there really is an overlap between special and general revelation. One way to see that is think about what's in the Bible.

Let's just deal with special revelation first. The Bible has things in it that we would sort of say are super special, that you could never have dreamed — in fact, the only way you could have gotten them was a dream — you could never have figured these things out. I mean, when you think about the revelation to John in the book of

Revelation with all the fantastic visions he had and that sort of thing, he didn't just sit around one day and say, "Well, this would be a great idea, let's do this, let's think this thought and have that vision." That's very super-esoteric, supernatural, super-special revelation. On the other end of the Bible, though, you do have things that are not so super, not so specialized. You'll have things like where Paul is writing to the Corinthians and he's talking about things that he knows that's going on there because he's gotten letters from them. Now that's still special revelation of God because it's in Scripture, what he is writing is Scripture, but he didn't get that information from a vision. He got it from a letter that he had received. Or, if you take Luke, when Luke tells Theophilus that I'm writing this account for you by going to all these eyewitnesses, well he's gotten information and is writing a special revelation because it's Scripture, but his information came from eyewitnesses. And so you have a range of things in the Bible from extraordinary special revelation to rather ordinary special revelation, or what we say in the lesson "very special revelation" to "generalized revelation." So it kind of lowers it down. It doesn't mean it's less authoritative. It just means it not so supernatural.

Well, take that range and now let's talk about the range of general revelation. In general revelation you have very similar things in the sense that some things in general revelation are so well known and so common that practically any mentally competent person in this world would be able to acknowledge it, like the universe is big. Or there's power in the universe. Or the universe is beautiful. Or the universe is harsh — those kinds of things. That's so common that you'd have to put it way over here on this very common end, very sort of low end of general revelation. But we also know that there are ways in which God reveals himself in nature that are rather specialized. Not everybody has all these general experiences. You have your experiences, you have yours, I have mine, and that means then that it's still general revelation because it's not the Bible, but it's still God revealing himself to you as an individual. So for example, if you become sick, that is going to be a form of general revelation. You're going to learn things about God, about yourself, about your moral responsibilities from the flu that you have. As strange as that sounds, that's true, and I think we all know we do learn when we get sick. A lot of people tell me that all the time. "I got so sick I was in the hospital for six weeks and it was a great time of blessing; I couldn't even read the Bible but it was a great time of blessing because I was learning so much about God from being sick, from being helpless, from being worn down" — those kinds of things. So that's a very specialized form of — individualized form — of general revelation.

So you have a range in general revelation that sort of parallels the range of special revelation. And that's what causes the overlap, so that the Bible sometimes talks about things that you can also learn from general revelation. Like when the Proverbs talk about ants are busy, they make lots of things. Well, it didn't take a vision to get that. All you had to do was go out and look at an ant hole. And you can do that, too. You don't need a Bible to find out that ants are busy and that they store up food for the winter and things like that. All you have to do is look and see. So there are things like that in the Bible, but also there are things in general revelation that we often

don't quite get as specialized when we don't realize that they are, "hey, this is my part of general revelation at this moment for me." And so we really are saying that God has revealed himself and continues to reveal himself in everything. Everything reveals God, the Bible in a special authoritative way and then general revelation every single thing else.

### **Question 3:** **Does God reveal things in dreams and intuitions?**

**Student:** Given that everything in general revelation says something to us about God, what would you say to someone who struggles or has a dream where he thinks, or she thinks, that God is talking directly to them? How would you deal with that dream as far as in light of special or general revelation?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's great, because I think that what this doctrine teaches, what this approach teaches, is that it's quite contrary to the way it often happens, especially when people become theologically educated. What they start doing is they start discounting things like premonitions, or dreams, or intuitions, or just that kind of, you know, that feeling you have. And if you go around, especially students of theology, talking about, "I feel the Lord is leading me to do this," and that kind of thing, everybody just sort of rolls their eyes and they intellectualize it. "Yeah, whatever. What did you eat for breakfast this morning!" Well, the fact is that what you ate for breakfast this morning is general revelation. And those premonitions you have, even when they're wrong is general revelation, because if it exists, it is revealing God. See, that's what's so strange about this.

It's sort of like when you think about murder, for example, which is wrong. The apostle Paul says in Romans 1 that's one of the things that reveals God to people; they know that the people who do such things deserve to die. So a premonition, an intuition, a dream, any kind of psychological experience, all of this is part of what happens in life and therefore has the implications of revealing God to us and God's will for us. Now what we don't want to do is to cross the line and to start giving a dream, or giving a premonition or an intuition the role of special revelation. You don't want to write a dream in the back of your Bible, and unfortunately, there are Christian groups that do that. You know, they'll call it a prophecy, maybe, that someone prophesies over them. And I've been in circles like that. I've been there, I've even done that to people much less received it. But when someone prophesies over someone, to use that kind of common term that people use today, and they say things that are not contrary to the Bible, they'll say things like, "The Lord is going to bless you, he's going to use you, one day you will be known as a servant of God around the world," and things like that. Well, that is something that should be taken as part of general revelation. And that means that insofar as it is true, and even insofar as it is false, it's going to say something to me about God and God's will for me. And if that kind of word comes from Christians over and over and over and over again, or



perhaps in the case of a dream, if you keep having the same dream over and over, and it's so powerful on you and you pray about it and you ask the Lord to give you guidance about how to evaluate it and what to think about it, if it continues to rest in your heart and continues to impress upon your soul, then you need to take it more and more and more seriously as guidance from God.

Now let me see if I can sort of lower the intensity of this a little bit by saying this. Even in my own tradition, my own branch of the church that tends not to think very highly of dreams and premonitions and intuitions and things like that, when people are asked, "Why do you feel you're called to the ministry?" If someone is seeking ordination, they'll ask that question, "why do you feel called to the ministry?" And there are two answers, and if you don't give both answers, they'll pull the trap door on you and you're gone. So you have to give the two answers. And the two answers are: I have an inward call and I have an outward call. Now the outward call basically means the body of Christ has seen my gifts and they are calling me, they're offering me a job. Put it that way, okay? That's fine. But if that's all you've got to give to this ordination group, if that's all you can say about your calling to ministry that other people have told me I ought to be a minister, well then you're out, because they're also looking for you to say I have an inward call. Now what is an inward call?

**Student:** Well my understanding has just been that there is a desire to serve in that capacity that actually is in your heart.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. It's a desire, a passion inside of you. It can go a step further, can't it? What other kinds of things could an inward call be? How might you articulate it?

**Student:** Holy Spirit tugging at your heart.

**Dr. Pratt:** There, Holy Spirit tugging at your heart; God leading me in this; I have this conviction; I've tried to refuse it; I've tried to go to Tarsus but I just can't do it; God keeps me pulling me back to it. That's what I'm talking about. You see? That's specialized general revelation. Now that's the one place in our day where my branch of the church still acknowledges that the Holy Spirit works in us psychologically, works in us emotionally, works in us in our premonitions, in our convictions, our intuitions, even our dreams, and that it ought to be taken very seriously. All I'm suggesting is that we need to spread that out a little more.

#### Question 4:

#### Is modern prophecy special or general revelation?

**Student:** I have a question about the specificity of the prophecies, if you will. So if someone prophesies over you and it's very specific, and that thing comes to pass,

**whatever it is, do we still consider that just general? Or do we put it under the bracket of special?**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's great. In the categories that we affirm, you'd have to say a specialized general revelation. Okay? If you say it's special revelation you're going to get that trap door. Because special revelation is reserved for something that is infallible and, in our day, written down already by apostles and prophets, the foundation of the church. The reason that we have this category of special revelation is to give us a standard, a written standard by which we can judge all other candidates — the canon. It's not as if God spoke one day, "Okay everybody, make a canon," but the church found out they needed one. They needed something they could use a standard to judge all these other things that Christians were saying. And so everything that other people say to us, or we get in dreams, premonitions, etc., needs to be judged by that. But there reality is that the Bible, New Testament included, doesn't give us a lot of information about what you're supposed to do with your life tomorrow, and what you're supposed to do. It just kind of gives parameters. And then the question is how do you fill in the space between the parameters? If you get a premonition that you're supposed to be an axe murderer, you're not supposed to be. I can tell you, it didn't come from God, okay? But if you're given a premonition that you should serve in Miami — that's your home city isn't it? Or are you going to get a premonition that you're supposed to serve in New York? See, now, both of those are fine in the Bible, right? This is where we're talking about the leading of Holy Spirit and the providence of God being general revelation, and the stronger it is for you, the more specific it is for you, the more specialized it is.

Our tendency, unfortunately, is to try to turn that filling in the gap into sort of a scientific thing, a purely rational thing. And that is what I'm arguing against here. I'm saying rationality, science, even sociology and things like that that we would use to sort of fill in those holes, that's legitimate. It's part of general revelation, but so is your dream. And so is what your next door neighbor said to you, and especially when they're authorities in your life like you pastor, or an elder of some sort. Or you've had this just pull in your heart that I have to go to Uzbekistan, I have to go, I just can't get it out of me; that's the leading of Holy Spirit that fills in those gaps in what the Bible has taught us. And so I'm saying that these are not special revelations in the sense that you must obey it no matter what. I mean, you must always submit it to the Bible and it's not special revelation in the sense that everybody else has to do it. It's not part of the canon of the church. But it is God speaking; it is God revealing himself, because God reveals himself in everything including those psychological experiences.

This really is a matter of what we often call vocation. And that's a big problem, especially for theological students these days. Theological students these day, in America anyway, they think of vocation as sort of a more-or-less business decision; I've been called to be a minister, now which church do I go to? Well, what I do is I send out a resume, I contact them, and I see which one is going to give me the best package, which one's going to pay me the most money, which one's going to give me the best schools for my kids, which one's going to be the kind of culture I belong to.

So we evaluate it sort of rationally. Well, there's nothing wrong with that, but we always need to remember that God may actually be calling a person to a place where they'll pay you less money and where you won't fit into the culture, where you won't be able to have a nice house. Can you imagine if Jesus had used those criteria for his ministry? Or the apostle Paul? Or 90 percent of the ministers of Christ in years past? If that had been the case, then none of us would have been Christians. They would have stayed in comfortable places. That's what I call the "yellow brick road to ministry" and they would have had a good professional life, but they would never had sacrificed the ways that they did that then resulted in you and me being Christians.

And so it's very important for us to get that notion that we must listen to that intuitional, that quiet voice, that premonition, that dream, that specialized general revelation, to get vocation, to know what I'm supposed to do with my life now, at this time and this place, because that is a form of general revelation.

### **Question 5:**

#### **Why do we need general revelation to interpret special revelation?**

**Student:** Now Richard, you said we needed general revelation to interpret special revelation, but isn't that what liberal theologians do?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yep. That's exactly what they do. I guess you could think about it that way and just sort of say that would be a dead-wrong thing to do. The fact is that what we call liberal Christians — let's just put it that way for lack of a better term — what they tend to do is they take things from science and archeology and even philosophy and things like that which are aspects of general revelation, and they read the Bible in the light of that. So they say, well, we can only read the Bible so far as it passes those tests. And what they're in effect doing is they're taking their understanding of general revelation and putting it on top of the Bible. That's really what they're doing. That's not what I'm suggesting. What I'm suggesting is that the revelation of God in the Bible and the revelation of God in everything else work together, and actually they work together perfectly because God's revelation in both sides are from him. And because of the character of God himself, they are harmonious. Now the problem is that they don't always look harmonious to us. What the Bible says and what science says ought to fit. If the Bible really is God's Word and if we're knowing science correctly, they ought to fit. What the Bible says and what philosophy says, they ought to fit if they're both saying the true thing. And the same thing would be true of any experience we have of the world. They ought to fit if the Bible is true and if we're getting the right vision of general revelation. But the problem is this: We never deal with the Bible itself and general revelation itself. We never get to that pure, we never get to that "in-itself-ness." Instead, what you've got is a wrapping around these two things. We have a wrapping around the Bible, and that wrapping around the Bible is our understanding of the Bible. Now is your understanding of the Bible as perfect as the Bible?

**Student: Not yet.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Not yet. Okay, good. So you're understanding of the Bible is different from the Bible itself. Now here's general revelation in and of itself — God speaking through everything — but it has a wrapping around it, too, that we deal with. We don't get to that thing; we get to the wrapping, and that means, in other words, we're dealing with our interpretation of the world around us, too. Now have you ever made a mistake?

**Student: Of course.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Okay. So, you ever lost your keys, things like that? Turned in the wrong lane in the car? That's the wrapping around general revelation. So we're not dealing with the things themselves. They do match up. But what we're actually dealing with is the wrapping around it, our interpretations around these two things. The unfortunate thing is that liberals often have the attitude of, "I'm understanding this correctly. I've got it right. And I'm understanding the Bible correctly. I've got *it* right. Now, they disagree. Now, what I'm going to do is force my vision of what the world around me says onto it and critique the Bible that way." And they forget that they're really just living with the wrappings. They're living with their understanding of the world around them and their understanding of the Bible around them.

Take archeology for example. Archeology is not a pure science. It's an interpretation of facts and data by schemes, and by philosophies, and by different approaches. That's why archeologists differ with each other. You can't get two archeologists to agree on six things, and that's because they're always interpreting the facts. Well, if you're interpreting the facts of archeology and you're interpreting the Bible, too, the reason conflict comes up is for at least three different reasons. One, we've misunderstood the facts. Or, we've misunderstood the Bible. That happens a lot, both of those. Or, we've misunderstood both. Now those are three different possibilities there, that I've misunderstood the facts of archeology, or I've misunderstood the Bible, or I've misunderstood both, and that's why they don't seem compatible. And for the most part, what we can discover is that sometimes our understanding of archeology, just taking that as an example, can actually help us understand the Bible better. It's not to discredit the Bible, it's to help us understand the Bible better, and archeology can help us, and science can help us, and all kinds of things can help us so long as they're used in submission to the Bible.

Now there is a fourth possibility when apparent conflicts come up — and sometimes we just have to admit this — and that is that we may never know how to reconcile science, general revelation and special revelation. We may be running into a mystery. One of the greatest mysteries in the Bible, of course, is the Trinity. Or even go beyond that, how Jesus can be fully divine and fully human. Most scientists, I think, would tell us that's not possible. It's not possible for someone to be fully God and fully man — two natures that don't mix together and don't change and don't form

composition or anything like that, in one person. But that's what we believe Jesus is — fully divine, fully human. Now anytime you take something that's as mysterious as that from the Bible and you bring it to science, science is going to collapse, because they have no way of handling that. So sometimes these apparent differences between special and general revelation are the fact that we're running into something that's beyond human comprehension. So there really are these four things: we could be wrong about general revelation, we could be wrong about the Bible, we could be wrong about both, or we could be bumping into a mystery that we just can't fathom.

I think one of the most helpful ways, then, to distinguish between what we mean usually when we say a liberal and a conservative Christian is this: It's the practical issue, it's the propensity we have of, on which understanding are we going to lean? When there's an apparent conflict and we can't resolve it quickly, where are we going to stand? Are we going to tend to stand on our understanding of general revelation? Or are we going to tend to stand on our understanding of special revelation, the Bible? Knowing that we might have to change that later on, is that where we're going to stand today, our interpretation? More liberal Christians tend to stand more on their understanding of general revelation — science, philosophy, logic, those kinds of things. The more conservative you are, the more you tend to hold onto your understanding of the Bible. Now that's not a choice of holding the Bible versus general revelation, it's just holding onto my understanding at this moment of what the Bible says. I mean, let's face it. There have been all kinds of things that Christians have believed that the Bible teaches that have been proven wrong, but it took general revelation to push us to the point that we could begin to see that we had mishandled the Bible. Can you think of an example of such a thing as that?

**Student:** The earth being flat would be one.

**Dr. Pratt:** Alright, the earth being flat is the obvious one, right?

**Student:** Or a geocentric system.

**Dr. Pratt:** A geocentric system? Exactly. It was obvious it seemed early on that the earth was flat, and anytime you read the Bible with that in mind, it looks like the Bible is affirming that. Now, how do you know that the earth is not flat?

**Student:** We've gone to space.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right, good. You can look at a picture of it now, right? I mean, it is so sure that you can take a photograph of the thing now. Just go up in a space shuttle and take a movie. It's not that hard. So our tendency then is not to throw the Bible out because of that, but to let general revelation with its weightiness, in this case, help us reinterpret the Bible. And so we say things like, well, the Bible's not trying to give a scientific description of the world. It's describing the world as it appeared to them. Okay? We call that a phenomenological understanding of the world and expression of the world. Alright, so that's good. Now a lot of Christians would tell us these days

that we should do the same thing with evolution, that everybody comes from the same species — the origin of the species, that we all come from one living thing. What would you say about that? Is that different from what we find in the roundness of the earth?

**Student:** Well, as our interpretation now stands as we hold the Scripture, I do think there would be a difference there.

**Dr. Pratt:** Why? What would be the difference?

**Student:** Well, God creates species, generally speaking, separately unto themselves. So as far as a common origin, that could be negated.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. And do you have a photograph of the common origin?

**Student:** I do not.

**Dr. Pratt:** Do we have a video of the origins of the world and how the different species developed? We don't. Okay? It's still very theoretical, and for this reason, rather weak. You see what I'm saying? Even if one day it were proven to be true, at this stage it is not proven to be true. Not like the roundness of the earth. If you were a more liberal Christian what you would say is, well, I don't need much evidence from general revelation. I've got enough, so now I'm going to reinterpret the Bible. But as a more conservative Christian what you say is, "Uh-uh, I have to have a lot of weight. There's a heavy burden of proof on the scientists to make me change what the church has always believed the Bible has said." And so we have to wait for that. Now I personally don't believe in theistic evolution, I don't believe in a common origin of the species. I can understand why some true believers could, but I think there's a heavy burden of proof on their side, that this is not an obvious thing, not like the roundness of the earth. And there's the difference, see. The weight of evidence has to be very heavy when it comes to general revelation, influencing our interpretation of the Scriptures.

### Question 6:

#### Do we need the Holy Spirit to help us understand even simple truths?

**Student:** According to the video, you say we need the Holy Spirit in everything. I mean, do we need the Holy Spirit in things as simple as learning how to drive a car or even brushing my teeth?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, it does kind of get silly, doesn't it, at some point. This is where my branch of the church is different from many others. I can just put it to you that way. I do believe that the Bible teaches that God is the source of all truth and that, because he is truth, that anything that is true in some sense comes from him, and that the

person of the Trinity who teaches the truth is Holy Spirit. That's why we gave that long quote in the lesson from Calvin where Calvin said that for the common good the Holy Spirit actually teaches people things like mathematics and dialectic and chemistry and science and psychology and all those kinds of things. The Holy Spirit works in common ways — that means not saving ways, but common ways — in everybody every time they do anything that's good or even speak of things that are true. That's a fairly radical point of view. It has not been the common view among Christians of other branches of the church. For example, Thomas Aquinas believed that you did not really have to have the work of the Holy Spirit to have natural knowledge, knowledge of coffee cups, or knowledge of lights, or knowledge driving a car or brushing your teeth. That was just something that sort of happened on its own, but to have religious truth or to understand higher religious truths, you had to have illumination from the Holy Spirit.

Well this is a little different view. The different view is that our minds are so corrupted, that if God did not show mercy to us in our sinful state that we would not be able to understand anything correctly. And so it is what we call common grace or the common operations of the Spirit of God that illuminates even unbelievers so that when unbelievers say it's 4 o'clock in the afternoon and it's 4 o'clock in the afternoon, this is a gift from God to them. Or when an unbeliever says murder is wrong, this is a gift from the Holy Spirit to them. Now it comes directly and indirectly sometimes, sometimes extraordinarily, sometimes not so extraordinarily. But nevertheless, it's a gift from God the Holy Spirit. The reason for saying this is so important is this: we don't have to run from those gifts ourselves. When Holy Spirit teaches a scientist something that's true, then we can embrace that truth because it has actually come from God and not from the pagan scientist. The pagan scientist has just been the instrument through which God has worked. Most of us did not learn two times two is four from a Christian person or from a solely Christian source. We learned it usually from someone maybe whose religious commitments are very questionable, or maybe they're even anti-Christian. But non-Christians can teach two times two equals four. Why? Common grace, common operations of Holy Spirit. And in some ways that enlivens the universe around us so that we don't think of the natural world as sort of a dead and material world and then we take our Christian faith and make that the supernatural world where God is at work, but everything, from the bottom up, is all work of Holy Spirit and sin, so that sin either corrupts or Holy Spirit restrains corruption and brings life out of the dead. I like that point of view. It's really very helpful.

### **Question 7:**

#### **Does the Holy Spirit really work in unbelievers?**

**Student: Richard, when you say the Holy Spirit doing the work in nonbelievers, when we think of what the Bible says of the Holy Spirit being a gift, to some extent, to the church, then we also embrace the idea that people in the image of God have**

**the capacity to create, to find out things. So how do you resolve that tension as far as it's a Holy Spirit operation versus just a common grace? Like it's part of they still have the image of God.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Right. What it does is basically it's a sort of personalizing. It's putting God involved in the process in a personal way. Once the image of God was corrupted by sin, all the capacities were not lost, but all the capacities were corrupted by sin. And then it takes God's personal attention through Holy Spirit to enable sinful images of God to do the right thing, to be creative, to do all the sorts of things you're saying in holy ways. So to whatever extent we see non-Christians doing what old theologians used to call "civic good," where they restrained sin, where they agree that stealing is wrong, where they agree murder is wrong, they agree that you should not be an axe murderer or something like that. That's the common operation of Holy Spirit rather than just a natural factor that comes out of their lives. It is re-personalizing, it's bringing God back into the picture. In fact, you know, one of the things that I think theological students often face is the fact that some of the best work, some of the best tools they have available to them for studying the Bible — even the Bible — don't come from Christians. You know, when you look at a Greek or a Hebrew lexicon, when you look at a dictionary to understand what the meanings of words are in the original languages, those lexicons were not written by evangelical Christians. Evangelical Christians don't know enough about those things to write such books. They don't devote themselves to those kinds of things. It's usually people that are even anti-Christian that are doing that. And yet we can use that because we see this as the sort of overflow of the gifts of Holy Spirit to the world.

The difference between the Holy Spirit's presence with the church, with the body of Christ and his common operations of the world has to do usually, when we think about this, in terms of salvation. The Holy Spirit is at work in the world restraining sin but not saving people apart from Christ. Now when he's given to us in large measure, and that's the way the Bible talks about it — pouring out, coming upon — it's quantitative. That's the way the Bible describes it. I don't like that because I don't know what exactly that means to say you get more of the Holy Spirit, but it's what the Bible does. The church is given more of Holy Spirit, and his work in the church is a saving work. He sanctifies us in saving ways. But you know that the Bible talks about people that are not believers being sanctified, too, like the children of unbelievers in 1 Corinthians 7:14. They're said to be holy. Now that doesn't mean they're saved. It just means they're set apart. And we also know that even the unbelieving spouse of a believer is sanctified. Well, how does sanctification take place? It's Holy Spirit work, non-saving but nevertheless Holy Spirit work. And so you can imagine what's true in the nuclear family, the children, the unbelieving spouse, to a lesser degree is true of people who live in a culture that has lots of Christians in it. They're also sanctified to some degree, and it sort of drips out and moves out, less and less and less I would suppose, as you move away from the influence of the Christian church, but nevertheless it's there.



So why is it then that we find so many good gifts like books and those sorts of things that help us in Bible study in cultures that were influenced by Christianity? Well, that's where the Bible is. You don't usually find biblical scholars writings lexicons in Greek and Hebrew from Hindu culture, right? So they're not going to be such a help to us, they're not going to be so useful to us. But if you find someone in the Jewish community writing a commentary on the Old Testament, let's say, that could be very helpful to us. And if it's a Christian who may be liberal — you have to be careful with this — but a very liberal Christian then they also can be helpful to us because, again, these are degrees of the Holy Spirit's non-saving, non-salvific work out there in the world.

So it is important I think for us to sort of re-personalize the process of knowing. Knowing is not something that just simply happens naturally. It's not a mechanical sort of thing that happens. It's a personal work of God. And this is one of the wonderful things I think about Protestantism as a whole and that is that we look at the presence of God in the world as a dynamic force, that his Holy Spirit, and the angels in this world are actually doing things in the world and that we don't have to become like modern people where we think of God as very distant and now the world just sort of works on its own. That's deism, not Christianity. And even in the realm of epistemology, even in the realm of knowing, Holy Spirit is at work in the neural synapses that take place, the neuron paths of your brain, and he's shaping them, he's moving them, he's causing those charges and those chemicals to react in certain ways. And he does that according to his pleasure both in Christians and in non-Christians. That's why I think it's really important to understand that work of Holy Spirit both in the church and outside.

### Question 8:

#### How do we come into personal contact with the Holy Spirit?

**Student:** Richard, how do we come into personal contact with the Holy Spirit so that we can actually understand the revelation?

**Dr. Pratt:** Wow, that's a big one, because there are some groups that do very well at this and some groups that don't. Let's just face it. I think that what I'm saying in the video is that understanding both general revelation and special revelation involves Holy Spirit. So what you want to do is learn how to depend more on him and how to have him lead you more faithfully and more thoroughly. That's really the goal. So it's not a matter just of thinking harder about things, or being more careful about things. There's a real sense in which when people begin to take the study of theology and the Bible seriously, when they become committed to the more academic approach, then they begin to substitute what was once a very dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit, they begin to push that out and substitute for that hard academic work. And there's a problem. I mean, when people first become Christians, generally speaking they don't know much about the Bible, they don't know much about theology, and

they just sort of listen and they may read a book or two, but every step along the way they're finding the Holy Spirit ministering to them and teaching them, and they feel this emotionally, and they are very conscious of it. But it isn't long before you start doing formal training in theology that the Holy Spirit becomes a sideline. And then if you're in a school or if you're in a learning community, they are constantly telling you now don't forget God, don't forget the Holy Spirit, don't forget your devotional life and things like that, but then they never give you time for it. And they never help you develop that.

It's really funny to me, actually very sad to me, that in a typical seminary, a typical Protestant Bible school, you are calling people to become ministers of the Word, and sometimes we'll even say the Word and Sacraments. Sometimes we'll even quote the Bible and say ministers of prayer and the Word from Acts 6. But it's very strange, isn't it, that if a school is devoting itself to that, that the school would not have a required class — not one required class — on prayer. Not one. I don't know of a single seminary in my whole country that has a required class on prayer. Now they'll have chapel that's usually optional once or twice a week. They may have a little class that talks about personal devotions, maybe. But not a class that teaches people how to be prayer people and that actually leads them into maturing their prayer lives. I'm convinced that's the missing piece in theological education, that we don't alongside of developing the skills that are necessary like the hard thinking, the intellectual skills, the academic skills, we don't also develop the ways in which the Bible teaches us to be sensitive to the moving and leading of Holy Spirit.

The fact is you don't find people in the Bible who are the godly men and women of the Bible saying things like, "Well I read it in this book and anybody that's logical can see that they ought to be thinking this way." That's not what they do. What they do is, "The Holy Spirit is showing us." Now they'll often quote the Bible in the middle of that because the Holy Spirit is showing them this through the Bible. But for us it's very depersonalized; it's all a matter of, here, we've got the book. Now if you want a religion that's just of a book and hard thinking, you've got the wrong one. You should become a Muslim because that's what that's all about. We've got the book that tells us everything we need to know, and anybody that just thinks hard about it can get it; anybody that's rational about the Qur'an can then get it. Well, that is not Christianity. Christianity is, we've got the book, but Jesus also said, we've got the teacher, and it's not him. Okay? The teacher is the Holy Spirit whom he gave to us when he ascended into heaven. And yet we will take the Holy Spirit and push him over here and act as if our religion is like Islam — just a book religion. And that's detrimental to say the very least.

The way the apostle Paul described it was you have to keep in step with the Spirit, you have to follow the Spirit, you have to lean on the Spirit, you have to be filled with Holy Spirit, and when you do those kinds of things then the fruit of Holy Spirit becomes a part of your life. It's fascinating to me when you look at the qualifications for church leaders in say Thessalonians and Timothy that there's hardly anything about how much they've learned, how many Greek verbs they can parse, or how many

Hebrew verbs they can parse. There's nothing about that kind of thing. It does say "apt to teach," and then we take that and turn it into this highfaluting academic thing. Instead, the qualifications for being a church leader are by and large personality issues: you can't be pugnacious, you don't like to fight and argue, you're temperate in all things. These are characteristics, and many of them are emotional characteristics. And yet those are the things that we ignore the most, the work of Holy Spirit on our character. And so I think it's time for us to begin to learn and even begin to seek how to follow the leading of Holy Spirit.

We mentioned that earlier when we started talking about how Holy Spirit will give us anticipations of things, or premonitions and intuitions about things, and convictions in our hearts and things like that. What we tend to do is say I can't trust those things; I can't trust those, those are like my feelings, and feelings would be very bad things to trust — as if your reasoning is better than your feelings and that somehow you think better than you feel. Well, that's certainly not the case if you believe that reasoning is also affected by sin. So what we want are Holy-Spirit-influenced reasoning and Holy-Spirit-influenced feelings and premonitions and leadings and convictions. And so bottom line is we have to become people of prayer. We cannot ignore spending long seasons of prayer. I don't mean five minutes, ten minutes. I mean long seasons in prayer and fasting as leaders of the church, and humbling ourselves before God, finding our way to solitude where we back away from other people and we get alone with God. Think about Jesus, how he did it. At the beginning of his ministry what did he do?

**Student: He went off into the desert.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, he went off in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights.

**Student: Lead by the Spirit.**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's the way he began his ministry, led by the Spirit into the desert. Now how do we usually begin our ministries now? We don't spend 40 days in the wilderness, we send out 40 resumes, and prepare 40 sermons. You know, that's what it means to be a minister now, to get ready for ministry now. Not spending time alone with God. And I'll tell you, if you were to spend 40 days and 40 nights not eating, only drinking water, you would begin to hear to the Lord speak. Funny things happen when people fast. Funny things happen when people are alone and actually seeking the face of God. You would know the leading of Holy Spirit in a situation like that. And so if your life or the lives of anyone else, if it's dry and it feels as if Holy Spirit is not personally involved in this, it's not because he is far away. It's because we have pulled ourselves away. You can quench Holy Spirit. It can be done. Obviously. Paul told the Thessalonians not to do this — quoting from the Old Testament, by the way — of quenching the Holy Spirit. And we need to be the kinds of the people that don't quench the Spirit, but rather are seeking the fullness of the Holy Spirit. He is what's so special to us now. He's the one. It's his personal ministry, but haven't you noticed that the more academic you become in your Christian theology, the more your Trinity

becomes just two persons — God the Father and God the Son? And then we will in our seminaries put up sealed windows that you can't open. We'll even put shutters on the windows to make sure that the Holy Spirit doesn't sneak in. What would the Holy Spirit do if he sneaked in to a normal seminary? He'd mess things up, wouldn't he?

**Student:** Yeah. It's fascinating in the sense like, in Reformed theology, one of the first things to go is prayer, born out of sovereignty God — a growing epidemic among reformed students you can tell.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. When people buy into certain branches of the church, certain theologies, they end up pushing aside the Holy Spirit. Well somehow we have got to get Holy Spirit back in here in a very dynamic and real and wonderful way so that God doesn't die on us. Jesus isn't here. Jesus is in heaven. The Father is not here. He has given us Holy Spirit. That is the person of the Trinity who fills us and leads us and moves us, and that's where we find our life.

### Question 9:

#### Why is truth analog rather than binary?

**Student:** Richard, what does it mean that truth is not binary; it's analog? Could you explain?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. I tried. It's not an easy concept, but I think it's an important one. So let me see if I can fill it out a little bit. When you think about truth, normally the way we have thought in the past is we've thought as if you have just two options; either something is true or it's false, plain and simple. That's the way we live most of our lives. We live in terms of that's right and that's wrong; the light is on, the light is off; the car is running or the car is not running; I'm breathing, I'm not breathing; I'm alive, I'm not alive. Okay? It's sort of the way we talk about life. We talk about it in binary terms. In fact we live now in the digital age, and so we even get this very strong impression because a CD, a digital CD, has better sound quality than an old tape, which was analog where things were put out in streams rather than in bits and pieces. We think somehow that binary, or digital, is probably closer to reality. The same is true with digital TV now because everything in the world is going to digital TV and has a better picture than the binary or the digital. On, off, on, off — that's got to be the way life really is. But as strange as it sounds, the so-called digital is what's artificial. And in fact, a CD that you get is really not a digital binary unit. It's actually just clusters of analog units. Everything in life is really more like that old sine wave that you see on the computer sometimes or on the screen at the hospital. That's what life is. It's not that. It's just not the case. In fact you can tell that by... Watch this. When I do that — that (points finger in rapid horizontal succession) you can see what's happening here, that what looks like I'm going one-two-three-four is actually one and then a fast movement to two, and then from two a fast movement to three. And that's the way it is even with a light switch. When you flip a light on, it doesn't

happen instantaneously. It's just faster than your eyes can see. It's actually moving up slowly and the current starts to flow through very slowly and up into the light.

So when we think of things in ordinary life as binary, we're in many ways sort of summarizing or simplifying much more complicated realities. Okay, well that kind of thing is true in theology. There's nothing wrong with talking, "This is true and this is false." There's nothing wrong with that so long as you are satisfied with the level of precision at that moment. For example, if I were to say to you, "The Bible is the Word of God," is that true or false?

**Students: True.**

**Dr. Pratt:** True, right? Practically anyone that would walk in here and say the Bible is the Word of God, we'd say, "that's good, that's true." But suppose I had a Muslim come in here and say, "The Bible is the Word of God," what would be your reaction?

**Student: Hmm.**

**Dr. Pratt:** At least a "hmm," right? You would have to start asking what exactly do you mean by that, okay? Or suppose we had a Mormon come in here and say, "I believe the Bible is the Word of God." You'd still go, "I'm not really sure we're saying the same thing." Right? Because Mormons will tell you that the original Bible was the Word of God, but what we have now is corrupted so it's no longer the Word of God. Even the old King James is corrupted and therefore not the Word of God, because that's the way they get out of the Book of Mormon contradicting the Bible. They say, what looks like a contradiction wasn't really there to begin with. So at the level of our conversation, the level of precision that we are assuming in our conversation of just the three of us, it's fine just simply to say the Bible's the Word of God. We agree. But when someone steps in that doesn't share our common assumptions, we have to start refining it a little bit. Well what exactly makes the Bible the Word of God? In what sense is that true? Is your understanding of that true? Therefore, is that statement you're making true? And what we discover then is that the more refinement we bring, the more precision we bring to practically any issue, what appeared to be at first a simple yes/no has fuzzy edges on it, because then you have to start asking questions like, "What exactly do you mean by that?" Let's just take this other example. The simplest Christian confession in the whole Bible is "Jesus is Lord." Is that a true statement or not?

**Students: It's true.**

**Dr. Pratt:** As far as we're concerned it is, right?

**Students: Right.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Okay, no problem. If somebody said, "Jesus is not Lord," then we would say that was a lie. But suppose we were talking to a group of people that use the word

“lord” — like say in the case of Mongolia — the word “Buddha,” which is the way they have translated “lord.” There is controversy right now in Mongolia over whether or not Jesus is the Buddha, the lord. And so you will find some Christians making this statement in Mongolia: “Jesus is Lord — Jesus is Buddha.” And then other Christians who will say, “Jesus is not Buddha.” All of a sudden we’ve got to crank up the refinement a little bit, right? We’ve got to zoom in a little bit and start asking, “What does that mean?”

And that’s the way it is. There are truths out there, but our descriptions of them, and our understandings of them are always a little bit off, always a little bit off. Take that thing again: Jesus is Lord. Okay? Now let me ask you this question. You understood that probably five years ago, if you were a Christian five years ago, you would have said that Jesus is Lord. Of course he is. He’s the Lord. The Bible says so. But now let me ask you this. It’s been five years. Has your understanding of that statement changed?

**Student:** Absolutely, as far as the depth and the breadth of what all that means.

**Dr. Pratt:** Would you agree?

**Student:** Yeah, intensified.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yours has, too? Alright, so when was your understanding of that statement “Jesus is Lord,” when was it true? Five years ago? Or today?

**Student:** Both.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. Uh huh and everywhere between. That’s right. So not just the statement but even your understanding of it, right? It’s always been true, but it’s changed. How is that possible? Well, it’s because we hope to understand it better, and in five years from now, unless you’re dead, I hope you’re going to understand it better. In fact, if you are dead you will understand it tremendously better, okay? So the idea here is that the truth that Jesus is the Lord, whatever that means, is a true statement; it has truth-value as God understand it. God understands that in a binary way. He knows exactly the full content of that statement and all that it means, and he has sharp edges in his understanding of it, because he understands everything. There’s no mixture of error, there’s no qualifications he needs to make because he knows all qualifications immediately. He knows them all comprehensively. But we don’t. So five years ago you believed Jesus is Lord, and that was good enough at that time. But as things move on, as you’ve gone to school and you’ve matured as a Christian, what you believed five years ago isn’t good enough anymore. Jesus is Lord now means something more than that. You may have even had to get rid of some ideas and then, five years from now, the same sort of thing.

And that’s the way it is with theological statements we make. Our statements are descriptions of a truth, and they’re either true enough to be counted as true at this

moment, or they're so far away from the truth, or they're false enough to be counted as false today. So we have to always think in terms of improving our understanding, and that's what the analog approach says, that every statement we make can be taken as true or false in shorthand, but always remember that even the best truths that we know, even the best doctrines that we know, even the best formulations of what the Bible says have to be refined and have to be improved. The Bible itself can't be improved upon. It is the truth of God revealed to us, but our understanding of it can. And theology, remember, is not the Bible. Theology is our understanding of the Bible with the work of Holy Spirit and the negative influence of sin. So rather than always talking in terms of, this is the right way to say it, this is the wrong way to say it, we need to start asking questions often more like: Is this the best way to say it? Is there a better way to do it? Is there a better way to think through this? Can you imagine what difference that might make in the relationships among Christians? What difference would it make? I mean, when we talk binary, "This is true and what you're saying is false," we draw the lines, some very big walls between us, right? But suppose you were to think more analog. What would that do to the relationships among us?

**Student:** Probably a little more unity in the church as far as the doctrinal lines not being so hard in the sand.

**Dr. Pratt:** That right. Let's take an example of that. Suppose someone comes up to you and says, "Jesus has promised to make his people prosperous." Okay? Now, what do you want to say about that? Do you want to say that's false or true?

**Student:** It depends on how you define prosperous for one.

**Dr. Pratt:** Exactly. That's the deal, you see. You're going to have to say to that person, "Well, let's see a little more, let's talk a little more, because I can agree with that statement, but we need to think through exactly what we mean. Is my understanding of that true enough to be counted as true? Is your understanding of that true enough to be counted as true?" Often what happens then in that kind of conversation is we start comparing and we start mixing our understandings together and sort of morphing together, and so a unity can develop that we could not have gotten before, because if someone had walked into the room before this conversation and said Jesus promised to make his people prosperous, we'd have said, "You liar." That's a falsehood. That's from the Devil." Well you don't know if it's from the Devil until you find out what the person means. And then often finding out what he or she means helps you then ask the question, well, would I want to say Jesus promises not to make his people prosperous? Because that's your option. In a binary system your option is Jesus promises to make us prosperous or Jesus does not promise to make us prosperous. But the truth is somewhere in between, and that's the analog quality. So the hope is that by having this attitude it will create some humility in us that even our very best — our very best — doctrinal formulations can be refined, and the worst ones can be refined even more. And I think we need a dose of that in Christian theology.

**Student:** Richard, but at some level on that analog scale, there has to be some bit of binary in there, correct?

**Dr. Pratt:** There is, and who decides that?

**Student:** You tell me.

**Dr. Pratt:** Uh huh. You see, there's the problem. There's the problem. We all know that somewhere you're going to have to, for practical purposes, sort of draw the line. But as you get closer to that line you're going to say, "Well, I really can't fellowship with you as a member of my church — for example — on this, but I'm not going to say you're not a Christian" or "I don't want that taught in my pulpit, but I'm not going to say that you can't teach it in your pulpit." You see, then, it starts becoming a matter of liberty of conscience. When you get close to that line, you start respecting each other's points of view and you just say, "I just don't agree with the way they put it in that detail, but he's my brother, she's my sister, and I can live with that, and we just have to go our separate ways." And that's often the way Christians have to handle those sorts of things.

**Student:** Do you think our posture of handling those differences is where we can resolve that tension as far as proposing a somewhat relative "the truth" in the sense of there are going to be degrees, we're going to have to try to get to it but literally our demeanor is going to be what should define us in the moment?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. Because you know the reality is the only way to keep the Bible as our absolute authority, unquestionable, always holding it as sola scriptura — the final ultimate standard — the only way to hold that is our ultimate standard is never to allow our theology to reach that level. Even our best interpretations of the Bible don't reach the level of being unquestionable. It's the only way you can keep the Bible above it. Because is even just one thing you believe equals, utterly equals, the Bible, then you're no longer believing in sola scriptura.

### **Question 10:**

#### **How does the Holy Spirit give us confidence in our theological conclusions?**

**Student:** Richard, can you talk more about how the Holy Spirit through extraordinary and ordinary ways helps us to have confidence in our interpretation of Scripture?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's where we come to, isn't it. If you can accept that analog model for theology and for theological truths, that it's true enough to be counted as true but false enough to be counted as false, sometimes that makes people go, "Well, then I can't be sure about anything. I can't have confidence in anything I believe anymore."



Because it gets fuzzy, and it gets all clouded up with it's my interpretation not the Bible, and those kinds of things. And so how do we get confidence or get conviction that what we believe is true? I mention that I think that the Holy Spirit does this in one of two ways — and you can even put those on an analog scale — of extraordinary and ordinary, and you can write it down a little bit extraordinary, a little more, a little less, a little less, a little less on a little scale there.

But let's just take it as two. By extraordinary means I mean things like when the Holy Spirit just gives you a conviction and you just cannot let go of it. We all have those kinds of experiences where you're in the middle maybe of even an argument and you just feel that something is wrong, and you have this conviction that you're going to have to stand on this. And if somebody stopped you at that moment, you might not even be able to articulate why you think it's wrong. You just know it is. And that is one of the great gifts that Holy Spirit gives us that sometimes he just reaches into our hearts and clamps our conscience in his hand and holds onto it, and we're not even able to reason our way through it, or think our way through it, or find any support anywhere other than I just know this is wrong, or I know this is right. And unfortunately, that's often the case when people haven't studied the Bible very much.

I can remember my grandmother who didn't study the Bible very much, had all kinds of very strong convictions, and she knew that it was right, and she knew that it was wrong. So sometimes we can overboard on that, because some of the things she had strong convictions about I wouldn't agree with anymore. But as a child hearing her, I was often impressed by the fact that she had these strong convictions from God that this was the right way, and I had to listen to that. In fact, I can even remember that when I took my first job as a seminary professor I was sitting down with a very old professor at the seminary and he looked at me and he said, "Richard, I want you to know something." "What's that?" He said, "The Holy Spirit is calling you to come here." I didn't want to go there. It was in a part of this country I didn't want to go to. I said to him, "How often have you said that to people?" He said, "I've never said that before to anyone." "So why then did you say it to me?" He said, "Because I feel like this is really what God wants me to say to you, 'You must come here.'" And I said, "Well, because you don't do that every day, I'll listen." He didn't have any good reasons. He wasn't trying to argue me to come. This was a conviction, an extraordinary conviction he had. And that is fine, and that's good, and often we have to have those, especially on spur-of-the-moment decisions or things where you evaluate it and you end up with six of one and half a dozen of the other, you need the Holy Spirit to do something extraordinary. That's part of what I was saying earlier about the leading of Holy Spirit that comes through prayer and fasting and those kinds of things.

But there are also ordinary ways that Holy Spirit does things. And there are different ways you could describe it. Now in this lesson, and throughout this whole series in fact, we're going to be talking about the ordinary means that God uses to increase our level of conviction or lower our level of conviction on the things that we believe. Through the history of the church it's been very obvious that there are certain things

that have a strength in this, that God uses, and I summarize them in three ways. You could do it any number of ways if you wanted to, but the first one is the interpretation of the Bible, or the exegesis of Scripture. In other words, if you want to know what God's will is, if you want to know what the truth is, where do you go? To the Bible. And you work hard at understanding what the Bible says. So that's one of those resources. As your learning of the Bible affirms what your conviction is, and as you learn more of the Bible and it keeps affirming of it, then what would happen to your level of conviction? Up it goes, right? So that's a very important one.

But there's a second one as well and it's what I call interaction in community. The Bible itself talks about the importance of this, of consulting with leaders, consulting with elders, submitting yourself to elders, being in community with each other, learning from the fact that Holy Spirit is at work in the body of Christ. That would include church history. It would include the current church that you're a part of, those kinds of things. So interaction in community is another major part of what helps us get confidence in the things we believe. So for instance, you're reading the Bible and you think the Bible teaches you something. And then you start looking at what Christians have believed over the last two thousand years and you find out that almost every single Christian has believed that, too. What does that do to your confidence?

**Student: Pretty strong.**

**Dr. Pratt:** It raises it up again, right? This is why we love, for example, the Apostles Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Well, you find that in the Bible, but you also find that almost every Christian in the world forever has been saying that. Okay? So if you ever doubt if God the Father made heaven and earth, well, you shouldn't, because there is so much harmony between the exegesis of Scripture and interaction in community, so your confidence level goes up.

But then there's a third one, and that's what I call Christian living. And that has to do with the personal ministry of you walking with God, you and your life with God, experimenting with life, living life, trusting him, and failing him, those kinds of things, your prayer life, your worship life, your individual Christian life before God. Well, suppose you read something from the Bible, you believe it's there, and you find that every Christian has always believed this, and then as you're living your life you experience that God is your Father; You feel his tender care in your life, you see it all around you every day of your life, there's another way God has been like a father to me — there he is again, like a father to me! Now what's that going to do? You've got it coming from the Bible, you've got it coming from church history, the interaction in community, and you've got it coming from your own life. So now what happens to your confidence? It's out the roof! Right? Okay. That's what you want. That's the good scenario. It's when all three of these ordinary resources that Holy Spirit uses affirm each other. But do they always affirm each other?

**Student: They do not.**

**Dr. Pratt:** They do not. Sometimes these things are at odds with each other, right? Your understanding of the Bible is sometimes at odds with what the church has said. And sometimes what the church has said is at odds with your Christian living. And sometimes your Christian living is at odds with the Bible. And in fact, most theological issues are like that, and it's unfortunate. The core of Christian faith, something like the Apostles Creed — which is sort of what we have said in these lessons is the core of the Christian faith — that's affirmed very strongly by all three. But the reality is that most things other than that; there's a little bit of tension here. And so you might be reading the Bible and come up with this very strong conviction that a certain particular doctrine is true, but suppose then you start reading about the history of the church and you find out that nobody has ever believed it before. What should that do to your confidence that you've understood the Bible correctly?

**Student:** Put the brakes on it.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, it should start dropping it down, right? And that's where that cone of certainty thing comes in. You move up toward the top and you're more certain, and then things start dropping down, you're less certain. And when the church of Jesus Christ for two thousand years hasn't believed something and you've stumbled on it, and now you know it; when you realize the church has never said it, it doesn't mean it's false. It just means you'd better back off a little bit. Sometimes, in fact, when your own Christian experience is at odds with what you think the Bible teaches, sometimes that experience will be so strong that it will make you reconsider your understanding of the Bible. That's just parts of general revelation — interaction in community, Christian living — interacting with your understanding of special revelation — the Bible. That's all it is, just special aspects of it.

And so, when I talk about the ordinary ways that Holy Spirit works in our lives giving us stronger convictions and weaker convictions, that's what we want to do. We want to understand how these various resources that God has given us work together to help us either get stronger convictions or lesser convictions, weaker convictions. Have you ever known a Christian that every single thing he believes he believes just as strongly as he believes everything else?

**Student:** I've met plenty of them.

**Dr. Pratt:** I know people that believe in the resurrection of Christ, and they believe that firmly. And they also know with just as much firmness how long a woman's skirt needs to be. Okay? It can't be but this long, and they know exactly where that is. Well see, that person is unable to differentiate between levels of conviction. I know people that believe that Jesus is the Lord and who are just as dogmatic about their views on the millennium. Well, there's another example, see? I mean, we ought to be able to look at the history of the church and know that Christians have disagreed over the millennium for millennia. And for this reason we ought to drop the level down because very conservative or even fundamentalist Christians tend to take everything in the Christian faith and sort of flatten the cone of certainty up. They want to put

everything in the top echelon, you see, so that if everything is not sacred, if everything is not right up at the very top, well then they don't believe they can believe it all. So when they get a crack in that system, what happens? Often it collapses. And this is one reason why people who grew up in fundamentalist churches often reject the faith when they find out just one thing that their fundamentalist background said was not true.

Well, liberal Christians tend to flatten the cone of certainty, too, but they flatten it down. They tend to say you can't be sure about anything, so just kind of live and let live. Well, what I'm saying is no, we don't want that. What we want is different degrees of certainty, different levels of conviction that come, sometimes extraordinarily by the Holy Spirit, unexpectedly, without even any good reason, but then usually through the interaction of exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and personal Christian living. And as these work together in dynamic tension with each other, they help us adjudicate where to put our different beliefs. And that's what I mean when I say that the Holy Spirit can give us different levels of conviction.

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