

Building Systematic Theology

Study Guide

LESSON
THREE

PROPOSITIONS IN SYSTEMATICS



THIRD MILLENNIUM

MINISTRIES

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CONTENTS

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE	3
NOTES	4
I. INTRODUCTION (0:27)	4
II. ORIENTATION (2:05)	4
A. Definition (2:43)	4
1. Indicative (5:50)	4
2. Factual (6:46)	5
3. Theological (12:31)	6
4. Direct (14:58)	6
B. Legitimacy (16:27)	6
C. Place (25:10)	7
III. FORMATION (29:04)	8
A. Philosophical Interactions (30:02)	8
B. Interpretation of Scripture (32:31)	9
1. Challenges (33:25)	9
2. Factual Reduction (38:53)	10
3. Factual Collation (51:22)	10
IV. VALUES AND DANGERS (1:00:20)	11
A. Christian Living (1:01:50)	12
1. Enhancement (1:02:35)	12
2. Hindrance (1:04:59)	12
B. Interaction in Community (1:08:01)	13
1. Enhancement (1:08:55)	13
2. Hindrance (1:11:56)	13
C. Exegesis (1:15:44)	14
1. Enhancement (1:17:10)	14
2. Hindrance (1:19:39)	15
V. CONCLUSION (1:24:10)	15
REVIEW QUESTIONS	16
APPLICATION QUESTIONS	22
GLOSSARY.....	23

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

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

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

Notes

I. Introduction (0:27)

Traditional systematic theologians are committed to exploring, explaining and defending sound Christian theology. An essential part of that commitment is expressing Christian beliefs in theological propositions.

II. Orientation (2:05)

A. Definition (2:43)

In the discipline of systematic theology, there is one main way theology is verbalized, and that is through theological propositions. “A theological proposition is an indicative sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim.”

1. Indicative (5:50)

As systematic theologians present their points of view they use all kinds of expressions, but the dominant mode of expression in systematic theology is straightforward indicative statements.

2. **Factual (6:46)**

Propositions are designed to assert factual claims. Propositions identify and describe facts.

Quantity:

- The subject of a universal proposition includes every member of a set without exception.

- Other propositions are “particular” because their subjects include only some members of a larger set.

Quality:

- Affirmative propositions state positively that something is true.

- Propositions may also have a negative quality.

3. Theological (12:31)

Theological propositions make factual theological claims. Systematicians focus attention on theology proper by making statements that directly concern God.

Systematic theologians also concern themselves with general theology, claims about aspects of creation as they relate to God.

4. Direct (14:58)

Systematic theologians seek to express their views with heightened concern for being direct or straightforward.

B. Legitimacy (16:27)

The claims of systematic theology are more than the expression of religious sentiments. They are proven and disproved by the empirical test of Scripture.

Two challenges to using theological propositions:

- Doctrine of divine incomprehensibility

We can't know God fully, but we can know him in part when he reveals himself to us.

It is legitimate to state what he has revealed.

- Modern scientific rationalism

The infallible Scriptures are the clearest and most authoritative source of evidence for testing theological viewpoints.

C. Place (25:10)

Building systematic theology requires four main steps:

- Technical terms:

- Propositions:

- Doctrinal statements:

- Comprehensive system of beliefs:

Theological propositions undergird all of the explanations, argumentations, defenses and persuasive techniques that we find in systematics.

III. Formation (29:04)

The processes by which experienced Systematicians create their propositions are enormously complex.

A. Philosophical Interactions (30:02)

Many claims that appear in systematic theology stem from philosophical discussions.

Although we must be aware of the dangers, Christian theologians have been right to interact with various philosophies.

B. Interpretation of Scripture (32:31)

The Bible is by far the most important source for theological propositions in systematics.

1. Challenges (33:25)

The Scriptures present at least two challenges to forming theological propositions.

a. Literary Variety

A number of genres appear throughout the Bible and combine with each other in countless ways.

- Genres

- Expressions

b. Doctrinal Arrangement

Scripture does not deal with particular themes in complete, discrete units, instead the same topic is often addressed in bits and pieces scattered here and there throughout the Bible.

2. **Factual Reduction (38:53)**

Systematicians use the strategy to overcome the challenge of literary variety in the Bible. Factual reduction is the process of focusing on the theological facts that biblical passages teach, and marginalizes other dimensions of these same passages.

When biblical passages are very similar to theological propositions, Systematicians simply note the explicit and implicit facts presented in a biblical text, and then focus on those facts that are pertinent to their discussions.

When biblical passages are not so similar to theological propositions Systematicians notice the literary features of passages so that they can identify the facts that these passages teach. Then they use those delineated facts in their discussions of theology.

If a passage employs figures of speech, Systematicians tend to explain what those figures of speech mean plainly.

3. **Factual Collation (51:22)**

Systematicians deal with the challenge of the bible's doctrinal arrangement through "factual collation."

Systematicians collect passages from all over the Bible as they form their propositions.

a. Repetitive Collation

Systematicians often form theological propositions by drawing from passages that repeat the same basic idea.

One way to confirm that we've understood the claim of one passage correctly is to show that the same claim is repeated in other parts of the Bible.

b. Compositional Collation

Systematicians find various factual claims throughout the bible, and collect these to form larger, multifaceted theological assertions.

IV. Values and Dangers (1:00:20)

Theological propositions in systematic theology have both values and dangers.

A. Christian Living (1:01:50)

Christian living amounts to the process of personal sanctification and this takes place on three levels:

- Conceptual (orthodoxy)
- Behavioral (orthopraxis)
- Emotional (orthopathos)

1. Enhancement (1:02:35)

Clearly and succinctly express many crucial aspects of our faith.

2. Hindrance (1:04:59)

Theological propositions are typically rather abstract about matters other than those we're facing. As result, they cannot offer sufficient guidance for the practical decisions we must make.

B. Interaction in Community (1:08:01)

Interaction in community helps us focus on the importance of the body of Christ in our lives. There are three important dimensions of interaction within the Christian community:

- Christian heritage (the witness of the Holy Spirit's work in the church of the past)
- Present Christian community (the witness of Christians living today)
- Private judgment (the witness of our personal conclusions and convictions)

1. Enhancement (1:08:55)

Becoming aware of the fundamental theological propositions of systematic theology is one of the best ways to become a more discerning follower of Christ.

2. Hindrance (1:11:56)

Sometimes Christians so closely attach themselves to a set of propositions that they have a difficult time interacting in positive ways with other believers who may not say things in exactly the same way.

Even the best theological propositions are limited in scope. And all are flawed in one way or another.

C. Exegesis (1:15:44)

Exegesis is vital to building Christian theology because it is our most direct access to God's special revelation in Scripture. There are three main ways the Holy Spirit has led the church to interpret Scriptures:

- Literary analysis (picture)
- Historical analysis (window)
- Thematic analysis (mirror)

1. Enhancement (1:17:10)

Propositions clarify the theological claims that are spread throughout the Bible.

2. Hindrance (1:19:39)

When we habitually highlight only factual claims, we cut ourselves off from many things that God offers us in Scripture.

Three interconnected dimensions of all biblical texts.

- Informative impact (facts):
- Directive impact (morals):
- Affective impact (emotions):

V. Conclusion (1:24:10)

3. Explain the place theological propositions have within the process of building systematic theology.

4. How does an understanding of propositions help us build systematic theology?

5. Explain how Systematicians form propositions from their interaction with philosophy.
6. Explain how Systematicians overcome the challenges of forming propositions from the Bible.

7. Why is it important to interact with both philosophy and Scripture when forming theological propositions?
8. Describe how Christian living enhances and hinders the formation of theological propositions.

11. How does a better understanding of the dangers of propositions in theology help us benefit from propositions in theology?

Application Questions

1. How can the legitimate use and place of propositions throughout history help you today in communicating the doctrines of the Christian faith?
2. How do you reconcile the use of philosophy in the formation of systematics?
3. How does scriptural support help determine where to place your beliefs on the “cone of certainty”?
4. How does becoming aware of fundamental theological propositions aide you in becoming a more discerning follower of Christ?
5. Explain why it is important not only to get the facts straight, but also to have the right morals and emotions?

Glossary

Aquinas, Thomas – (ca. 1225-1274) Italian theologian and Dominican friar who wrote *Summa Theologica*

Berkhof, Louis – (1873-1957) Influential Reformed theologian who wrote *Systematic Theology* in 1932

Compositional collation – Process of using several different arguments to defend a point of view

Erickson, Millard – (1932-) Theologian and professor of Theology who wrote several books including *Christian Theology*

Factual collation – Process of gathering passages from various parts of the Bible to form propositions

Factual reduction – Process of focusing on only one point of a biblical passage and marginalizing other dimensions of the same passages

Incomprehensibility of God – Term used in theology to express the fact that we can know some things about God as he reveals them to us, but we will never know everything about God

Nicene Creed – Creed written by a council held in Nicaea in A.D. 325; an expansion of the Apostles' Creed that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity and refuted Arianism

Repetitive collation – The process of using a series of Bible passages with similar content to present an argument for a theological point of view

Reymond, Robert – (1932-2013) Reformed systematic theologian and professor who wrote *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*

Scientific rationalism – Philosophical belief that human reason is the supreme judge of truth

Shedd, William – (1820-1894) Presbyterian theologian and professor of Systematic Theology who wrote *Dogmatic Theology*

Systematic theology/Systematics – A theological discipline that seeks to give a rational and orderly presentation of the doctrinal truths of Christianity

Theological proposition – An indicative sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim

Theology proper – The doctrine or study of God; any theological matter that refers directly to God

via negationis/via negativa – Latin phrase for “the way of negation,” meaning to learn about God by contrasting him with his creation; part of the three-fold strategy developed by medieval Scholastic theologians for pursuing natural theology

Westminster Confession of Faith – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647