

**Study Guide to**  
**Building Your Theology, Lesson One:**  
**What is Theology?**

**Featuring Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Have you ever found yourself gazing at some great building, bridge, or highway, and wondering how it was made? Who conceived the idea, drew up the designs, hired the contractors, acquired the materials, and supervised the construction? All of the great building projects of our time, from the great skyscrapers of our cities, to the slender spans linking one landmass to another, to the plunging tunnels under the sea, are the product of thousands of engineers, workers, and many others, using techniques that have slowly developed over the centuries.

In many ways, this is also true of theology. Modern Christian theology is the result of innumerable contributions, over thousands of years, from the writings of the Old Testament, the Apostles, the teachings of the early Church Fathers, church councils, theologians, pastors, laypeople, and of course, Christ. Perhaps you've been a Christian for most of your life and have taken all of this for granted. Or maybe you're a relatively new believer, and have not yet pondered how this great edifice we call "Christianity" came to be. But in this series of Lessons, which we've entitled *Building Your Theology*, these are the kinds of issues we will be exploring. Our goal will be to explain how each Christian can understand and develop his or her own Christian theology, and appreciate that of others.

Theology is such a vast subject that the prospect of grasping even a basic understanding of it can seem daunting. So, we need a strategy to accomplish this task. In our first Lesson, we will explain what theology actually is. We'll do this in three main sections or "Signposts:"

**The Definition of Theology**  
**The Goals of Theology**  
**The Topics of Theology**

We recommend that students watch only one Signpost at a time. After each Signpost, conduct your discussion (if you are studying this as a group) and/or read the appropriate questions and guidelines in the study guide. Review the DVD or tape as often as needed to answer the study questions, facilitate discussion, or simply gain a fuller understanding of the subject matter. Study questions are numbered consecutively (e.g., "SQ1") and appear in *italics*. Feel free to use your own paper if the space provided is insufficient for your answers.

## I. The Definition of Theology

Naturally, if we want to study a subject, we have to know what that subject is, what it entails. So, it will help us to have a working definition of “theology.” Now, it might seem that we should simply define “theology” as “the study of God.” But this definition describes only a small part of what theologians do. We will look for a more helpful definition by considering three matters:

**Typical Definitions** of theology  
**Tendencies** of these definitions  
**Evaluation** of these tendencies

Let’s get our study underway by looking at how some theologians have defined “theology.”

### A. Typical Definitions of Theology

It may seem strange to say this, but according to Romans 1:18-20, everybody “does theology” in some sense. As these verses say:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

The Greek that Paul used here to say “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven” suggests that God’s wrath is being revealed in nature, right now.

*SQ1. List three ways God is doing this today:*

Our main concern, of course, is to make a serious, concerted effort to study theology. So, we should move beyond the theological observations that everyone makes, and turn to the definitions of “theology” offered by some representative theologians.

### **Thomas Aquinas**

Thomas Aquinas defined theology as:

A unified science in which all things are treated under the aspect of God either because they are God himself or because they refer to God.

Generally, we use the word “science” differently than did educated people of the past. What we call “science” today (e.g., subjects like chemistry, physics, biology, astronomy, etc.) was once known as “natural philosophy.”

*SQ2. When Aquinas used the word “science,” what did he mean?*

That Aquinas saw theology as an academic task should not surprise us. In fact, this definition is probably the first that springs to most people’s minds when they think of “theology.” Another aspect of Aquinas’ definition that may seem quite natural to us is the way he distinguished between two categories, that is:

*SQ3. The first category includes \_\_\_\_\_.  
It treats such subjects as the attributes of God (e.g., omniscience, omnipresence, aseity or self-existence). This category is sometimes called*

\_\_\_\_\_.

SQ4. *The other category deals with \_\_\_\_\_.*  
*It includes many different subjects, including eschatology (the study of last things) and the way in which Christ is present in the Lord's Supper.*

**Charles Hodge**

It is interesting that although Hodge lived several centuries after Aquinas, he defined “theology” in a similar way. For instance, both used the word “science,” although Hodge’s use of the word was closer to the modern definition than Aquinas’ was. According to Hodge, “theology” is:

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

SQ5. *The “facts of divine revelation” find their source in \_\_\_\_\_.*

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Hodge also said:

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

SQ6. *Since Hodge saw theology as a “science,” and in fact held up chemists and physicists as models for theologians to follow, how did Hodge think theologians were to approach the study of the Bible?*

## **William Ames**

This Puritan writer said that the heart of theology is “the doctrine of teaching or living to God.”

*SQ7. How does the emphasis of Ames’ definition of “theology” differ from the emphases of the definitions offered by Aquinas and Hodge?*

*SQ8. What are some advantages to approaching theology with Ames’ emphasis? What disadvantages might be associated with this emphasis?*

## **John Frame**

Frame differs from these other theologians in that he is contemporary to our times. But it is also true that his definition of “theology” is very much in keeping with Ames’ definition. For Frame, theology is defined as “application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.” Like Ames, Frame certainly has a place in his definition for the academic issues raised in the study of theology, but he emphasizes that theology is the application of the teachings of Scripture to the totality of our lives.

*SQ9. Of these four different definitions of “theology,” which one most closely resembles your present understanding of the term? Explain your answer.*

*SQ10. Is any one of these approaches more “correct” than the others? Why?*

In the next part of this Lesson, we’ll begin to evaluate the tendencies of these differing approaches to the study of theology, as well as the importance of understanding and appreciating their differences.

## **B. Tendencies**

It probably comes as no surprise to hear that the way someone defines “theology” affects the way he or she does theology. In the four definitions we just compared, we can see two important and valuable “perspectives” or “orientations” to theology:

<p><b>Academic Orientation</b> <b>Life Orientation</b></p>
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Let’s look first at the academic orientation to theology.

## 1. Academic Orientation

SQ11. *Of the four theologians we've examined so far, which ones represent the academic orientation to theology?*

SQ12. *According to Dr. Pratt, a strong emphasis on the academic (or "formal") aspect of theology often treats the application of theology as a "second step." What potential problem can arise from this approach?*

## 2. Life Orientation

SQ13. *Of the four theologians we've examined so far, which ones represent the life orientation to theology?*

Until recently, this was very much a minority viewpoint, but it is much more common these days to find theologians stressing a perspective viewed from a "life orientation."

SQ14. *Dr. Pratt gives several reasons for this shift in approach. What are they?*

## C. Evaluation

Now that we have the “big picture” of the academic and life orientations to theology, we can begin to evaluate these approaches, paying particular attention to the advantages and disadvantages that can accompany each.

### 1. Academic Orientation

*SQ15. What are the advantages to using our intellectual skills in “doing theology?” Why are the advantages so important?*

It’s clear from the Scripture that God places a very high value on intellectual ability and wisdom. For example, according to 1 Kings 4:29,31, King Solomon’s exceptional skills in this area are said to have been a gift from God:

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore... He was wiser than any other man ... And his fame spread to the surrounding nations.

Passages like this, as well as the “Wisdom Literature” of the Bible (e.g., Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), indicate God’s approval of intellectual study. Indeed, they teach that it is imperative for us to hone our intellectual abilities and to use them to advance God’s kingdom.

Nevertheless, it is also true that the academic approach has certain dangers. Dr. Pratt mentions some of these.

*SQ16. List the dangers to the academic orientation that Dr. Pratt mentions.*

One of the great ironies of a strictly academic approach to theology is that well-educated and informed people can actually deceive themselves. Those who have been in the church for many years have often encountered examples of this. We may even be guilty of it ourselves! It is possible to use our academic skills to rationalize all kinds of sinful behavior. But the study of theology is never to be used as a tool to justify sin, or selfishly to manipulate others.

*SQ17. List some examples from Scripture where an emphasis on knowledge is condemned when it is not accompanied by “living theology.”*

## **2. Life Orientation**

The great strength of this approach to theology is that it submits to the commands of Scripture. One example is that of James 1:22: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Other admonitions of this sort can be found in 1 Corinthians 8:1 and 13:2. An excessive reliance on academic abilities at the expense of obedience is a very real danger for the believer.

But, as is the case with the academic orientation, an exclusive commitment to the life orientation is hazardous.

*SQ18. List some dangers to the life orientation to theology.*

While it can be encouraging that more attention these days is being paid to a life orientation in theology, it is also true that this could result in the church facing a new set of challenges. In particular, syncretism (in which the church confuses and combines pagan religions, psychological, scientific or other contemporary philosophical beliefs with Christian ones) is a possibility. Opportunistic individuals might also capitalize on the widespread uncertainty, apathy and ignorance that are the bitter fruit of academic neglect.

The preventative for intellectual hypocrisy and indifference is to realize that we need the theology of the academy as well as theology for life. As we continue these Lessons, always remember that mastering this material is not an end in itself. It is to prepare you, as well as those you influence, to be fit for the kingdom of God.

We are now ready to proceed to our next Signpost. View the second portion of the video “The Goals of Theology,” and then interact with the materials in Part II.

## **II. The Goals of Theology**

Now that we’ve spent some time defining the study of theology, we need to turn our attention to the reasons we do theology, to the things we hope to accomplish through our studies of theology.

Again, we’re going to approach our subject in three small steps:

**Three Goals** of theology  
The **Interdependence** of these goals  
The relative **Priorities** of these goals

## A. Three Goals

Actually, there many possible goals for studying theology, but we're going to base our goals on the two orientations we've just discussed: the academic orientation, and the life orientation. One goal (orthodoxy) will address the academic issue, and the other two goals (orthopraxis and orthopathos) will address the life issues.

### 1. Orthodoxy

*SQ19. Dr. Pratt has a very simple definition for "orthodoxy." What is it?*

As simple as this definition is, and as obvious as the goal may be, this will prove to be one of the most controversial objectives of the theological enterprise. By way of mass communications media such as radio, television, printed material and the internet, Christians now are exposed to more diverse points of view than at any other time in history. This is to say nothing of the vast shifts in population that have resulted in more cultural interaction than many of us have previously encountered.

*SQ20. Should we expect these forces to affect our search for truth or "right thinking"? Why or why not? If the answer is "yes," how should we expect them to affect our search?*

Having said all this, we need to remember that as "cosmopolitan" as our world seems to be today, the church faced a very similar situation during its formative days in the Roman Empire. Despite the challenges it faced in those days, it still experienced some of its most spectacular growth at that time. Pursuing truth and right thinking in this environment can take a great deal of

effort, just as it did in Jesus' day. But the same rewards for our own lives, as well as for others, are just as accessible now as they were then. Rather than merely seeing the times as an obstacle to our Christian lives, we need to learn to recognize and take advantage of the opportunities they offer.

## **2. Orthopraxis**

*SQ21. How does Dr. Pratt define orthopraxis?*

*SQ22. Recall the four theologians we discussed before. Which ones emphasized orthopraxis in their definitions of "theology"? Explain your answer.*

*SQ23. Based on this Lesson, what are some things that make it hard for Christians to maintain orthopraxis as a goal?*

*SQ24. Unfortunately, sometimes the church is its own worst enemy when it comes to orthopraxis. What have been some of the church's conspicuous failures in this area?*

*SQ25. Our Lesson quotes from James 2:19: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder." If the demons believe so many things that are true, why don't they benefit from this knowledge?*

*SQ26. According to our Lesson, is orthodoxy more important than orthopraxis? Is orthopraxis more important than orthodoxy? Explain the relationship between the two.*

### **3. Orthopathos**

*SQ27. How does our Lesson define orthopathos?*

*SQ28. Many people would be surprised to think of emotions or feelings as an aspect of theological study. Do you find this surprising? Why or why not?*

*SQ29. Why do so many theologians overlook the emotional dimension of theology?*

SQ30. *Are there such things as “good” feelings or “bad” feelings? Explain your answer.*

SQ31. *List some passages in the Bible (other than the example provided in the lesson) in which the writer expresses his emotions.*

## **B. Interdependence**

Now that we know our goals, we need to see how they interrelate to one another; indeed, how each goal depends upon the others.

SQ32. *How is orthodoxy important to orthopraxis and orthopathos?*

*SQ33. Describe two situations in which your praxis (behavior), or that of someone you know, was confirmed or challenged by doctrinal teachings.*

*SQ34. Describe two situations in which your emotional state, or that of someone you know, was influenced the facts of theology.*

*SQ35. How is it possible for someone's orthodoxy to be affected by their behavior?*

*SQ36. How can our behaviors change our emotional states?*

One thing that makes some believers nervous is the idea that our feelings and emotions can affect our doctrine, our convictions about what is true. It's common for people to think that our emotions have to be kept completely out of our analytical and rational activities, including the study of theology. But sometimes these people fail to realize that in order for us to believe that something is true, we also have to feel that it is true. At least to this extent, orthodoxy will always have an emotional dimension to it.

*SQ37. What examples from Scripture does the Lesson offer to demonstrate that emotions can lead us into right thinking and behavior?*

### **C. Priorities**

At this point we have come to an obvious question: Of the three goals of theology (orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathos), which should we spend the most time and effort in developing? What is the best strategy to use in order to maximize the advantages each of these goals has to offer?

*SQ38. What is a very common strategy used by many evangelicals? Is it a good strategy? Why or why not?*

*SQ39. What other strategies might be effective? In what circumstances do you imagine these would do the most good?*

SQ40. Dr. Pratt has a saying: "Our beliefs, actions and feelings form

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*SQ41. What does this saying mean?*

*SQ42. Of the three goals, (orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathos) which is/are your strongest point(s)?*

*SQ43. Should you continue to focus on your strongest point to develop the others? Or should you concentrate on your weak areas to develop them? Why?*

*SQ44. Dr. Pratt has another saying he likes to use: "Because the deck of life is always shifting, balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity." What does this saying mean, and how can it help us develop a strategy of priorities?*

*SQ45. What are the dangers of sticking with just one approach to these goals?*

*SQ46. To which of these dangers are you most prone to? How do you plan to guard against these in your theological studies?*

One set of goals for this Lesson is to get you, the student, to realize the dangers to which you are naturally prone, to help you understand why this is the case, and to help you develop means to counter these dangers. This is one reason that theology is never “mastered” or “finished” in an absolute sense. Theology is a project that believers should be working on for their entire lives.

We are now ready to proceed to our final Signpost. View the third portion of the video “The Topics of Theology,” and then interact with the materials in Part III.

### III. Topics of Theology

Now that we understand what theology is, and what the goals of theology are, we need to determine what our areas of concern are going to be, and where to place these concerns. The scope of topics included in “theology” is so vast that it’s easy to become overwhelmed (and discouraged!) by the immensity of it all. Hopefully, our efforts in this section will make the whole operation more manageable. For this Signpost, we’ll focus on two ideas:

The theologian’s **Options**  
The need for **Selectivity**

#### A. Theological Options

*SQ47. Our Lesson contains a substantial list of options that are available to the student of theology. What are a few of these?*

*SQ48. From which perspective (orthodoxy, orthopraxis or orthopathos) do most seminaries primarily view these topics? What perspective is rarely emphasized? Why do you think this might be so?*

## **B. Selectivity**

There are at least two reasons that we have to be selective when considering the topics of theology. As we've already said, the subject is so immense that it is easy to be lost and overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the topic. The other reason that we have to be selective is that we do not have enough time to do everything.

To make these Lessons manageable, we're going to confine ourselves to a limited number of topics. And we're going to organize these topics under three major divisions, which is typical of the way many seminaries approach this task. Each major division will correspond to a Main Topic.

*SQ49. What are the three Divisions? To which Main Topic does each correspond?*

\_\_\_\_\_ *division corresponds to* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ *division corresponds to* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ *division corresponds to* \_\_\_\_\_

The video gives some examples of topics that are generally found in each division. We will talk about these three Main Topics in greater detail in a later Lesson. Keep all of this in mind, and refer back to this page to refresh your memory as needed.

One final point: Have you noticed we have three Goals, three Divisions, and three Topics? Later in this series the reasoning behind this will be made clear.