

**Study Guide to**  
**Building Your Theology, Lesson Two:**  
**Exploring Christian Theology**

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

Recently I picked up a book on the subject of Islam and began examining the covers. In a summary statement on the back, it declared that this book “was a completely objective look at Islam, from a Christian point of view”! Apparently the editors of this book missed the irony: Books about any subject, examined from a particular point of view, are never objective. They may be very worthwhile books, and they may even be true, but they are not objective.

Even within Christianity we are often faced with the same problem. You don’t have to be a long-time believer to realize that within your own denomination, within your own church, and even within your study and prayer groups, people are going to disagree about certain matters. They may be somewhat arcane disputes, perhaps over the extent of the Atonement, or differences may arise over relatively commonplace issues, such as the mode of baptism or which activities are permissible on Sundays.

Why can’t we all just read the Bible, believe, and do what it says? Unfortunately, too many of us believe that we are the only ones doing that very thing! It’s those “other people” who refuse to see the plain truth of Scripture! The trouble is that they are saying the same thing about us.

Disputes like these discourage many from making a serious study of theology. If people disagree on so much about Christianity, is it possible for us to know anything? And many of those outside the Church see this as an excuse not to believe at all.

Fortunately, the state of Christian theology is not really that bad. In fact, with a little effort we can distinguish Christian theology from non-Christian theology with relative ease. We can also investigate how various traditions within the church shaped Christian theology as we know it today. And we can look at a specific tradition, the Reformed Tradition, to learn its basic tenets. This last examination is especially important because the Reformed tradition is the basis for these Lessons. Accordingly, this Lesson will be divided into three major sections or “Signposts:”

**Christian Theology**  
**Theological Traditions**  
**Reformed Tradition**

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. Christian Theology**

*SQ1. What are the problems that accompany defining “Christian theology” as “what Christians believe”?*

*SQ2. What problems might be involved with defining “Christian theology” as “what Christians ought to believe”?*

We’ll address the difficulties involved in defining Christian theology in three steps:

<p><b>Problems</b> involved <b>Working Definition</b> <b>Unity and Diversity</b> within Christianity</p>
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**A. Problems**

SQ3. *What main feature of Hinduism distinguishes it from Christianity?*

SQ4. *Islam is more similar to Christianity than Hinduism is. What are the similarities between Islam and Christianity?*

SQ5. *What are some important differences between Islam and Christianity?*

SQ6. *Why is Judaism so similar to Christianity?*

*SQ7. What main feature of Judaism clearly distinguishes it from Christianity?*

Various cults that are based upon Christianity (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Christian Science, the faith of Sun Yung Moon) can seem extremely close to Christianity, especially to those who aren't particularly familiar with Christian theology. (In these particular examples, the cults all deny, to one degree or another, the divinity of Christ.)

Perhaps even closer to true Christianity are those churches and denominations that have strayed away from the beliefs of their founders. For example, some churches deny that Christ atoned for sin.

*SQ8. List some traditional Christian beliefs have many modern churches abandoned. List some non-Christian beliefs they have adopted.*

*SQ9. Why might churches like these be so hard to distinguish from true Christianity?*

The most difficult distinctions to draw between Christianity and non-Christianity are those that exist between genuine believers and the denominations that represent them. Practicing Christians can be found in many denominations: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and the incredibly numerous Protestant groups.

*SQ10. What kinds of differences might exist between individual believers and traditional Christianity?*

*SQ11. Dr. Pratt presents a list, a collection of essential Christian beliefs that are typically provided by his students in class. While it is true that every belief in this list can be considered "essential," how many of them did you believe when you became a Christian?*

*SQ12. How many of these do you now understand completely?*

SQ13. *How many of these beliefs do you think were held by the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43)?*

## **B. A Working Definition**

Despite the difficulties involved in defining “Christian theology,” we will still need a working definition in order to pursue theological studies. For this purpose, we will use the Apostle’s Creed, which is a historic statement of Christian faith from the early church. This definition will not satisfy everyone completely. Without doubt, many of us would prefer to add to this definition, or perhaps leave things out. But for the purposes of these Lessons, any person or church who affirms the teachings in the Apostles’ Creed, and any theology in accordance with this creed, will be considered “Christian.” This will help all of us, regardless of our backgrounds, in assembling a theology that we can share together.

*I believe in God the Father almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
And born of the Virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified, died and was buried;  
He descended into hell.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.  
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
The holy catholic Church,  
The communion of saints,  
The forgiveness of sins,  
The resurrection of the body,  
And the life everlasting, Amen.*

*SQ14. Considering the entire Apostles' Creed, are there any portions that you are not comfortable with, or do not understand? List those portions and describe your discomfort or lack of understanding.*

Keep in mind that one does not have to affirm or comprehend every single statement in the Creed to be considered a believer. Again, this “working” definition is just that — a starting point for you to begin building your own Christian theology.

### **C. Unity and Diversity**

Now that we've looked at the Apostles' Creed, and adopted it as our working definition of “Christian theology,” we can now see that Christianity is both unified (because all of us, regardless of our backgrounds, can affirm at least most of the Creed) as well as diverse (because there are a lot of areas of concern that the Creed doesn't mention). We will explore these ideas under the following headings:

<p>Christian <b>Unity</b> Christian <b>Diversity</b></p>
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#### **1. Unity**

Many people, both believers and non-believers, would have a hard time accepting the statement that Christianity is unified. But the Christianity really is unified, at least in some respects. According to the Creed, Christians throughout the world form “one holy catholic Church.”

*SQ15. What does the word “catholic” mean in this context?*

*SQ16. Read John 17:22-23. How would you respond to the idea that attempts to make Christianity more unified “just aren’t realistic”?*

*SQ17. List some of the beliefs, beyond those found in the Apostles’ Creed, that are shared by the basic divisions of Christianity (Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant).*

## **2. Diversity**

For most of us, diversity within the Church is much easier to recognize than unity. But this raises a natural question: Since we are supposed to believe in the same God, the same Christ, and the same Holy Spirit who leads us unto truth, why are there differences among us?

First — and this may come as a surprise — God expects and even approves of some of these differences!

*SQ18. According to our Lesson, this kind of diversity results from:*

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Have you ever wondered why we have four Gospels instead of just one? Or why the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament depict the same events and the same people in different ways? Sometimes the differences in their accounts are quite significant. At least one reason for this “duplication” is

that the biblical writers had different goals and objectives in the writing of their different books. The four gospels give us different perspectives on Christ. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each focused on different concerns. Due to our human limitations, one perspective just isn't enough.

*SQ19. Since God inspired the Scriptures, what should we believe about this kind of diversity?*

*SQ20. Since the Scriptures aren't being written anymore, should this kind of diversity end? Why or why not?*

Sometimes, diversity is not so benign. Sometimes individuals and groups wander into false doctrines, practices, or pathos.

*SQ21. Have you ever been accused of holding to a false doctrine or practice, or of having "wrong" emotions? Have you ever discovered that any of your doctrines, practices or emotions were unbiblical? If so, how did you react?*

Most of us who have been believers for many years can recall various times in our past when we held false beliefs, acted wrongly, or had inappropriate emotional responses. The reality of the “Christian walk” is that our theology is very likely to change over time. It may even happen to you as you complete these Lessons — and this is typical.

SQ22. *To keep from falling into error, our Lesson teaches us to be*

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SQ23. *Along with this, we need to be ready to* \_\_\_\_\_

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Sometimes changes in our theological positions are relatively easy to make. You may encounter a concept that you have never considered previously. Sometimes a friend is earnestly seeking help in some area, and in the attempt to help him or her you make a new discovery. Times like these can be very enjoyable and gratifying.

However, the process of change can sometimes be very slow and difficult. Many have risked friendships and even broken relationships over theological issues. At times, people have even gone to war over them. This is an area in which we must tread lightly, with discernment and care. We must realize that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who changes hearts and minds.

We are now ready to move to our next Signpost. View the section of the video entitled “Theological Traditions,” then interact with the materials in the next section of this study guide.

## II. Theological Traditions

If you’re from a Protestant background, you might be a little surprised to encounter a discussion of the role of “tradition” in the study of Christian theology. Many of us are from backgrounds that have a negative view of this aspect of theology, but when everything is taken into consideration, its importance is undeniable. We will look at Theological Traditions in three steps:

A <b>Definition</b> of Tradition The <b>Tendencies</b> of Tradition The <b>Importance</b> of Tradition
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## A. Definition

As we have already noted, a lot of us come from backgrounds that don't look upon tradition in a favorable way. This commonly results from emphasizing a negative definition of the term. While there are definitely negative aspects of tradition to consider, we will also examine a positive definition of the term.

### 1. Negative

The reason many of us look on tradition with suspicion is that we confuse "tradition" with "traditionalism."

SQ24. *What is the difference between "tradition" and "traditionalism"?*

SQ25. *Give three examples of religious traditionalism.*

### 2. Positive

SQ26. *Our Lesson defines "theological tradition" as: "A relatively*

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*\_\_\_\_\_ from each other."*

SQ27. Which New Testament writer used the terms “passed on” and “received” in the context of Christian traditions?

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SQ28. Why is it significant that this writer used this terminology?

SQ29. Give one example each of a longstanding doctrine, practice and pathos within Christianity.

SQ30. Give two examples of ways in which your church’s tradition is distinguished from others.

## **B. Tendencies of Theological Traditions**

SQ31. List the three “orthos” from the previous Lesson:

Ortho \_\_\_\_\_, Ortho \_\_\_\_\_, Ortho \_\_\_\_\_

Theological traditions within the church tend to fall into one (or maybe two) of these three categories. In other words, traditions tend to reinforce *doctrines*, *practices* or *feelings*. Understanding this helps us see why the character of churches differs so greatly.

SQ32. What advantages might there be to a heavy emphasis on doctrine?

SQ33. What disadvantages might there be to a heavy emphasis on doctrine?

SQ34. What advantages might there be to a heavy emphasis on practice?

SQ35. *What disadvantages might there be to a heavy emphasis on practice?*

SQ36. *What advantages might there be to a heavy emphasis on feelings?*

SQ37. *What disadvantages might there be to a heavy emphasis on feelings?*

### **C. Importance of Theological Traditions**

Ultimately, what is the point in making these kinds of analyses? We do this primarily to become more aware of ourselves and of others, not to discover points of contention or to cause division.

## 1. Awareness of Ourselves

*SQ38. According to our Lesson, where do students of theology get the idea that they must divorce themselves from their particular religious tradition or heritage before they can study theology?*

*SQ39. What has been the result of this “divorce?”*

*SQ40. Rather than trying to separate ourselves from our heritage, students of theology should strive to:*

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Our Lesson suggests several questions students should ask themselves in order to gain a better understanding of the influences that affect their thinking:

*SQ41. What branch of the Church do you call home? This could be a denomination or a “movement” of some sort.*

SQ42. *What are the general tendencies of your particular tradition? Does it emphasize orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos?*

SQ43. *What most concerns you personally: doctrine, practice or affections? Why?*

SQ44. *What kinds of doctrines does your church consider to be most important?*

SQ45. *What kinds of behaviors and practices does your church emphasize?*

*SQ46. What emotions might be considered acceptable or unacceptable in your church?*

## **2. Awareness of others**

Just as your particular heritage and tradition affect you, the Christian traditions of your fellow believers will likely influence their thinking.

*SQ47. Think of your friends and acquaintances that come from different Christian backgrounds than you. How does their thinking differ from yours? On what issues?*

We are now ready to view our final Signpost in this Lesson. View the portion of the video dealing with the “Reformed Tradition,” and then interact with the final part of this Study Guide.

## **III. The Reformed Tradition**

As a student in these Lessons, you may or may not be familiar with the kind of theology known as “Reformed.” The major reason we are exploring this particular tradition is that all of these Lessons will be strongly influenced by this heritage. Knowing this will help you understand many of our assumptions in these Lessons. Being aware of the similarities and differences between your tradition and the tradition that influences these lessons will enable you to respond

responsibly to the teachings presented here. So not be overly distracted by particular doctrines with which you disagree. Rather, take this opportunity to learn how theological beliefs are “built.” Generally speaking, different traditions build theology in the same way, even though they come to different theological conclusions. We will navigate this Signpost on Reformed theology in three parts:

Historical **Developments**  
Theological **Tendencies**  
Theological **Distinctives**

### A. Developments

SQ48. *This Lesson mentions three of the more significant movements of the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They are:*

\_\_\_\_\_ *in Germany*

\_\_\_\_\_ *in Zurich, Switzerland*

\_\_\_\_\_ *in Geneva, Switzerland*

SQ49. *Which one of these movements is primarily associated with the type of theology known as “Reformed?”*

\_\_\_\_\_

SQ50. *Don’t feel guilty about answering this question honestly: Would you take a job if you knew that the average life expectancy in that occupation was only six months? Why or why not?*

*SQ51. List the Reformed Confessions, Creeds, and Standards mentioned in the Lesson.*

Later in this series, we will refer to one of these in particular. You can learn more about that particular Confession in the sidebar “The Westminster Confession of Faith.”

This segment ends with this statement from David Steinmetz’s *Calvin in Context*:

For more than four hundred years Calvin has influenced the way successive generations of Europeans and Americans have thought about religion, structured their political institutions, looked at paintings, written poetry and music, theorized about economic relations, or struggled to uncover the laws which govern the physical universe.

*SQ52. Had you ever heard of Calvin before this lesson? What did you know about him? Why is it easy or hard to imagine that he had this type of influence?*

## **B. Tendencies**

*SQ53. According to this Lesson, which tendency or tendencies are strongest in Reformed churches: orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos?*

SQ54. *What does the Westminster Shorter Catechism say that confirms your answer? What is missing from the summary in the Westminster Shorter Catechism?*

### C. Theological Distinctives

Since we now know that Reformed Theology has such a strong doctrinal emphasis, we can best familiarize ourselves with this branch of the church by looking at these four distinctives:

The **Solas** of the Reformation  
**The Unity of Scripture**  
**The Doctrine of God**  
The relationship of **Culture** to Christianity

#### 1. Solas

SQ55. *Translate and define “Sola Scriptura.”*

SQ56. *Translate and define “Solo Christo.”*

SQ57. Translate and define “*Sola Fide*.”

SQ58. Translate and define “*Sola Gratia*.”

SQ59. Translate and define “*Soli Deo Gloria*.”

## 2. The Unity of Scripture

Many believers feel that there is a strong separation or division between the Old and New Testaments. Unfortunately, the use of the word “Old” in naming the first Testament leads many to believe that this portion of the Bible is merely of historical interest, that the “Old” has been set aside or superseded by the “New.” One thing that distinguishes the Reformed tradition from other branches of the church is that it stresses the unity of the two Testaments; it denies that the New supplants the Old, and it insists that both Testaments teach essentially the same thing.

SQ60. The movement that sees a fundamental separation between the Old and the New Testaments is called:

\_\_\_\_\_.

SQ61. Under this view, the Old Testament is considered \_\_\_\_\_.

SQ62. *Under this view, the New Testament is considered \_\_\_\_\_.*

Rather than seeing the two Testaments as fundamentally opposed to each other, the Reformed tradition sees the whole Bible as presenting a unified theology. Law and grace, good works, and salvation by faith alone are to be found in both the Old and New Testaments. Students should understand the various stages of the Bible as presenting a developing theology, not as presenting theology that supplants early theologies.

As with any interpretive method, it is possible to carry this idea too far. There are those, for instance, who make too little distinction between the Old and the New Testaments (e.g., the school of thought called “theonomy” teaches that the letter of the Old Testament Law is to be followed as closely as possible even today). It is sometimes helpful to think of the Old Testament as a set of instructions given to a young child, and of the New Testament as a set of directives for adults. This is not to say that the New Testament presents more complex rules, or that the Old Testament’s theology is less developed or comprehensive. It is merely to say that the New Testament assumes more history and more revelation than the Old Testament. Just as adults have more knowledge and experience to draw from as they reflect on life, the New Testament assumes more knowledge on the part of its audience. As you might imagine, figuring out how the developments in the New Testament impact our understanding of particular Old Testament texts is not always easy. This is one of the reasons that doing theology in the context of a Christian “community” is so helpful (we will explore this idea in more detail in a later Lesson).

### **3. The Doctrine of God**

SQ63. *What is the “transcendence” of God?*

SQ64. *What is the immanence of God?*

SQ65. *Which of these aspects of God (transcendence or immanence) has Reformed theology historically tended to emphasize?*

SQ66. *What do you think might be the practical results of this emphasis?*

SQ67. *What problems might arise from an overemphasis on this concept?*

#### **4. Culture**

The relationship between Christianity and human culture is something Christians rarely take into consideration when studying theology. Our Lesson quotes from Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, in which Niebuhr delineates five basic approaches Christians take to culture.

SQ68. List the five basic approaches Niebuhr mentions:

Christ \_\_\_\_\_.

Christ \_\_\_\_\_.

Christ \_\_\_\_\_.

Christ \_\_\_\_\_.

Christ \_\_\_\_\_.

SQ69. Which of these is identified as the Reformed view?

SQ70. Give some historical examples of how this viewpoint has been put into practice.

SQ71. In Genesis 1:28, humanity was given a cultural \_\_\_\_\_.

SQ72. What did this mandate require of humanity?

*SQ73. Reformed theology has insisted that every aspect of human life is to be brought under the Lordship of Christ. Has this changed your own thinking about the arts? Science? Politics and Law? If so, how? If not, why not?*