

**Study Guide to**  
**Building Your Theology, Lesson Three:**  
**Relying on Revelation**

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

Recently it was necessary for me to make a very long motor trip in a very old car. For more than 2,000 miles I was on “pins and needles,” constantly wondering if the vehicle was going to be able to make the journey without breaking down. Needless to say, I was very happy when I made the round trip successfully, proving that my car, while being quite old, was still reliable.

I think that many believers look at their theology in the same way. Christian theology is a very old subject, and there are so many alternatives out there that many of us go through our lives with the same discomfort as I did on my motor trip — we hope that we’ll be able to make it without our belief system breaking down. And just as the inner workings of automobiles can be mysterious to those of us who aren’t mechanics, the inner workings of theology and the Bible upon which it is based, are sometimes strange and unfamiliar to us. As a result, we often have a hard time placing confidence in them. Perhaps we even wonder if such confidence is even possible or advisable.

In this lesson we will see how theologians have learned to rely on God’s revelation in the development of Christianity. We will do this in three major sections or “Signposts:”

**Finding Revelation**  
**Understanding Revelation**  
**Developing Confidence**

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. Finding Revelation**

For Christian theology to have any meaning or significance, we have to have *revelation*, some means by which God communicates his truths and

teachings to us. To see how God communicates revelation, we'll examine three specific issues:

**General Revelation**  
**Special Revelation**  
**Interconnections** between these two

## **A. General Revelation**

*SQ1. Why is this form of revelation called “general”?*

There are two aspects of General Revelation that we need to look at. First, there is what we will call the “medium” of general revelation.

*SQ2. According to Romans 1:18-20, what is the medium or conduit of God’s general revelation?*

*SQ3. Imagine you are standing by the side of a road looking at an immense crop of grain. What could this field tell you about God?*

It's relatively easy to understand how nature, and our understanding of it, can reveal God. What is not common, or well-understood, is how mankind's use of nature can also reveal God.

*SQ4. What can a nuclear power plant tell us about God and his creation?*

*SQ5. What does an arsenal of thermonuclear weapons tell us about God and his creation?*

There is an important reason that the studies of science, architecture, politics, the arts, medicine, music, and many others are important for the Christian community. Before science was "secularized," a chief motivation for the study of nature was to learn more about God. That's why many religious figures, like Jonathan Edwards, also had scientific interests. It is also why many scientific personalities (e.g., Sir Isaac Newton) were fascinated with religious subjects. It is no coincidence that the Scientific Method, and the phenomenon of applied technology, came out of a culture dominated by a Christian world view.

But the benefits of pursuing knowledge have sometimes been blunted and compromised by mankind's sinful nature. The search for knowledge, the arts, and the development of technology, divorced from a Christian context (as it is in the secularized West of today), has proven to be very dangerous. In a Christian context, however, education, research and study are far more than a means to earn income or to achieve a sense of personal fulfillment. The most important things these do for us are revealing God and benefiting his image (humanity).

This brings us to our next subject. We've looked at the medium of general revelation. Now let's look at the content of general revelation.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul did not go into great detail about what people actually learn from general revelation. But it is clear from verse 20 that creation reveals “God’s invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature.”

*SQ6. So, one major category of knowledge revealed in nature is God’s*

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For instance, God’s omniscience (his exhaustive knowledge of all things) cannot be viewed directly. But we can get learn about its extent through an examination of nature. For example, a few years ago scientists finally finished “mapping” the human genome. I read that printing all of this information out on standard sheets of paper would result in a stack equal to the height of the Washington Monument (more than 555 feet high)! This is a staggering amount of information, representing stupendous complexity — but it gives us an indication of the intellect responsible for designing humanity.

A second category of knowledge is mentioned by Paul in Romans 1:32.

*SQ7. According to Romans 1:32, what else does general revelation reveal?*

*SQ8. Think about what you see in general revelation, then list some of the things it has to teach us about our moral responsibilities.*

## **B. Special Revelation**

As much as can be learned about God and his claims upon humanity through general revelation, we need far more specific information in order to begin the work of constructing a Christian theology.

*SQ9. Why is special revelation is called “special”?*

*SQ10. According to Hebrews 1:1-3, how has God most clearly and fully disclosed himself?*

*SQ11. In what additional ways has God provided special revelation to his people?*

*SQ12. What did Christ think about the Old Testament? In what biblical passages is his view evident?*

### C. Interconnections

Because we now have so much special revelation, many believers, consciously or not, see too little value in general revelation. But in fact, to the same extent that general revelation is enhanced by special revelation, special revelation is dependent upon general revelation. We'll gain an understanding of these interconnections by looking at two ideas:

The **Overlap** of general and special revelation  
The **Need** for both forms of revelation

#### 1. Overlap

Although we tend to think of “general” and “special” as two rigorously distinct categories of God’s revelation, it’s actually more helpful for us to think of these two kinds of revelation as overlapping to a significant extent. Let’s consider the spectrum of special revelation first.

*SQ13. The lesson distinguishes between the following three “types” of special revelation:*

- \_\_\_\_\_ *special revelation*
- \_\_\_\_\_ *special revelation*
- \_\_\_\_\_ *special revelation*

*SQ14. Give a biblical example of each type of special revelation. You may include the examples from the video, or use others that come to mind.*

SQ15. *The lesson distinguishes between the following three “types” of general revelation:*

\_\_\_\_\_ *general revelation*

\_\_\_\_\_ *general revelation*

\_\_\_\_\_ *general revelation*

SQ16. *Give a biblical example of each type of general revelation. You may include the examples from the video, or use others that come to mind.*

SQ17. *Are you surprised that general revelation can teach us about matters that we usually reserve for special revelation? Why or why not?*

## **2. Need**

By now you will not be surprised to find that, due to the overlap between these two forms of revelation, we consequently have a great need of both.

*SQ18. What are the primary functions of special revelation?*

On the other hand, many believers, even those who have been in the faith for many years, would be surprised to the extent that we depend upon general revelation.

*SQ19. Why can't we build our theology from the Bible, and only the Bible?*

*SQ20. List two matters that general revelation addresses that special revelation does not address.*

SQ21. *Is it ever a good idea to approach an understanding of general revelation without guidance from special revelation? Why or why not?*

## II. Deriving Theology

Establishing the fact that we have sources of theology in nature, Scripture, and Christ is an important first step in developing our theology. But just as having a pile of automobile parts is not the same as having a car, the mere possession of God's revelation is not the same as having Christian theology. In fact, deriving theology from revelation can be quite difficult. To see why this is so, and to see how the complexities can be handled responsibly, we will look at three factors:

The **Hindrance of Sin**  
The **Illumination** of the Holy Spirit  
The **Results** for our theology

### A. Hindrance of Sin

While most Christians have some appreciation of the effect sin has on our cognitive abilities, Reformed theology is distinct in its affirmation that left to ourselves all of us would reject the revelation of God with all our strength.

SQ22. *Theologians refer to this as the “\_\_\_\_\_ effects of sin.”*

## 1. General Revelation

*SQ23. If general revelation is so pervasive, and observed by virtually everyone, why is it that most people reject it? What is the answer that Romans 1:18 gives?*

Sin causes us to “suppress the truth,” or literally, to “hold it down.” As much as those outside the church claim non-belief, it is nonetheless true that even under the influence of sin, they understand enough of God’s general revelation to be “without excuse.”

*SQ24. In Romans 1:24,26,28, what is God’s response to those who “suppress the truth?”*

*SQ25. Consequently, how much value does general revelation have for those who do not believe?*

## 2. Special Revelation

Since sin corrupts our ability to understand general revelation, one might suspect that sin also impairs our comprehension of special revelation. One would be right.

*SQ26. Read John 5:39-40 and 2 Peter 3:15-16. Summarize their teaching regarding the ways sin affects our ability to interpret Scripture.*

You may have noticed that these verses are talking about unbelievers. But even sincere believers are not immune to this effect. Our lesson gives the example that 17<sup>th</sup>-, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century theologians defended the African slave trade.

*SQ27. List two other ways sin affects believers' interpretations of Scripture.*

## B. Spiritual Illumination

Given the fact that sin has corrupted our abilities to understand God's general and special revelation, what hope do we have of ever understanding God's revelation to the point that we can confidently build a Christian theology? As the title of this section indicates, we need *spiritual* assistance to make theological headway. Specifically, we need the illumination of the Holy Spirit. While virtually all believers will acknowledge this need, the truth is that many of us give only lip-service to the role of the Holy Spirit. We depend, instead, on our rational and intellectual abilities. To gain an appreciation of the Spirit's role, we

will first look at how the Holy Spirit grants insight into special revelation, and then at how he enhances our ability to comprehend general revelation.

### **1. Special Revelation**

Read Numbers 24:2; John 11:45-53; Matthew 21:33-45; and Hebrews 6:4-8. In these passages we see some ways that the Spirit enables people to understand God's revelation.

*SQ28. Are the people mentioned in these verses believers or non-believers? Why is this detail significant?*

Our lesson refers to these as “common operations of the Spirit” in the context of “common grace.” Just as non-believers can benefit from God's gracious gifts of sunshine, rain, bountiful harvests and the beauty of nature, they can also benefit from Scripture. Non-believers can even understand and teach true theology. When they do, however, it is because of the work of the Spirit.

But the Spirit's illumination of believers is far more effective than the help he gives to non-believers. As our lesson points out, the Church is “the temple of the spirit — the repository of his special presence and ministry in the world.”

*SQ29. Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16. How does the Holy Spirit's illumination of believers differ from his illumination of non-believers?*

## 2. General Revelation

That the Spirit ministers to believers by helping us understand special revelation should not be new to any of us. But we are less accustomed to thinking that we need his assistance to understand general revelation. Nevertheless, the Bible indicates that what is true of the Spirit's role in special revelation is also true of his role in general revelation.

*SQ30. Read Daniel 5:14. What did King Belshazzar perceive in Daniel? From where did these characteristics come?*

*SQ31. Read Proverbs 2:6. We are accustomed to thinking of intelligence as something that we inherit or develop by human effort. From where does wisdom ultimately come? Does this mean that genetics and human effort play no role in gaining wisdom? Explain your answer.*

*SQ32. Read Exodus 31:3. What does this verse tell us about the Spirit's ministry?*

As we can see, the Spirit can minister to us in all sorts of ways, including those that are addressed by general revelation. Our lesson points us to John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book 2, Chapter 2), specifically, to Calvin's comment that even fallen man is "clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts." Humanity's understandings of mathematics, physics, chemistry and engineering, as well as our abilities in the arts, are ultimately not a product of human self-effort, but instead are gifts from God.

### **C. Results**

Understanding how the Spirit ministers to us in special and general revelation is great comfort to the believer, but it is not the whole story. A moment's reflection on this will help us see why this is so. At some point, nearly every believer perceives a conflict between special and general revelation. For example, we think we see a contradiction between the Bible and the facts of science.

*SQ33. Provide a specific example of how a conflict like this has arisen in your own life or in the life of someone you know.*

In fact, this sort of thing crops up constantly as we study theology. Belief in the Bible is easy and comforting when, for example, archaeological finds support it. The latest discoveries in modern physics are very exciting when seen in the context of a Creation.

But as we all know, things are not always so easy. Some aspects of the Bible have not yet been confirmed historically or archaeologically. The Bible presents a six-day window for creation, but science tells us that the Earth and the Universe have been in development for billions of years. This conflict between Creation and Evolution is an old, old story. What should we, as believers, do in these situations?

An important key in beginning to wrap our minds around this is avoiding premature judgments. Practically speaking, a premature judgment might say, "The Bible teaches X" or "Science has proven Y." More reflective and humble

judgments take the form of, “The Bible seems to teach X” and “Science appears to have demonstrated Y.”

*SQ35. Do special and general revelation ever really contradict one another? Why is so?*

*SQ36. What is the difference between speaking of revelation as it actually is, and speaking of our understanding of revelation? Why is this distinction important?*

Since we are limited beings, encumbered by sin, apparent conflicts between general and special revelation need not alarm us. In fact, we should expect them from time to time. When they occur, our lesson gives us four ways to evaluate the situation:

*SQ37. First, we may have \_\_\_\_\_ special revelation, so that we need to reevaluate our interpretation of Scripture.*

*SQ38. Second, we may have \_\_\_\_\_ general revelation, so that we need to align our beliefs and behaviors with the Scriptures.*

*SQ39. Third, we may have \_\_\_\_\_*  
\_\_\_\_\_.

*SQ40. Fourth, we may have encountered a \_\_\_\_\_ that is beyond the ability of human comprehension to grasp.*

One more thing needs to be mentioned: Often, we don't know which of these four situations applies to us. What do we do then? Sometimes we have to choose sides either by accommodating our understanding of Scripture to align with general revelation, or by maintaining our interpretation of Scripture and relying on it to guide our understanding general revelation. At other times, we may be able to reserve judgment until we have more information.

*SQ41. Those who tend to accept their understanding of general revelation over their understanding of special revelation are often considered to be more*

\_\_\_\_\_.

*SQ42. Those who tend to accept their understanding of special revelation over their understanding of general revelation are often considered to be more*

\_\_\_\_\_.

In our thinking, the second approach is “the way of wisdom.” The historical reality, as far as the church is concerned, is that those who favor general revelation have tended to find themselves rejecting more and more special revelation — even when to the point that they consider all special revelation to be totally unreliable. But if we are to make errors, it is far better to be mistaken about the facts of science, history, etc. than it is to reject Scripture. Nevertheless, since we know that our understandings of the Bible are flawed by sin, we need to be willing to revisit our beliefs time and again.

We are now ready to proceed to the final Signpost of this lesson. View the segment entitled “Developing Confidence,” then interact with the remainder of this Study Guide.

### **III. Developing Confidence**

As a student of theology, you are probably wondering: In the light of what we've seen already, how it is possible to develop confidence in a particular theological position? If we are indeed hindered by sin, and are at times unsure how we resolve conflicts between general and special revelation, are we condemned forever to find ourselves in a “twilight zone” of uncertainty? To develop confidence in our theology, we'll look at three considerations:

The **Analog Quality** of confidence  
The process of **Deference**  
Appropriate **Alignment** of confidence

### A. Analog Quality

Our lesson uses the example of a simple light switch to illustrate how many of us categorize our beliefs as “yes or no,” “either X or Y,” or “I believe in this, but I don’t believe in that.”

SQ43. *Is it necessarily wrong for us to think of our beliefs in this way? Why?*

SQ44. *What illustration does our lesson use to illustrate situations in which we are not completely certain of our beliefs?*

SQ45. *Beliefs illustrated by the on-off switch can be termed \_\_\_\_\_.*

SQ46. *Beliefs illustrated by the dimmer switch can be termed \_\_\_\_\_.*

SQ47. *List three theological beliefs that you think of in “binary” terms.*

*SQ48. List three theological beliefs that you think of in “analog” terms.*

Our lesson goes farther with the illustration of a plasmic sphere configured in layers: an outer layer, a core, and series of layers situated between them. (You may want to review this particular portion of the video and consider it carefully before you proceed with the next questions in this Study Guide.)

*SQ49. According to this illustration, what kinds of beliefs (theological or otherwise) might be found in the outer layer?*

*SQ50. According to this illustration, what kinds of beliefs (theological or otherwise) might be found in the middle layers?*

SQ51. *According to this illustration, what kinds of beliefs (theological or otherwise) might be considered “core” beliefs?*

SQ52. *Which of these beliefs are most difficult to change, and why is this so?*

SQ53. *Regarding theological matters, and keeping this illustration in mind, what happens when someone becomes a believer and “converts?”*

SQ54. *Should we expect to hold all of our theological beliefs with the same measure of confidence? Why or why not?*

## **B. Process of Deference**

Given that we can't expect to be equally certain about every belief, you might now be wondering how we can assign a proper degree of certainty to our theological convictions. As a practical example, there are some Christians who are absolutely certain that baptism should only be done by immersion. But of course, there many believers within the church think such certainty is misplaced. Some, no doubt, disagree with this certainty simply because they are committed to a different mode of baptism. But many others believe that certainty in this matter is simply not appropriate. In their eyes, belief in a mode of baptism is simply not in the same "class" as a belief, say, in the divinity of Christ.

*SQ55. List two other examples in which believers may have an inappropriate degree of certainty (or uncertainty) in their theology.*

It's important for us to develop a process of deference, a reliable way to assign appropriate levels of certainty to our theological beliefs. But how can we go about doing this?

*SQ56. Review the portion of the video that features chapter 5, section 3 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Summarize its teaching.*

*SQ57. Have you or anyone you know ever had one of these “extraordinary” convictions or insights from the Holy Spirit that are “without, above, and against” ordinary means? Describe the belief and your reasons for saying it was contrary to ordinary means.*

Since we are engaged in a “formal” study of theology in these lessons, our primary concern will be of the more ordinary means that the Holy Spirit uses to achieve degrees of certainty. We’ve already looked at one of these mechanisms in Lesson One, and we will review it here. Specifically, the Church has acknowledged three main ways in which the Spirit has granted illumination by revealing three primary areas in which future leaders of the church are trained in seminaries (See also the sidebar “The Three Perspectives of Van Til and Frame”):

**Biblical Division (Exegesis of Scripture)**  
**Doctrinal and Historical Division (Interaction in Community)**  
**Practical Theology Division (Christian Living)**

*SQ58. Our lesson defines “exegesis” as “skills by which we may discern the teachings of Scripture.” What kinds of “skills” are these, generally speaking? Supplement your answer with three specific examples of these types of skills.*

*SQ59. To which kind of revelation does the term “exegesis” primarily apply?*

SQ60. *Which form of revelation is primarily associated with “Interaction in Community”?*

SQ61. *Dr. Pratt likes to say, “The first step toward heresy is often exegesis.” Explain what he means by this statement.*

SQ62. *“Christian Living” interacts with special revelation and general revelation. What parts of the Christian life are more closely associated with special revelation?*

SQ63. *Which parts of the Christian life are more closely associated with general revelation?*

Although the Holy Spirit is involved in exegesis and community, he is especially integral to our Christian life. It is the Holy Spirit in our lives, working with exegesis and community, who ultimately gives us confidence in our theology. An undue emphasis on one of these areas, without appropriate reference to the others, is a recipe for trouble.

### **C. Appropriate Alignment**

Now that we have seen a reasonable way to develop confidence in our theology, we can begin to assign appropriate levels of confidence to the particular beliefs that are a part of Christian theology.

Recalling the “plasmic sphere” illustration from earlier in this lesson, imagine “boring out” a cone that extends from the surface of the sphere to the very core. Remove the cone and set it upright.

Now we are ready to talk about our “cone of certainty.” As Christians, we hold to a wide assortment of beliefs. But we know from this lesson, as well as from experience, that we don’t hold to all of them with the same degree of certainty. How do we know how to assign a proper level of certainty?

*SQ64. Describe an experience that you had in which you simply felt that something was true, but were unable to explain why.*

*SQ65. Of our three “perspectives” (Biblical Exegesis, Interaction in Community, and Christian Living), which was most closely associated with this “feeling?”*

While we certainly shouldn't ignore such feelings of certainty, the "formal" study of theology must also engage the other two perspectives.

*SQ66. Now, suppose that there is considerable harmony among the three perspectives as they concern a particular belief. How confident should we be in this belief? How high up in the cone of certainty should we place it? Why?*

*SQ67. What kinds of beliefs might warrant such confidence? Give three specific examples.*

*SQ68. Now, imagine we encounter a belief in which there is significant disharmony. What kinds of beliefs involve a large degree of disharmony? Give three specific examples.*

*SQ69. If the weight of one or two of these perspectives is particularly heavy, should this belief be placed higher or lower in the cone of certainty? Why?*

*SQ70. Suppose the weight of influences is about the same in all three perspectives. How should this affect its placement in the cone of certainty?*

In wrapping up this particular lesson, you should note that there is no standard “process” or “formula” for making these kinds of estimations. It is likely that your level certainty regarding various Christian beliefs will differ from others in your particular tradition, denomination, or church. But the best means for refining and minimizing these differences is through Biblical Exegesis, Interaction in Community, and Christian Living.