

# Building Your Theology

Lesson 2

Exploring Christian  
Theology

Manuscript



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# Building Your Theology

## Lesson Two

### Exploring Christian Theology

#### INTRODUCTION

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When young couples marry, they often have to deal with differences that stem from their family backgrounds. They may love each other deeply, but they also need to acknowledge how much their families have shaped their priorities and expectations. If they don't recognize this fact, it can be difficult to build the kind of loving and respectful marital relationship to which Christ has called us.

In many ways, the same is true as followers of Christ explore theology. Christians have different priorities and expectations that stem from the influences of their cultures, their sub-cultures and from the traditions of various branches of the church. These backgrounds deeply shape the priorities and expectations we have as we study and live Christian theology. But if we don't acknowledge how much these influences impact us, it will be difficult to build the kinds of loving and respectful theological outlooks to which Christ has called us.

This is the second lesson in our series on *Building Your Theology*. In this lesson, we'll lay out the basic orientations that will guide this entire study. We've entitled this lesson, "Exploring Christian Theology," and we'll set forth some of the more important presuppositions that will guide us as we explore how to develop a distinctively Christian theology.

We'll look at this subject in three ways, moving from broader to narrower concerns. First, we'll define our perspective on Christian theology — what kind of theology is Christian? Second, we'll explore how specific Christian traditions give shape to Christian theology. And third, we'll look into some of the basic tenets of the Reformed tradition — the specific branch of Christian faith that undergirds these lessons. Let's turn first to the general idea of a Christian theology. What will we mean in these lessons when we use this terminology?

#### CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Although we often speak of "Christian theology," the meaning of this expression isn't altogether clear. Some people refer to Christian theology as what Christians *actually* believe. But we all know that many Christians believe things that are not genuinely Christian. Others speak of Christian theology as what Christians *ought* to believe. But we have to admit that we don't always agree on what we ought to believe. Because of these and similar complexities, we need to clarify what *we'll* mean in this series when we use the term "Christian theology."

We'll touch on three matters: First, we'll look at some of the problems with creating definitions for Christian theology. Second, we'll propose a working definition of

Christian theology. And third, we'll note the unity and diversity that Christian theology entails. Let's look first at some of the difficulties we encounter as we try to define Christian theology.

### **PROBLEMS WITH DEFINITIONS**

One of the greatest problems we have is finding ways to distinguish Christian theology from non-Christian theology. Sometimes the differences aren't hard to see, but many times it's extremely difficult to separate Christian theology from other theologies. When we consider Christianity alongside other major religions of the world, there are a number of theologies that are easily distinguished from Christian beliefs. For example, although some people have tried to combine Christianity and Hinduism, the polytheism of Hinduism makes it very different from Christian faith. The worship of many gods rather than the worship of one God makes it hard to confuse the two.

Islam, on the other hand, is much closer to Christianity. Like Christianity, Islam traces its heritage back to Abraham. And more than this, the prophet of Islam interacted with Christian teachings as he and his followers composed the Quran. So, there are a number of similarities between Christianity and Islam. Still, for the most part, we don't have great difficulty distinguishing Islam from Christian faith because there are pronounced and fundamental differences between them. For instance, Christianity affirms the deity and supremacy of Christ, in contrast to Islam's denial of these truths.

And what about Judaism? Judaism is even more closely connected and similar to Christianity because Christianity grew out of Judaism. Nevertheless, because Judaism denies that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, very few people confuse it with Christian faith. The theological perspectives of these and other major world religions are so different from Christian theology that most people have little difficulty separating them. We can erect fairly solid boundaries between our theology and theirs.

**Well, what distinguishes Christianity from Judaism and Islam in terms of theology, of course, is about the person of Christ, the focus. All religions are about some sort of faith belief. Those other religions, of course — Judaism and Islam — are about a belief in God here, just as we have in Christianity... And the story, I think, that's different for us, growing out of Judaism, is that God keeps his promises... Christ in Christianity becomes the fulfillment of all of those previous promises. He becomes the fulfillment of that Messiah, who does, in fact, save people from their sins. He becomes that person who does, in fact, not just give his life as a martyr, but someone who actually provides a way for us to be redeemed, to be justified, to be forgiven.**

— Dr. Oliver L. Trimiew, Jr.

At the same time, many schools of theology blend Christian and non-Christian thought, making it difficult at times to separate genuine Christianity from other faiths. We'll see such syncretism in our day in popular Christian cults, such as Jehovah's

Witnesses, Mormonism, and Christian Science. It can even be found in many churches and denominations that have abandoned the theological stances of their forebearers in favor of modern liberalism. Now, some aspects of these syncretistic religions are easily distinguished as non-Christian, but other elements are very close to true Christianity. For this reason, in these cases, we have difficulty drawing sharp lines between Christian and non-Christian theologies.

To make matters worse, think about the theological landscape among faithful believers in Christ. Even within the realm of genuine Christianity, it's often easier to speak of Christian *theologies* — in the plural — than Christian *theology*. There are so many different forms of Christianity that it's impossible to identify to everyone's satisfaction which forms of Christianity should be considered genuine. Does true Christian theology include the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox churches? How about Roman Catholic doctrines? Which is the purest form of Protestant faith: Anglican? Baptist? Lutheran? Methodist? Presbyterian? Nearly every segment of the church evaluates the purity of the various branches of Christianity in its own way. And almost every branch believes that its theology is the purest version of all. When we think about it in terms of these Christian intramural disagreements, it becomes even more difficult to define "Christian theology" precisely.

Think about it this way: What if you were asked to distinguish Christian theology from all other theological systems in the world by writing all the doctrines that people must believe in order to be counted as Christians. You may say: Jesus is the Lord; Jesus is the Savior; Jesus is the only way of salvation; Jesus died for our sins; Jesus was resurrected from the dead; God is Triune; Jesus is fully God and fully man; all people are sinners; justification is by faith alone; Christians must be holy; the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Well, when we look at all of these concepts, it becomes pretty clear that a person would have to be very well-educated and informed even to understand all of them, much less believe them all.

Now, of course, the doctrines we listed are important Christian teachings. But it should be evident that a person may have genuine Christian faith and Christian theology without hearing about some of these doctrines, much less understanding or believing all of them. So, which doctrines are absolutely essential for Christian faith? What is the bare minimum of Christian theology? In truth, only God knows for certain exactly where that line is drawn.

These are the kinds of problems we face as we try to define Christian theology. In relation to some other religions, it's not difficult to distinguish ourselves, but it's very difficult to know precisely what elements are essential for a theology to be genuinely Christian.

These and other problems with defining Christian theology lead us to propose a working definition that will guide our discussions in these lessons. This definition won't answer every question that may be raised, but it will provide us with a significant and helpful measure of clarity. It won't be a perfect definition, but it will be sufficient to use as we proceed.

## WORKING DEFINITION

In these lessons, we'll orient our definition of Christian theology to the well-known and ancient expression of Christian faith called the *Apostles' Creed*. This creed existed substantially in its current form by about 200 A.D. and came to its present form around 700 A.D. Christians from all over the world have recited this creed for centuries as a summation of their Christian faith:

**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.**

This worldwide expression of Christian faith summarizes Christianity in very simple and essential ways. And it will serve as our basic definition of Christian theology. For our purposes, all theology that accords with this creed will be counted as Christian theology.

**Adopting the *Apostles' Creed* as our basic definition of what constitutes Christian theology is very important because it's important to distinguish true Christianity from so-called "Christian" cults and even other religions that may be similar to Christianity in some ways or another. But at the same time we always have to remember that it's not as clean-cut as we might want to say. I mean, for instance, does anyone really want to say that the fact that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate is *critical* to the Christian faith? Now, we may want to say, yes, it's important that we believe that Jesus actually lived on this planet, but Pontius Pilate himself? Probably not. And so there are things like that in the creed that we might quibble over this detail or that detail. And in addition to that, some of us would want to add other things to those essentials of the Christian faith. For example, the *Apostles' Creed* does not mention the Bible. It**

doesn't mention the inerrancy of the Bible or the infallibility of Scriptures or *sola Scriptura* or anything like that... So, when we think about adopting the *Apostles' Creed* as our standard, our operating definition of what orthodox Christianity is, we have to keep those subtleties in mind. But at the same time, the *Apostles' Creed* connects us to the church through the centuries, and it connects us broadly to the true body of Christ even today around the world. So, it's a helpful way of summarizing Christianity and distinguishing it from Christian cults and from other religions.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The *Apostles' Creed* is central to our understanding of the Christian faith. It reflects the core beliefs of what it means to be Christian. And you see that outlined in the various statements that are there. It defines, in many ways, what I would argue to be the perimeter of orthodoxy. It talks about how the Father and the Son relate to one another, how we relate to God, and how God relates to creation. And those three elements are central to our understanding of this life, salvation, our relationship with God... And what the *Apostles' Creed* does is it helps set that as a perimeter, defining how each of those relationships ought to be conceived as we understand it through the Word of God.

— Dr. Scott Manor

For example, the creed mentions creation. It mentions all three persons of the Trinity: the Father, Jesus Christ his only Son, and the Holy Spirit. It refers to the incarnation, death, resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus. It also speaks of the forgiveness of sins, the general resurrection, the final judgment, and the hope of everlasting life. Because it provides such a strong and broad foundation, we'll use the *Apostles' Creed* as our working definition of Christian theology. Although we'll speak of doctrines that go far beyond this short list, for our purposes, we can be satisfied that a theology is Christian if it accords with this creed.

To overcome our problems with definitions of Christian theology, we've used as our working definition the text of the *Apostles' Creed*. In doing so, it immediately becomes apparent that there is both unity and diversity within the theology of the Christian faith.

## UNITY AND DIVERSITY

When students begin to study theology, they often speak confidently of “Christian theology,” as if it's just one thing. But as they become more keenly aware of the many different perspectives theologians have held throughout the millennia, they often begin to

wonder if we should speak instead of “Christian theologies” — in the plural. As we mentioned earlier, even within the realm of genuine Christianity, faithful believers hold many diverse views. So, which is it: Christian theology or theologies? Is there one, unified Christian theology? Or are there many, diverse Christian theologies? In the end, the answer is that both are true.

We may speak of a single, unified Christian theology because there are many common beliefs, practices, and feelings among Christians. But we must also be ready to speak of multiple Christian theologies that differ from one another. Let’s consider first the theological unity among Christians.

## Unified Theology

When we consider all the different churches and denominations in existence, it seems hard to speak meaningfully of theological unity among Christians. How many times have you heard unbelievers say, “You Christians can’t even agree on what you believe. Why do you expect me to become a Christian?” And sometimes we have to admit that it does seem like followers of Christ can hardly agree on anything. But disunity is only part of the picture.

As the *Apostles’ Creed* puts it, true Christians throughout the world form one “holy catholic church.” Despite our divisions, the body of Christ is theologically unified because Christians agree on a number of core beliefs that distinguish them from cults and other world religions. As we explore Christian theology in these lessons, we’ll need to acknowledge the unity of faith that joins all Christians together. The apostle Paul spoke of the unity of the church in this way in Ephesians 4:4-5:

There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-5).

In fact, the doctrinal unity of the church should be a goal that all Christians have. Jesus himself prayed toward this end in John 17:22-23:

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:22-23).

When we look more closely at the church, we see that Christians have varying degrees of theological unity with each other. In the broadest sense, according to our definition, all Christians are unified theologically by their belief in the tenets expressed in the *Apostles’ Creed*. This fundamental unity calls on us to show respect, patience and love for all who affirm the creed, no matter what branch of the church they represent,

because everyone who affirms the creed is a fellow believer. In this environment, we must learn to speak the truth in love, as we're told in Ephesians 4:15.

In addition, theological unity among Christians increases when we share beliefs that go beyond those mentioned in the creed. For instance, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants hold in common such beliefs as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. But Protestant denominations that have remained true to their heritage have much more theological unity with each other than they do with non-Protestant churches.

Although we tend to seek unity with those with whom we have the most in common, and then to treat as adversaries those with whom we have little in common, our Lord exhorts us all toward unity. For this reason, we must never allow the differences among Christians to distract us from the vast common ground we have in Christ. Rather than despairing because Christians aren't able to agree on every single doctrine, we need to recognize that, to one degree or another, Christians agree on the central tenets of the faith. In this sense, Christian theology is a unified reality. And more than this, it is our responsibility to promote ever-increasing theological unity within the body of Christ. As the apostle Paul put it in Ephesians 4:13-16, we are to:

Attain to the unity of the faith ... so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine ... Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:13-16).

God's desire for his church and the goal he has established for us to pursue is not theological fragmentation, but increasing theological unity according to the teachings of Scripture.

**It's interesting. One of the challenges for us as Christians is to take Jesus' prayer seriously where he says, "I pray that my church, my people, would be one as I and the Father are one." And there's a tension in that because, on the one hand, we can be drawn to say, "What really matters is truth and not unity." And when people do that, they don't care about other Christians with which they disagree with. The call to unity doesn't have any grip on them and on their churches. But if we take Jesus seriously and what's on his heart and in his prayer, then that's not an option for us. Unity must really matter... And one of the things we have to wrestle through is how do we value one another? How do we show unity without being the same? And I think one of the things we struggle with is we confuse unity with sameness. Unity is not the same thing as sameness. So we can be united even as we have disagreements, different perspectives on things, and one of the things that can help that unity is to say, "You know, brothers and sisters from other traditions can really help us**

**discover things that we've missed." ... And so we can seek unity, allowing distinction and trying to be faithful in the midst of it.**

— Dr. Kelly M. Kapic

While Christians are unified to varying degrees, it's important also to acknowledge and accept degrees of diversity among us. In this sense, we rightly speak of multiple Christian *theologies*, rather than simply one Christian theology.

## Multiple Theologies

Protestants easily recognize that when they extend their associations to churches other than their own, diversity increases. When different denominations encounter each other, they almost always face diversity. For example, when Eastern Orthodox and Western churches come together, the differences are profound.

Now, as we face the diversity within the church, we have to ask a serious question: Why are there differences among us? We all have the same Spirit. We all believe in the same Christ. We all share many central beliefs in common. So, what causes diversity among Christians? In addressing this issue, it helps to distinguish at least two kinds of differences among Christian theologies.

In the first place, some differences exist simply because we cannot represent every theological truth with equal force. The limitations we face as humans make it inevitable that we'll select and emphasize some aspects of the Christian faith more than others.

***Limitations.*** We simply can't give equal attention to all dimensions of our faith at the same time. This limitation on theologians and theology often explains much of the doctrinal diversity among Christians. This kind of diversity from selection and emphasis is wholesome and approved by God. We know God approves of such diversity because even biblical authors differed in what they wrote down and emphasized.

For instance, we have four different gospels because God led Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to concentrate on different aspects of the truth about Jesus' life. Since Christians under the infallible inspiration of the Holy Spirit differed in their emphases, we should be happy that the same is true for Christians today. Just as God loves different kinds of flowers and trees, delights in mountains as well as valleys, and enjoys making different kinds of people, he also enjoys seeing his children develop their theologies in different ways.

**The notion that unity that we have in Christ is somehow challenged by doctrinal diversity, I think, is not the case. I think, in other words, that within Christ there is both breadth and parameters; that faith in Christ involves certain common convictions, and along with that a recognition that certain understandings, certain ideas, certain teaching lie outside those boundaries, and therefore, in a sense, outside of Christ as he has been revealed to us on the pages of the New**

**Testament. But the Christ of the New Testament is not narrow, and there is then room within these boundaries, these parameters, for some differences in terms of the articulation of Christian faith... There is, therefore, the possibility of the great denominations or theological traditions of the church differing on certain matters but still maintaining a core conviction with regard to Christ.**

— Dr. David R. Bauer

We should more than expect Christian theology in rural Africa to select and emphasize different truths than Christian theology in New York City. We should expect South American Christian theology to be different from Christian theology in Beijing. This diversity results from the Lord leading his redeemed people to express different aspects of their faith in accordance with their own cultural settings and in response to their own particular needs.

In the second place, other forms of diversity are not so innocuous and require much more caution. These are differences driven by sinfulness and error. Rather than being matters of emphasis or selectivity, these differences result when groups or persons stray into false doctrines, practices and pathos.

*Sin and error.* When diversity of this sort arises in the church, at least one person or group holds an erroneous viewpoint. And in some situations, everyone may be in error. In these cases, we must humbly and sincerely seek to discern where the error lies.

**So, there's this really interesting puzzle that we have as Christians because we believe that the Bible is God's authoritative word, we believe that that's what should govern our faith, our life, our commitment to him — the way we live in community, the way we speak of the gospel, the way we present it to other people — and yet what Scripture is teaching is not always immediately clear to everyone all the time. And so we want to follow and be under the authority of what it teaches, and yet we know that we won't always be right, that what we think it's teaching is what it's actually teaching. But if we knew we were wrong at any one point, we would just stop thinking that and start thinking the right thing; so it's not like it's right there for us. I think a very helpful piece of advice, or a very helpful way to approach this is something that, to use the fancy language, we would call "epistemological humility." And what that just means is that we have a sense, an awareness, of our flaws, of our failures. Residing with our picture of what Scripture says is an awareness that, I could be wrong; I could be wrong about this. And so the saying, "I could be wrong about this," in and of itself, we stay committed to it, and when we're convinced of Scripture's message, we let it be an authority over us. And yet that, "but I could be wrong about this" should make us motivated to go learn. It should make us motivated to listen to other people who disagree. And rather than being scared and even angry**

**because, “That’s not what Scripture says,” it can make us interested and even feel a sense of importance to listen to other interpretations, because we understand, we could be wrong, and even if they’re wrong too, by listening to each other we may end up a little closer to what’s right.**

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

To discern error, we need, on the one hand, to be self-critical, ready to forsake any false beliefs that have entered into our theology. And on the other hand, we need to be ready to help other believers improve their understandings as well. Sometimes this will be fairly easy, but other times this process will be extremely difficult. And we can be sure of this: We’ll never rid ourselves or others of *all* error until Christ returns in glory. Yet, it’s still our responsibility as followers of Christ to work hard at keeping ourselves true to the teachings of Scripture and helping others to do the same. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:16. He said:

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).

**In our work in the field, we encounter different missionaries from different denominational backgrounds, different traditions, and I think it important that we work together with them. We have so much in common across the board in the evangelical community. Now, we do have issues where we disagree. There will always be divisions over end times and baptism and spiritual gifts, some of those being maybe the three biggest ones where churches are divided. But there is so much that we have in common. And I think that our theologians and our pastors all need to be concerned, first and foremost, for recognizing those areas that we have in common. And the more we do that, the more that we cultivate a sense of unity and commonality around those core essential elements of the faith, the more we are likely to treat those areas where we disagree with a spirit of grace rather than a spirit of judgment or condemnation.**

— Dr. Steve Curtis

Now that we’ve seen what we’ll mean in these lessons by the term “Christian theology,” we should turn to our second topic: Christian traditions.

## CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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It's only natural for Protestants to be suspicious of Christian tradition. We see ourselves as deeply rooted in the Reformation, and the Protestant Reformers reaffirmed the authority of Scripture over all human traditions. Still, not all human traditions contradict the Scriptures. And, as we're about to see, the Scriptures themselves teach that when Christian traditions represent wisdom that the Holy Spirit has given the church, there is much value in them. So, what place do theological traditions have as we build a Christian theology?

To answer this question we'll touch on three topics. First, we'll define the term "theological tradition." Second, we'll examine some of the tendencies of theological traditions. And third, we'll investigate the importance of theological traditions in our lives. Let's look first at what we mean when we speak of a Christian theological tradition.

### DEFINING TRADITION

Evangelical Christians employ the term "tradition" in so many ways that we need to specify how we'll use it here. We'll clarify the issue first by providing a negative definition — explaining what we *don't* mean — and then by offering a positive definition — stating what we *do* mean. In the first place, in many evangelical circles today the term "tradition" has very negative connotations because it is closely associated with what we'll call "traditionalism."

#### Negative Definition

As American theologian John Frame put it:

**"Traditionalism" exists where *sola Scriptura* is violated.**

In other words, traditionalism bases theological beliefs on human preferences, usually longstanding traditional preferences, rather than on the Scriptures. In Mark 7:8-13, Jesus said these words to the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees:

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men...  
making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed  
down (Mark 7:8-13).

Followers of Christ should reject traditionalism because it gives to mere human opinion the authority that rightly belongs only to Scripture. Since human folly rather than divine revelation can easily guide our faith, we should oppose traditionalism in all of its forms, just as Jesus did in his day.

**Well, first of all, tradition is a good aspect, I think, for Christians. It's where we can get our doctrines summarized for us. But we need to also be careful about the dangers associated with tradition. Some of us know of Mark 7 where Jesus actually rebukes the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law by obeying the traditions of man and actually set aside the things of God... One of the stories that comes to mind is one church I once visited. So this church was very formal and loved prayer books in the mornings. And there were old people who struggled when the youngsters who were from down the universities coming to church because they felt these young people were actually not respecting the traditions. And the church actually barred them from coming in instead of actually seeing these young people as people who were lost, who were seeking the Lord, and that they could reach out to them. So that's what can be one of the ways where our traditions can get in the way of the gospel.**

— Dr. Vuyani Sindo

In the second place, although “traditionalism” has very negative connotations, we should have a different outlook on “tradition.” As strange as it may sound to our modern evangelical ears, the apostle Paul actually affirmed a positive role for tradition in the body of Christ.

## Positive Definition

Listen to what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:3:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The expression “delivered” in Greek is *paradidome* (παραδίδωμι) and “received” is *paralambano* (παραλαμβάνω). These terms appear several times in Paul’s writings to describe his transfer of Christian teachings. This fact is important to our discussion because these were the same terms used in first century Jewish circles to describe the teachings of Jewish traditions.

In effect, Paul viewed Christian faith as a tradition to be passed down from person to person, from generation to generation. Even though we may be using the term “tradition” in ways slightly different from Paul’s use, we need not be put off by the terminology of “Christian tradition” or “Christian traditions.” Clearly, Paul himself employed the language of tradition in a positive way.

**Scripture itself speaks positively of both oral and written apostolic tradition. As evangelicals, when we say we want to pass on Scripture, we can freely say, we also want to preserve apostolic tradition... So,**

**for instance, when the Protestant Reformers were evaluating church traditions according to Scripture, they felt free to dismiss and set aside those traditions where they didn't agree with Scripture. But where church tradition agreed with apostolic tradition, *in Scripture*, the Reformers defended those church traditions.**

— Dr. Andrew Parlee

**There are many benefits to our traditions, what we sometimes call rituals. People need to remember who they are, to constantly remember who God is and what God has done, and many traditions and rituals help us to remember. When you give that place to traditions and rituals and use them merely as a reminder of who God is, what God did, who humanity is, and what humanity's position is, it helps us to strengthen the faith we have in God. They should never take the place of God; they should never take the place of Jesus and his merits. They are only a reminder; they represent what our relationship with God means and how we develop it, how God allows us to have that relationship with him, and those rituals and traditions help us to remember him.**

— Rev. Pablo Torres, translation

For our purposes, we'll define a theological tradition as:

**A relatively longstanding theological doctrine, practice or pathos that distinguishes branches of the church from each other.**

Let's break down this definition into two main parts. First, it's "a relatively longstanding doctrine, practice or pathos." That is to say, when we speak of a theological tradition in these lessons, we do not have in mind something that started recently. Rather, a system of beliefs becomes a theological tradition in our terms only when it has existed for quite a while. According to our definition, only beliefs enjoying years of acceptance in the church rightly qualify as traditions.

And second, a theological tradition "distinguishes branches of the church from each other." In other words, we have in mind those features of particular denominations or associations of believers that are identifying characteristics. What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The Baptist tradition. What makes a Methodist a Methodist? The Methodist tradition. When groups of believers share common outlooks over a long period of time, these outlooks become their distinctive theological paths. They find their hearts are more at home in one branch of the church than another.

**When it comes to Christian traditions or branches of the church and the various things that different branches of the church emphasize and the paths that they have followed over the years, it's easy to go to extremes. One extreme is to reject any such influence on your life —**

**you emphasize your individual life, your individual walk with Christ and your individual reading of the Bible. And people that overemphasize that extreme end up being a lot like a homeless person. And maybe you've seen a homeless person that walks down the street and he'll notice this, and he'll pick it up and put it in his bag or in his cart, and he'll notice something else that was left by the way or another thing left by the way. And so, the bag is just full of things that really don't fit together, and his life is sort of disintegrating. It has no unity. He has no home to go to. So that's one extreme, is that heightened individualism, sort of, rejection of Christian traditions or branches of the church and the wisdom that they have.**

**Now, the other extreme is to take tradition, a branch of the church, the paths that various portions of the church have followed for years, to take that more or less like a prison... And you can find long-term traditions that have been handed down from generation to generation and you can lock yourself into them as if you're in a building without any windows at all; no door to get out of. Why do you do this? Why do you believe that? Why do you feel this way? "Well, it's because that's what my church tells me to believe and to feel and to do." And that's like making a Christian tradition as if it were a prison. And we don't want tradition to be either the extreme of rejection, where you are an individual that has no home, and you also don't want to make a branch of the church your prison either, because there's so much to be learned from other branches of the church other than the one that you may identify with.**

**So, I often think of a denomination, or a branch of the church, or the paths that they have followed for years — a tradition, a Christian tradition — as a home. Now, you know what a home is like. It's the place you go to sleep. It's the place you go and feel comfortable. It's where you are. You do certain things inside your home in ways that may be different from what other people do. But it's your home... And that's the way I think it's very helpful to think about branches of the church, and the rules that they give us, the policies they give us, even their doctrinal summaries, and the ways that they tell us to feel and to behave in our Christian faith. It's great to have that as your home because we have to depend a lot on the body of Christ to sort of fill in the gaps that are in our lives, to help us think through things more carefully, and to live in ways that are pleasing to God. But at the same time, we can go outside of our branch of the church — our tradition — make friends, learn from them, and come back to our own branch of the church — our own home — and change things in ways that accord more with the Bible.**

**— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Now that we've defined what we mean by Christian theological traditions, we should also note some tendencies of theological traditions.

## TENDENCIES OF TRADITIONS

We all realize that many branches of the Christian church are distinguished by theological tendencies that have characterized them over time. Many followers of Christ explicitly and self-consciously identify with one theological tradition or another. Others do not. But whether we realize it or not, we're all deeply influenced by our theological traditions. These theological tendencies are represented by the books we read, the sermons we hear, the churches we attend and the Christian friends we keep. If we hope to keep these traditions from overly influencing us, we need to become aware of these influences and their strengths and weaknesses.

In the preceding lesson, we noted that theology involves orthodoxy — right or true doctrines, orthopraxis — right behavior or practice, and orthopathos — right feelings or emotions. For this reason, it's helpful to note that different theological traditions within Christianity tend to fall into one, or possibly two, of these three categories.

Some theological traditions have a tendency to emphasize orthodoxy, some tend toward orthopraxis, and some accentuate orthopathos. First, let's consider how some branches of the church are distinguished from others by their traditional emphasis on orthodoxy.

### Orthodoxy

We all know of denominations that see their identity primarily in terms of what doctrines they hold. Their teaching ministries and doctrinal stances form the heart of their Christian faith. Unfortunately, these branches of the church can be rather doctrinaire. That is, they can be heavily preoccupied with doctrinal controversies, and they usually insist on a large measure of doctrinal uniformity. This preoccupation with doctrines often leads to intellectualism, where learning and understanding the data of the faith becomes an end in itself.

**When we emphasize the doctrinal or conceptual dimensions of Scripture, we want to avoid what people call “intellectualism.” But that’s not the same thing as avoiding intellect or avoiding the mind... Paul speaks of not just the Spirit bearing witness together with our Spirit, but he speaks of the mind of the Spirit. He also speaks of the renewing of the mind, that the mind plays an important role. It’s part of who we are, it’s part of God’s gift to us, and we can use that when we approach Scripture... But it’s not a mind that says, you know, “I am intellectual, I can look down on everybody else.” It’s not a mind even that when we are listening to a sermon, and we hear a Scripture**

out of context we say, “Ah, I’m smarter than they are,” which was a temptation I had as a younger Christian. Because sometimes there’s still something of value that’s being said there, we need to have a mind that’s humble, that’s willing to learn what God has to teach us, but we use that mind in service.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Second, rather than emphasizing orthodoxy, other traditions in the church tend to distinguish themselves more by their orthopraxis.

## Orthopraxis

There are many churches that find their distinctive identity in what they *do*, as opposed to what they teach. Their Christian service and programs of action are their greatest strengths. They often have long lists of dos and don’ts for their members. Sadly, these branches of the church often reduce the Christian faith to mere activity. Christianity becomes a matter of *doing something*. And this preoccupation with activity often leads to legalism.

**In my own Christian life I’ve seen how an emphasis on obedience is important, for certain. I mean, Christ said that we were to go and make disciples teaching them to obey all that I’ve commanded you. And when I first became a believer, I was in a group of believers or Christians that really emphasized obeying what Christ taught and especially obeying the Great Commission. But over time that really kind of overshadowed that sense of grace and love and the freedom that we have that the gospel provides... I mean, I would have run out of steam a long time ago if it was just on the basis of obeying what God had told me to do. The sense of love, the sense of grace, the sense of freedom to fail is also important... So, I think we need obedience. We need to be concerned about how we live our lives, but the gospel frees you in a way and empowers you in a way that that legalism just never will.**

— Rev. Frank Sindler

Third, other theological traditions distinguish themselves, not by their focus on orthodoxy or orthopraxis, but more by their orthopathos.

## Orthopathos

The emotional dimension of the Christian faith is center stage in these churches. Religious affections are so highly valued that many times little else matters. These Christians don't want to be bothered with doctrine. And they don't want to be called to certain kinds of behaviors, unless those behaviors make them feel better. For this reason, it's not uncommon for these branches of the church to be characterized by emotionalism.

**I grew up in the Assemblies of God tradition, and the Assemblies of God is a tradition that in many ways rightly values the emotional side of who we are, created as God's image. But when certain traditions that value one thing go awry, they can often do that by overvaluing it. And it was in university where I started to realize a little bit more of who we are as whole beings created in God's image. And that's whole beings that are not just emotional but are cognitive and that have a volitional dimension to who we are. When I started realizing that, and when I realized the way the Bible speaks about these three dimensions of who we are, the way the Bible talks about the relationship between our minds and our wills and our emotions as being mutually dependent, as being symbiotic. Symbiotic, of course, means the relationship can flow both ways. Sometimes our emotions arise out of right thinking. But actually, sometimes right thinking arises out of emotions, out of right emotions, right feeling. Sometimes our emotions inform how we act. Sometimes how we act informs our emotions. So, all three of these dimensions of who we are, they mutually inform one another, and that helped balance me out in terms of how I look at who I am and who others are as emotional beings.**

— Dr. M. B.

Needless to say, everyone will have to evaluate the tendencies of Christian traditions in different ways. But it's fair to say that theological traditions generally find their identities by stressing one or two of these orientations.

Now that we've defined the idea of Christian traditions and seen the kinds of tendencies such traditions usually exhibit, we should recognize the importance theological traditions have for these lessons on building theology.

### IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONS

Put simply, an awareness of the importance of traditions plays two critical roles: first, it helps us understand more about ourselves; and second, it helps us understand more about others. Let's think for a moment about how we need to see ourselves in the light of theological traditions.

## Awareness of Ourselves

Until recent decades, leading secular philosophers insisted that the pursuit of truth requires us to free ourselves from the shackles of tradition, especially religious tradition. This outlook became so influential in western cultures, that well-meaning evangelical Christians have often adopted it for themselves. Rather than affirming the value of drawing from a well-established theological tradition, we act as if we should cast aside all traditions as we pursue the truth God has disclosed in Scripture.

The idea that traditions shouldn't influence our theology was very popular and supported by many of the perspectives of Enlightenment modernism. The goal of serious academic study of the Bible from the Enlightenment forward was to divorce oneself from theological prejudices and traditions. You'll recall that this was Descartes' method in his attempt to defend the rationality of the Christian faith. Descartes doubted everything so that he could clearly distinguish knowledge from mere belief. Beliefs, such as superstition and mere religious tradition, were to be discarded in the pursuit of objective, rational truth.

Now, in many ways, students who seek to divorce themselves from their religious heritage or their particular Christian theological tradition are applying Enlightenment and Cartesian standards to theology. Sadly, this approach to theology is responsible for much of the apostasy that we've seen in the Western church in recent centuries. Modern liberalism is the result of applying these modernist Enlightenment agenda to theology. But there's a better way to deal with theological traditions. Rather than trying to divorce ourselves from our theological orientations, it's much more helpful to strive for self-awareness. In other words, it's beneficial for us to know more and more about the heritage that constantly influences us as we build a theology. Self-awareness enables us to evaluate and manage some of these influences.

**We exist within a world of cultures, of worldviews. We're not a *tabula rasa*; we're not a blank slate. We bring a lot of our own presuppositions, our own pre-thoughts to Scripture... But understanding that we are influenced by multiple factors, in that, whether it's my denominational, non-denominational, my previous teachings, my parents, my friends, the world as a whole, we are bombarded with information from all ways, shapes, forms and fashions, and all those things can infect how it is that I interpret Scripture. So when I go there, again, I must go with humility, I must go with reverence, and understanding my own sin nature and the desires of my heart to maybe want to change some things. So now, how do I discern between my thoughts and then what I perceive to be the Holy Spirit? So I must adhere to the tools of interpretation, and, more than anything, the reverence and respect of our holy Father.**

— Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.

It's very helpful to ask ourselves a few questions. First, what branch of the church do you call home? You may think in terms of a denomination or a movement of some sort. It could be a formal or informal association. Perhaps you adhere to more than one tradition or a combination of traditions.

Beyond this, what are the general tendencies of your tradition? Does your branch of the church primarily emphasize orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos? In other words, are you most concerned with doctrine, behavior or emotions? What motivates you in your faith? What energizes your life in Christ? After you've identified these basic tendencies, then you can begin to identify the character of your tradition even further by asking questions like: What kinds of doctrines are most important? What behaviors are most emphasized? What emotions are considered acceptable or unacceptable? When you can answer these kinds of questions, you'll be in a position to manage the influences of your own background as you develop your own Christian theology.

Now when considering the importance of theological traditions, an awareness of ourselves and the effects our traditions have on us is essential, but we should also have an awareness of how traditions influence others.

## Awareness of Others

Whenever we discuss theology with other believers, we must always remember that their associations and their traditions heavily influence them, just like ours influence us. The theological stream to which they belong can explain many of their convictions as well. This means that other Christians may have agenda very different from our own. They may have different priorities, strengths and weaknesses. And the more we recognize this about others, the more fruitful our interactions can be and the more we can avoid unnecessary divisions.

**Having an awareness of theological tradition of other believers or other churches is very, very important because, as we can see today, the church is divided, in most cases, along denominational barriers, and most of the time it doesn't have to do with what all denominations agree upon, but it has to do with setting traditions that we have in our churches. And it is very, very important that if we want to have a fruitful interaction between Christians and between denominations, we know each other's tradition and also respect that tradition. It's not also just knowing their tradition, but at times it's important to know why they believe what and why they have those traditions... Just to respect what they are doing, in a way, can pave the way for both sides to have meaningful interactions that will benefit both of them and also will enhance them doing God's work together and also doing work in God's kingdom together as well.**

— Rev. Dr. Humphrey Akogyeram

Having defined our perspective on Christian theology and considered the importance of how particular theological traditions influence the process of building a theology, we should turn to our third topic: the Reformed tradition. We need to deal with this subject because these lessons will be deeply influenced by the theological perspectives often identified as Reformed or Reformation theology.

## REFORMED TRADITION

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I'm convinced that authors and teachers of theology need to be as open as possible about the orientation of their theological points of view. It does no one any good to act as if we simply go to the Scriptures as blank slates. To be sure, we shouldn't just obediently adhere to a particular Christian tradition. We must always strive to submit ourselves to the full authority of Scripture. Still, at a minimum, we have priorities and emphases that align us more or less with this or that branch of the church. When teachers admit that this is true, then their students are better equipped to evaluate what they read or hear from them.

To explore the contours of the Reformed tradition, we'll look into three matters: first, the historical origins and developments of this branch of the church; second, the tendencies of Reformed theology; and third, some of its theological distinctives. Let's look first at the origins and developments of the Reformed tradition.

### ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The term "Reformed theology" comes from the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but many different theological movements comprised the Protestant Reformation. Among the more significant groups were the Lutherans in Germany, the Zwinglians in Zurich and the Calvinists in Geneva. Although in a broad sense we may speak of all three of these movements as Reformational, the term "Reformed" came to apply primarily to the third group — those Protestants who were deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin.

Now this branch of the church was not restricted to Geneva by any means. In the days of the Reformation, Reformed churches were very evangelistic and spread throughout and beyond Western Europe. Calvin himself was a Frenchman, and many of his students helped lead the French Huguenot movement. These young ministers suffered much persecution in the early decades of their work. But the theology of Geneva was so strong that more and more young men kept going into France to build the church of Christ there.

The Reformed movement continued to grow throughout Europe. In Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Hungary and other nations, churches sprang up by the thousands. Several highpoints of the early continental Reformed theology should be mentioned. For instance, the Belgic Confession in 1561 and the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563 have great significance in the Reformed branch of the church. These were some of

the earliest presentations of the theological system taught in Geneva. In addition, one strong arm of the Reformed tradition in continental Europe was the Dutch Reformed church. It's perhaps best known for the Synod of Dort, which met from 1618 to 1619 to deal with the Arminian controversy — a divergence from Calvinism based on the teachings of Arminius.

**One of the earliest catechisms of the Reformed branch of the church is the Heidelberg Catechism. And I just love that catechism because it reveals something about Reformed theology that often isn't emphasized. Reformed theology is sometimes considered a highly doctrinal set of beliefs and really not concerned with practical life and the daily experience of Christians. But the Heidelberg Catechism begins this way: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" What is your only comfort in life and in death? Now, you have to know that when that catechism was written, it was written in a context where Reformed Christians were being persecuted. They were dying for their faith in large numbers. And the expectation was that they would continue to be persecuted and that they would continue to die in large numbers because of their beliefs, because of the things they stood for. And so, it's just wonderful to realize that the opening of that catechism — again one of the earliest ones in this branch of the church — asked the question, "Where do you find comfort in life and in death?" And of course, the answer is in Jesus and in the fact that the Father knows even the hairs on your head and that nothing can happen to you apart from his care and his providence over your life. But it's a wonderful thing to realize that, at least in its earliest phases, and then even true later on, that this branch of the church was very much concerned with orthopathos, or the role of emotions in our faith.**

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The Reformed tradition also grew significantly on the British Isles. John Knox, who lived from 1505 to 1572, studied in Geneva and returned to establish Reformed or Presbyterian churches in Scotland. The Scots Confession of 1560 is a well-known document from that time. The Reformation also took root in England, where the Puritans, along with other groups, drafted the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1646 and published it and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms in 1647. Scripture citations were added in 1648. These documents, known as *The Westminster Standards*, are still used in many Reformed churches today. Many different Baptist groups in the British Isles also considered themselves part of the Reformed tradition and expressed their faith in documents like the London Baptist Confession, first published in 1644.

The Reformed tradition spread to many other parts of the world as well. The English Puritans, and later Scottish Presbyterians, brought it to North America in force. And missionary efforts carried it to many parts of Africa, Indonesia, Southeast Asia and South America as well.

Now, at each step of the way in its history, there were many developments that gave Reformed theology its distinctive characteristics. And, as in all other branches of the church, there have been serious failures and apostasy in Reformed churches. Difficulties still plague this part of the body of Christ. But today, vibrant, biblically-sound Reformed theology is taught and lived out in nearly every part of the world.

Now that we know a little bit about the historical origins and developments of the Reformed branch of the church, let's look at its theological tendencies.

## TENDENCIES

Earlier in this lesson, we pointed out that while Christian traditions have strengths, they have weaknesses too. In fact, it's often been the case that our greatest strength becomes our greatest weakness. As we know, even great leaders and advocates in the past have had human weaknesses. And the same is true in our contemporary context. So, what are some of the positive and negative tendencies of the theological stream that guides this series?

In terms of our earlier discussion about tendencies in Christian traditions, we should ask what Reformed theologians value the most: orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos? Throughout the centuries, it's been evident that, with some rare exceptions, the Reformed tradition has primarily stressed orthodoxy, with a secondary emphasis on orthopraxis. Except for some Puritan writings, orthopathos has not received much attention.

When doctrine and duty are emphasized to the practical exclusion of orthopathos, our emphasis on doctrine tends toward intellectualism and our emphasis on duty toward legalism. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis are the natural tendencies of Reformed theology, and both are strengths and weaknesses for this part of the body of Christ. So, for better or for worse, because these lessons have been influenced by this tradition, these tendencies will likely appear over and over in these lessons, both as strengths and weaknesses.

Having considered the origins and tendencies of the Reformed tradition, we should look at some of its more prominent doctrinal distinctives — especially since this tradition stresses doctrine over other aspects of theology. Understanding these features will help you evaluate more thoroughly the viewpoints presented in these lessons.

## DISTINCTIVES

We'll mention four doctrinal positions that characterize this branch of the church: first, what has come to be known in English as the "Five *Solas*" of the Reformation; second, the unity of Scripture; third, the doctrine of God; and fourth, a distinctive approach to the relationship between Christianity and human culture. Let's look first at the Five *Solas* of Reformed theology.

## Five Solas

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it's become common to speak of the Five *Solas*, or *Solae* in Latin. These doctrines have traditionally been summarized in statements that all contain forms of the term "*sola*," which means "alone" or "only." Most evangelicals have heard of at least some of these: *Sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone"; *Solo Christo*, "Christ alone"; *Sola fide*, "faith alone"; *Sola gratia*, "grace alone"; and *Soli Deo gloria*, "glory to God alone."

*Sola Scriptura* is the doctrine that Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and life. It stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic belief that the church itself possesses an infallible tradition, apart from the Scriptures, that may be expressed through the ecumenical councils or through the Pope.

*Solo Christo* affirms that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man. It stands in contrast to those who look to the saints or to Mary for mediation. Christ is the only Savior, the only one to whom sinners may turn in order to receive pardon from sin, and thereby, escape the wrath of God.

*Sola fide*, or "faith alone," is the doctrine that God justifies believers through the instrumentality of faith alone, and not by any other means, such as human effort or human works.

*Sola gratia*, "grace alone," describes the way God grants us the blessings of salvation. God grants grace to his chosen people from all eternity. He freely justifies us on the basis of Christ's merit and graciously credits that merit to our account.

*Sola gratia* asserts that we have no personal merit that contributes to our salvation. The entire process of salvation from eternal election to eternal glorification is based solely on the grace of God.

*Soli Deo gloria*, meaning "glory to God alone," is the doctrine that all creation and acts within creation should be, and ultimately are, designed to bring glory to God alone. The Reformers used this slogan because they opposed all doctrines that attributed some measure of merit to human beings, and therefore, detracted from the honor that rightly belongs to God alone.

In addition to the *Solas*, it's important to note that another distinctive of the Reformed tradition is its outlook on the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

## Unity of Scripture

In recent history, it's become common for many evangelicals in North America, and for those who come under their influence, to believe that there is a fundamental separation between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is generally seen as law, while the New Testament is viewed as gospel. The Old Testament is thought to stress works, but the New Testament emphasizes grace. The Old Testament is perceived as bringing only judgment, whereas the New Testament brings salvation.

By contrast, the Reformed tradition looks at the whole Bible as presenting a unified theology. Law is in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Gospel is in both Testaments. Good works are required in both Testaments. Divine grace brings

salvation in both Testaments. There is judgment in both the Old and the New Testament, and salvation comes in both the New and the Old Testament. Now, of course, there are differences between the Testaments, but these differences are simply developmental. That is, they represent developments of biblical faith from earlier stages to later stages. But there is still a fundamental theological unity between the Old and New Testaments.

**Often when I speak to Christians they act as if the Old Testament and New Testaments are completely different in the way they speak about God and the gospel, but the longer I spend reading the Bible, the clearer it becomes to me, and to many others, that actually the Old Testament and New Testament speak with one voice. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus made clear to the disciples that the whole of the Old Testament, the law, the prophets, the writings, they all speak clearly of him, of the gospel and of the implications of the gospel. So the whole structure of the Bible is based on God acting towards humanity in grace, and then, in the light of that grace, calling people like us to live in response to him in obedience to his commands and to live in a life which reflects what is ultimately the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ. So increasingly, as I read the Old Testament and the New Testament, I hear them speaking with one voice. Whilst the commands that God gives are shaped and tailored to time and space before and after Christ, they are based on the same indicatives and essentially ask the same of his people.**

— Dr. J. Gary Millar

When we properly consider the differences between the Old and New Testaments, we conclude with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in chapter 7, section 6 that:

**There are not two covenants of grace differing in substance, but only one, under various administrations.**

Now to be sure, this emphasis on the unity of Scripture has led to some errors in Reformed theology. Sometimes not enough distinction is made between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Yet, this emphasis on the unity of the Bible is one of the greatest strengths of Reformed theology. You'll notice that in these lessons we'll use the Old Testament as much, if not more, than the New Testament as we explore how to build our theology. Our goal will be to construct theology that accords with the *whole* Bible, not just with the New Testament. The influence of the Reformed tradition on these studies will be evident in this way at nearly every turn.

In the third place, in addition to its focus on the *Solas* and the unity of Scripture, Reformed theology has a distinctive emphasis when dealing with the doctrine of God.

## Doctrine of God

**Protestants have stressed for 500 years now that the doctrine of God is**

**important not only in and of itself, but because all other doctrines have to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. The Protestant doctrine of God is not substantially different from the Eastern Orthodox or the Roman Catholic doctrine of God. And at the same time it's the most unique Protestant doctrine because Protestants believe that every other doctrine of the Bible has to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. So, theology proper — it's what theologians call the doctrine of God — is vital for every believer, and every believer has a doctrine of God whether they think of themselves as theologians or not. And that doctrine of God is vital for the way they live the Christian life.**

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Historically, Reformed theology has given attention to both the transcendence and the immanence of God. Reformed standards like the *Westminster Confession of Faith* speak strongly about both the eternal transcendent decrees of God and the immanent providence of God. This historical balance in Reformed theology reflects the fact that the Bible describes God as both transcendent and immanent. In some passages, he is portrayed as lofty, distant, beyond and above everything. And in other passages, the Scriptures speak of him as immanent, close and intimately involved with history, especially present with his people.

Even so, when compared to other Christian traditions, the tendency of Reformed theology has been to emphasize the transcendence of God over his immanence. Other Christian traditions often stress divine attributes that are more readily associated with God's nearness, such as his kindness, his mercy, his love and tenderness, his patience, and his presence. Now, Reformed theology affirms these divine attributes, but it has *tended* to emphasize others that are more closely associated with transcendence, such as his eternity, his immutability, his sovereignty, his aseity or self-existence, his omnipotence, and his omnipresence. Listen, for instance, to the Westminster Shorter Catechism's characteristically Reformed definition of God. In response to question number 4:

### **What is God?**

The Catechism answers this way:

**God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.**

This answer is true and in accordance with the Scriptures. But it obviously stresses God's transcendent qualities — those attributes that make him above and over all — rather than his immanence.

Although an emphasis on the transcendence of God can be taken to extremes, a proper understanding of God's transcendence rightly undergirds many elements of

Christian theology. Therefore, this tendency will guide these lessons in particular directions.

Along with the *Solas*, unity of Scripture and the doctrine of God, we should mention one final distinctive of the Reformed branch of the church. How does Reformed theology view the relationship between Christianity and human culture?

## Human Culture

**I believe that Reformed theology sees an intimate relationship between God and human culture. In other words ... you can always find that God is manifest in any culture, in any age. God's presence in human life, in human culture, is essential and has always been evident. A great example is when the apostle Paul goes and preaches in Athens and sees the "unknown God" that the Athenians worship, and he takes advantage of that opportunity to tell them, "This is the God that I preach to you." You can see God reflected even in cultures that say they don't believe in God, because in their moral principles you can sometimes see God's presence, you can see God's love, you can see God's creation. Even if they deny it, there is always an intimate relationship between God and human culture.**

— Rev. Pablo Torres, translation

From the days of Calvin's ministry in Geneva, the Reformed tradition has taken a fairly consistent approach to these matters. One way to summarize this distinctive point of view is to follow the well-known typology created by Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture*. In his book, Niebuhr gathers various Christian approaches to culture into five major groups.

"Christ against culture" is Niebuhr's label for the view that culture is evil and to be avoided by Christians. Separatist movements such as medieval monastic orders and modern Amish and Mennonite communities are well-known forms of this view.

Niebuhr uses the expression "Christ of culture" to describe those views that primarily affirm culture and attempt to accommodate Christ to what they find in the world. This approach can be seen in many modern liberal Protestant churches.

Between the two extremes of *Christ against* culture and *Christ of* culture, Niebuhr describes three views that attempt various ways of reconciling Christ and human culture. "Christ above culture" is a view that attempts a synthesis between Christ and the world. "Christ and culture in paradox" describes views that see a dualism between Christ and the world. And "Christ the transformer of culture" pertains to the opinion that Christianity should influence, and in some ways "convert" cultures to biblical norms. In Niebuhr's view, the Reformed position fits within this last category.

Now, at different times, the Reformed tradition has put this point of view into effect in a variety of ways. Sadly, some of these efforts were closely associated with European colonialism. But there have also been some generally positive examples of the transformation model in the past. Usually, we point to Puritan England and Puritan

America, as well as to Abraham Kuyper's efforts in Holland, as more positive examples of the attempt to have Christ transform human culture. In all events, the general Reformed position on culture may be summed up in this way: When God first made humanity and placed us in the Garden of Eden, he gave humanity a cultural mandate. Listen to the familiar words of Genesis 1:28:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Genesis 1:28).

Adam and Eve were called to serve as God's vice-regents over the world, managing the earth and its potentials for the glory of God. From the Reformed point of view, this cultural mandate has not been set aside. Instead, it is affirmed by the rest of Scripture. In fact, the gospel mandate that Christ gave his church was designed to redeem God's people from sin so that this cultural mandate might be fulfilled.

Because of this, Reformed theology has insisted that every dimension of life must be brought under the lordship of Christ. Reformed theology rejects the idea that some aspects of life are religious and others are secular. From this point of view, all of life is religious, governed either by true or false religion. The arts, sciences, law, politics, business, family, school; every aspect of human culture should be accomplished in ways that honor the Word of God and bring glory to God.

**In many, many places in Scripture it's very clear that the kingdom of God is to affect every part of who we are and what we do, and that our very role as image bearers, to reflect God's kingship, is an essential part of our discipleship. In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul talks about what it means to "learn Christ." And in talking about discipleship, he doesn't begin with worship practices. Instead, he begins with the way that we speak to our neighbors, that we should stop speaking lies and start speaking the truth to our neighbors. And then he goes from that — the role of being a citizen — to our work life, and he says, "The one who stole should stop stealing and should work with his hands in order that he might have something to give to others." And so, what we can see in terms of "learning Christ" or being a disciple of Christ, for Paul, affects every part of our life. And later in that chapter and on into chapters 5 and 6, he'll talk about family life, parents and children, husbands and wives. He'll talk about our worship life and that we should sing songs to each other and encourage one another. And he'll also talk about how we should respond to the principalities and the authorities. Jesus did this as well when he told his parables. He would just point to a particular part of life — look at this rich man and a poor man — and he would talk about what the kingdom of God looks like. How should the rich relate to the poor? So every part of our lives is under the reign of God.**

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on exploring Christian theology, we've set forth some of the important outlooks that will guide this entire study. We first defined Christian theology as that which accords with the *Apostles' Creed*. We also saw that there are a variety of Christian traditions within theology that shape and characterize the various branches of the church. And finally, we pointed out that these lessons will be guided by the orientations of the Reformed tradition, including its origins and developments, tendencies and theological distinctives.

Every follower of Christ has been given the privilege of exploring Christian theology. As we do, we'll find that we have much in common with other believers in the ways we think, behave and feel — in our orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. But we'll also find that Christian theology is not without variety. Throughout the millennia different branches of the church have developed their own traditional priorities and emphases. And we benefit in countless ways as we interact with these traditions. Exploring Christian theology is a lifelong endeavor that we share with every believer as we seek to build theology that honors Christ in every dimension of life.

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