

Building Your Theology

Lesson 2

Exploring Christian Theology

Lesson Guide



thirdmill

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

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

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

Notes

I. Introduction (0:19)

II. Christian Theology (1:48)

“Christian theology” can refer to:

- what Christians *actually* believe
- what Christians *ought* to believe

A. Problems with Definitions (3:04)

One of the greatest problems is finding ways to distinguish Christian theology from non-Christian theology.

Many theologies are easily distinguished from Christian beliefs, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

Many schools of theology blend Christian and non-Christian thought, making it difficult to separate genuine Christianity from other faiths.

It's very difficult to know precisely what elements are essential for a theology to be genuinely Christian.

B. Working Definition (10:34)

The *Apostles' Creed* has been recited by Christians for centuries as a summation of the 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.

For our purposes, all theology that accords with this creed will be counted as Christian theology.

C. Unity and Diversity (16:05)

There is both unity and diversity within the theology of the Christian faith.

1. Unified Theology (17:13)

Christians agree on a number of core beliefs distinguishing them from cults and other religions.

The doctrinal unity of the church should be a goal that all Christians have (Ephesians 4:4-5; John 17:22-23).

It is our responsibility to continually promote theological unity within the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:13-16).

2. **Multiple Theologies (23:51)**

While Christian theology is unified to varying degrees, it is also important to acknowledge and accept degrees of diversity within it.

- **limitations**

Our limitations as humans make it inevitable that we'll select and emphasize some aspects of the Christian faith more than others.

Redeemed people express different aspects of their faith:

- in accordance with their own cultural settings
- in response to their own particular needs

- **sin and error**

Differences result when persons or groups stray into false doctrines, practices and paths.

To discern error, we need to be:

- self-critical, ready to forsake any false beliefs that have entered our theology
- ready to help other believers improve their understandings as well

III. Christian Traditions (33:14)

A. Defining Tradition (34:04)

1. Negative Definition (34:30)

Today, the term “tradition” has very negative connotations because it is closely associated with “traditionalism.”

Traditionalism bases theological beliefs on human preferences, usually longstanding traditional preferences, rather than on the Scriptures (Mark 7:8-13).

Christians should reject traditionalism because it gives to mere human opinion the authority that rightly belongs only to Scripture.

2. Positive Definition (37:15)

Paul viewed Christian faith as a tradition to be passed down from person to person, from generation to generation.

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

- *“A relatively longstanding theological doctrine, practice or pathos”*

Only beliefs enjoying years of acceptance in the church rightly qualify as traditions.

- *“distinguishes branches of the church from each other”*

When believers share common outlooks over a long time, these outlooks become their distinctive theological paths.

B. Tendencies of Traditions (45:04)

Different theological traditions within Christianity tend to fall into one or two of three categories:

- those who emphasize orthodoxy (doctrine)
- those who stress orthopraxis (practice)
- those who accentuate orthopathos (emotions)

1. Orthodoxy (46:30)

Some denominations see their identity primarily in terms of what doctrines they hold:

- Teaching ministries and doctrinal stances form the heart of their Christian faith
- Can be heavily preoccupied with doctrinal controversies
- Usually insist on a large measure of doctrinal uniformity
- Often characterized by “intellectualism”

2. Orthopraxis (48:48)

There are many churches that find their distinctive identity in what they do, as opposed to what they teach.

- Christian service and programs of action are their greatest strength.
- Often have long lists of dos and don'ts for their members.
- Often reduce the Christian faith to mere activity.
- Often characterized by legalism.

3. Orthopathos (50:45)

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.
- Don't want to be bothered with doctrine or behaviors, unless they make them feel better.
- Often characterized by emotionalism.

C. Importance of Traditions (53:24)

An awareness of the importance of traditions helps us understand more about ourselves and more about others.

1. Awareness of Ourselves (53:41)

The goal of serious academic study of the Bible from the Enlightenment forward was to divorce oneself from theological prejudices and traditions.

Modern liberalism is the result of applying modernist Enlightenment agenda to theology.

Awareness of the heritage that constantly influences us as we build a theology enables us to evaluate and manage these influences.

Questions for developing self-awareness:

- What branch of the church do you call home?
- What are the general tendencies of your tradition?

2. Awareness of Others (58:34)

When discussing theology with other believers, we must remember that their associations and their traditions heavily influence them.

The more we recognize the influences on others, the more fruitful our interactions can be.

IV. Reformed Tradition (1:00:45)

A. Origins and Developments (1:02:00)

The term “Reformed theology” comes from the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

Many different theological movements comprised the Protestant Reformation; most significantly, Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists.

The term “Reformed” came to apply primarily to those Protestants who were deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin.

Highpoints of early Reformed theology:

- Belgic Confession (1561)
- Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
- Synod of Dort (1618-1619)
- The Scots Confession (1560)
- Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)
- Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647)
- London Baptist Confession (1644)

B. Tendencies (1:08:02)

The Reformed tradition has primarily stressed orthodoxy, with a secondary emphasis on orthopraxis.

When doctrine and duty are emphasized to the practical exclusion of orthopathos:

- Our emphasis on doctrine tends toward intellectualism.
- Our emphasis on duty tends toward legalism.

C. Distinctives (1:09:56)

Four doctrinal distinctives characterize the Reformed branch of the church:

1. Five Solas (1:10:11)

These doctrines have traditionally been summarized using forms of the Latin term “*sola*,” which means “alone” or “only.”

- *Sola Scriptura* — Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and life.

- *Solo Christo* — Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man.

- *Sola fide* — God justifies believers through the instrumentality of faith alone, apart from works.

- *Sola gratia* — The entire process of salvation, from election to glorification, is based solely on the grace of God.

- *Soli Deo Gloria* — All creation and acts within creation should be, and ultimately are, designed to bring glory to God alone.

2. **Unity of Scripture (1:13:27)**

It has become common for many evangelicals to believe that there is a separation between the Old and New Testaments.

The Reformed tradition looks at the whole Bible as presenting a unified theology.

The differences between the Testaments simply represent developments of biblical faith from earlier stages to later stages.

There are not two covenants of grace differing in substance, but only one, under various administrations (Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.6).

3. **Doctrine of God (1:17:25)**

The Bible describes God as both transcendent and immanent.

Reformed theology affirms God's immanent attributes, but it *tends* to emphasize those associated with transcendence.

God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 4).

A proper understanding of God's transcendence rightly undergirds many elements of Christian theology.

4. **Human Culture (1:21:07)**

Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* gathers various Christian approaches to culture into five major groups:

- *Christ against culture* — view that culture is evil and to be avoided by Christians
- *Christ of culture* — views that affirm culture and attempt to accommodate Christ to the world
- *Christ above culture* — view that attempts a synthesis between Christ and the world
- *Christ and culture in paradox* — views that see a dualism between Christ and the world
- *Christ the transformer of culture* — view that Christianity should influence and convert cultures to biblical norms.

The Reformed position sees Christ as the transformer of culture.

The Reformed position on culture: when God first created man in the Garden, he gave humanity a cultural mandate (Genesis 1:28).

The gospel mandate that Christ gave his church was designed to redeem God's people so that the cultural mandate might be fulfilled.

Every dimension of life must be brought under the lordship of Christ; all of life is religious, governed by true or false religion.

V. Conclusion (1:28:15)

3. What accounts for the unity of the body of Christ? Why it is our responsibility to promote theological unity within the body of Christ?

4. What accounts for the diversity within the body of Christ?

5. As we survey Christian theology, why is it important to maintain a balanced perspective regarding theological unity and diversity?

6. What is “tradition”?

11. Summarize each of the five distinctives of the Reformed tradition.

Application Questions

1. Should you believe all of the doctrines in the Apostles' Creed? Why or why not?
2. What implications does the theological unity of all believers have for the way you view and interact with other branches of the church?
3. What positive influences has your theological tradition had on your theology? What negative influences has it had?
4. What are the emphases of your tradition? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these emphases? How might you change your emphases to counter these weaknesses without losing the strengths?
5. What are some of the strengths and dangers of Reformed theology? In what ways might your understanding of the tradition behind these lessons help you discern truth from error within them?
6. Reformed theology tends to insist that all life is religious. Do you agree or disagree with this idea? Why or why not?
7. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?

Glossary

Apostles' Creed – A statement of the Christian faith formulated and written to unify the basic tenets of essential Christian theology (ca. 2nd to 6th centuries A.D.)

Arminius, Jacobus – (1560-1609) Dutch theologian who gradually grew to oppose the principal tenets of Calvinism, including the doctrine of predestination

Belgic Confession – Confession of faith written by Reformer Guido de Brès in 1561 in the Netherlands; one of the doctrinal standards of the Reformed Church

Calvin, John – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

catholic – Term meaning "universal"; used in the Apostles' Creed to describe the church as including all believers, from all places, throughout all of history

cultural mandate – The command in Genesis 1:28 instructing humanity to develop and rule the creation to display God's glory

Descartes, René – (1596-1650) French philosopher and mathematician; often called the "father of modern rationalism"

divine immanence – Attribute of God referring to his closeness to man and creation; God's active involvement in space and time

divine transcendence – Attribute of God indicating that he is superior to man and above all limitations of the creation, including space and time

doctrine – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

emotionalism – A disproportionate and often excessive focus on the emotions

Enlightenment, the – A philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized human reason over religious, social, and political traditions

Heidelberg Catechism – Sixteenth-century Protestant creed written to provide a unified summary of the teachings of Scripture

Huguenots – French Protestants who were persecuted during the Reformation and forced to flee France

intellectualism – A disproportionate focus on the intellect without regard to emotional or behavioral considerations

Knox, John – (ca. 1505-1572) Scottish Reformer who established Reformed, or Presbyterian, churches in Scotland

Kuyper, Abraham – (1837-1920) Dutch theologian, writer, and prime minister of the Netherlands who was concerned with private education and established Reformed Churches in the Netherlands

legalism – A disproportionate focus on or adherence to keeping the moral law without regard to faith or the gospel of Christ

London Baptist Confession – A Protestant summary of biblical doctrine for Calvinistic Baptists, first published in 1644; the Second London Confession was published in 1677 and republished in 1689

Luther, Martin – (1483-1546) Sixteenth century German monk and Protestant reformer who initiated the Reformation when he posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517

Niebuhr, H. Richard – (1894-1962) American theologian and teacher who wrote *Christ and Culture*

orthodoxy – Right or straight thinking

orthopathos – Right or correct feelings or emotions

orthopraxis – Right behavior or practice

Protestant Reformation – A sixteenth-century religious movement that attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, but eventually broke away, forming the Protestant church

Reformed theology – Calvinistic school of theology with an emphasis on the five solas, the transcendency of God, the unity and authority of Scripture, and the transformation of culture

Scots Confession – The first confession of faith for the Scottish Reformed Church, written in 1560 by six Scottish ministers, including John Knox

Sola fide – Latin phrase meaning "faith alone"; the belief that justification is by faith alone and not by works; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

Sola gratia – Latin phrase meaning "grace alone"; the belief that salvation is based solely on the grace of God and not on our personal merit; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

Sola Scriptura – Latin phrase meaning "Scripture alone"; the belief that the Scriptures stand as the supreme and final judge of all theological questions; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

Soli Deo gloria – Latin phrase meaning "glory to God alone"; the belief that all creation and acts within creation are designed to bring glory to God alone; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

Solo Christo – Latin phrase meaning "Christ alone"; the belief that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

syncretism – The practice of mixing different religions or mixing philosophy with religion

Synod of Dort – An assembly of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands in 1618-1619, where they debated the Arminian controversy and decided in favor of the Five Points of Calvinism

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

traditionalism – View that bases theological beliefs on longstanding traditional preferences rather than on the Scriptures

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

Westminster Larger Catechism – A traditional Protestant summary of Christian teaching, originally published in 1647; more comprehensive than the Shorter Catechism

Westminster Shorter Catechism – A traditional Protestant summary of Christian teaching, originally published in 1647

Zwingli, Ulrich – (1484-1531) Influential Swiss Reformer and priest who is regarded as the founder of Swiss Protestantism