Building Systematic Theology

Lesson 1

What is Systematic Theology?

Lesson Guide

CONTENTS

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 manuscript 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. IIIM 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 (0:29)

If we take the time to arrange our theology in a systematic way, we'll actually be able to get much more done in service to Christ and his kingdom.

Systematic theology is one of the main ways the Holy Spirit has led the Christian church to put its theology in order.

II.   New Testament (2:55)

All systems of theology other than the Bible reflect the imperfections of sinful human beings. So, we should be very interested in how systematic theology compares to the Bible.

A.   Systematic Theology (3:58)

Historically speaking, systematic theology has been one of the most influential ways Christians have built theology.

Some examples of systematic doctrines are:

"Systematic theology seeks to give a systematic presentation of all the doctrinal truths of the Christian religion" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, ch. 4).

1.   Biblical (6:38)

For protestant theologians committed to *sola Scriptura*, to say that we focus on doctrinal truths is to say that all of our theology must accord with the Bible.

Wrong foundations for systematic theology include:

- Church tradition or dogma

- Religious experience

- Non-Christian philosophy

2.   Logical (9:00)

Systematicians seek to make clear how the teachings of Scripture reveal a unified logical system of beliefs.

3.   Traditional (10:46)

Systematics interacts not only with the Bible but also with the main ways the Bible's teachings have been expressed by theologians throughout church history.

Systematicians usually organize the doctrines of Scripture in this way:

1. Bibliology:

2. Theology proper:

3. Anthropology:

4. Soteriology:

5. Ecclesiology:

6. Eschatology:

B.   New Testament Theology (13:10)

Sound Systematicians seek to make their assertions correspond as much as possible to the assertions of the New Testament. Even so, systematics is very different from the New Testament. The contours of New Testament theology differ from those of systematic theology in at least four ways.

1.   Diversity (15:00)

There is much more diversity of terms and categories in the New Testament than in systematic theology.

Organic inspiration: The Holy Spirit guarded biblical writers from error and from contradicting each other, but he did not flatten the vocabulary and categories of New Testament writers so that they were uniform.

2.   Pastoral Character (17:42)

The writers of the New Testament expressed their theology in ways that addressed relatively specific needs in specific ways, rather than in permanent, universal truths.

3.   Genres (19:58)

Systematic theology is written in one basic genre: an extended essay or
treatise. By contrast, the writers of the New Testament used many
different literary forms and styles.

4.   Basic Framework (21:25)

New Testament writers largely structured their theology around the theme
of the messianic kingdom of God, rather than around the traditional
structure of systematic theology.

One of the primary goals of New Testament writers was to explain that the
transition from this age of exile and sin to the messianic kingdom of God
was going to involve a complex and extended process:

- Inauguration:

- Continuation:

- Consummation:

III.   Historical Developments (26:50)

Systematic theology came about through a long process of the church responding to and ministering in a changing world.

A.   Patristic Theology (30:28)

1.   Cultural Changes (30:55)

Gentiles, rather than Jews, became the leading theologians of the church. They began to describe Christianity in terms of the Hellenistic philosophies of their day.

Christian leaders reached out to the world:

- Syncretism:

- Legitimate Ministry:

2.   Theological Changes (34:48)

The dominant philosophical and religious stream in the Mediterranean world was an outlook commonly known as Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism was rooted in the teachings of Plato, but also included new ideas introduced by philosophers such as Plotinus who lived from AD 203-279.

Dualism:

Rationalism:

Mysticism:

Faithful Christian theologians in the Patristic period did not allow their attention to Neo-Platonism to supplant their basic commitments to the true gospel.

Spiritual Priorities

Importance of Reason

Importance of Mysticism

B.   Medieval Theology (45:15)

During the Medieval period, Christians more consistently applied Hellenistic views of human rationality and logic to Christian theology, which is commonly known as Scholasticism.

1.   Cultural Changes (46:00)

The intellectual communities of the Mediterranean world turned away from Neo-Platonism and toward the philosophy of Aristotle.

2.   Theological Changes (48:00)

Scholasticism was highly rationalistic, stressing the value of logic in exploring, explaining and defending all of theology. The physical and spiritual worlds, and even God himself, were to be analyzed through the careful application of logic.

Aristotle's views on logic:

Terminology:

Propositions: assertions of fact formed by a subject and a predicate.

Syllogisms: Logical arguments in which propositions are arranged to form premises and conclusions.

Priorities: In order to communicate with their Aristotelian culture, scholastics rigorously structured their doctrinal summaries in the order of theology from above.

C.   Protestant Theology (1:03:00)

1.   Early Reformers (1:03:50)

The goal of early protestant theology was to reconstruct Christian theology according to the content of Scripture.

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* displayed a significant concern with Aristotelian logic in the ways he employed technical terms; expressed his theology largely in propositions; constructed syllogisms to reason through issues; and patterned his theology according to the priorities of theology from above.

2.   Classical Confessions (1:08:30)

Protestants in different regions of the world produced a number of classical catechisms and confessions that summarized their faith.

The Westminster Confession embraces Aristotelian logic in the ways it relies heavily on technical terms, how propositions are the central form of expression, the ways careful syllogisms undergird the presentation of theology, and how it orders the topics of theology according to the priorities of theology from above.

3.   Modern Systematics (1:11:49)

Charles Hodge (1797-1878) gave reason and logic a central role as he employed traditional technical terms, relied on propositions, built his case with careful syllogisms and followed the priorities of theology from above.

"The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches." — Charles Hodge

IV.   Values and Dangers (1:15:22)

God has provided three main resources upon which we must draw as we build Christian theology: the exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community and Christian living.

These major theological resources help us evaluate the levels of confidence we should grant to particular beliefs we have.

A.   Christian Living (1:18:20)

Christian living involves our sanctification and our growth in holiness.

- Thoughts (orthodoxy)

- Actions (orthopraxis)

- Feelings (orthopathos)

1.   Enhancement (1:19:28)

Systematic theology is particularly strong in the area of orthodoxy. It provides us with a systematic way of thinking, a conceptual framework for considering rightly the issues we face in our daily lives.

2.   Hindrance (1:22:03)

We can become so preoccupied with putting our beliefs into a logical system that we ignore other dimensions of Christian living, especially orthopraxis (conforming our behaviors to the will of God) and orthopathos (conforming our emotions to the will of God).

B.   Interaction in Community (1:24:13)

Christians interact with each other because we know that the church is the central arena within which the Holy Spirit ministers in the world. And Christ expects us to build our theology in concert with others who are filled with the Holy Spirit.

- Christian heritage:

- Holy Spirit:

- Present Community:

1.   Enhancement (1:25:18)

Systematics constructs theology with an eye to the things the Holy Spirit has already taught the church of Christ, paying attention to how great men and women in the past built theology.

2.   Hindrance (1:27:03)

When we take the traditional focus of systematic theology too far, it can lead us to irrelevance, ignoring what the Holy Spirit teaches the present community and how he informs our private judgment.

C.   Exegesis of Scripture (1:28:45)

The main ways the Holy Spirit has taught the church to interpret the Bible.

- Literary analysis (picture):

    Literary analysis seeks to understand the Bible as a document designed by human writers to influence their audiences through conventional literary means.

- Historical analysis (window):

    The primary focus of historical analysis has been to reconstruct what happened in biblical history and to understand the significance of those events for people living in those times.

- Thematic analysis (mirror):

    We look at the Scriptures as a mirror, as a way of addressing questions, topics, or themes that are important to us, even if they are not prominent in the Bible itself.

1.   Enhancement (1:32:50)

This process of collating and combining different verses into a whole helps us avoid treating one thing the Scriptures say about a topic as all that they say on a topic.

2.   Hindrance (1:34:00)

Systematic theology often hinders exegesis because it does not focus on literary and historical analysis of the Scriptures. It places limitations on what we derive from the Bible.

V.   Conclusion (1:35:20)

Review Questions

1. Describe the contours of systematic theology in terms of its commitments to scriptural truth, logical coherence and traditional emphases.

2. Describe the contours of New Testament theology in terms of its diversity, pastoral character, genres and framework.

3.   In what ways is systematic theology like New Testament theology?

4.   In what ways is systematic theology different from New Testament theology?

5.   Why and how did authentic Christian theology change to meet the challenges of ministry to the Gentiles during the Patristic period?

6.   Describe the theological movement of Scholasticism, and its use of Aristotelian logic.

7.   Describe the three stages of Protestant theology in terms of the early Reformers, the
        classical confessions and modern systematics.

8.   What similarities are there between the way theology was done in the Patristic, Medieval
        and Protestant periods?

9.   Describe how systematic theology enhances and hinders the three aspects of Christian living.

10.   Describe how systematic theology enhances and hinders the three aspects of interaction in community.

11.   Explain how systematics enhances and hinders exegesis.

12.   How can we successfully navigate the dangers of systematic theology in order to take advantage of its values?

Application Questions

1. Why is it helpful to have systematic theology in addition to the Bible itself?

2. What aspect of systematic theology helps you the most in living the Christian life?

3. What aspect of systematic theology helps you the most in interaction in community?

4. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?

Glossary

anthropology – Theological term for the study or doctrine of humanity

Aquinas, Thomas – (ca. 1225-1274) Italian theologian and Dominican friar who wrote *Summa Theologica*

Berkhof, Louis – (1873-1957) Influential Reformed theologian who wrote *Systematic Theology* in 1932

bibliology – The study of the Bible

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

dualism – Theory that reduces a subject to the mutual existence of two opposing principles or entities

ecclesiology – The study or doctrine of the church

eschatological – Having to do with the study or doctrine of the last days

eschatology – The study or doctrine of the last days

historical analysis – An exegetical approach to the Bible that views Scripture as a window to history

Hodge, Charles – (1797-1878) Well-known theologian from Princeton Theological Seminary who wrote numerous commentaries, articles and books, including his three-volume *Systematic Theology*

literary analysis – An exegetical approach to the Bible that views Scripture as a literary portrait designed to influence readers in a particular way

mysticism – Belief system that emphasizes the need to go beyond reason to receive revelation through transcendent spiritual enlightenment

Mystics (Christian) – Those who believe that the higher truths of Christianity can only be grasped through transcendent spiritual enlightenment

Neo-Platonism – A philosophical school of thought rooted in Plato; begun by Plotinus (A.D. 205-270); idealistic, spiritualistic teaching bordering on mysticism; taught that all existence comes from the "One," the "Absolute"

orthodoxy – Right or straight thinking

orthopathos – Right or correct feelings or emotions

orthopraxis – Right behavior or practice

patristic theology – Theology from approximately A.D. 150-600 that described, explained and defended Christianity in ways that were relevant for Hellenistic cultures

Philo of Alexandria – (ca. 20 B.C. - ca. A.D. 50) Hellenistic Jewish philosopher and writer; considered to be the originator of the allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture

premise – A statement that leads to a conclusion

proposition – A sentence that asserts as directly as possible at least one factual theological claim

rationalism – Belief system that emphasizes the use of reason and human reflection

scholasticism – School of philosophy taught by the academics (or "Scholastics") during the medieval period that put great emphasis on the use of Aristotelian logic and attempted to harmonize Christian theology with classical philosophy

scholasticus – Latin term meaning "scholar"; applied to those who lectured in dialectic or logic

soteriology – The doctrine of salvation

syllogism – A logical argument in which two or more premises lead to a conclusion

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

systematic theology/systematics – A theological discipline that seeks to give a rational and orderly presentation of the doctrinal truths of Christianity

thematic analysis – An exegetical approach to the Bible that views Scripture as a mirror that reflects the readers' interests and questions

theology proper – The doctrine or study of God; any theological matter that refers directly to God

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