

Systematic Theology Study

Session 1

Introduction

Welcome to the introduction for our study in systematic theology. I know this topic sounds complicated and technical and from an academic standpoint, it is. However, there is good news. Scholars and academic leaders are not preparing or leading this class. My goal will be to make each session easy to understand so that, in the end, you will know why you believe what you believe. If you've ever wondered why Christians believe what they believe or wonder why you believe what you believe, you are in the right place because that's what we are going to spend the next ten to twelve weeks examining together. The main goal of this class is that when we are finished you will know what you believe and why you believe it. You may or not agree with me on every point that I make but if you don't you will be challenged to know why you don't. Faith is built upon knowledge of the truth. If you don't know why you believe something, then you are holding the belief through superstition and not biblical faith.

[II Timothy 2:2, 2:15]

Here's the deal. Since man was first created, he has always held a belief in something or someone higher than the individual. Maybe it was a personal god, a deceased family member, an entire collection of supernatural beings, a force of nature, a set of values, a supreme being or whatever. The thing is that mankind has always wanted something or someone higher than himself to worship and look to for guidance and help as well as explain the mysteries of life. This belief in a higher being or power has led to the various religions of the world. Religion gives each follower a general worldview and perspective on life. A religion usually encompasses belief, emotions, doctrines, attitudes and lifestyle. In short theology is the study of God and the religion resulting from a relationship with God. Theology analyzes the various statements of belief of a religion and tracks down the source of that belief so it can be evaluated as true or false, complete or incomplete. In this class we are limiting our study to the Christian faith alone. Since the God of Christianity is an active God, any study of the Christian faith will also need to include His works. The target we are aiming to hit each week will be to make statements of doctrine that line up with the Christian faith related to the topic each week. So if we are talking about Jesus Christ, our aim is to make statements concerning Jesus Christ that are true and based upon what has been revealed about Jesus Christ. These statements become the doctrines that Christians believe and put into practice in their lives. What we believe is important because it determines how we live our lives.

Q: What do you think is the most important source of information for us to study in coming to find the truth of what Christians believe? *(The Bible)*

Q: Why do you think the Bible is the most important source of information for us in this search for the truth? *(It is the Word of God. It is the special revelation of God)*

Q: What is necessary for us to believe that the Bible is the Word of God? *(That there is a God, that He exists)*

By answering those three questions, you've just laid the foundation for the entire class. We begin by realizing and believing that God exists. If we don't believe God exists, then there is no reason at all to concern yourself with any theology. After coming to a belief in God we need to believe that He has revealed Himself to mankind in the Bible, His Word. Then since, the Bible is God's Word, we need to investigate and study that Word to see what God has revealed - not just about Himself but about everything He has wanted to make known to mankind.

[Hebrews 11:6] - Believing that God exists is the first and most important step in determining what God has said. To not believe is to make this study purely academic, which theology is never meant to be. It's meant to lead us to a dynamic life different from that those who don't believe in God can't possess.

Theology is necessary for many reasons.

1) Correct doctrinal beliefs are essential to the relationship between the believer and God. How do we know what sort of relationship God wants to have with us if we don't have the proper beliefs based upon God's special revelation - the Bible. We cannot approach God unless we have the knowledge of how to do so and this comes only from Him. This is true because God is a spirit and thus cannot be known through our five senses.

2) Correct doctrinal beliefs are essential because truth and experience are related. What you believe will impact the way you live. The man who falls off the top of a 50 story building may say, "*I'm still fine*" at every floor on his way down and actually mean it. However, the facts of the matter will eventually catch up with him in the end. We may live happily after a loved one dies until we actually hear about the death. Then our world is turned upside down and the truth comes crashing in on our experience. What you believe will eventually make an impact on how you live so to know the truth of your faith is the only way to come to grips with reality as it unfolds in your life.

3) Correct doctrinal beliefs are necessary because of the large number of alternatives and challenges to our faith. Between secular or worldly belief systems and other world religions, there are a lot of other belief systems that people put their faith into. We need to be able to articulate accurately what we believe and why so that we can glorify God, live victorious Christian lives and persuade others to come to know Christ.

Most theology begins with questions. Let's take a look at a few questions as illustrations just so you have an idea of what I'm talking about and how this works.

[Genesis 1:26-31]

Q: What does this passage teach us about man? (*He was created in God's image. He was given dominion over all creation. He was to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*)

Q: What was God's final pronouncement over His creation at the end of the 6th day? (*v.31 - It was very good. In other words, things were just the way God intended for them to be. Everything "worked" properly and was in order according to how God wanted things to be.*)

[Revelation 20:11-15]

Q: What is happening in this passage? (*v.11 - the Great White throne judgment at the end of history*)

Q: What happens to the people whose names do not appear in the book of life? (*v.15 - they are thrown into the lake of fire (hell)*)

So, at the beginning of creation, God created man in His own image and declared him and the rest of creation to be very good. Now at the end of history, God is throwing some of the people He created into hell. Here's where theology enters the picture.

Q: What happened so that some people, who were originally created in God's image are going to be thrown into hell at the end of time? (*Man sinned against God.*)

However, neither of the passages we just read contains the word "sin". So in order for you to come to that conclusion, you must have had to study some other part of the special revelation of God, what we call the Bible, to come to that conclusion.

[Psalm 14:1-3]

Q: What does this passage teach us about people or at least some people? (*They don't believe in God, they have turned away from goodness*)

[Romans 3:9-18]

Q: What does this passage teach us about people? (*All people have sinned and none do good or seek after God.*)

[Romans 6:23]

Q: According to this passage, what is the result or payment for sin and disbelief? (*death*)

Notice that for the sake of time and this introductory example, I'm not drawing the line all the way to hell. We would need a few more verses to actually go from the wages of sin being death to showing that this death is a spiritual, eternal death in a place of torment called hell. Also, I'm not dealing with the justice of God at this moment but just assuming that since there is a judgment at the end of time, the God of the Bible is a God of justice in some manner.

Now let's look at how theology could handle a challenge from a group claiming to be a Christian religion. The Jehovah's Witnesses were formed in the 1870's and took on the name in the early 20th century. They have many beliefs that are contradictory to what we'll call orthodox or normal Christian beliefs. One of those beliefs is that Jesus Christ was a created being. He is not God, in fact, there is no Trinity at all. Jesus was the first creation of God and so He is over everything but is not God. The following is one source for their belief.

[Colossians 1:13-15]

Q: What does v.15 teach us about Jesus? (*He is the firstborn of all creation*)

Q: What does the term “firstborn” mean? (*It means the child who is born first in a family*)

The JW's say that Jesus was born of God and thus a created being. He is not eternal nor is He God.

Q: If you were having a discussion with a JW, what would you say to them? Would you agree with them or not? If not, why not?

Theology helps us answer those questions. It digs into the Word of God to find answers. But it is important to understand theology as two streams that converge and form a large river of truth. The first stream is that of the Bible, God's Word. The second stream that enters the river is history, specifically, what did earlier believers have to say about such matters. Was there ever a time in the history of Christianity when others held that Jesus was not God but merely a created being?

It turns out that in 318 A.D. there was a dispute between two Christians in Alexandria, Egypt, which at that time was one of the prominent centers of academic thought and Christian faith. The conflict was between Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria and Arius, a priest in his district. Arius believed for the Father to beget the Son means that the Son had a beginning and thus was not God but rather a created being. This conflict created severe civil and religious unrest within the Roman Empire and so the Emperor Constantine convened the first ever global church council to settle the matter and discern the truth. In the end, this council (the Council of Nicea) ruled Arius and his beliefs heretical - they were wrong. The movement began to fade rapidly after this ruling in 325 A.D. However, the devil loves to use the same material as often as he can get away with it so he brought the same beliefs back to light through the Jehovah's Witnesses - fifteen centuries later. To dismiss the JW's beliefs, we don't have to re-create the wheel, we just need to go back in time and see how the early church fathers came to their conclusion that Jesus Christ was and is God.

[Matthew 16:13-19]

Q: What was Jesus asking His disciples in this passage? (v. 13 & v.15 - *who others thought He was and who they thought He was*)

Q: Who did Peter claim Jesus to be? (*The Christ, the Son of the Living God*)

[John 1:1-2, 14-18]

Q: Who was the Word John speaks about in this passage? How do we know that? (*It's Jesus Christ and v.14 says the Word became flesh. We know that Jesus took on human flesh.*)

[John 10:30]

Q: What does this passage teach about Jesus? *(That He and His Father are one. They are one in essence and one in purpose.)*

[Philippians 2:5-11]

Q: In v.7, what does Paul say Jesus did when He took on human nature? *(He emptied Himself. He set aside His divine privileges and powers and became completely dependent upon the Heavenly Father.)*

[Titus 2:11-13]

Q: What is Jesus called in v.13 of this passage? *(our great God and Savior)*

[Hebrews 1:1-4]

Q: What is the exact representation of something? *(It is the same thing - the same nature/essence. Jesus is said to be the exact representation of God. It's hard to get more direct than this passage.)*

Now the JW's have changed some of the verses in John and the one in Titus to reflect their heresy. (See my handout on Presenting the Trinity in Evangelism to counter their changes by using only verses that they didn't change but show Jesus as God.) However, back to their original verse in Colossians 1:15 calling Jesus the "firstborn" it is good to know that the term is often used to mean "preeminent", "most important" or of "first or highest rank or order" - higher in stature and nature than others. In other words, Paul is not saying in Colossians that Jesus was born but just that He occupies the place of highest importance for mankind. Jesus Christ is the most important being for mankind as He was God who came to earth as man and did for us what only God could do - live a sinless life and then die in our place and then rise from the dead to prove He was God.

So let's go back and discuss the two streams that form true and solid doctrine.

Q: What are the two streams that we use to establish true and solid doctrine? *(the Bible and history)*

The Bible is God's Word. So we need to make sure that we are spending time interpreting it correctly. We use various tools so that we can understand the ancient languages of Hebrew and Greek and get a good translation into our modern language. We look at the words and the grammar. We also need to look at the historical setting of the passage so we understand what was happening at that time as it may give us a clue to why this passage was written or why it was written a certain way. Despite this, there are some passages in the Bible that are obscure and difficult to interpret. From where we are sitting, 2000 - 4000 years after the Bible was written, the words are not so clear and the setting is unknown or unfamiliar to us.

It's in these uncertain times when we have to draw from the second stream which is history. This is not history of what was happening in the Bible account but rather the history of the passage AFTER the Bible was written. Let's take the book of John for example in the New Testament. The apostle John wrote it somewhere around 80 - 85 A.D. Unlike the other disciples of Jesus, John was not executed until he was a very old man. He had several men who became his disciples and went on to lead churches. Two of the most famous of John's disciples were Polycarp, who became the Bishop of Smyrna (one of the churches mentioned in Revelation) and Ignatius, who became the Bishop of Antioch (the first church established outside of Jerusalem). These men ministered and wrote extensively. In their writings they would use various passages from Scripture to answer questions and teach the truth, as it had been handed down to them. They knew John and had the opportunity to learn what Jesus was like and what the meaning of various Scriptures were because John could clear up their misunderstandings in person. These men also had disciples and over time they would lead churches and write about the doctrines important to their time to answer questions and confront challenges. Thus, by reading how these early church fathers addressed various issues, we can learn a lot about how the various passages in the Bible were interpreted by those who lived closest to the time of their writing.

What happened was the over time, many centuries, and the expansion of the faith around the world, that not everyone had access to these ancient writings and so they would find themselves dealing with questions without a solid foundation. Sometimes, they arrived at solid answers, sometimes they arrived at good but incomplete answers and sometimes they arrived at heresy (which is completely wrong and dangerous). For us, when we come to a question of doctrine and in our search for an answer we come across an obscure or difficult passage, we can look back at the ancient writers and commentators of the passage to see how they used the passage and what it meant to them.

There is a danger of building your doctrines without one of those two streams. If you build your theology upon Scripture but without any history, you have started a cult. This is what the Mormons, JW's and all other cults have done. They have taken the Scripture and re-translated it into a form that suits their beliefs without taking into consideration any of the writings, teachings, and doctrine that originally taught us about Scripture. Take the Mormons for example. In the 1800's Joseph Smith cut away all the historical teaching of the church since the time of Christ and then re-interpreted the Bible in a way that was brand new (and complete fiction). He re-wrote history (none of which has ever been substantiated) and then wrote three other books which he places above the Bible in importance. When you cut the stream of historical interpretation out of a your doctrine, you establish a cult.

On the other hand you can build your doctrines upon history only, ignoring Scripture, and end up with an organization which is spiritually dead and in bondage to Spiritless traditions. This is the problem with many mainline Christian denominations of today. They are established on empty traditions and those in them are ruled by superstition rather than the Holy Spirit. The textbook example of this is Martin Luther, one of the main leaders of the Protestant Reformation that broke the Christian church away from the Catholic Church. Before going further with this illustration, it is important to note that many of Martin Luther's works and beliefs are orthodox and he championed many of the doctrines, especially justification by faith in Christ alone, which we hold as truth. However, there are a few examples, the following story one of them, where Martin Luther got doctrine really wrong. When he started his church, the Lutheran Church, he realized that the Lord's Supper, as practiced by the Catholic Church was in error. The Catholic

Church believed (and still does believe) in something called “transubstantiation”. This is the belief that the bread taken in the Lord’s Supper and the wine used in the Lord’s Supper, under the power of the priest, is actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ and that these elements must be taken in order to receive grace. Catholics believe that grace is given through these elements which they believe are literally the body and blood of Christ. The Catholic Church used this to keep their people returning to church weekly to receive grace for the week. To not attend church or to be in bad standing with the priest or church was to forfeit any chance of obtaining grace - according to Catholic theology.

Martin Luther rightly saw through this error. However, he was unable to completely unshackle himself from Catholic theology. Rather than examine the Bible, as to how God saw the Lord’s Supper, Luther invented a new belief which remains the Lutheran teaching to this day. It’s called “consubstantiation”. (Luther didn’t like the term “consubstantiation” but rather “sacramental union” as the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper occupied the same space in heaven as the body and blood of the Lord Jesus.) His belief was that the actual body and blood of Jesus co-exist with the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. In Luther’s theology, the bread and wine are not replaced with Christ’s actual body and blood as in the Catholic belief but that the body and blood of Jesus are present with the bread and wine. He couldn’t break completely with the Catholic Church’s belief on the Lord’s Supper because he allowed his personal beliefs that he brought from his days a priest to cloud his heart on the issue. (Luther also didn’t break with the Catholic Church over infant baptism and indeed has kept that practice and teaching alive despite no Biblical evidence of infant baptism ever having been performed in the Bible.) He didn’t teach that the Lord’s Supper brought grace to those who partook of it but rather it brought the presence of Christ to them. In essence, his tradition from the Catholic Church (which was heretical in that it was teaching the Lord’s Supper as a means of obtaining God’s grace) and twisted it and then built a new (and equally heretical) tradition upon the old one. This kept people coming to church weekly and believing that they needed to partake of the Lord’s Supper weekly to experience the “presence of the Lord”. Now this is not what was taught in Scripture and has even less Scriptural basis than the Catholic belief. But the truth is that both are in error as the presence of the Lord is not with us because we partake of the Lord’s Supper but rather because we have been saved and have the Holy Spirit living within us. The Lord’s Supper is purely symbolic and meant to bring us to remember what Jesus did for us on the cross - not to grant us any special experiences or grace. Many others of the early Reformers, those who broke away from the Catholic Church were able to totally break free and saw the Lord’s Supper as what it is taught in Scripture - a commemoration rather than some mystic ceremony with magic powers.

To be fair, Lutherans aren’t the only modern denomination that practices “consubstantiation”. The Presbyterians also hold to it because their founder, John Knox, was greatly influenced by John Calvin who was directly influenced by Martin Luther. Knox and Calvin, like Luther, did not want to fully break from all the teachings of the Catholic Church. In this you actually see the stream of history being used to perpetuate heresy and error because tradition and superstition was given priority over the truth of Scripture. Yet Huldreich Zwingli, Balthasar Hubmaier, Menno Simons, and Conrad Grebel (all early Reformers, like Martin Luther) claimed the Lord’s Supper as symbolic and to be done, as Christ taught, a remembrance. They studied Scripture and then allowed it to speak to them about the truth rather than allowing their cherished traditions to be foundations of their faith. (Many of these men were Catholic priests before they broke away from the church and they found the moral fortitude and boldness

to break completely free from the errors they saw in Catholicism.) The point is when you cut Scripture out of doctrine and rely solely on your traditions (as Luther did) you end up with lifeless traditionalism and superstition. This is why both streams are important in developing complete, truthful doctrines.

So for our study, we are going to look at Scriptures primarily but also look to see what various Christians from the past have written about the doctrines of the faith so we can get a handle on the truth from God's Word. To help us with this there is a hierarchy of authority - what is more important than other things in determining what is right and true.

1. Direct statements of Scripture
2. Direct implications of Scripture
3. Probably implications of Scripture
4. Inductive conclusions from Scripture
5. Conclusions inferred from General Revelation
6. Outright speculation

Here is a list of the doctrines we are going to study in this class.

1. Who is God?
2. What is God like?
3. What does God do?
4. Who is man and what is he like?
5. What is sin?
6. Who is the person of Christ?
7. What are the works of Christ?
8. Who is the Holy Spirit?
9. What is salvation and how does one obtain it?
10. What is the church and what does it do?
11. What are the last things and the final states of man?

Now, theology must always stay fresh in order to answer the questions our culture is asking today. So I want you to give me some of your questions about various doctrines that you may have - questions that ask, "*What do we believe about this and why?*" I will fit your questions into the session that answers your question so we can all learn from it. You can give it to me tonight or you can text it to me or however you want to communicate it to me.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?