Building Systematic Theology

Lesson 1 What is Systematic Theology

Faculty Forum

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With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Michael Briggs
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
Is Christian theology rooted in Scripture alone?

Student: Richard, the question lesson says that Christian theology is rooted in Scripture and not in tradition or experience or philosophy, but isn't Scripture a part of these things, or aren't these things a part of Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, they all are. I guess the best way to summarize what we're trying to say there in that lesson at that point is these are not the main concerns that we should have when we are doing systematic theology. We shouldn't be primarily looking to tradition or primarily looking to religious experience, or primarily looking at philosophy, because people do that. In some ways, what we're trying to do at that point is distinguish traditional systematic theology from contemporary forms of it. And some people have reduced systematic theology to church tradition, or the history of dogmatics. In many ways, traditional Roman Catholics have done that, but even some modern more liberal Protestants have done that. They say systematic theology is just sort of a history lesson of how it has been done, not how it ought to be done. But then you get other groups, and I think sometimes this would tend to be seen among charismatics and others, that their system of theology grows primarily out of their experience of Christ. And then you have the sort of secularists, or the university theologians who have turned theology, or systematic theology, into philosophy of religion. That basically began with Paul Tillich making religion your ultimate concern which gets it out of the Jesus thing and the God thing, and now you've got just whatever your particular concern is that can become your sort of philosophical approach.

Well, it's true that every time you read the Bible, you're reading it in light of your tradition. You can't avoid it. You're reading it in light of your religious experience as you can't avoid it. And you're also reading it in terms of whatever philosophical approach you have to life, whether you realize it or not, everybody's got one, and so you can't avoid it completely. But the goal, I think, of traditional Protestant theology is to root it in the Bible. That's *sola Scriptura*. It's our only ultimate authority — the Bible is — and so rather than just wholesale buying into these other approaches, we always want to ask,

well, is it true to the Bible or not? And that's all that's really being said. We're not trying to say you can do this purely from the Bible without any of these other influences.

> **Student: Richard, could you give me an example of how that would play out, let's say in a modern day theological example, where you think maybe somebody's going too far in one direction over another.**

Dr. Pratt: Well, let me pick on my own kind of people. I have a lot of people in my branch of the church that are very traditional, and they allow tradition to answer their theological questions for them. And so they don't maybe even care whether the Bible says it or not, or where the Bible might say it, or what the biblical justification is for something? They just want to know, is it in our confession, or is it in our catechism? That would be a traditionalist. And if you root your theology in that, then you're rooting it in something that is already weak, meaning a tradition, meaning human summaries of the Bible. And I have other friends that relate their Christianity, their thoughts, the way they organize their faith, in terms of what they're experiencing at the moment or what grand experience, especially heightened religious experiences they're had. And I believe in heightened religious experiences. I don't think there is anything wrong with them, and in fact, I think they're necessary to have because people in the Bible do. But the problem with orienting yourself towards that and using that as your only criterion is that it leads you to the ups and downs and tossed to and fro by every experience that you have. And then when you get to the philosophical things, then that just becomes ridiculously heady and nobody care anyway. But knowing about the philosophical orientations that people have does help because all of us do have them whether we admitted them or not.

> **Student: Well, Richard, considering the fact that none of us are going to get this right, some of us are going to focus on tradition, some on philosophy, some on religious experience. How profitable is it for us to legitimately examine these other groups and see what we can draw from?**

Dr. Pratt: It's not only legitimate, it's absolutely necessary, because everybody has a propensity. Everybody tends to do one or two of these. A lot of people feel very safe if they can quote a document that's 300 years old, 400 years old, and say, you see, that's what you're supposed to believe. Other people feel very safe if they can confirm what they believe based upon some heightened experience, some spiritual experience that they've had. Other people think that it's heightened if they can prove it philosophically. And we all do this automatically. It's a part of human nature. But whatever your propensity is, it's always good to force yourself to the others, to make yourself go to the others, because if you go to the others, then you get more insights into yourself and you get more insights into brothers and sisters in Christ whom we need. And that's why I think, in some respects, denominationalism is probably one of the worst things that has happened to the church. Even though there are some positives to it because it gets things done, there are some negatives, because what happens in denominations is birds of a feather flock together. So… I mean, you've seen it. You get a group… let's form a denomination. Well, they're all like each other. That's why they like to be with each

other, and so then what's a propensity becomes a monster because you don't have any of the other witnesses around you, people who are more experientially oriented or more traditionally oriented or more philosophically oriented. You don't ever have them around you. Why? Because they go to the other denomination. So we all think we're right and we're all just focusing on one aspect of this.

Question 2:
Should we use general revelation in systematic theology?

Student: Richard, let's talk a minute about general revelation. The Bible talks about how we see God through general revelation and we learn more about him. Shouldn't we be using that same idea in using general revelation in systematic?

Dr. Pratt: Yup, we should. We always do, and we always should. Let me clarify something, though. Because I think that a lot of people, when they hear that term general revelation, they just think about going out in the woods and looking at trees or hearing the birds sing or looking at the mountains. Isn't the mountain big? Well, God must be big. And that's about the furthest extent they going thinking about general revelation. But when you look at Romans chapter 1, he doesn't just talk about nature. Paul talks about the fact that people who are doing even evil things in society, look at things in society and they know that's wrong. So it's not just raw nature that teaches us about God. Everything, even human creations as it were, cultural things, teach us about this. And so the reality is that not of us can escape it. None of us can so systematic theology free from things we know from general revelation. One of the easiest examples of this — and you can think of some — is most of us don't learn how to read by reading the Bible. Most of us learn how to read through general revelation. You can't do systematic theology very far, you can go very far with it, unless you are a reader. And so here you are just at the basic level having to use general revelation to help you do systematic theology. In fact, the more competent you are in understanding different areas of systematic theology, the more competent you are at understanding different areas of general revelation. These things fit back and forth with each other. It's not as if systematic theology, or for that matter, any kind of theology, is just quoting the Bible. Can you think of other things you need to have, Rob? Can you? Things that you have to have to be able to do systematic theology other than the Bible?

Student: Light to see the Bible

Dr. Pratt: Light. You need to know your culture. You need to know all those kinds of things. And those are not all evil things. Those are things that God gives us as gifts. That's the important thing. There is a lot of evil that you have to get rid of that's not general revelation. But the good things that are out there that teach us the grace of God that's shown to us in all areas is the kind of thing that we need to have when we do systematic theology. You can't avoid it.

Student: Richard, can you give us an example of maybe some errors that we might make if we exclude general revelation from our systematic theology?

Professor Name: That's a great issue because… The first thing I want to say is that people, when they exclude general revelation, they do it selectively. Okay? They can't do it all. They can't get rid of it all because you can't even do theology without general revelation, can't even read the Bible without it. So we sort of said that. So what they'll do is they'll say, I don't want to consider that, or I don't want to consider that, rather than, I don't want to consider any of it. But the reality is that if you don't do this, if you don't consider general revelation around you, what you're going to end up doing is simply pouring yourself into systematic theology. I mean, for example, how do we know that people in different parts of the world, or even our next door neighbors for that matter, have different needs that need to be met by theology? How do we know that people who live in Africa have a different set of questions than people who live in North America, for example? Or China, or India, or Latin America? How do we know that? You don't get that from the Bible. You might find some principles that sort of say that, but what you're going to do is you're going to have to get in touch with those people. You'll have to know who they are. And the same is true even in a local church. I mean, we might be up there teaching a system of theology that has nothing to do with their lives. It just may not even be touching things that they need to know and that need to meet. And as Christians, our goal is not to do theology the way that it helps us, but rather to do it in ways that help other people. Because doing systematic theology or being a theologian is a spiritual gift, and as we know, Paul tells us that spiritual gifts are for the edification of the church. And so we're not supposed to be thinking our own thoughts so we can be happy that we feel good about our theology. We're supposed to be systematizing theology in ways that meets the needs of people other than ourselves — perhaps ourselves at times, too, but others in particular — so that we can do theology as it ought to be done. And that involves general revelation all the time. So if you want to ignore general revelation around you, then what you're going to end up doing is just doing theology the way you like to do it and ignoring the needs of others.

Question 3:
Why is logical coherence important?

Student: Richard, you say that we have to be logically coherent. But what's wrong with just taking each topic as it comes and deal with them scripturally?

Dr. Pratt: Well, nothing would be wrong with that. In fact, that's what you want to do, is you want to deal with them scripturally. But I think probably the best response is to say the Bible doesn't leave topics separated from each other. The Bible itself deals with the logical coherence between this subject and that subject. You know, the classic example, of course, if Romans, how Romans builds a case chapter by chapter, section by section, connecting the sinfulness of Jews and Gentiles with their need for

justification by faith, Jews and Gentiles, and so on and so and so on through the whole book. But it's not just Romans. Every other book of the Bible does the same thing. None of them deal with just one topic. That's the first thing we need to say. And none of them deal with these issues separately from each other. They all have a way of relating them to each other, which we would want to call logical, I hope, in some sense, but we do need to remember that there are different kinds of logic. Logic of a narrative is different from the logic of an epistle, or the logic of a poem is different from the logic of a wisdom saying or something like that. I suppose the most scattered or the most "a-logical" part of the Bible would probably be Proverbs because sometimes you get proverbs that are just sort of stuck in there with no apparent connection to the things that come after it and before it. But certain interpreters recently have argued very strongly that even the proverbs are connected to each other logically. I wasn't fully convinced by the commentary, but it's all right. I think it's true, though. So I guess my response is, so long as you don't narrow your idea of what logical coherence is to a very strict criterion of what that is, and you allow yourself some flexibility as to what you mean by connecting the logic of this to the logic of that like the Bible does, then the whole Bible is logically oriented. Have you ever known people that just say one thing and say another thing, and they don't seem to have any coherence at all?

Student: Not necessarily.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly. That's the problem. Usually people do not live their lives totally illogically. If they do, we tend to diagnose them and put them away. We consider them somehow out of sorts or unable to function responsibly in society. But the problem is that lots of times theologians and philosophers have a very narrow idea of what it means to be logical. And that's the problem I think people face with systematic theology as we'll see in this very lesson we're talking about. The theology of Christianity, traditional systematic theology, was governed by a particular kind of logic that had a particular flavor to it, a particular style to it. And it is very rigid in some respects. It is very meticulous and not the sort of thing that you do in a normal daily life. And that is what people tend to resist. They tend to want to say, you know, why do we need to get into all those logical implications of this, that and the other, and work all these details out and things? Now sometimes we may be wondering to ourselves whether we should or not, because what we're facing there is a particularly narrow definition of what it means to be logical, and the Bible doesn't just have that definition; though, in some places it even has that.

Question 4:
How can we focus on multiple themes in Scripture?

Student: Well, Richard, how do we get from the perspective of… For example, when I grew up, I had a pastor every Sunday, he had a theme, he had this three points, and he would preach just on that.

How do we get away from that tendency to want to just really focus it? You know, you talked a little bit ago about how we really have to look at the Bible as really always addressing multiple issues at one time. So in our daily preaching, or when we're talking to folks in our congregation, how do we move away from that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I guess the only way I can respond to that is just to say, try to help people remember how what you're talking about fits into the bigger picture. And you don't have to elaborate on that. You don't have to sit down every time you have a Sunday school lesson and go through the whole systematic theology again. But when something comes up in a lesson that sounds as if it may be contradicting something that is in the system of theology, then usually people need to be at least receiving an aside saying that's not so. For example, I tend when I preach to emphasize the humanity of Jesus a lot. I do. I know I do it. I do it consciously. Because in my circles, people don't emphasize that very much. They usually think of Jesus as just divine and that his humanity was just sort of a nice thing, but who cares… okay, I'm glad to know he was that, but, whatever. And so I tend even in preaching to talk about Jesus the man, but I can only do that so far or to a certain extent before I see eyes looking strangely at me. And when I see those eyes start looking strangely at me, then I back up and I'll say something just quick like, now we all do believe that Jesus is fully God, but we also believe he is fully man, and then take off again. And what that does, it helps them… it helps with the dissonance they feel between the focus of a particular lesson and the bigger picture of their theology. It sort of gives them resolution for a moment, gives them a little peace so they can step with you a little further into that particular theme. And I think that those kinds of things are just the sort of thing you do when you are teaching or preaching and you're watching people's eyes; you're thinking about what they're thinking rather than just looking at your manuscript and thinking about what you're thinking. Because you're not teaching or preaching to yourself. You're preaching and teaching others. And that's another example of how general revelation is there. You see, because my looking at their eyes is general revelation, and it's actually leading me in how I'm going to teach the Bible to them.

Question 5:
Does systematic theology impose Aristotelian thinking onto the Bible?

Student: Richard, I guess the only dissonance that I may have is that as we're working through the New Testament, actually, all of Scripture, you see various genres, and typically you see either narration or, in the case of the New Testament, all these epistles. And they're dealing with specific issues. What would you say to the person who would argue that what you're doing is simply imposing some sort of Aristotelian framework on Scripture.

Dr. Pratt: Well, I would say people do tend to do that. Traditional theology does tend to do that. It tends to flatten the Bible down so that it all is saying the same thing. There are

no mountain peaks, no valleys, no rivers, no trees. The fact is, one of the reasons we have systematic theology is because the Bible itself does have the mountain peaks and the valleys and the trees and the rivers and the lakes and the rocks and the animals. So, and the Bible itself does not always help people connect that one little piece that it's talking about with the bigger system. It doesn't. Occasionally it does, but usually it doesn't. And that is the reason why we have systematic theology. It's to help people do something that the Bible itself does not do. Now that raises the question, of course, of whether we should do it or not. Why not just leave a topic the way Jesus did? Well, sometimes it is effective to do that, and to realize that Jesus does that occasionally, means it's okay for us to do. For example, when Jesus says if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Well, he does not relate that to the larger system and explain what that might mean. He just says it and walks away. And sometimes teaching needs to be like that, to create dissonance, which is what he was doing there, create the crack in the system that people have where they would say to themselves things like, well, you know, what my eyes do really isn't that important, what my eyes do really doesn't have that much effect on me. And so Jesus comes with this punch that does not smooth out into the great system of theology and walks away from them. Well, preaching sometimes is to be that way. Teaching is sometimes to be that way. But if you do that all the time, you're going to have trouble. And that's why Jesus will sit down with his disciples and explain things.

Question 6:
Does systematic theology incline us toward speculation?

Student: Do you think that systematic theology would give us the propensity to try to answer some of the mysteries that are in Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, it certainly will do that. And we'll talk about that. I'm sure, more and more, because there are lots of mysteries in the Bible, and when we push the issue of logical coherence, we sometimes push it into speculation, and that's really very important to avoid.

Question 7:
Why is traditional emphasis important in systematic theology?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you put a big focus on why we should do systematic theology from a traditional emphasis. What's the most important thing about that?

Dr. Pratt: Well, in some ways, it's not so much why we ought to. That's really not the focus at least of this lesson. It's more trying to give a sense to the people who are viewing this as to what we are going to do. In other words, there are other ways to do what people call theology, even systematic theology, that do not depend much on the ways it has been

done before. Now this series is concerned with the ways it's been done before, and so I'm just sort of highlighting that to let people know that's the case. But let's just make the point that people today, even in my own circles and in many other circles, they do theology in ways that are different from traditional systematic theology. The biblical theology movement that's in a different series focuses on that and how we would try to do theology in a slightly different way, though, actually it's very dependent on traditional ways. But the reality is that that there is value in looking at the ways Christians have done theology in the past, and the value is this: they had the Holy Spirit, too. And any time you look at the past, you're going to find positives and you're going to find negatives, and in some respects, the positives you want to build on are the negatives you want to avoid. But if you don't know anything about the way theology has been done in the past, then you're not going to be able to build on what they did that was good, and you're going to repeat the mistakes they made. I mean, one great example of that is sometimes in past Christians have done their systematic theology in ways that actually compromised the Bible's teaching for the sake of being relevant to their day. And from our vantage point, we can look back those times when they did this, and we can see it. Sometimes we can't see it in our own day. We can't see how we're compromising because we're the ones doing it. It's sort of a blind spot. But we can see the blind spots the people in the past had, and just becoming aware of that and learning about those kinds of things can help us in our day. But then there's the positive as well. You get the successes of the church in the past and how it has defined certain things and helped understanding of the Bible in certain ways, and we can build on those successes, not just learn from their mistakes, but their successes, because, yes, they were sinful, therefore they made mistakes, but yes, they had the Holy Spirit, and therefore they had successes in theology. So that's what we're trying to do, just give that kind of orientation.

Question 8:
Why do some Christians prefer modern thinking over traditional thinking?

Student: Richard, it seems like there is a segment in the American church today that has rejected the teachings of the past, and for some reason, they embrace the modern, and whatever is modern is good, whatever is traditional is bad. What is the motivation behind this?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think it's what C.S. Lewis called a chronological bigotry. How's that? If you think about liberalism, just sort of classic liberalism that is in many of the mainline churches, they have this sort of chronological bigotry that from the enlightenment and afterward, we do things better than human beings did before that time. So modern people are better at this thing, whatever it may be. Sending people to the moon? Yes, we are better at that. Doing theology? I'm not so sure. But they think anything modern would be a better way to approach things. And so you get people doing things like ignoring what the early church said about the Bible, for example, and coming up with their own approach to the Bible. They ignore what the early church said about the person of God,

and they stick their own things in there. Why? Simply because modern people do it better. Now, we have in recent decades in the emerging church, in the so-called postmodern church, a sort of chronological bigotry against the modern period. Okay? Everything modern you sort of feel like we're beyond that now, we are better at things than they were. And so you get a de-emphasis on certain kinds of rational thought and certain kinds of theological approaches simply because they were done either by the liberals in recent history or by the ancient church in the past, and so you end up with another form of chronological bigotry. The reality is that I don't think there is a whole lot of justification for having a bigotry about your own day, and we're not that much better off than people were in the past. And so I think it's just important for us to realize that, that there is value in learning from the past as well as from the present.

Question 9:
Are we held accountable to the past?

Student: In what ways do you think we are held accountable by the past?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think that, you know, the Apostle Paul said, follow my example as I follow the example of Christ, and he also said that things like the experiences of Israel in the Old Testament were for us today, in, 1 Corinthians 10; they were not to forget those experiences of the past. I think we are called by the Bible, we're to be responsible in theology by remembering the past and what's been done, and to ignore the past is to repeat it. And many times, we don't want to do that.

Question 10:
What role does the Old Testament play in systematic theology?

Student: Richard, the lesson talks about how systematic theology is kind of born out of the New Testament. What role does the Old Testament play in all of this?

Dr. Pratt: Honestly, not much. Occasionally it does, but usually not. Systematic theology is focused on things that are true and remain true and never change. Now that's just the nature of traditional systematic theology. And so when they go to the Bible, these systematic theologians of the past and even the present, if they are in the traditional mold, then what they tend to do is look for the final analysis, the last answer that the Bible gives, because that is the permanent answer. That's the one you can count on. That's the one that is really of major importance to them. That comes from the history of systematic theology, but the idea is this. Let me give you this example. Rather than talking about the Old Testament sacrificial system in systematic theology, which they do a little bit on occasion, but rather than focusing on that, what they zero in on is the death of Christ. Why? Because Christ is the completion or the fulfillment of all that had come before him

in the sacrificial systems of the Old Testament. So if you're looking for the permanent way to think about sacrifice and atonement, you're not going to go back to bulls and lambs and things like that and talk about what they did in their rituals. That's sort of, as it were, irrelevant. Now they wouldn't say it's utterly irrelevant because that teaches us some things about Jesus, but you're really concerned with is Jesus, and his death, and his resurrection. And the same is true for the other teachings of the New Testament. It is, unfortunately, something that's built largely out of what the church perceives to be the teachings of the New Testament and only appeals to the Old Testament when you are pressed to do so by some need of some sort.

So when you think about what part of the Bible's history does systematic theology normally talk about? Well, it talks about the "*historia salutis*," or the history of salvation. But what is that history of salvation piece that they talk about? It's the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. It's not what happened in the exodus, or what happened in Abraham's day, or what happened in the exile. That's not really of interest, because all those were preliminary to the finale in Jesus. And so that's why you get the focus on the New Testament.

> **Student: Well Richard, I would be thinking, especially as an Old Testament scholar like you, I would be wondering if don't we sometimes leave something out, something historical. Can you even give us an example of when Old Testament actually does filter in?**

Dr. Pratt: I think the reality is that when we have theology that's built on the New Testament, you're building on what I would humorously say is the end notes of the Bible. Now I say that as a joke, but at the same time, let's face it, the New Testament is very small, it doesn't say a whole lot about a whole lot. And the reason it doesn't is because it was never designed to replace the Old. It was designed to be, as it were, a filter or a lens for understanding the Old. And so when you're theology is built out of, as most systematic theology is, primarily the epistles of the Apostle Paul, then you're leaving out a lot of Revelation. And so your picture of Jesus and what he did, your picture of what the church is, your picture of what life is from systematic theology is sometimes like a black-and-white sketch without much color, without much life, without much blood pumping through it, because the New Testament wasn't designed to give you the blood and the pictures and the colors and the flavors and the sounds. That comes more from the Old Testament. And the New Testament writers were thinking that way: I don't really need to talk much about this because the people already know this from the Old Testament. The sad thing of course today is that people today don't know the Old Testament. Again, that's why biblical theology is impressive to many people and is interesting to many people, because it does reach back into the Old and brings theology all the way through the development.

> **Student: Okay, now you're not saying, though, that things like, let's just say Genesis 1 and 2 don't speak to theology proper, or Isaiah 53 doesn't speak to Christology. You're not saying that?**

Dr. Pratt: Not at all. In fact, they do. And those are the kinds of passages that systematicians will draw upon. They tend to draw upon the Old Testament when they are talking about the character of God, the attributes of God. Why do they do that? Because the New Testament doesn't talk about it much. Right? In how many places in the New Testament can you think of them talking about the aseity of God, the self-containedness of God, or the eternality of God, and things like that? It's really not an issue talked about in the New Testament. So when you have to, you go back. But if you're talking about things like what is salvation, how does a person come to salvation, the *ordo salutis*, and things like that. That's primarily a New Testament issue to the systematician's mind, and they don't even want to go back to the Old Testament to even look, because what you find in Paul's epistles on that is fairly stable and fairly secure, even the terminology. But when you start looking for that terminology in the past, in the earlier parts of the Bible, you find that they use the terminology differently. And so this would just cause confusion. So you sort of leave that part out. But when it comes to things like the personality of God, his attributes, those kinds of things? Yes. Trinity? No. And as you know, systematic theology is dedicated under theology proper to Trinity, and you don't find that in the Old Testament. You find a few hints here and there, but that's a New Testament teaching and not an Old Testament teaching. So it is based, unfortunately, primarily on New Testament teaching.

Question 11:
Should we do theology pastorally instead of systematically?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you talk about how the New Testament really has a focus on pastoral epistles, and we see that focus. Why don't we really focus on the pastoral versus focusing on systematics?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question, because a lot of people would argue that we need to do theology the way that the Bible does it, and the issue here becomes one of the Bible being our authority not just for the content of theology, but for the manner of theology, or the organization of theology. And I personally believe that yes, that is true, that we ought to have theology being done in the various genres that the New Testament and Old Testament have, in the various styles, the various focal points that they have including pastoral. It's really not an either/or choice in my mind, because in some respects, what we inherit as systematic theology was pastoral in the past. It was pastoral to certain kinds of needs, certain kinds of issues. When Jesus gave us the great commission, he commissioned us to teach all nations, and I think that that's where systematic theology comes in. It's designed to communicate the teachings of the Bible to a particular kind of world. Now that world is not the world in which most Christians live. And that's what we've got to become convinced of. It's the world of academics. It's the world of people in certain kinds of academic settings and, as we'll talk about in a few moments, in the Mediterranean world with the philosophical issues that that faced. So it's not as if it's totally wrong or totally irrelevant, but you're right to say that the Bible doesn't have very

many examples of things that come close to systematic theology. Some people would point to Romans as being like that. People would disagree with that, especially these days. I sometimes point to things like Ecclesiastes as a sort of philosophical treatise, that kind of thing. It is more philosophical, or logical, or systematic in the sense than what you find in the New Testament pastoral epistles. But it is important for us to say that just because this is the way it has been done, it doesn't mean it's the only way to do it. And I think that the pastoral emphasis of the New Testament helps us do that. I think one of the biggest differences between systematic theology and pastoral theology in the Bible is the technical language that they use. Systematic theology is very keen on making sure you use terminology in the same way every time you use it. The Bible doesn't do that. And the reason it doesn't do that is because while it wasn't illogical, it's not systematic in that sense. It's not meticulous in the definitions of terms and things like that. So you get variety in the Bible, and it's because they were more pastoral. They were just less formal I guess is one way to put it.

Question 12:
Should we use systematic theology in preaching and pastoring?

Student: Richard, as an aspiring pastor myself, I look at systematic theology, and I see great benefits in it. But it also seems like it is an academic exercise pretty much meant for theologians. And yet, then I have this responsibility of stepping into the pulpit, and it seems to me there may be a disconnect. How can I take this rich foundation of systematic theology and step into the pulpit and pastor my people?

Dr. Pratt: Well, not by repeating systematic theology, unless you want to make them as irrelevant as you are. How's that? Because the reality is people by and large don't live in that kind of world, and they don't need to live in that kind of world. Systematic theology grew up within the church and within circles within the church where the more academic or intellectual issues were the need. But that was not the need even of the average person even in those days. It was just the need of the leaders or the theologians of the world at that time as they discussed very high and lofty ideas. And so I think that we have to be very careful how we indoctrinate people into the system of theology that any particular denomination might represent, because they all have it. Sometimes it's not spoken, sometimes it's not written down, but they all have a system of theology. But if you're always in those kinds of levels, or those kinds of big picture, abstract sorts of things, you are going to ignore the needs of real people. And that is one of the great dangers especially of students is that they make a confusion between what they may need as students, as academic people at this time in their lives, which would be more of a systematic theology, and thinking that because it helped them where they are, it's going to help everyone else. And it actually can hurt people, because it will remove their Christianity from their real lives. All preaching is autobiographical. All teaching is

autobiographical to some extent. You can't avoid it. You always talk about the things that have meant something to you. But you can push yourself as a teacher and as a preacher to concern yourself and to concentrate on what they need. And of course, the only way you do that is by knowing them, and that's a big issue. For people that like systematic theology, they tend to not like people. Sorry, but it's true. And there is a correlation there. They don't want to be involved in people's lives. But providing them with enough framework to help them live their lives is what we want to do with systematic theology.

Question 13:
Does the focus of systematic theology differ from the focus of the Bible?

Student: It seems that the traditional categories of systematic theology differ from the kingdom focus of the New Testament. Is it possible that by spending our time in systematic theology and building these systems that we're actually detracting from the focus of the New Testament itself?

Dr. Pratt: It's not only possible, it is reality. How's that? You know, I think the reality is that systematicians have always understood the Bible in terms of the questions that they bring to the Bible. And a lot of those questions were not in themselves rooted in the Bible. They were rooted in more philosophical issues that they faced in their days, and we'll talk about that in terms of Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, and things like that. It's not that it was evil. It's just that it's a different sort of set of questions. When the New Testament writers were writing, they were writing out of their Palestinian-Jewish context, and within that context, there was one dominant issue, and that is, when is the Messiah going to come, and what is Messiah going to do. Period. You can put a period at the end of that sentence. That was the dominant concern, because for hundreds of years they had been in exile, and they had been under the tyranny of foreign nations, and they wanted that to be over. They wanted the promise of the Prophets for the new world, the new age, the kingdom of God to come. And that was what was dominant in their thinking, and it was also dominant in the thinking of Jesus, and it was also dominant in the thinking of the apostles and the other writers of the New Testament. That is, without a doubt, in my mind anyways, these days the centerpiece of the New Testament's teaching is what we call eschatology, or the kingdom of God, or the hope in Messiah that Jesus fulfills.

Now biblical theology has emphasized that. Once again, this is why people are often very interested in biblical theology as opposed to systematics, but I believe personally that the emphases that systematics have had in the past are valuable so long as we don't replace the Bible's emphasis with that. It's not as if the Bible is perfectly balanced. The Bible has also got an angle to it. It's dealing with the truth, it never tells us a lie. But it has an angle, and the angle is what about these Jewish hopes for the kingdom of God. Well, when systematic theology was growing, the angle shifted. The questions were shifting away

from eschatology, kingdom of God, Messiah, to questions like, what's the nature of God? Is Jesus human or divine? What's the nature of the church? All those kinds of things that the New Testament addresses indirectly. It doesn't address them directly. And that's why I think systematic theology is different. But you're right. It can distract us from what the emphases of the New Testament are.

Question 14:
What modern questions is systematic theology answering?

Student: Richard, in the video you talk about how the church fathers had to really deal with the Trinity and basically breaking down the different parts, because those questions never really came up for the New Testament believers. What are some of the more modern questions now that systematic theology is answering we bring to the table versus folks who lived a thousand years ago would have never asked?

Dr. Pratt: I think one of the issues that people have to face today that they didn't have to face a thousand, fifteen hundred years ago is multiculturalism. We cannot escape anymore the fact that we aren't the only people in the world. You know, it used to be very easy. Even as child whenever I heard about China, it was always those starving Chinese children, or clean you plate because of the starving Chinese children. Things like that. China was a far-off place that I didn't even have photographs of. All I had were sketches in a book at school, the Chinese people with their funny hats. Now, of course, people go to China all the time, and Chinese are here all the time. And that's the way the world is now. We face the reality that people of different races and different ethnic orientations and different countries and different cultures, even the Christians, look at life differently. Well, when you're dealing with the Mediterranean world, there was some difference — yes, the early church had to deal with that, the medieval church had to deal with that as it moved more toward Europe — there were differences, no doubt. But at the same time, that culture was very unified in large part because of the remnants of the Roman Empire. It was still very singular in its approach to life, and so traditional systematic theology did not have to deal with the issue of what's normative, what's cultural.

And that's a big difference for us today, a big difference. Especially in our day when the vast majority of Christians now do not live in Western Europe or North America, the United States. They live now in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and that's going to continue to go that way, unless God changes the course of history, that the majority of Christians are not going to be people who have inherited this non-Hispanic Western European culture. There are going to be people of various cultures, and they're going to do their Christian theology in different ways, and they're going to have different emphases and

that sort of thing. And we have to wrestle with that today in ways that Christians have never had to wrestle with it before.

Question 15:
What happens when culture influences systematic theology?

Student: What are the potential benefits but also potential hindrances of having these new cultural influences impact our systematic theology?

Dr. Pratt: Well, Philip Jenkins says that as the majority of people in Christianity are in other parts of the world, they're going to start leading theology. That it's not just going to be that you've got more people, but actually, the leaders of Christianity are going to be there, too, and that different parts of the world are going to have to start paying attention to what they're saying. That's going to be a difficult time, especially for North Americans, because we tend to think that we're the best at everything, and Christians tend to think in this country that we're the best at theology, too. Well, we're not. We may do some things well, and we may even be the best at certain things, but we're not the best at everything. And as their agenda starts to dominate Christian theology, which it will do, presumably in the near future — we're talking 25 to 50 years before this happens — we're going to find ourselves challenged I think in some ways that are good, because we have certain emphases in North American and Western European Christianity that have probably gone way off track, very far off track, and they will have different emphases that will help us align ourselves more with the Bible. But then again, China, Asia at large, Africa, Latin America, they don't do theology perfectly either. But you can imagine that they're going to be very different.

Think about it this way. How many North American theologians, I mean leading theologians that sort of set the pace for everybody for the last 300 years, how many of them do you think wrote their theology and thought through theology under great persecution and suffering? Not many. They had personal illnesses, they had family problems, things like that. They experienced wars, things like that, but not a lot of persecution in North America for Christians. It hasn't always been convenient, but it hasn't been a hardship for us. Well, Christians in Asia and in Africa and in parts of Latin America have suffered persecution, and they're going to be writing their theology out of persecution and suffering and deprivation. The question might be put this way, what would be the difference if you're talking about the omniscience of God, that God knows everything, how would you talk about that differently if you are a North American who has never suffered much persecution, never gone to prison for your faith and things like that? How would that be emphasized and talked about differently by someone who spent 25 years in prison because of their faith? So it's that kind of reality that we have to face. We're facing it already in most churches in North America by the changes in music. It's already happening. But what's changing in music in the church of Western Europe and North America is going to start changing in systematic theology, too. And it's going to

challenge us with good things, and we're going to have to figure out what's good about it and what's not so good about it.

Question 16:
Is it right to use systematic theology to discipline and teach the nations?

Student: Richard, you mentioned in the video how the Bible doesn't say to go and read to all nations, read the Bible to all nations. We're supposed to teach. So what makes systematic theology the right way to go about teaching?

Dr. Pratt: Well, it doesn't. It makes it right, the traditional systematic theology, makes it right — we're giving them the benefit of the doubt here — it makes it right for their time. The idea here is just simply that if you're going to do theology responsibly as a Christian before God, if you're going to teach the Bible responsibly as a Christian before God, you don't just repeat what the Bible says over and over and over again. We love the Bible. We always want to make sure that what we teach is true to the Bible, but the Bible was written for a particular time also, and its emphases and its organization and things like that are particularized by the form in which it's given. It's not given to us as a timeless book. Now it does have timeless importance and it has timeless value, but it was written for particular kinds of people at a particular time in history. That's why, for example, it's written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. You know, if we were to really study the Bible the way perhaps we ought to, we'd be studying it in those languages. And then we'd realize very quickly how different it is from where we are today. Just take the New Testament. The questions that people were asking in the first century Palestine are different from the kinds of questions that we are asking today. Now they're similar in some ways, but also then very different. And systematic theology was the attempt to answer different sorts of questions that were being asked during the period of the New Testament. Now it's not as if the New Testament has nothing to say about them. They do. The New Testament writers do have things to say about those questions, but they are indirect, and that's the emphasis here, that to do theology doesn't mean that we should just read the Bible to people. We've got to find out how to communicate those indirect teachings of the Bible to people today more directly, depending on what their questions are. Can you imagine a question that comes up today in the church of Jesus Christ that would not have come up in first century Christianity?

Student: How would a believer deal with the pornography that's prevalent on TV today?

Dr. Pratt: Well, actually that might be a whole lot more like the first century than you can imagine. It's sort of funny, because if you go to the site of Ephesus today, you can go to where the wealthy people of Ephesus lived, and you can actually walk above the rooms of their houses that have been excavated, and the walls are just covered with pornography

of all sorts. So you have when the Apostle Paul, if he were to visit someone's home, or if a Christian were to visit someone's home that had any money at all, they had pornography on the walls. It's very interesting how we deal with it differently today, but of course, at this point it has come into our homes which is a little bit different than going to someone else's home. And yes, there are differences along those lines. And the sorts of things that we have to concern ourselves with, things like modern warfare, the issues between nations today that are different than in those days. When we consider things like technologies that are different today than they were back then, education different than it is today, various art forms that we express today are different than they were back then. There are big differences, and so we have to learn how to follow the example of the church early and the church medieval to bring contemporary theological questions to the foreground today, but to address them by the authoritative Word of God in the Old and New Testaments. That's the key, that we keep taking ourselves back to sola scriptura, keep going back to it and saying this is where we find our answers, even as difficult as that may be at times.

Question 17:
How can we relate ancient cultural situations to modern situations?

> **Student: Richard, I understand that we need to translate the scriptural text, the Greek and Hebrew, into modern language when we communicate, but how do we take the cultural situation and translate it into a modern culture and ensure that we're not losing anything?**

Dr. Pratt: You can't. You can't ensure that you're not losing something. In fact, you can be guaranteed you are losing something. But that's okay, because the people who first read the Bible in the original languages and in the original cultural setting were always missing things. This is just part of the reality. That's why you have theology. You have theology because you want to acknowledge that there's a process to this by which you're always going to be missing something, and so the next guy comes along and tries to do a little bit better. So it's a good thing that we know this and we realize that every time we study the Bible, we're going to miss some things, we're going to get other things. But there's also a great advantage to theology, and that is that sometimes the theologians bring out things in Scripture that are implicit in the Bible that perhaps even the original people that received it didn't even put together. And that happens, too. I always ask people, you know, they say, why do we need theology? And the answer is because if you don't have theology, then you're going to be left with something as confusing as the Bible is. The point of theology is to make things clearer than even the Bible does sometimes, by connecting this to this and that to that in ways that the Bible doesn't do it explicitly. Now you always want to be true to the Bible, but you at the same time want to see how various pieces fit together that the New Testament, for example, or other parts of the Bible, don't particularly put together in particular ways. The cultural setting, however, is very important to remember, that as you look at the Bible and you look at

theology in the past, always to evaluate what they've done in terms of their own cultural biases and their own cultural tendencies is extremely important, and then to look at your own cultural biases and tendencies and put them on the table as well to try to be self-reflective is very important, too.

Question 18:
Are some modern cultures more similar than others to ancient culture?

Student: Richard, would you say that there are certain cultures that are more close to how they lived in the Bible than today? For example, I've been to Africa and I've seen things that appear to be quite similar to what I read in the Bible.

Dr. Pratt: Of course. If you're a more agrarian society, you're going to have a lot more connections with things that are in the Bible because they were basically agrarian. If you have limited access to electricity and things like that, you're going to be closer to the way things were in the Bible. If you can't travel much, the same thing. It's true that there are places in the Bible that will be in certain ways closer to the culture of the Bible, and I would suppose we could even find correlations to later on after the Bible in the history of the church as well, where people are sort of stuck, as it were, at a particular stage that you could find correlations. And that's why it is so important for us especially in the contemporary world to start thinking about how systematic theology needs to be done in different ways today to meet the needs of people, to communicate the gospel to people in an extended way, as they live in different cultures.

If you were in Africa, was that on a mission trip of some sort? Yes, well, then you know who sometimes your way of thinking about Christianity probably didn't make much sense to them. Is that fair? Okay, well I would hope not. Because your Christianity is for you, and so as somebody going to them with the message of Christ, you had to be careful to try your best to contextualize it for them so that they would understand what the gospel is. And this is of course one of the biggest challenges that we have faced in the past especially, but now it's going to be interesting, as we said earlier, when the dominant forces of Christianity are coming from other parts of the world, they're going to have to start contextualizing their theology for us. And that's going to be very interesting to see how that works out, because now, if they become the leaders of the Christian world, which I think they will for all practical purposes, they're going to have their emphases, and their emphases are not going to work in your culture or my culture. And so now Africans or Asians will have to be contextualizing the gospel back for North Americans and Western Europeans. Imagine that. Which will be a glorious day because then maybe we can learn something after all.

Question 19:
Do the differences between modern and ancient culture make the Bible irrelevant?

> **Student: Well you're talking in this context about contextualizing the gospel in our modern day. But I also think about trying to read Scripture in the context of its cultural setting, and I see the possibility of us looking at something that maybe we disagree with in Scripture and way, well that was cultural and it doesn't apply today. How do we avoid that pitfall?**

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think that a lot of people do approach the Bible that way. They approach it and say, what parts are cultural and what parts are normative? Now that's just true. And usually the answer to that comes from their prejudices, as you said, what they are willing to do. If they're willing to submit to that part of the Bible, then they'll say that's normative. If they're not so comfortable submitting, they'll say that's just cultural. I don't like that approach where you pick and choose which parts are cultural and which parts are normative. I believe that the better way to look at it is to say it's all cultural, it's all normative, because it is all incarnated. The whole Bible is incarnated into the culture of the people who first received it, and there are varieties of those. And while it's practical and useful for them in their cultural setting, it also is normative for the people of God from that point forward.

Now, the difference comes in how you express it's normativity in one culture and another and another and another. The classic example of course is when Paul says greet on another with a holy kiss. Well, there are Christian churches today that still have holy kisses between men and women to women and men to men. And I've had some interesting experiences, in Siberia for example, seeing that happen and being a part of that, that weren't so pleasant for me as a Westerner, because we sort of think of the greeting style being a handshake. I don't know why we avoid the holy kiss, but we do. But in some respects, what we're trying to do in western culture, we're trying to do something like the holy kiss that would be true for our day. So, for example, if I'm meeting a stranger, I might shake his hand. But if I'm meeting a brother whom I love, I'll hug him. And that would be the comparable sort of thing that would be true to the normativity of greet on another with a holy kiss, but acknowledging that in that day that's the way it was done, and in fact, it was for the most part common among all people in the Mediterranean world to do that kind of kissing of the cheeks and that sort of thing. So it was enculturated for them, but now we need to re-enculturate it for us, too, in ways that correspond.

Question 20:
How did the early church use Neo-Platonic language?

Student: Richard, can you give me an example of how the early church used neo-platonic language?

Dr. Pratt: I can do that. It's important to get this, because we still have remnants of this in our own theology, and we don't even realize it because it's just so much of the tradition that we just sort of repeat these things. But for the first at least five centuries of Christianity, there was a strong emphasis on what generally speaking people called Neo-Platonism, influence of Plotinus and other expressions of Platonic philosophy in the Mediterranean world. It was the intellectual language of the day. And even when you find words that are so important in the early creeds like person, or nature, or essence, or substance, you're dealing with either the Greek words or the Latin equivalents of those. And they were all being defined in terms of this neo-platonic philosophy. But what I think is probably most obvious to many of us would be things like the emphasis that the early church had on the sacraments. You see, in our day we don't have much emphasis on the sacraments except in this particular tradition or that particular tradition which are in many respects sort of leftovers from way back when. And we don't even usually know why we would even use the word sacrament. Most of us think of baptism, for example, and the Lord's Supper as ordinances rather than sacraments. So why do we use the word sacrament? Well, the word sacrament, sacramentum, is the word mystery in Latin. Okay? And you remember in the video that Neo-Platonism was very much concerned with a person going from normal existence up into becoming divine, becoming one with the divine. And that's extremely important. It was platonic in some respects, but then neo-platonic especially, that human beings find salvation by becoming divine, by becoming one with the divine. And so there was a process for getting that, and the process was leaving your fleshly passions behind, don't just be somebody who is driven by hunger and by sexual desire and violence and those kinds of things, but first become a rational person and be thoughtful and reflective and be logical about things. But even that's not enough, because you're still down here in sort of the human realm. What you have to do is reach religious ecstasy, or philosophical ecstasy, which was the mystic's experience.

And that's why you find so much in the early church and emphasis on mysticism and a lot of people going out into the desert and having mystical experiences, visions and the like. It's also why you find in the early church fathers, a lot of emphasis on the sacraments, because the sacraments of the Lords' Supper and baptism were not just ordinances, they were mysteries, they were mystical experiences that have been ordained for the church. Some of that's true, I think, but at the same time, you can see the emphasis there of the truly pious, the truly spiritual person, leaves the earthly world behind and moves into the spiritual realm. Well, that is contrary to the Bible, to be perfectly frank. The Bible doesn't define a human being as the soul encased in a physical body. A human being is an inner person and an outer person, but the person is both of these together. So a human being is both body and soul, body and spirit. And that's why orthodox Christianity believes in the resurrection of the body.

In some respects, the Neo-Platonists were a lot like the Sadducees in Jesus' day in that they believed that spiritual experience continued in eternity but not physical experience. And of course the Apostles Creed makes it very clear that we believe in the resurrection

of the dead and the life everlasting, so we believe in bodily resurrection before we can get to the point that we spend eternity with Jesus after he returns. He was raised bodily, we are raised bodily. So we don't have this antagonism and this hatred of the flesh like the Neo-Platonists did. They saw physical existence as the problem, and the Bible doesn't see it as the problem. So it's everywhere in the early fathers.

Question 21:
Does modern theology emphasize the spiritual over material?

Student: Well, you just mentioned a second ago that there is some of that language in modern theology, but it seems like modern theology is rife with this distinction between the material and the spiritual and how we all want to go is get done with this life here on earth and go to heaven and be with our God in heaven.

Dr. Pratt: I think that popular theology is like that a lot. It's amazing, actually, how oriented it is toward this sort of thinking. Now it fits a lot with today's philosophies, especially New Age philosophies and after New Age, but it even fits in with modern Western philosophy with its emphasis on the mind, on the superiority and that somehow the rationality of the human being is what makes them different from other animals, as they would say — this is what makes us above them, and that's what will continue is your rational mind as you go away because in the modern world we know now that the body is corrupted and disintegrates and goes back into the earth, and all that kind of thing, but your mind or your consciousness continues. So there are analogies even in the modern world with that, and unfortunately, lots of Christians are poorly taught about the resurrection of the dead.

It's quite fascinating to realize that we are part of the body of Christ, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, even in our physical body, that the members of our physical bodies are the body of Christ also. This is how he argued against Christians exercising freedom that they had, in the Corinthian situation at least, of going with prostitutes, because the ethic in Greek society was basically you can go to prostitutes so long as you don't become emotionally involved with them, so long as it's just a physical relationship. And the Apostle Paul argued against that by saying, no, no, no, your physical body, the members of your physical body, that's the body of Christ, too. So it doesn't matter whether you mind gets connected or not, or whether you fall in love with the prostitute, it also matters if you have physical relations as far as Christianity is concerned. Why? Because our bodies are now in Christ. And interestingly enough, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says that even when our spirits are in heaven after we die and we wait for our bodies to be resurrected, that our bodies are still the body of Christ even here. There is still a union with Christ when we're separated from them temporarily.

So this is a very important teaching of Christianity that needs to be emphasized. And happily, lots of people are getting back into it. But you're right, it has been missed, and

it's that influence of Neo-Platonism. And you'll find spiritual Christians today that emphasize the mystical, emphasize the ecstatic, and sometimes that's very much along the lines of the neo-platonic as well. I believe in ecstatic experience. I believe if you don't have ecstasy, religious ecstasy as a Christian, your life is dull to begin with, but even if you don't have it, it's going to get worse than that. You're going to be discouraged, you're going to be forlorn; the things of this world are going to bring you down. I think there are moments when we need to transcend the normal experience, but this is not union with God in some metaphysical sense. This is simply a human being reaching up to the higher levels of mysterious experience. So we've talked about the sacraments, for example. While many Christians think that the Lord's Supper and baptism are just sort of physical signs that don't mean anything, well, we can do it, we cannot do it, the reality is that Christianity has always believed that when a person is baptized and when the person receives the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in faith, now not automatically but in faith, that there is something that happens that's mysterious, that grace is given if the person is exercising faith in Christ. But it has to always be done in the context of faith. So the neo-platonic emphases are there all over, but sometimes we miss them because we're so comfortable with them.

Student: How would we combat that tendency?

Dr. Pratt: I think the only way to do it really is to call ourselves back to the beliefs of the Bible itself. It's always *sola Scriptura* and the realization that the early church, the early Christian church, the Old Testament Jesus and the New Testament, did not believe in this separation of body and soul and the hatred of the physical and that sort of thing. God made the world, he liked the world, it fell into sin, he's going to remake the world, and eternal life is going to be physical not just spiritual.

Question 22:
What is the difference between Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism?

Student: Richard, you begin the lesson by talking about Neo-Platonism and its effect on systematic theology, and then you move into the Aristotelian logical framework. Can you tell us the difference between the two?

Dr. Pratt: It's good to get a picture of what's going on here, because if we don't, we're going to be confused by thinking that what systematic theology does with the Bible is just straight-up reading the Bible. And many people have the impression that what systematic theologians have done is simply to take the Bible and teach it in a straightforward manner, and that's not exactly what's happened. We did mention earlier… Michael raised the issue of Neo-Platonism and what effect it had on Christian theology, and that was the dominant force certainly in the first five centuries all the way up at least to Augustine. He was sort of the champion of Neo-Platonism. But there was a definite shift that took place after the time of Augustine and it sort of culminates in Thomas Aquinas. He was

considered the sort of contemporary out there on the forefront of all this. He is the one that finally settled the issue. And the struggle between Augustine and Aquinas was between basically Christian mystics and Christian scholastics.

Now if we can just sort of focus on that for a moment, you need to realize that during that period of time, Christian scholars were having a lot of interaction with Muslim scholars, and they were interacting with each other, not in war but intellectually. Islam at this point… this is after the fifth century forward… they were very concerned with Aristotle. Aristotle was the philosopher of Islam. It's one reason why Islamic culture was more advanced than Christian culture in some respects. While Europe was sort of dipping culturally, Islam was rising, because Christianity had so bought into the neo-platonic view of life, mystery and those sorts of things, that it had not really moved more toward the scientific realm, which Aristotle did move people toward. But, by the time you come to the ninth century, tenth century A.D., you're having a lot more influence from Aristotelianism in Christianity, and that is the form of Christian theology that we call scholastic. Scholastic doesn't mean academic, it means Aristotelian, okay?

So what were the characteristics of that? Well, if you want to contrast it with Neo-Platonism, it's basically the elimination of mystery. If we were to say that the epitome of neo-platonic Christianity was reaching the upper levels of ecstasy and mystery, becoming one with God, Aristotelianism saw logic and empirical data related to the logic as the epitome of all knowledge. And as far as Aristotle was concerned, you ought to be able to categorize everything in your experience in a rational way, and you ought to be able to figure out how every piece of experience and every piece of creation in life fit into different logical categories, and you ought to be able to connect them logically to each other and build this gigantic pyramid of reason that eliminates the mysterious as being the force or the compelling goal of all theology. Instead, the compelling goal of all theology was to organize; your database, as it were, was the Bible. And so what you wanted to do now is organize this and show all the logical connections among all the different things that the Bible and church tradition had said. And Aristotelianism was a very important move.

But that's why usually scholasticism is identified or characterized by people in the modern world as being highly logical, highly rational, and sometimes even speculative, because they felt no fear about drawing out logical inferences and more and more and more and more. I mean, the Bible may be over here and what it said, and you can have one or two inferences from that, but you end up with 25 away from that. But they had no problem with that. You know, the sort of myth that scholastics argued about was how angels can you get on the head of a pin? Well, we look at that and we go, what are you even talking about? But the reality is that they talked about those kinds of things because they felt like that truth had to be logically connected. And so there was emphasis on coherence of theology. There was emphasis on it being rational because God's mind is rational, our minds are rational, so it must fit rationally, and to be comprehensive as well. And this is what Aristotelianism did for Christian theology, it made it that way.

Question 23:
Does traditional systematic theology overemphasize rationality?

Student: Well, Richard, it seems kind of awfully dangerous to limit in such a way to pure logic and also pulling out the emotional aspects of so many these things.

Dr. Pratt: Well it does. It does pull out the emotional, because you can think of mysticism as highly emotional. I wouldn't want to reduce it to that, but I think a modern person might tend to do that. You know, that mystical experiences are not rational, they are super-rational and therefore highly emotional, we would say, perhaps. And it does discount that. It does discount the emotional side of Christianity. Now that's not to say that Thomas Aquinas himself, or any other that endorsed this, were unemotional or that they were somehow disconnected in their religious life, they wouldn't sing hymns because they were emotional, or things like that. They were poets. They understood poetry. Aristotle himself loved poetry. He wrote about poetry all the time, wrote poetry. So they understood that way of thinking and they lived on that kind of life on a personal level, but when it came to academic theology, there is the crunch. When it came to doing the academy and living theology there, it was very much a rigorously defined exercise.

And that's what you find in many people that endorse traditional systemic theology today, because contemporary traditional systematic theology is much more influenced by Aristotelianism than it is by Neo-Platonism. And so what do you find? You find that when you go to a class on systematic theology, it's usually highly rational, highly deductive, brings in the inductive, and then starts to do some things from it over and over and over and over, trying to relate this truth way over here to that truth way over there by some kind of logical means, and you don't find in the classroom theology being discussed on the level of hymnody or poetry or personal relationship with God, things like that. Instead, you're discussing one substance of God, three persons of God, how the who and the what relate to each other in the Trinity and all those kinds of things, and ay yi yi, you know, you're head blows up as you think about it, but you're supposed to be rational about it all. And when you take that same systematic theologian, the professor who is teaching it that way in class, and you go into his life, you'll find when he goes to church, or she goes to church, they're singing hymns. They're doing the more human thing.

The problem comes is that when you think for a moment that doing theology in that Aristotelian or scholastic way is the best way, that's when it becomes dangerous, because you feel like you're doing something that's sub-par if you are following your intuitions, or if you are feeling your way into certain subject matters, or if you're praying about them. Remember that many of the early church fathers wrote their theology, including Augustine, in prayer, in the genre of prayer. They prayed to God as they did their theology. That you don't find very much in Aristotelianism, and you don't find it much in contemporary, traditional systematic theology. That would be considered sub-par. And that attitude is what we've got to break with, it seems to me.

There is great value in being rigorous. There is great value in meticulously relating subjects to each other. There is great value in trying to be comprehensive as Aristotelianism did, as scholasticism tried to be. But there's a great danger to that if you think that's God's way of doing it. It is a way of doing Christian theology, not the way to do Christian theology. If there is the way, and I don't think there really is, but if there is the way, it would have to be the way the Bible does it, and everything else including scholasticism is derivative from that. And so when you think about how does the New Testament, just take the New Testament, how does it do theology? Well, the Apostle Paul wrote letters. He prayed. You have prayers in the New Testament. You have songs in the New Testament. You have arguments in the New Testament. You have all those kinds of things, and that reaches a much fuller orbed human existence than a strict sort of scholastic approach to theology.

Question 24:
What is the role of the Holy Spirit in systematic theology?

Student: So, Richard, where does the Holy Spirit fit into all of this?

Dr. Pratt: Everywhere. How's that? But I think that's really the answer. There is a tendency, and there's no doubt I think that this is true, that when you follow systematic theology and you see the influence this has come under, Neo-Platonism, and then how certain parts of that continued on into the scholastic period, what was left behind was largely the emphasis on mysticism or on Holy Spirit, on the experience of God and the relationship with God. And it's very easy as you move forward from the period of scholasticism into the modern period, which was even further removed from the mystical, much more rational, much more an attempt to be superior to the subject and to master the subject, and that kind of thing. What we find is that traditional systematic theologians do not emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit very much. And when you look at local churches and denominations that emphasize systematic theology, there is a sort of natural tendency, a correlation, to deemphasize the Holy Spirit. And why is that? Well, it's my own personal opinion that it's absolutely wrong to do this, but it does open you up to things that really don't fit into the system of neo-platonic, scholastic, modern, traditional systematic theology. It just doesn't fit. When you think of theology as a science, and like Charles Hodge did, and you're going to take the data of the Bible and use it in the scientific model to do the inductivity and then do the deductions, and all those sorts of things… now you've got theology. Well, there was no need for the Holy Spirit there. There was no real need for the conscious dependence and prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit through that process. Though I'm sure Charles Hodge did pray and did depend on the Holy Spirit, there's no need for it. It's easy for you to forget about that because it's all very logical, it's all very much human oriented. It's just making the right deductions and inferences from the Bible.

So that's why you find, I think, the churches that emphasize that kind of theology losing touch with, if they ever had it, the more intuitive, the more emotional, and the more imperceptible or indecipherable ministry of the Holy Spirit. The problem with Holy Spirit is the problem that Nicodemus learned from Jesus, and that is that the Holy Spirit is like the wind, he comes and goes as he wants, and you can't really put him in a box and you can't say, you know, this is the way it is, and he always acts this way.

Student: You can't systematize him.

Dr. Pratt: You can't systematize the wind; you can't systematize the Holy Spirit. And so when we learn to depend on the Holy Spirit more in theology, what we're doing is something that is quite out of sorts, even counterintuitive, for people that naturally tend towards systematic theology. They're not the kinds of people that sort of naturally find themselves in step with the Spirit. In fact, if you were to say, Is your theology in step with the Spirit? if they were willing to answer that question, most of them would say, well is it true to the Bible? And if you said, yes, I guess so. Well, then, I'm walking in the Spirit. In other words, they reduce it all down to, can you deduce my theology from the Bible? Now you say, what difference would that possibly make? Well, the Holy Spirit is very important to give us insights that go beyond what we can do in our own natural abilities. And in fact, sometimes Holy Spirit actually works against our natural abilities. I mean, think about it this way. Is there anything in the Bible that you believe is true but you can't put it together and make it make logical sense with other things in the Bible?

Student: God's sovereignty and man's choice.

Dr. Pratt: Alright, there's a good example. There are tons of them, right? Really, when you start thinking about it, there are lots of things that you say, you know, I believe in this — I got that from the Bible. I believe in this — I got that from the Bible. But putting them together is very hard and in some kind of logical package. Well, upon whom, then, do we depend to find assurance that these understandings are right and are true? It's not our ability to make them coherent. It's our ability to depend on and to be sensitive to the witness of Holy Spirit. And Holy Spirit normally works through our rational abilities, but he's not limited to that. He can work without them and above them and against them at his will. He's free to do this. And he does. So that sometimes you may not have a good argument for a position that you hold, but you're absolutely convinced that it's true, and you're absolutely convinced that the conviction has come from the Holy Spirit, and so you better stand for it even though you may not be able to argue your way through. Now the fact that you can't argue for it might put up a yellow light and say, be careful here. But it should not put up a red light. Just because you can't figure it out, doesn't mean it's not true. You must be sensitive to the way Holy Spirit works in your heart and your life. I mean, think about it this way: When people are called to the ministry and they're asked why should we accept you as a minister? What are the answers usually? What are we supposed to them?

Student: I believe in proper theology… I was called by God.

Dr. Pratt: I was called by God and have an inward call from the Holy Spirit. There's usually two things: an inward call from the Holy Spirit and an outward call from the church that they recognize the gifts in you. But the first one is that inward calling. Well, what is an inward calling except the ministry of the Holy Spirit that goes far beyond what you might be able to logically deduce from the Bible. I mean, if you used your rational abilities only, you could probably decide 15 different things you could do with your life and never violate the Bible. But you need the Holy Spirit to do the interpolation between the options. Holy Spirit brings us between the barriers or the parameters that the scriptures give us and leads us in certain directions. And that's what it means to be walking by the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit, being filled with the Holy Spirit. The Bible doesn't just tell us obey God and think right. It tells us that we must be filled with Holy Spirit, we must lean on him and depend on him and walk in his path, and those kinds of things. Without it, we can't do good theology.

Question 25:
Do systematic theologians sometimes avoid the Holy Spirit's ministry?

> **Student: Richard, you mentioned a second go that systematic theology didn't have a need for the Holy Spirit, but is it possible that there is also the motivation of maybe they kind of fear what they don't understand or what they can't control?**

Dr. Pratt: Of course. You know I do believe that they do have a need for the Holy Spirit's ministry. Sometimes they don't feel like they do. Or like you say, sometimes they may even be afraid of it. It's just something that's sort of out there that's indefinable in some respects, a lot like love, a lot like poetry. But there are people in this world that don't like love and don't like poetry who want to reduce everything down to some kind of scientific formula. I know that in seminary we get a lot of people that were business school graduates or they were engineers… that's you? okay… business school? Alright. Well, you know that you don't like people that aren't like you. And you know, if somebody walks around quoting poetry all the time, you go, "What's wrong with this person?"

Unfortunately, when a person gets into systematic theology very heavily, even if they have inclinations more toward the intuitive and more toward the emotional and that sort of thing, they will sometimes lose that when they do theology because they've been told by their teachers or by their churches that real theology is manly theology, and manly theology is done in a rational way. And that's a really sad situation, because the fact is that every time we make any decision in life, we may be thinking that we're doing it just purely rationally, but we're not. What we're doing is bringing in a lot of other elements that we don't even recognize, from past experience, from contemporary experience, from our feelings, from our moral conscience, from our intuitions. They're all coming in and they're helping us define decisions we make about what we believe is true, what we believe is false, what we believe we ought to do, what we ought not to do. And when you

don't realize how powerful those forces are on the decisions that you make, then they don't disappear, they run roughshod over your decisions. And you can't even put words to it, and sometimes can't even acknowledge that it's happening, that your prejudices are what's making you make this choice.

So what I think is important here in this regard is that we give concerted effort to prayerfully considering, prayerfully devoting ourselves to the person of Holy Spirit himself, asking him to work in us on those levels that I just mentioned, like the intuitive, the prejudicial, the emotional, the conscience, all those kinds of things. And when we do that, then at least we have the chance that maybe some of those things can be sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Being filled with Holy Spirit is not the same as just obeying the Bible or doing the right thing. That's evident because Pharisees obeyed the Bible a lot, but they weren't filled with Holy Spirit. Being filled with Holy Spirit is likened to being drunk with wine for a reason; it goes beyond the normal rational processes. And so it's the kind of thing where we need to go to God as Trinity and not just at two persons but three, remembering that Holy Spirit is active and involved in all aspects of theological decision-making, and sometimes that is lost when people emphasize traditional forms of especially scholastic theology too much in their lives.

Question 26:
Should we focus on the past or present when we do theology?

Student: Richard, I appreciate the thought that if we focus on too much on a Christian heritage, we might lose sight on our modern Christian living. Are there practical ways that we can engage our Christian heritage but still speak to modern theological issues?

Dr. Pratt: I think so. When I think about the tension between focusing on the past and focusing on the present, I think that probably one of the things that I have learned through the years anyway is that you have to stay away from people in the church a little bit, especially ministers, because ministers almost always focus on the past, and they think that the answers of all of life are found in what was done 200, 300, maybe even a thousand years ago in Christianity, and it's not. So you have to get out of the ghetto, and you have to get out where people are. And that's a hard thing for ministers to do because we're devoted to the Bible — that's in the past, we're devoted to our traditions — that's in the past, but people don't live back there. They live here and now. And so we have to get connected some way to what's going on in our world. And I'm surprised many times, especially as a teacher in seminary I'm surprised, at how many students don't read the newspaper, don't watch the news on television, don't know what's on at the movies, don't know what's even happening around the corner. It usually shocks me to no end that that's the case. And I don't know how a person can be relevant in their preaching if they don't know what's going on in the lives of the people that are out there, because the average Christian person is not spending 6 days a week reading the Bible and studying old theology and things like that. They are living their lives at the office or at the

workplace or in the neighborhood. And so we have to know what's going on at the office, the workplace and the neighborhood.

Question 27:
How do we guard our hearts when we interact with modern culture?

Student: Richard, I was wondering about that and thinking, how can I guard my heart in the midst of all that if I am going to be so involved in the culture of the day? How do I make sure I'm careful? Because I really want to make sure I'm reading my Bible and reading Scripture. How does that look?

Dr. Pratt: Well, there's no way to guard your heart. How about that? "A man sits as many risks as he runs." That's what Emerson said, and I believe that. In other words, it's just as risky for you to be out of touch as it is for you to be in touch. And I think sometimes we think that — especially leaders of the church — we think that if we can isolate ourselves from the evil temptations of the world around us, all the contemporary things that are going on and just stay in the past, that somehow that will keep us safe. It doesn't keep us safe at all. What it does is it just opens up a whole new world of mistakes for church leaders, and errors, and even sins for church leaders. Because if you're not willing to risk a little bit by knowing what's going on out there in the world, then you are actually sinning against your people, your congregation, by not being able to meet their needs. I mean, the Apostle Paul was able to quote Greek philosophers, he was able to quote slogans that were being thrown on the street in his day; he does it all the time in his letters, and we've got to be able to do that, too. We have to know what's going on in our day in order to make Christian theology relevant for people. That doesn't mean falling into the sins, but it does mean knowing what's going on.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles and Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.