Building Systematic Theology

Lesson 4
Doctrines in Systematics

Lesson Guide

ABOUT THIRDMILL

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Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to hundreds of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than a dozen other languages through our partner ministries. The curriculum consists of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources. It is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in learning communities.

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CONTENTS

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

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

- **Before you watch the lesson**

  - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.

  - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.

- **While you are watching the lesson**

  - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.

  - **Record comments and questions —** As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.

  - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.

- **After you watch the lesson**

  - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.

  - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I.   Introduction (0:28)

Doctrines are not substitutes for the Bible. They are simply ways to summarize what we sincerely believe the Bible teaches.

II.   General Orientation (2:04)

A.   Definition (2:34)

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

1.   Topics (3:26)

Systematic theologians have found it useful to divide theology into various topics. From the medieval period there has been a strong tendency for systematic theology to divide into five or six main regions:

- Bibliology:

- Theology proper:

- Anthropology:

- Soteriology:

- Ecclesiology:

- Eschatology:

2. Synthesis (5:57)

Rather than focusing on one passage at a time, doctrines normally express the teachings of many Scriptures.

Apostles' Creed

3. Explanation (8:48)

Doctrines explain what the Bible teaches about a topic. These explanations can be as simple as collating information into theological propositions, or as involved as an exhaustive defense of a complex theological teaching.

It helps to think of the explanatory quality of doctrinal discussions as falling along a continuum: simple statements, moderate explanations, extensive explanations.

- Apostles' Creed

- Catechisms and Confessions

- Formal Writings

B. **Legitimacy (13:59)**

One of the most compelling cases in favor of creating doctrines is that biblical figures model this practice for us.

1. **Jesus (15:17)**

Topic:

Synthesis:

Explanation:

2. **Paul (18:35)**

Topic:

Synthesis:

Explanation:

C.   Goals (24:00)

Doctrines are shaped by a positive goal of establishing true teachings, which is what followers of Christ ought to believe. They are also shaped by a negative goal of opposing false doctrines.

1.   Positive (24:59)

The positive direction of systematics is guided not only by the Scriptures but also by traditional Christian emphases and priorities.

2.   Negative (26:33)

One of the main purposes of doctrinal discussions has been to counter false teachings.

In addition to opposing falsehood because Scriptures do, Systematicians also adopt this negative goal because they seek to follow traditional Christian emphases and priorities.

D.   Place (31:17)

It helps to think of the process of building systematic theology as moving from the simplest to the most complex.

Technical Terms:

Propositions:

Doctrines:

Systems:

III.   Formation (33:20)

A.   Biblical Support (34:41)

The most critical way systematic theologians support their doctrinal discussions is by seeking the support of Scripture.

1.   Process (35:40)

Systematic theologians collate different aspects of biblical teachings. They use theological propositions to create larger, more complex theological syntheses. They form layers upon layers of biblical teachings until they have finished their discussion of a theological topic.

2.   Example (37:05)

Berkhof's discussion of "Objections to the Theory of Perfectionism," is found in part 4 chapter 10 of his *Systematic Theology*.

Perfectionism: the belief that we can be entirely free of sin in this life.

Outline of Berkhof's argument against Perfectionism: "In the light of Scripture, the doctrine of Perfectionism is absolutely untenable."

- The Bible gives assurance that there is no one on earth who does not sin.

- According to the Scripture, there is a constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit in the lives of God's children, and even the best of them are still striving for perfection.

    o Paul gives a very striking description of this struggle, which certainly refers to him in his regenerate state.

    o Paul speaks of a struggle that characterizes all the children of God.

    o Paul speaks of himself, practically at the end of his career, as one who has not yet reached perfection.

- Confession of sin and prayer for forgiveness are continually required in Scripture.

    o Jesus taught all his disciples to pray for the forgiveness of sins

    o Bible saints are constantly represented as confessing their sins.

Systematicians reduce Scriptures to facts, they collate those facts to develop theological propositions, and they synthesize those propositions into higher and more complex levels of theological claims.

B. **Logical Support (43:19)**

Although Systematicians employ logic at every step in the process of building systematic theology, logic is especially important as they form their doctrines.

1. **Authority (44:27)**

The authority of the Bible always trumps the authority of logic.

Protestants have realized that the capacity to reason logically is a valuable ability. But, the capacity to reason logically is still a limited ability that must be exercised in submission to God's revelation in Scripture.

Law of non-contradiction: Nothing can be true and not true at the same time and in the same sense.

The principle of non-contradiction is highly valued in systematic theology and it is limited when we use it to explore the Scriptures. It must be in submission to the Bible.

Systematicians respond to apparent contradictions in the Bible by emphasizing one of two factors: our fallibility and our finitude.

Fallibility: Sin has corrupted our thinking so that we fall into errors. Because we are fallible, we sometimes misread the Bible, imagining contradictions where none actually exist.

Finitude: Despite logical tension created in our finite mind, we must accept both seemingly contradictory ideas as true. And, if we are unable to reconcile these ideas, we must attribute this inability to our limitations.

2.   Deductive Implications (56:28)

Systematicians face the need to:

- fill in the gaps between the explicit teachings of Scripture
- deduce the assumptions underlying the explicit teachings of Scripture

Deductive logic: "Deduction is a way of reasoning from premises to necessary conclusions."

Theologians present only those premises they believe offer the most helpful and most compelling support for their beliefs. Sometimes deduction is abbreviated because so much is assumed, but other times the deductions are spelled out in more detail.

Deducing the logical implications of biblical teachings is one of the chief ways systematicians build theological doctrines.

3. Inductive Certainty (1:01:52)

"Inductive logic is a way of reasoning from particular facts to probable conclusions." From the facts of Scripture, Systematicians infer probable conclusions.

a. Types

Repetitive induction: drawing conclusions from particular facts that repeat the same truth over and over.

Compositional induction: drawing conclusions from particular facts that come together, to form compound truths.

b.   Inductive gap

In inductive arguments conclusions often add information that is not contained in the premises. They often go beyond the premises. As a result, there is some distance between what we observe and what we conclude.

Inductive gap: "the distance between what we know and what we conclude in an inductive argument."

Repetitive induction

Compositional induction

The conclusions of systematic theologians are not utterly certain. They may be very likely, or even settled judgments but not utterly certain in every detail because they are based on induction.

c. Implications

i.   Narrow the gap

It is the responsibility of every believer to work as hard as possible to narrow the inductive gap so that we can have as much certainty as possible in our conclusions.

ii.   Remember the gap

We cannot escape the inductive gap. It is wise to acknowledge that certain theological conclusions are less likely or more likely than others.

IV.   Values and Dangers (1:17:56)

A.   Christian Living (1:19:21)

The process of personal sanctification, which takes place on a conceptual (orthodoxy), behavioral (orthopraxis) and emotional (orthopathos) level.

1.   Enhancement (1:20:10)

Doctrines help us to think logically about our faith on a large scale. Because God accommodates Scripture to our finitude, no single biblical passage can say everything that might be said about a topic. So, we need to draw logical connections among a wide range of biblical passages.

2.   Hindrance (1:25:04)

Reducing the process of drawing theological conclusions to mere logical rigor will cut us off from many of the vital resources that God has provided in the full range of Christian living.

B.   Interaction in Community(1:27:24)

Interaction in community helps us focus on the importance of the body of Christ in our lives in three important ways:

- Christian heritage (the witness of the Holy Spirit's work in the church of the past)

- Present Christian community (the witness of Christians living today)

- Private judgment (the witness of our personal conclusions and convictions)

1.   Enhancement (1:28:17)

The most positive impact of theological doctrines on Christian living is the way that they can bring unity and harmony to the church by making us more capable of reasoning together through the many teachings of Scripture.

2.   Hindrance (1:33:44)

Focusing on doctrines too much can actually hinder interaction among Christians. Churches could avoid many problems if they would just pay more attention to the things that other churches consider most important.

C.   Exegesis of Scripture (1:33:44)

Exegesis is our most direct access to God's special revelation in Scripture. The three main ways the Holy Spirit has led the church to interpret Scripture are:

- Literary analysis (picture)

- Historical analysis (window)

- Thematic analysis (mirror)

1.   Enhancement (1:35:15)

Many of the most basic tenets of our faith are not directly or specifically addressed in the Bible.

Often, the most foundational things that people believe are never stated explicitly. Instead, they are assumed.

One of the goals of systematic theology is to discover the doctrinal assumptions that gave rise to what we find in the Scriptures.

Systematic theology is one of the most helpful tools for uncovering the implicit teachings of the Bible.

2.   Hindrance (1:38:44)

Systematics sometimes strays into speculation. It explores ideas and reaches conclusions for which there is very little or no biblical support simply because these conclusions seem logical.

V.   Conclusion (1:42:14)

Review Questions

1. Describe doctrinal statements in terms of topics, synthesis and explanations of doctrinal statements.

2. Explain how Jesus and Paul gave legitimacy to the practice of creating doctrines.

3.   Describe the way in which doctrines are shaped by both positive and negative goals.

4.   Describe the place doctrines have within systematic theology.

5.   Explain how doctrines are simply ways in which we summarize what we believe about the Bible.

6.   Explain how Systematicians use biblical support to substantiate the formation of theological doctrines.

7.   Briefly describe the use of logical support in the formation of systematic theology in terms of authority, deductive implications, and inductive certainty.

8.   Explain the importance of using both logic and Scripture in formulating theological doctrines.

9.   Explain how theological doctrines both enhance and hinder Christian living.

10.   Explain how theological doctrines both enhance and hinder interaction in community.

11.   Explain how theological doctrines both enhance and hinder the exegesis of Scripture.

12.   How does the awareness and proper navigation of the inherent dangers of forming theological doctrines help us to reap the enhancements that theological doctrines provide?

Application Questions

1.   Suppose a friend said to you, "Creeds and catechisms have no authority because they are not found in Scripture." How would you respond to your friend?

2.   Why is it important not to overemphasize God's transcendence or his immanence? Why is it important to remember our finitude when seeking to understand theological doctrines?

3.   How should Christians respond to the fact that doctrines are only probable rather than certain?

4.   As a student of the Bible, how can thinking about doctrinal certainty in terms of the cone of certainty be of value to you?

5.   Does your community give its attention mostly to doctrine, personal religious experience or corporate worship? How can you balance and appreciate the different emphases within the body of Christ?

Glossary

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

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

Chalcedonian Creed – Creed written in A.D. 451 by a church council in the city of Chalcedon that affirmed, among other things, that Jesus is "truly God and truly man"; also called the Chalcedonian Symbol, and the Definition of Chalcedon

deductive logic – The process of reasoning from general statements to form a logical conclusion

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

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

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

exegesis – From a Greek term meaning "led out of" or "derived from"; the process of drawing out the proper interpretation of a passage of Scripture

fallible – Likely to make errors

fatalism – A view of the future that simply accepts what is to come because the events are inevitable; in this view, God is impersonal and does not interact with man

finitude – The state of being limited

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

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

inductive gap – Missing or weak element when reasoning from particulars to probable conclusions; the distance between what we know and what we conclude

inductive logic – A way of reasoning from particular facts to probable conclusions

Infralapsarianism – The belief that God's decree to save his people should be placed after his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin

lapsarian question – Theological debate that tries to determine the logical order of God's eternal decrees

law of non-contradiction – Principle of logic that assumes nothing can be both true and not true at the same time and in the same sense

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

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

open theism – Theological outlook that says the success of God's plans, purposes, and will are entirely dependent on history, especially on the choices that spirits and human beings make

premise – A statement that leads to a conclusion

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

sublapsarianism – Belief that God's decree to save his people came after his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin, and that his decree to save came after his decree to offer redemption

synthesis – The process of combining different components of something into a whole

systematic theologian/systematician – A person who is dedicated to explaining Christian beliefs in an organized manner using biblical and theological support

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