

# Building Your Theology

## Lesson 1

## What is Theology?

Faculty Forum



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# Building Your Theology

## Lesson One: What is Theology?

### Forum

With  
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Students  
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### Question 1:

**How are orthopraxis and orthopathos different from orthodoxy?**

**Student:** Richard, I've heard the term orthodoxy many times, but I haven't really heard the terms orthopraxis or orthopathos. Can you explain those a little bit more?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's a great question because I am using those three terms of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos, and they're real important in these lessons. And you're right, orthodoxy people talk about it all the time, but they don't talk much about orthopraxis or orthopathos. Now you'll find some groups in recent history, especially liberationists and people like that, Marxist — so-called Marxist Christians who talk about orthopraxis, and that orthopraxis for them means you can't just think about theology. You do theology. You live it. And I think a lot of people would just be comfortable living with the idea of orthodoxy and now add to that orthopraxis. You hear people all the time saying, "Yeah, let's be right theologically, but let's be practical" — praxis. And so they like to live with those two. But there's a problem with just living with those two, and it is that when people think just orthodoxy, orthopraxis, the third dimension, orthopathos — or feeling the right way — gets ignored. I mean, I think usually people include orthopathos, or feelings, within orthopraxis, but it's very easy especially in some branches of the church to ignore the feelings if you're not actually giving it a title, giving it a name. And so, yeah, for me it really means something very important to say that when you do theology, you're not just interested in thinking the right way, nor are you interested in just behaving the right way — and that's what I mean by praxis, I mean things you actually do, physically do — but you're also interested in the feeling side of all of this. You can't separate them as if they're separate things, but you can distinguish them. They are different focal points, they are different centers as you work through your theological issues.

## Question 2:

### What are some examples of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

**Student:** Could you give me an example of what orthopathos might be? Because it seems like everybody like feels different from one minute to the next. How do we define it?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well let's just take an example of all of them. Okay, let's just say, "Jesus is Lord." Let's just take that; that's probably the most basic Christian commitment we have or basic theological notion we have. And if we say that Jesus is Lord, orthodoxy means: we know what that means. We know for example that it means he is the controller of everything, that he's not a creature but he's the creator himself. So the lordship of Christ would mean that we have the right kinds of ideas associated with that, unlike, say, Jehovah's Witnesses. When they say Jesus is Lord — and they do — what they mean by that is that he's the biggest and the best of all the creatures. Okay? So that would be an unorthodox way of thinking about Jesus. So there's orthodoxy, you think about him. Now the practice, the orthopraxis of that statement, "Jesus is Lord," is that you do things with your body that demonstrate that you believe in it. Okay? Like, you don't kill people, or things like you share your faith with people, or you seek to make Christ the Lord of your life in your behavior, so you try to treat people better, you try to obey the Bible. You do those kinds of things in outward ways with your body.

Orthopathos is a little bit different than that. You can believe the right things about Jesus, and you can do the right things about the lordship of Jesus in some ways, physically, without ever really touching the attitude, or the sentiment, or the affect, or the emotions. And to know that Jesus is Lord in the fuller sense of that expression means that you'll also be "orthopathic," that is — not pathetic in the way we often use the word meaning miserable or aren't we sorry for this person, but thinking, doing, and then feeling the fact that Jesus is Lord. So, when you and I think about the lordship of Christ, it ought not just cause us to think the right doctrines, it ought not just cause us to do certain things with our bodies, but it should also cause us feelings of awe, and reverence, and adoration, feelings of repentance and sorrow over sin, affection for Jesus, love for him. These are the kinds of things that come from a true knowledge, a fuller knowledge, of "Jesus is Lord." And the same kind of schema can be applied to every single theological truth, because people just tend to think theologians are dry and cold. And the reason they think that is because theologians, by and large — that is, professional ones, the ones that write the books — they do tend, the more academic they are, to focus more on the orthodoxy and leave the others. Or if they're super-practical, they'll move down into the orthopraxis. But very seldom do you hear people talking explicitly about orthopathos. And that's what we are saying in this lesson is one of the distinctive and specific goals of Christian theology.

### Question 3:

#### Does orthopraxis add a requirement of work to the gospel?

**Student:** Now Richard, I understand that orthopraxis, it's really important and we need to emphasize it, but doesn't it seem like we're adding something to the gospel?

**Dr. Pratt:** Wow. Yeah, I think a lot of people would hear it that way, so I'm glad you raised that. It's real important to understand that we have a misconception among us, and that is that many times we think of faith, saving faith, the faith that justifies us, as something that's purely mental and that, in other words, it's just an orthodox thing — meaning in other words, if people come to faith in Christ, what that means is somehow they agree that the gospel is true and that they're saved by faith in Christ rather than by their own good works, things like that. And if they just agree, if they just give mental ascent to that teaching or that doctrine, then they're okay. They're saved, they're justified, no problem. That's what we say. That's wrong. Nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to what saving faith is, because as we know, the Bible doesn't just say believe in Christ, it also uses synonymously at times that they obeyed the gospel — not that they just believed the gospel but that they obeyed the gospel, the New Testament says. And the reason for that is because saving faith is something larger than mere orthodoxy, merely being able to say the right words or being able to enunciate exactly how Jesus is the Lord and Savior and the way of faith, and things like that.

And that's why the Bible connects saving faith to things like repentance and change of life, because saving faith is more than orthodoxy. It also involves behavior. If we don't confess with our lips — and there's a behavior — that Jesus is Lord, then we cannot be saved. Now don't take that too literally because if people don't have lips, that's not what they have to do. It is still possible for mute people, for example, to be saved. But if they don't behave in ways that demonstrate that they have the right way of thinking and that they are repenting of their sins in their lives, then they're not having initial saving faith. That's why even in the Bible, often for adults anyway, baptism is associated with saving faith, because the baptism in the New Testament is often the sort of first step a person takes. In modern day evangelicalism it's often walking down an aisle, or raising your hand, or signing a card, something like that — making a decision, praying to receive Christ, we say. So, believing in Christ does involve not just orthodoxy but also orthopraxis.

Now it also involves orthopathos, feelings. Because repentance is not just being sorry for your sins and loving God, but it does involve feeling sorry for your sins and love for God. If you don't have the love of God in you, then you cannot be saved. It's really that simple. And love in many ways is an affect, it's a pathos, it's a feeling. And we mustn't reduce that to an action, and we mustn't reduce that just to an idea, or a doctrine, as it were. So, all three of these, orthodoxy, orthopathos, orthopraxis, all three of those are involved in the initial commitment that people make to Christ

which saves them by faith alone, as we say in my tradition — by faith alone. But faith involves orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos.

Now, where works comes — this is where the confusion comes — is in the ongoing life of the person after they've received Christ, after they have been saved initially. And if we think somehow that in order to be saved God accepts our faith but then we have to add to that works of righteousness to be saved, then we're missing it. Now, orthopraxis, or good works, is important, and it's part of the whole package of salvation, but it's the working of God's Spirit within us bringing the fruit of saving faith out. It's not that we're adding merit, not that we're adding goodness. So sometimes we overstate the case when we tell people that believing in Christ is a simple thing, and we let them think that believing is just affirming certain truths. And it's not that. It does involve illustrating that acceptance of truth in your behavior and demonstrating it in the way you feel as well.

#### **Question 4:**

##### **Which is primary: orthodoxy, orthopraxis or orthopathos?**

**Student:** Now, is there any sort of primacy because it seems like we emphasize you get orthodoxy right which will lead to orthopraxis and pathos, but it seems that you're saying they're all perspectives on one thing?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that is what I'm saying. And just to put it in a nutshell, the idea here is that the old language that people used to use was there's an economic priority to ideas, and I think there's some truth to that, that you have to know something before you can behave on the basis of it and before you can feel about it. But we'll talk more, though, about how they interrelate to each other, but there is this kind of economic priority. It's not that it's somehow closer to God or of substantial value to believe something and then to move toward praxis and feelings, but there is the sense in which you've got to have ideas. For example, people are not saved by grabbing a Bible and holding it close to their chest and feeling how good it feels. Okay? They're saved by opening it up and reading it and understanding it. Or when the gospel is spoken to someone, they don't somehow take that and just sort of embrace it emotionally without any cognizance. So, there's a sense in which, yes, there is this kind of economic priority to believing it in the sense of orthodoxy and then moving to praxis and pathos.

#### **Question 5:**

##### **How do orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos interrelate?**

**Student:** Now Richard, I'd like to ask you a little bit more about how these three perspectives can act — orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. Is one supreme above the others?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's great, because it's real important, and that's why we spend some time on it in the lesson. The normal way that evangelical Christians think is that there's a priority of orthodoxy which then will result in orthopraxis — meaning in other words, think right, then you'll act the right way. And then if you act the right way, then maybe, they usually say, you might begin to feel the right way. And so there's this one, two, three priority given. And there's nothing wrong with that in itself, because it does work that way; thinking right leads you to right kinds of practices, and the right kinds of practices can lead you to the right kinds of feelings. So, there's nothing wrong with the one, two, three.

The biggest problem I have with the one, two, three system is that if it's the only way you work your way around that triangle, then number three always gets ignored, or underplayed at least. Because when can you ever get your thinking straight enough to move on to number two? And then when can you ever get number two — acting on things — when do you ever get enough of that going that you can then move on and concentrate on number three? The answer is never, usually. And unfortunately, the Westminster Shorter Catechism even leads us into that kind of prioritizing when it says that the chief teachings of Scripture — “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” — the answer is “what we are to believe concerning God and what duty he requires of man,” and there you have orthodoxy, what we believe about God, and what duties — that's orthopraxis in most of our minds. Although I don't think that's the best way to read the catechism, that is the way people tend to do it. And so this one, two, three prioritizing is alright, but if that's the only way you do it, then you end up ignoring number two, and the you end up really ignoring number three, which is orthopathos.

And so, what I'm arguing for in this lesson is that there is a wisdom to learning how to reprioritize, in other words, to start emphasizing different things, because all three of these are interdependent. Orthodoxy depends on orthopathos. For example — every teacher will tell you this — the most important role that a teacher has is affective, that is, dealing with the affect, that you have to be motivating people to learn. If you're not motivated to learn, it's very hard to learn ideas. So, orthodoxy is influenced by your orthopathos. So, if you're in love with God, if you're thrilled about your faith, if you're really excited about learning about something in the Bible, then your pathos, or orthopathos, which is a good thing to have, is motivating you to orthodoxy. And also — I think we all know this — that orthopraxis can also help us in our orthodoxy because very often — we talk about this with students especially — that students don't have enough experience many times to avoid crazy theories. You know, they get these ideas of, “Oh, I know exactly what the Bible says about how to start a church.” And so, they get all the rules out in abstract and then they go out and try to start the church, and they realize it doesn't work. And then they go to somebody who's had some experience, some practical experience, some orthopraxis, and they begin to realize, “Hey, I don't need to compromise with praxis or practical things; the problem is that I didn't have enough practice to know what the Bible is actually saying.” That's the problem. So, practice actually clarifies what the Bible was actually saying to us in terms of orthodoxy. And so, these three connect to each other in every way imaginable. And that's why that slogan



comes up in there, that all beliefs form webs of multiple reciprocities, because all of these things are interconnected in a variety of ways.

### **Question 6:** **What is a web of multiple reciprocities?**

**Student:** Now, that term, “web of multiple reciprocities,” that’s mentioned in the video as well. And it’s kind of mentioned in passing, and you just mentioned it again. Can you kind of flesh out that a little bit more?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. It’s hard to flesh it out without going into a long explanation, and that’s why I didn’t do it in the video, frankly. But let me just say it this way. We usually think that there is not just a set of right beliefs but that this set of right beliefs has a particular logical connection among its various pieces that a right-thinking person will always observe. In other words, this belief connects to that belief in this logical way, and that belief connects to that belief in this logical way, and logical, logical, logical. And then we do that and we think well that’s the only way to connect those things, that that’s the only logical relationship among them. But the fact is that all of our beliefs connect to all of our beliefs with manifold logical connections.

Let me give you example. A lot of people would say I believe in the Bible as, say, their first premise, and that leads me to the conclusion, because I read the Bible, that Jesus is the Lord. So, I believe in the Bible first and then I believe Jesus is Lord. I conclude that. Well, the fact is, that’s true, that if a person believes in the Bible then they’re going to come to believe that Jesus is Lord. But you can reverse it as well. A person who believes that Jesus is the Lord is led to the conclusion on the basis of Jesus’ own life that the Bible should be believed. So, which comes first? Which is more important, believing in the Bible or believing in Jesus as Lord? Well, the fact is both of these work on each other in reciprocities. And a web of reciprocities occurs when you have multiples of these interconnections where they just start piling on top of each other, on top of each other. So rather than thinking of our Christian belief system as — in terms of orthodoxy, orthopathos, orthopraxis — as just connecting in one particular way, these all connect in manifold ways. And the limitations of those manifold connections is just a matter of our imagination, the limits of our imaginations, because orthopathos connects to orthopraxis which connects to orthodoxy, and orthopraxis connects to orthopathos which connects to orthodoxy, and orthodoxy leads to orthopathos which leads to orthopraxis, on and on and on and on it goes.

And that’s the way it is with every single thing of the Christian life. All beliefs form webs of multiple reciprocities. And then when we begin to think of an argument or we start at any particular moment to trace our way through different Christian beliefs, what we end up doing then is just picking one or two of those paths of connections, and we don’t ever get them all in any particular paragraph or any particular sentence. And so, it’s just real

important to keep that in mind. And that's where that balancing act comes in. Because you've got these beliefs that form these huge webs of interconnections or multiple reciprocities, the question is always which do I emphasize? And that's where we have to make the wisdom choice.

### Question 7:

#### How can we balance orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?

**Student:** Now Richard, you also bring up the term or the phrase, “The deck of life is always shifting,” and applying that to how we should interconnect orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos. Talk about what you mean by that shifting.

**Dr. Pratt:** Well let me remind you of the whole expression, okay? It goes something like this: “Because the deck of life is always shifting, balance can be nothing more than momentary synchronicity.” That's a mouthful, I know. I'm sorry. But you have to say it in ways like that to get people to remember it. Once they get it, they got it, okay? So, let me do it again. “Because the deck of life is always shifting” — so imagine your life as a theologian as if you're standing on a boat, the deck of a ship, and you're standing on top of a beach ball on top of the deck of that ship. And you're holding a tray with a cup of tea. Now that cup of tea is the theological concept you're trying to serve to the body of Christ. But as you do that, you're balancing yourself on this huge beach ball that's rolling around on the deck, and the deck is moving back-and-forth like this in this rocking ocean. And that's the way life actually is. I know a lot of times we don't think of it that way. We think of the earth as if it were flat and somehow it was established on pillars and everything just stays the same, but it doesn't. It's always changing, sometimes more dramatically than other times, but it's always shifting. We change, the world around us changes, what God is doing in the world changes. All those kinds of things shift all the time. And the people whom we're teaching are also changing all the time. They're on their own decks of life.

So here we are, trying to figure out what should we emphasize at any given moment? I mean, pastors have to do this all the time. Teachers have to do it. Ordinary Christians have to do it when they deal with their friends and even with their own personal lives. How do you decide what you're going to emphasize? Okay, so let's just stick with the orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos options. Which of those three should a person emphasize? Well the answer is it just depends on the tilt of the deck. If the deck is tilted this way, then if you don't lean the other way, then you fall overboard. So, if you're in a situation where the need of the body of Christ that you're worshiping with or teaching in Sunday school, or a friend that you're witnessing to, whatever it may be, if it's leaned over very heavily on the emotional — orthopathos — then probably you need to be pulling hard the other direction more toward orthodoxy and orthopraxis. If you find churches that are very much oriented toward orthopraxis — and there are lots of those where they are, you know, everything has to do with let's do something for Christ; we're

not going to think about this anymore; we don't care what we feel, we're just going to do the right thing; love is a verb. I mean, you hear that all the time, right? Love is a verb. You know, you "do" love, you don't "feel" love. Well if that's the kind of thing that's being said all the time in a church, well then people tend to be like this — way over on orthopraxis. If you see a situation like that, then you probably need to be pulling them the other direction more toward orthodoxy and orthopathos. And if you find a church that's oriented toward orthodoxy where they just want to study the Bible more and more and more, learn more and more doctrines, memorize catechisms, things like that, and they think that's the end goal, that that's the end of the game, then you probably need to be pulling the other two directions leaning back this way. However, the deck is tilting at the time, we usually as teachers need to acknowledge that and diagnose that, get a sense of that, and then pull back the other direction.

So, in terms of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos, the goal is to constantly be moving. We all have our natural propensities. My natural propensity is towards orthodoxy. I mean, I would love not to ever have to do anything for Christ; I would love to never have to feel anything, if I could just be satisfied with getting the right ideas. But that's not good, that's not holy, that's not wholesome. There are other Christians I know that couldn't care less about doctrine and all they want to do is just be active for Christ. Well, you can't say that's a bad thing in the sense of desire to serve Christ, but we've got to have good doctrine and pathos, too. And then there are groups that want to do nothing unless it feels good or feels exciting, so they're way out on the orthopathos and we pull them back the other direction. But that always changes — that's what's so important. It always changes. So, you trace your way through the web of multiple reciprocities — remember that one? You trace your way through that depending on how the deck is shifting. Have you ever seen people that have gone one direction or the other? How would you describe a church that overemphasizes orthodoxy?

**Student:** The church that overemphasizes orthodoxy is going to be dry. It's going to be like you're going to walk in there and think, are these people even alive? All they do is just try and memorize and don't actually put my feet on the ground and do something for Jesus.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. Have you ever known churches like that?

**Student:** Yes.

**Dr. Pratt:** Me too. See? And this is why I'm sensitive to it. My own tradition does that a lot. We're not called the "frozen chosen" for nothing. Okay? It's because we just sit around and talk about our religion and think that that's doing religion, and it's not. Have you ever seen churches that overemphasize orthopathos?

**Student:** Yes, actually. I've been in situations where that's been the case.

**Dr. Pratt:** I would guess that you've probably been one of those.

**Student:** No, not necessarily. No, I would probably find myself with you in the orthodoxy camp. But churches that emphasize orthopathos tend not to want to necessarily look at Scripture, or look at all of Scripture. They tend to maybe pick out a few verses here or there that apply to their situation, but they don't look at the whole of Scripture, at what it teaches about a certain subject, so they're not really intent on really learning about something. They just kind of go with it, go with it and just kind of go off on it.

**Dr. Pratt:** And some of those churches emphasize supernatural spiritual gifts, for example. But others — and this would be more common because they're not the only ones that overemphasize orthopathos — would be those that sort of turn church into a therapy session. You know, that the goal of the gospel is for you feel better about yourself and your relationship with God, and that's all they're concerned about. So if you're not feeling better, then it's not worth our discussion, it's not worth our time. Especially if it's going to make me feel bad or feel empty, then I don't want to talk about it. I'm not going to do anything that's not going to make me happy.

In fact, I was in the airport one time and a pastor, a friend of mine, actually walked to me and said, "Hey, I've heard that you're working with Third Millennium. You must be so thrilled. You must be so happy." And I said, "Well, I'm committed. I don't know that it's making me happy right now," because it was at a pretty hard time. And he said, "But Richard, if you're in the will of God, you're going to be happy." And I looked at him and I said, "What religion are you talking about?" I said, "I don't think Paul was really thrilled to death when he heard that he was going to have to suffer much for Christ." You know, people aren't happy about that. But they're committed and they endure, and they try to have proper Christian attitudes toward it. But happiness is what it's made up to be sometimes. And unfortunately, especially in prosperous Western culture, fulfillment, and self-actualization, and happiness, those attitudes, those feelings, just seem to be the end-all. But now, let's pick on the third group. You ever been in churches that are activistic or orthopraxis is everything?

**Student:** Absolutely. I can actually remember a friend of mine saying systematic theology is pointless. It's just guys sitting around talking about ideas. They're not out there living, being Jesus to the world around them.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, there are lots of churches that do that know. I know like one thing that's happening these days is the "emerging church" talks that way a lot. They talk a lot about Christianity, Christ religion, Christ faith is an active faith of service. Well, who could disagree with that? It is an act of service, and sitting around and just talking about ideas is fairly worthless. But you can go to the point, like many of them do, of saying therefore theology, traditional theology, is not important anymore. It doesn't matter if you believe in the Trinity, it doesn't matter if you believe in the divinity of Christ anymore. All you have to do is just live the Christian life. And the reality is you can't live the Christian life

without the right doctrines and without the right feelings. And so all these things go together, and this web of multiple reciprocities and this deck of life balancing act is what we've got to shoot for.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How can we resolve tensions between orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?**

**Student:** Now Richard, a question that I have is what we do when there seems to be a tension or conflict between something we read in the Bible and then when we try to live that out in real life?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, like when orthodoxy and orthopraxis and orthopathos conflict with each other, or seem to?

**Student:** Yeah.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, because they do. And this is one of the realities of that web of multiple reciprocities is that things don't always just jive with each other. They often create tensions. I mean, if you start valuing the way you feel about certain things, then there are going to be things in the Bible that are said that are not going to make you feel quite at home, or safe, or identified with these things, or sympathetic toward these truths. I mean, let's just face it. When we read about the holy wars of Israel, I hope that very few of us sort naturally feel like, well that's a great idea, let's just kill everybody. I mean, it should create a sense of disconnect or dissonance.

Or take another example. When the Bible tells us in Revelation 6, for example, that Jesus won't return until the full number of martyrs has been completed. And then somebody stands up and says, "Alright, now that means you need to be a martyr, you need to practice that" — orthopraxis — endanger yourself. Well, you know, that's going to be a different thing for many people to do. So, there are tensions here, and the reality is sometimes the tensions that we feel are clues. They're like caution lights coming on on the traffic light. They're clues that maybe we haven't understood the doctrine correctly. That's one good thing about orthopraxis and orthopathos, that you try to practice a teaching and you see it's not working. And sometimes the failure in practice can be a caution light that comes on and says, "Well, maybe I didn't quite understand it."

I can think of an example in my own life. When I was a very young Christian, I thought that if I just believed hard enough that a poison oak infection I had on my face, if I just believed hard enough that it would go away that it would. And so, I can honestly tell you sitting right here that I believed with all of my heart that it would go away. I told the Lord, I said, "I'm going to spin around and when I look back in this mirror it's going to be gone," because that's what I had been taught. As a very young Christian I'd been taught if you just believe it, it will happen. Okay, so act on it, take a step of faith —

orthopraxis. And so, I spun around in front of that mirror and opened my eyes, and it was still there. And what that experience of orthopraxis, the attempt at orthopraxis did was not show that the Bible was wrong. The light came on. Maybe I didn't understand the Bible correctly. Maybe my teachers were not telling me the right thing when they told me if I just believed hard enough that...the Bible taught that I just believed hard enough it would be done. So sometimes those tensions alert us to the fact that we are not understanding the Bible correctly. And so, we go back to the orthodoxy and work at it harder.

Other times, however, orthopraxis and orthopathos — and this would especially true in Western culture where Christianity is relatively easy — sometimes we feel tension simply because we're not willing to accept the truth. The truth of the Bible is hard. I mean, when Jesus tells us for example that you save your life by losing it, basically in Western Christianity we don't know what that means. We don't have a clue what that means. And so, it's very hard for us even to conceive of a practice that would lead us into risking our safety, risking our prosperity, those kinds of things, for the sake of the gospel, even though clearly that is what the passage is teaching. Jesus is saying if you try to secure your life in this world, if you try to make everything just right and safe and wholesome and good, then you're actually going to end up losing the faith. And so, risking is something that's hard to do, but at the same time we understand the Bible correctly and we must work hard at it, even if it's uncomfortable.

And “feelings” is the same thing, because we all have this notion, especially again in modern Western Christianity, that if you're thinking the right thoughts and you're believing the right things, then God wants good for you, and that means you're going to be a happy person. In fact, the largest churches in my own country are just filled with pastors that go around telling people all the time that Jesus wants them to feel better, Jesus just wants them happy. You know, that's the goal of the Christian life. But it's not true. Jesus himself was not happy all the time, and yet he obeyed the Lord. Remember he begged not to have to go to the cross, “If there's any way possible, I don't want to have to do this.” But instead of saying, “Well, now my feeling bad about this means I'm misunderstanding what God has told me to do,” what he finally came to was, “I've got to do it anyway.” So sometimes the tension between these various things that we have going on of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, orthopathos brings up a caution light and says maybe you're really not understanding it correctly. But other times it just says it's just time to go on and do what God says even if you don't feel like it, even if you don't see it working out easily.

**Student:** So that kind of would help us with a situation like a lot of people feel the tension between God being good and in control of all things and the fact that our world is really messed up. We see death and pain. How can we hold together a loving God and a messed-up world?

**Dr. Pratt:** Exactly. That's an easy thing to hold so long as you don't know real suffering. If you're not doing the orthopraxis of getting your hands dirty with real life in this world. And often that then creates other tensions even inside of orthodoxy — how can I work

this out? The orthopraxis of serving the poor, of helping the needy and seeing their suffering can then move you back into orthodoxy and say I've got to work on this a whole lot more. How can God be good and the world be like it is?

And here's another frustrating thing. Okay, so God has called me to do something good in this world, but I've spent the last 15 years of my life in this place trying to do something good and it's all falling to pieces. And unfortunately, that's something that pastors often have to face; they work very hard in a church, they build that church up, then they go on, they're called to someplace else, and the next thing you know, the church they just left is falling to pieces. And so, they look at it and say, then what sense does all this make? My orthopraxis did not comply with my orthodoxy, and it certainly isn't making me feel good. So those tensions just keep moving us around, which is what we have to do. We have to keep moving, moving, moving around. And if we do, then we'll be able to see how these tensions can actually help us grow.

### **Question 9:** **Why is the series titled “Building Your Theology”?**

**Student:** Now we've entitled the series “Building *Your* Theology.” Now just from the very title, isn't that being subjective? Isn't it more proper to say building “God's” theology or building “the” theology?

**Dr. Pratt:** The “right” theology maybe?

**Student:** Yeah, exactly.

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's good. I mean, I don't want anyone to misunderstand it, so I'm glad you raised the question. Because it is important to realize we're not just going after our personal theologies. That would be something that you might hear in different groups other than this one, that, you know, well you can your theology, I'll have mine, you have yours, so you just build your own theology the way you want to do it. We are concerned with making theology as biblical as it could possibly be because for us here the standard is the Bible, and so we're trying to approximate the teachings of the Bible in whatever we do in theology. But at the same time, we use the word “your” in there, your theology, building your theology, because we want to emphasize that this is not something that's impersonal, that it really does involve you and me — us together, in fact — doing this in ways that are as best we can right for us and the best we can possibly do so that it is something that we can own. A lot of times people think about theology in very abstract terms and they end up not really affirming it from their hearts, and we're concerned that this be something that, as you build, that it's something that touches your heart and comes out of your heart so that you own it in that sense; it's yours in the sense of owning it, not yours in the sense of it's your opinion. Though, of course, there's a sense in which no matter how hard we work to make to make a theology as objectively true as possible, it's still going to have that subjective element, right?

**Student:** Right, because we're dealing with people. We're dealing with fallen human beings.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. So, in that sense it is your theology versus my theology versus his. And so, there's sort of a lesson of humility in that, too. On the one side we do want to say your theology in the sense of you own it, but on the other side we want to say it's your theology and that's the best you're ever going to do. It's yours. So insofar as you are a fallen creature and limited in your perspectives and your ability to understand, then you've got to acknowledge that, that what your theology is might not be exactly right. And so, you do the best you can. You build a responsible theology, not a perfect theology. I used to always tell people there are two kinds of books in this world: perfect ones and finished ones. And the same kind of thing is true in theology. There is perfect theology and then there's your theology, and my theology, and we just have to sort of live with that. Have you met people that think their theology is "the" theology? It happens all the time. And then you get the other extreme of people saying you can't know "the" theology, "the" truth. So, you end up with this sort of where it's kind of in between those two extremes.

**Student:** So, you're really wanting people to take their theology, or what they're building, and apply it? Is that part of what you mean by "your"?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, by making it yours, right. Applying it to your life, letting it be true to who you are, letting it shape you and then you affirming it and being able to own it. I mean, what good is a theology that's just academic or just abstract? If it doesn't affect your life, if it doesn't reflect who you are, if it doesn't move you forward in life, then it's not Christian theology in the purest sense of that word. We want theology that's going to create a love for God and a love for people — the two great commandments — and that involves the whole person. So, theology has to be embraced not just thought about.

### **Question 10:** **Is it biblical to engage in formal theology?**

**Student:** Richard, we don't see in the Bible formal structures of theology, formal theological statements. How do we justify saying that we should build these kinds of theologies? Shouldn't we just read the Bible and then use that as our theology?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's great. Good. That is a hard question because you do get the impression, especially from the New Testament that the kind of theologizing talk about God that they were doing doesn't really match up with what we tend to do today as Christians. I mean, let's just sort of face it. It looks like a different sort of thing. There are two things I would just say about that. One is that what we have in the New Testament is not formal theology because the New Testament is, as it were, written out of the formal theology that the



apostles and other New Testament writers believed. These are letters, for example — the Pauline epistles — are letters addressing practical issues in the lives of those people, but they address the practical issues of those people's lives out of a system or systems, a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world that the apostle Paul had in his heart. Now he never sat down and wrote, "The Philosophy of the Apostle Paul." In fact, people want to argue that the book of Romans is that, but it's not. The book of Romans is very much oriented toward the conflicts between the Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome, and if you think about how those chapters lay out, you can see almost everything is about Jewish and Gentile controversy. And so even that is very pastoral.

But what we do in Christian theology is we take these letters, these pastoral letters — and even the Gospels are, in many respects, pastoral, and Jesus' own personal ministry was pastoral — we take that material and we try to reconstruct, as it were, what was underneath it, what was behind it. What makes sense out of these sort of pieces sticking up out of the surface of the water or the tips of the iceberg that we find in the New Testament? What makes sense of that underneath? And that's what formal theology is. It's sort of piecing together all these different pastoral things. It would be like my sermons, and when I preach I don't preach theology in a formal sense. I'm trying to preach — and even teach — I'm trying to teach to the needs of the people that are out there as good pastors would try to do, always. But back inside of me is a sort of frame of reference, a way of looking at life and a way of looking at theology that informs those applications. And unfortunately — sometimes unfortunately — in formal academic theology all we ever do is try to talk about what's under the surface — What's that frame of reference? What's that format out of which we speak in pastoral ways? And that's where I think the disconnect happens, is that people don't see the almost immediate connection between the more formal and the practical — the more informal as it were — because everybody does theology to one degree or another, and everybody has even a sort of set of beliefs, and all we're doing in formal theology is speaking to that set of beliefs and trying to refine that and mature that as much as possible.

**Student:** So, as we try to read the Bible and formulate our theology, it seems like would take a lot of wisdom to do something like that.

**Dr. Pratt:** It takes a lot. I mean, a huge amount. Because you have to take not just the New Testament which is all these pastoral tips of the iceberg sticking up out of the water, but you also take all the variety that's in the Old Testament, too, and bring that in as well. And in addition to that, as we say in this lesson in fact, you have to bring general revelation, the revelation of God in all things into play as well. So yes, creating a formal theology is very complicated, and that's why we have to talk about it to some degree. David, have you ever seen people that become so formal and so academic in their theology that they don't bring it up to the surface?

**Student:** Or they don't admit it. They don't think that they have any kind of formal theology. They sort of deny it almost, but you can tell by the way they talk and the way act that they do have a very formal theology. And so, they almost kind of betray their own person.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, maybe they haven't learned it in a school, and in that sense it's not formal. But they've got a way of looking at life. They have a "world and life view" we say often. And they do. And that's the reality that we're talking about. That's what we mean by more formal theology. And hopefully, by giving attention to that, you actually do it better. Now that doesn't always work. Sometimes you do it worse when you give attention to it. But if you can think of it like a computer, I think of formal theology or the sort of undergirding theology that's down here as sort of the default drive to which people drop when they're not being forced into answering a particular kind of question or think it a particular way by some software. It's just sort of where they naturally go back to.

My grandmother who was a Christian but not very well educated in Christianity, she had a very developed theological posture about all kinds of things. And it worked for her. She had a system by which she thought about things. Now some of the things she thought were wacky, but nevertheless she thought them. And every time a question would come up, she would drop down to that default. I mean, that was what she believed. That was her bottom line. It was a system of beliefs that she had. And so, in formal theology we do things like come up with words, jargon, that hopefully clarify things and help us do it in better ways. We interact with other people who have done this through the centuries so we can do it in better ways. We go back to the Bible in more academic ways so that we can create a better system, a more formalized and reflective system. But it's something that everybody does. It's not something that is utterly different even from the New Testament, because the writers of the New Testament had their theological belief system as well. And that's what we're trying to uncover, that kind of thing, in formal theology.

### Question 11:

**Do the academic and life orientations toward theology influence each other?**

**Student:** Richard, in the video you talked about the academic orientation toward theology and then the life orientation — one being more formal, that being academic, and one being more practical being life orientation. It would seem that academic informs the life orientation, but couldn't you reverse the process ?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, well that's the way most people would think of it. They think in terms of you have to have to formal theological academic approach much like what was Aquinas and Hodge — we used their definitions of theology to illustrate that — and that's the source from which you get practical theology. And then you would say that the more practical orientation, or life orientation that we found in Ames' and Frames' definition of theology is really derivative. It comes from the more academic. Well, to run the risk of losing my job since I do academic theology, it is true that academic leads to practical, but what we often miss is that the practical realities lead to better academic, too.

It goes both ways. It has to go both ways because theories are like painting a room. You know how we have this expression where you can paint yourself into a corner and it's just because you haven't had enough experience to realize that if you paint this way or that way, you're going to end up not being able to step out of the room without stepping on the paint? Well that's sort of the way it is in theology. People can think themselves into all kinds of corners and move themselves sort of logically to different conclusions that when you deal with it in real life you begin to realize, wait a minute, maybe that's not exactly the direction I should have gone. And so, the academic side does lead us and should guide us insofar as it's true to the Bible, it should guide our lives. But living life in the light of the Bible also then comes back and informs the academic. And this is why these two orientations are so very important, that we not allow ourselves to sort of drift just into one or drift just into the other, but that both are important, both the academic orientation and the life orientation.

In some ways I think more recent theologians have been more toward the life application or the life orientation represented by Ames and John Frame, but they've done that more or less in reaction to sort of old ways of doing theology. And we also always have to remember that people like Charles Hodge and Aquinas, they had other writings, too, and they had life that was much bigger than what they did in the systematic theologies, or in Aquinas' case, "The Summa" or his other formal theological writings. In fact, many times people in the old days in very early Christianity, maybe even in the medieval period, they would do theology in the form of prayers and songs. They were theologians, they were academicians, they taught in schools, but they would write their theology in other styles. And what that reflects is the fact that they were getting their academic theology from more than just academic reflection; they were getting it from life experience. And the fact is that even the most academic person is going to get a lot of feedback from life into the academic pursuit.

Now that feedback may not be good, it may not be wholesome, it may not be very rich because academic people tend to be withdrawn from real life issues and from especially larger ones and more challenging ones. I mean, what kind of person normally spends the amount of time you have to studying ancient languages and sitting in the library, except what we pejoratively call a bookworm? You know, a bookworm is a person that often tends to be inadequate in social interaction and tends not to be very well prepared for dealing with the larger scope of life, and so they sort of retreat — that was me — you sort of retreat to books. You still have life but it's a very narrow vision of life that then feeds into academy. So, what you want is a broad life experience, broad life orientation in theology that can feed up into the academy.

### **Question 12:** **How can we broaden our orientation toward theology?**

**Student:** Well, how do you break out of that? Because I have many friends who are like you who are very academic and have this very

**narrow life experience. How do you break out of that and broaden your life experience?**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a great question because I think that in many respects I think it's a matter of becoming self-conscious first, and that's why we even set it up in this lesson this way, that there's this academic orientation and life orientation, just to sort of raise the issue that people do this. And well-known and gifted theologians go in both directions. And what that does then is it sort of calls each individual to say, well, what's my natural propensity? Honestly, most people that are watching Third Millennium videos like this one are probably more toward the academic, at least at this stage in their lives. They may not be there their whole lives but at this moment they are. So, it's a call to them to reassess that and to say, "Am I over-emphasizing the academic side of theology?" And you do that simply by becoming aware of who you are, and then in some respects, working against what your natural propensities are.

I know sometimes we tell people a lot, you know, find your passion and then do it for God, find your gifts and do it for God. And all that's true and that's good and nothing wrong with that. But there's a sense in which we also have to discover our weaknesses and strengthen ourselves. When people do weightlifting, they don't just strengthen the strong muscles they have. They work very hard to get the weak muscles up to par. And that's kind of the way it is in theology, too. So if a person tends to be very practical in their orientation — I don't have time for those theological books, I don't have time for systematic theology, I don't have time for reading those highfaluting books with all those big words in it because I love Jesus too much to be involved in that — well they need to understand loving Jesus, at least to their students, involves getting into that kind of thing, because it's a rich heritage of academic theology.

But if your natural propensity is the other way, then you've got to push yourself, you have to push yourself to do the other things, and that means doing things that are hard and risky. And it might be even psychologically challenging to a person that's academic in his or her orientation, like exposing yourself to real pain and suffering in the world, like working with poor people, like traveling to other countries and becoming involved in short-term missions, to force yourself into risky and difficult environments so that you can begin to see the need for theology to be life-giving and not just intellectually satisfying. I mean, have you known people that just look at theology as intellectually satisfying and that's it?

**Student:** When I look in the mirror every day.

**Dr. Pratt:** Oops. I wouldn't have asked you that question if I'd thought that. But yeah, I think that's a serious issue. And so, if that really is who you are, then it's very important as you prepare for Christian leadership not to allow that propensity to continue. I mean, it's my orientation, too. The last thing I want to do is be uncomfortable, but that's the first thing I need to do. And I can't tell you how when I finished school and I began to do mission trips a lot and go to different parts of the world and see real seriously difficult places — like in communist countries and things like that in the old days when

communists were still communists and Christians were still Christians in those parts of the world — I found that extremely challenging. But I also found it extremely life-giving, and it changed the way I looked at all theology. The academic didn't become less important to me, but the life application, the practical orientation, the life orientation, became much more important to me. And it did have that kind of feedback effect as we were talking about, that it began to challenge what I was emphasizing.

You know, we all have our favorite drums to beat, right? And branches of the church have their favorite drums to beat, and usually those drums that we constantly beat just sort of fit nicely with our corporate personality, because “birds of a feather flock together,” and so you tend to have people with the same kind of personality gathering in churches and so get this sort of corporate mentality, and it's really a monster by that time when everybody you're around is just like you in their personality and their orientations, and so then it becomes, as it were, codified and authorized by your community, your local church let's say, or your denomination. That's when it gets very serious and when we have to as Christian leaders break out of that and not be people who completely comply with the norm of our community, because that usually does little more than just confirm us in our own myopic views of the world.

### **Question 13:**

#### **Is formal theology the best way to discover truth?**

**Student:** So, I understand the value of seeking truth and trying to know rightly, but is formal theology really the best way to go about doing this? I mean, can't we find truth and these sort of things through prayer and devotion?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yes, we can, and in fact, we must. How's that for a short answer? There is a danger when we overemphasize the sort of intellectual side of theology. It's a very serious danger. Because what we tend to do is look at the Bible, which is God's special revelation, and then start drawing all of these implications from it and creating this really closed system where we are relying — and it's possible to do this — relying too much on the intellect. Now I say that with hesitation because we live in a day today, at least in Western culture, where the intellect is sort of demoted and emotions and the like, passions, are raised up higher than they used to be. If I were saying this 25 years ago I wouldn't even have had to say that, but now I do. I have to say there's a value in what's happening in what we call the postmodern world where passion and emotion are raised up more on par with the intellectual.

But at the same time, when people begin to study theology and when they go to school and things like that for theology, they tend to be told that's really not what's important, what's important is the intellectual. So, let me just talk about what the danger of the intellectual is. The danger of the intellectual approach is that you look at the Bible and you begin to then use your logical reasoning powers to sort of figure everything out. And the fact is the Bible really only gives us very broad parameters of what we're to believe

and what we're to do with our lives as Christians. And in order to get more than just broad parameters, what we tend to do in an intellectual model is sort of fill in the space between the parameters with logic, with logical conclusions, with inferences. And that's where the arguments start happening. By in large, evangelical Christians don't disagree over that many parameters that the Bible sets. I mean, they do some but basically, we don't. But we start disagreeing over how you work this out in life because some people are working it this way logically and other people are working it this way logically, and they end up at cross-purposes, and that's where the struggles come.

And I think a lot of that comes from the fact that we're not willing to draw from the other resources that God has given us. He has given us the Bible, his special revelation which is authoritative in all things, and he has given us our intellect to work our way through the Bible by good and necessary deduction, we're told, is the way to do this. And that's fine. But the Bible also tells us that God reveals himself in what we call general revelation, and that's the revelation of God in everything including what you're talking about: prayer, and devotion, being quiet with God, all those kinds of things; to use psychological terms, intuitions, your premonitions, all those kinds of things. They also involve us in the ways of God and help, as it were, fill in those parameters. So rather than thinking in terms of rigorous logic doing that all the time, sometimes it does have to be the intuitional, it has to be the feelings you have about things; we sometimes will say, the leading of God, or we might sometimes say, the convictions that we have. And you may not even be able to logically analyze all those convictions. They just may be there by the work of Holy Spirit in your life and they come from being connected to God by devotion and by prayer and by worship, those kinds of things. And that's a part of general revelation that helps us a lot.

I know that there are friends of mine — and I used to be this way a lot more than I am now, although I still tend to be this way at times — who just thought that they could figure out exactly what the Bible said about almost every single issue and what practical implications that had by simply reasoning, reasoning, reasoning, reasoning. Now you can imagine what those people were like. They were very cold, they were very dogmatic, they were very sure of themselves, they didn't have many questions left, and they weren't very sensitive to the fact that other people might be being called by God to other directions and other paths and other ways. And so, you'll often get this, say, in missions programs. You'll get groups, and they come to me sometimes, missions committees, and they say, "Look, we have these hundreds and hundreds of applications for support for missions. How do we decide which ones to support?" They're looking for a rule. They're looking for a principle. And they say, you know, "Jesus tells us to do this, and he tells us to do this, and now, help us figure out the logical way of analyzing and vetting out all these different things so we can throw these applications away and pick the right ones." And I just have to look at them and say, now look, the Bible gives you big parameters here and you don't want to support a missionary who's a known axe murderer. That would be against the Bible.

And sort of moving in a little bit, you can also see that God has brought these applications to you so that should give them some priority since they're in your pot here

that you're talking about. But ultimately, it's going to mean your committee has got to come to the point that you're on your knees before God and you're seeking the conviction or the leaning, or the intuition, of Holy Spirit as to which of these has priority, because most of the time when you examine one mission or another mission, it's six of one and a half-dozen of the other. I mean, you can see that this is a very valuable thing, and this is a very valuable thing, and how in the world are we going to decide this apart from us feeling called by God to have this focus, so we're going to take this one and not take that one? And that can only come as we devote ourselves to prayer and to solitude and fasting with the Lord.

### **Question 14:**

#### **Should we evaluate general revelation in terms of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos?**

**Student:** Now you mention general revelation as something that's sort of a parameter or something that helps fill in the gaps. Now don't people go overboard and start to do everything rationally and intellectually even when it comes to general revelation? Because that's a really entirely different category when it comes to what God has given us.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. Because sometimes when people hear the word general revelation they're thinking only in terms of what you can see in nature around you, like going out into the woods and seeing a big tree and saying, "Oh, this makes me feel close to God," or seeing a mountain and saying, "Isn't God great since he made a great mountain." And that's true. Looking at the clouds, not seeing images of Jesus, but looking at the clouds and being amazed at their beauty, things like that, that's all true. So, nothing wrong with that. And then you get other groups — and this would be my tradition, too — that say things like even scientific reflection on nature is a part of general revelation, which it is. And that if we're understanding the world properly through science, computers, technologies, those kinds of things, then we are learning more about the ways of God, the ways God wants us to live, and to think, and to believe, and to feel, and things like that. But once again, even in those areas, even in nature, you can highly over-intellectualize it to the point that you paint yourself into an intellectual corner.

And you can do things like... Well, here's a great example of this; the recent church growth movement. The recent church growth movement has basically taken the science of sociology and has said, look, we can do all these statistical surveys, we can do all this reporting, and on the basis of this we can fill in the gaps of what the Bible tells us about church planting. So, the Bible tells us we should start churches. I don't of anyone who would disagree with that, okay? But what kind of churches? And where? And what should they be like? And how big should they be? And what should be your priorities? Well then, the natural tendency for the intellectual Christian is to do that in scientific ways. Well, the principle of homogeneity is one of them. If you want a growing church

then you've got to have people who are alike. Okay? So then you adopt that — you over analyze and you adopt that principle, and then you go for it with the sense that this is what God wants us to do. Just because homogeneous churches grow doesn't mean that homogeneity is the way that God wants it to be necessarily. Homogenous churches are not necessarily the right way to do it, especially if you end up excluding people on the basis of that principle of homogeneity. But it's all based on this sort of intellectualized, scientific approach.

And so, we do have to be very careful that even when it comes to looking at general revelation, the intuition, the conviction, the leading of the Holy Spirit, the personal ministry of Holy Spirit, is extremely important, and, as you were saying, the devotional side of this is extremely important. Because I think that when you start analyzing, how does God want us to make our local church look — what does he want it to look like — there's nothing wrong with it being specialized, but the answer to that question can't come simply from the Bible, because it just sets broad parameters, nor can it come simply from intellectual analysis of scientific data like sociological data and things like that. It also has to come from, again, that leading of Holy Spirit, which comes only through prayer and devotion.

### Question 15:

#### Do you have to be smart to do theology?

**Student:** Now Richard I get the impression that to do any kind of theology, whether it be more academic or more life-oriented, that you just have to be smart. You know, that a lot of people think, well, that just leaves me out because I just can't do it. How do we help those kinds of people?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, it's sad that that's the impression people get, because it is the impression people get, honestly, that many times people who study theology the way that we're doing it here in this curriculum, they often get the impression that they can't use fifty-dollar words, they can't use six syllable words and quote Latin phrases and things like that, that they're not going to be able to get true theology. And there's just nothing that could be further from the truth than that. In fact, I guess what I would want to say to a person that raised that question is this: first, don't be impressed. Don't be impressed by people who use big words and who quote Latin phrases and things like that, because often that's just a façade that's hiding a great deal of insecurity, and that people learn how to use and play this theological game among academics. Typically, academic theologians have one audience and one audience in mind, and that is other academics. And they want to practice and they want to be respected within their peer community, and so they work according to certain genres, and they work according to certain standards of living and of speaking and of handling materials. And that's simply not the case. I mean, I'm sure that the apostle Peter was a very gifted theologian, but he was terribly uneducated. Now we'd have to say that the apostle Paul, on the other hand, was



highly educated. So there's nothing wrong with being intellectual. But notice how the apostle Paul is, as Peter had to admit it as he wrote in his epistles that some things that Paul says are very hard to understand. Well that's the illustration there, you see. Here's poor Peter sitting over here going, "Well, oh look at me, I'm no academician. But Paul was a great rabbi trained up in the great schools of Jerusalem, so, you know, who am I?" But that's not what he did. Instead, when he had his epistles written, he said, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ" just like Paul did, because he had authority and he was understanding the truth, too.

So, Christian theology is for people of all kinds of different backgrounds, and some of it can be more academic, and some of it can be nonacademic. But what I have found is that those that tend to succeed in more formal theology with an academic background often tend to be inadequate, and they're unable to do theology well. They may sound as if they're doing it well, but they're not. And the way you can tell that is by looking to see what kind of fruit their theology produces in their lives as well as in the lives of people that follow them. Because sometimes academic theologians are protected from view, they're not put in fishbowls, and so you sort of don't know the dark side of a professional theologian, and so they seem so impressive. They're saying the right things and they're saying it so well, and they're saying it so forcefully, and those kinds of things. If you knew their lives you might not be so impressed. But if you can't see the fruit in their lives because they're sort of kept away often in the academic closet, then look at the lives of the people that follow their teachings. And what I think you often find is that some of what we would call the best theologians, the followers of some of the best theologians are just flat out hard to live with, and their lives are not full of joy, you don't find the fruit of Holy Spirit in their lives, you don't find them serving people. Instead, what you find is they're taking again — what I put in quotes — "good theology" and being terrible people. But the reality is that good theology produces good people, and so when you find so-called good theology turning out bad people consistently — there are always exceptions — but consistently, if it happens consistently, then you need to question whether or not that theology is really good, maybe there's something messed up about this.

I can give you an example. In my own branch of the church there's a lot of talk about the need to focus on God, and this is in reaction to humanism, so we sort of understand that; you know, we need to be theocentric and we need to exalt God up and make him bigger and higher and help people to understand how great he is and those kinds of things, none of which is wrong. That's absolutely true. And if you think humanity is on top of the heap, well then you need to understand God is on top of the heap and not humanity. But what often comes with that is this exaltation of God in a way that the Bible doesn't exalt God, by denigrating people. You see, the Bible does not denigrate the image of God to exalt God. Now it denigrates sinners, no doubt about that, and especially vile sinners, but it does not denigrate people in order to exalt God. But what you often find with academic theologians, — sort of again painting themselves in a corner here — to exalt God, we have to denigrate, and ignore, and not think about, and not honor people. And so what kind of people do you find them to be? Unloving, uncaring, unthoughtful, not servants, but rather boisterous, and prevailing, and pushy and those kinds of things, and uncaring

about their neighbors and those sorts of things. So that's not good theology gone bad in practice. That's bad theology. Because the Bible tells us that you exalt God by properly exalting people, or to put it the way Jesus put it, you can't love God without loving people. They go hand in hand. They're a photo finish. Now, loving people second place to a loving God, but they're a photo finish. And that's why often I'll tell people things like these, I'll say "Proper theocentricism without anthropocentrism is not proper theism at all." So, to be theocentric in a way that's not also human-centric — second place but nevertheless centered — is not to be properly theocentric. I mean, that's just the reality of it. And when you find then that theologians are hailed as being great theologians because of their ability to communicate, or they write lots of books, or they have all these great deep, heavy thoughts, and yet you see their lives with the lives of their students not bringing forth the fruit of love for people, then it's not misapplication, it's bad theology to begin with.

**Student:** Yeah, I mean I can even think of having studied theology for a while now, even talking with people who would classify themselves as not as smart, say, that they sometimes just have this depth of insight that sometimes I don't even have because I focus on so much on the books, that that intuition that we talked about, Holy Spirit leading, has given them almost a greater understanding of who God is than I have.

**Dr. Pratt:** Absolutely. I mean, you know, it's always true — I've found this to be so true — that when you go out into the church and you find people who are godly, who are living holy lives, especially older people, they often have better insights into the Bible than the academically trained young person. Now they may not have the big words to stick on it, they may not have the fifty-dollar tags to put on it, they may not be very articulate about it, but they sort of sit there very quietly and then, every once in a while, open their mouths and say something that calms the whole room, straightens everything out. And it's really the ones that are all wrapped up in the academic that have entered into the artifice; they're entered into this artificial world that they think is the real world but it's not. This is why medical internships are so important. It's one thing to study the books of medicine. It's another thing to practice medicine. And you know how in the fables of medical school where as soon as doctors begin to study different diseases, they suddenly get all those diseases because their world is so oriented toward the books that they're studying, the data that they're studying, that they can't look at real life again. They're afraid to touch door handles. Every time they have a pain in their back they think they're having cancer. Or every time they have a chest pain they think it's a heart attack or a brain aneurysm or something. And the fact is, maybe they are having a brain aneurysm, but probably not at the numbers that they think they are. And so, you realize that this paranoid medical student is actually not in reality. That's the point. They've got all this information and they can't juggle the information well enough with real life, they can't bring it to bear yet. And life has not influenced them enough yet to sort of calm them down about these things so they go sort of crazy about the data that they have.

Well theologians do the same thing, especially young ones. They do exactly the same thing. They get all these patterns of thought and they start working on them, and they start looking around themselves and over-analyzing life, thinking that they can figure out what's actually out there from the book out. But the fact is that just like a doctor goes into practice and it takes years to figure out if somebody comes with a headache you give them an aspirin, that's what you do. You don't go do an MRI on their head unless it's a serious headache and has gone on for quite a while and the aspirin doesn't take care of it. Go figure, okay? And the same kind of thing is true with theologians. We want to pull out the MRI machine and start opening skulls up and things like that on the basis of a couple of years of study in a school. And that's seriously dangerous. So, I think we have to be very clear that just because a person can make good grades in a school, just because they can memorize a lot of data doesn't make them good theologians. In fact, people often who can't memorize or articulate lots of data are the better theologians.

### **Question16:**

#### **How do biblical studies, history and theology, and practical theology interrelate?**

**Student:** Now Richard, you divide doing theology into three main divisions: biblical theology, then you have historical theology, and then you also have practical theology. Now doesn't it seem like biblical theology should be premier, the primary one, and then the other two undergird and help us to understand but still are secondary?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, what value do they have? Well, let's remember what they are. They are biblical studies; biblical theology is a more technical thing, so it's Bible study basically, including Old Testament and New Testament. And then the second big category is history and theology, so that would include things like church history and systematic theology, doctrines of the church. And then the third category is the practical theology and, you know, whatever comes under that; there are lots of different things. And there is, of course, a sense in which, because we are Protestants we want our theology, all of it, to come from and be in accord with the Bible. So I guess there's a sense in which we want to say yes, because the Bible is our ultimate authority, we want that biblical studies should have a lot of attention. And in fact, they do. Studying the Old Testament and New Testament, traditionally speaking, has been sort of the heartbeat of what you do in a seminary. And then that historical and doctrines should flow from that, and then practical should flow from the doctrines and the history. Alright, so let's just admit that yes, in this sort of artificial ideal world, that might actually be possible, that you come into a school or you start studying theology as a blank slate, and the first thing you do is you learn the Bible, and then the next thing you do is you learn some church history and theology, and then the next thing you do is you learn how to apply it. Now that's a sort of blank slate approach. In fact, I was involved in a seminary where they had revised their whole curriculum to be just like that, that the first year was Bible only, second year was theology and church history only, and the third year was practical studies only, because

they had that kind of Cartesian building model of one block on top of another on top of another. So, let me ask you, what's wrong with that approach?

**Student:** Nobody comes as a blank slate.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right, exactly. Everybody, before they ever start studying the Bible, has already come with a lot of practical Christianity and a lot of tradition and a lot of history and doctrine whether they realize it or not, right? I mean, if you were brought up in the West, you've got all kinds of theological doctrines floating around in your brain because you grew up in the West. Or if you grew up somewhere else you got another set of them. And if you've been a Christian for more than a day or two, you've got all kinds of practical theology going on in you. And if you were brought up in the church then you've got a ton of practical theology in you. And all of that is not simply derived from the Bible studies that you're doing — the biblical studies department, as it were — but rather it feeds into it. And this was my objection when this curriculum was brought up. I said people don't learn this way. Let's just get the Bible straight and then let's move to theology and history and then let's move to practicality. Nobody does that. And to have a curriculum integrate all three of these along the way so they kind of bounce off each other constantly is very important, too, because it reflects the way we actually live. I mean, does anybody study car mechanics without ever having seen a car? Usually not. They usually have experienced cars in many ways and they have all these presuppositions that they bring to the study of the car. And the same kind of thing is true with the Bible. We have all these things that we have practiced and believed. Are they all bad or are they all good, those things that we practiced and believed that we bring to the Bible?

**Student:** Yes.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yes. That's right. Some are bad and some are good, and they're all kind of bad and they're all kind of good, probably, in some way or another. And so, it's not as if we should walk into this formal study of theology and now let's just get rid of everything we've ever believed so we can really get it the way it actually is from the Bible. But rather, we've got to bring what God has given because some of the things that we learn from practical experience and from history of the church and doctrines and things, they're gifts from God, and they actually enable us to understand the Bible better. So why would you ever want to get rid of those? I mean, those are gifts from the Lord. I am glad that I was brought up in the church. Now, it twisted me in some ways, but I am glad that I as a little child memorized Bible verses and got theology. I tell people this all the time, even though I was school until I was thirty years old studying theology and studying the Bible, I can tell you quite frankly that I learned much more about the Bible from my childhood Sunday school, from my vacation Bible school days than I've ever learned studying as an adult. Much more. And all of that background work that I did in my church and practical Christian living as well as, you know, this is what we believe in our church, these are our doctrines, all those things equipped me to do what I do now which is biblical studies primarily. And so, it's not bad. It's good. So yes, there's a sense in which we do want to give priority to the Bible department or biblical studies areas, but we must never allow ourselves to be fooled into thinking that we simply derive the others from that. These all

integrate with each other. And we've already talked about that — webs of multiple reciprocities. And these three are web of multiple reciprocities, too. So when you study theology it's good always to sort of be moving from one to the other and never allowing one to have utter priority over the others.

### **Question 17:**

#### **Why do seminaries have a hard time teaching practical theology?**

**Student:** Now Richard, I've been a seminary student, and from what I've learned from the practical side of things, being preaching or theology or ministry or whatever, it actually turns into more of an academic, intellectual pursuit which would fit more in the biblical studies side of things.

**Dr. Pratt:** Or the theology side, whatever.

**Student:** Right. People just tend to run away from that. Why is that?

**Dr. Pratt:** I think it's because we have a basic model of education that is classroom oriented. What are you going to do if all you do is come in and you have this medieval model of what education is where you have the expert professor, doctor, come into the room, and he functions as a human data transfer unit, which is what we're talking about here, where he or she stands up and reads from notes, and then the students are human Xerox machines from the medieval period writing their notes from the lecture as fast as they can and then regurgitating that onto an exam. I mean, apart from the fact that we have some people that are doing it differently, that basic model has not changed yet. And so, when you have nothing more or little more than a medieval classroom, that now uses perhaps other media and things like that to add to or distract a little bit from the boring professor, when the professor is still functioning in the classroom basically and fundamentally as a data transfer unit then nothing else can happen in the class without taking away from what you think ought to be done.

And so, what I'm convinced of is this, that the value-added feature of a learning community, like living people in a seminary together or a Bible school together where they actually meet together with human beings, is that human element. It's the meeting together. The basic data of a solid theological education can be transferred much more effectively by many other means: multimedia, books, whatever, you name it. The transfer of data can happen by other means. The value-added feature of being in a school is that you have a human being in front of you who allows his or her humanness to be shown, and they get out from behind the podium and enter into the lives of the students. Now so long as the requirement of the classroom is data transfer, that professor will never be able to get out from behind that podium very much without everyone feeling as if they're getting cheated. Well you've been in classes like that, right? Well, you say to yourself, why isn't he giving us anything? He's just talking about his life and things like that.

That's because you're still depending on that event in the classroom as the data transfer time. And especially in practical theology where you do practicums, where you actually take class time to discuss real issues of life, or you actually take field trips and things like that, so rather than talking about Islam, you go meet Muslims. You have Muslims come to the class. Or rather than talking about a funeral, you actually go to funerals. You go to the funeral home and you talk to the morticians there and ask them what goes on in here so you can understand what goes on. Now a lot of people in an academic setting would say, well that's a waste of time. And why do they call it a waste of time?

**Student:** Because it's not data transfer.

**Dr. Pratt:** It's not data-heavy. That's right.

**Student:** It's experimental.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right, exactly. But we all know from life that life experiences are very formative. David, you have a child. You have two girls, right?

**Student:** Mm Hmm.

**Dr. Pratt:** And so, you've had babies — well not you, but your wife, you and your wife. Did you read any books before you had the first baby? You didn't? Well you should have. Most people do. You didn't read any books about birth and babies?

**Student:** No, it was all from people that I knew. I learned...

**Dr. Pratt:** Well I'll bet she read a book or two.

**Student:** Yes. Well... right.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's the difference between you having the baby and her having the baby.

**Student:** Right.

**Dr. Pratt:** Okay, but if your wife were here, though, I would guarantee that she would say that the book learning was good, but it was the experience of it that really formed her. And I would more than guess that for the second child she probably didn't read a book, unless there was some special need or some special problem.

**Student:** Right.

**Dr. Pratt:** And the reason for that is because once you go through the experience of it, you begin to realize that other things, not heavy data transfer events like reading a book, are really very heavily laden with data. See, that's the deception. We don't think that going to visit a funeral home would be heavily laden with data. It is heavily laden with data. It's just different kind of data. And we would not think that going to a hospital and

being a chaplain and spending hours and hours and hours walking the halls of the hospital would really be informing us and shaping us, but the fact is that it does and much more powerfully and much more effectively than sitting in a classroom talking what it means to minister to people in the hospital. See, that's the reality. And so, we have this kind of artificial model of thinking that classroom is the data transfer event and that other things outside of class are not really important enough to be brought into the academy. But happily, that model is being broken.

The other thing I think that's even more important to me, frankly, because I think that part of the model is being increased is — remember how we talked earlier in the lesson the difference between orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos? Well, becoming a classroom that's more practical usually means a focus on skill developments, which is praxis — orthopraxis, how can I preach better? So, we have to have labs for that. How can I counsel better? We have to have a few labs for that. So, you're trying to learn skills. What's ignored in a typical theological education is the emotional development — the orthopathos. And I can tell you this, that's not ignored in military training. I often liken theological education to boot camp, the initial training session of a young soldier. And you know how much — I don't know if maybe you've been through it, or if you haven't you've seen videos of it or movies of it — you know how highly emotional it is and how they work very hard to effect or affect the person's emotions by breaking them down, then giving them a sense of pride and accomplishment and a willingness to obey and that sort of reflex emotions to obey the commands, and those kinds of things. All of this is working on the affect, it's all working on the orthopathos in the military environment.

Well, we don't do that much in theological education. We are focused on the orthodoxy, and then when you break the traditional mold you go over to skill development, orthopraxis, but orthopathos still remains largely outside of the view. And so, students are not given the opportunity to have their hearts broken by the suffering that goes on in hospitals. And lots of students come to theological education and go through all three years of their academic programs and they become ordained ministers without ever seeing, without ever being with one single person who dies in their presence. Now I don't know how a person could become a minister of the gospel and never have held the hand of a dying person at the last moment when they go from this life into the next. I don't know how you could do that, because that's what it's all about. How you minister to people as their children are dying, as their children are in such pain and suffering that they're screaming and writhing in agony, how can you deal with that if your heart has not already been broken by that? And that's why, in counseling programs, they often do these kinds of, sort of, overload stimulation on the emotional level where they get you to the point that you are emotionally broken and then rebuilt up. But that doesn't happen normally in a theological education. You've been to seminary. Has it happened to you there? Purposefully? Maybe it happened but did it happen purposefully?

**Student: No, never purposefully. Now I've been thinking, as we go through these series then, as we learn how to build our theology, what would you recommend experientially, "orthopathetically," if you will,**

that we should do as we listen to these lectures, as we get that data transfer?

**Dr Pratt:** Yeah, because in a multimedia program like what we're doing here, there are some emotional elements and we're trying to bring that to bear as much as we possibly can, but it's largely data transfer. In fact, what we're hoping is that the things we do are going to allow teachers in schools to be free from the data transfer responsibility. See, that's kind of the goal. It's to sort of enable them to do that more easily so they can spend their time on other sorts of things. And for students to do those kinds of things less intensively, maybe on their own free time or at their own schedule or own pace, so that they can be involved in other things as well.

I guess the word that comes to my mind — at least it's been very important to me — is that we don't find ourselves really developing orthopathically, orthopathetically, unless we are risking. I really do believe that's true. You know, pain causes growth and growth causes pain. Okay, that's sort of the way it is. Tension causes growth — psychological growth, spiritual growth — and spiritual growth causes tension. And so, you have to put yourself, you have to voluntarily step into situations where life is a mess. Now, you know, often our lives can be messes without having to look for it. Let's admit that. But at the same time, when you're a student sometimes you're sort of isolated from all that. And so rather than waiting until the end of an academic career, I want to start suggesting to people that they put themselves in risky, tension-filled, horrifying, shocking, as well as elating and wondrous and magnificent and just overwhelmingly joyful environments and that they seek to minister in those environments. What does it mean to be a minister of the gospel if you cannot weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice? And now if you've never done it, you can't. What does it mean to say that our religion, the pure form of our religion is visiting widows and orphans and prisoners when we've never done it? And I can't tell you how many people that I know go through theological education and go into the ministry and have never been in one prison their whole lives.

Now I can also tell you from my experience that prison life can be very shocking; not that I've been in prison but I've visited many. And one of the most dramatic examples of that was visiting a prison in Siberia. Now you can imagine prisons in the Western world are very nice compared to a prison in outer Siberia near Yakutsk, Siberia. And just to walk into that place with another Christian minister who led chapel and just to see how those men lived, what their lives were actually like, brought to me a life transformation on the orthopathic level that I could never have gotten from reading a book, I don't care how carefully I read it. And it's very important for people who are preparing themselves for gospel ministry to be people who have risked their lives. And if they have not risked their lives for the sake of the gospel, they have no business being out there proclaiming it as a well-informed and well-taught and mature Christian. That's why in many places like in China they don't allow you to be a pastor unless you've already been to prison. It's not that you have to go to seminary. You have to do that, too, but you have to go to seminary and you have to have been in prison. And they do this largely because — I'm not suggesting you make that a requirement — but they do that because they understand, because they've had enough prison experience in the church to know that this is what



really forms people. It's the nonacademic, it's the non-classroom experience that really brings perspective to all the things that we do in a classroom. And so, my suggestion practically, if that's what you're asking me, is get out of the classroom. There's plenty of ways to risk your life for Jesus and to lose it so you can find it and then minister the gospel to people around the world.

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**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*.