

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

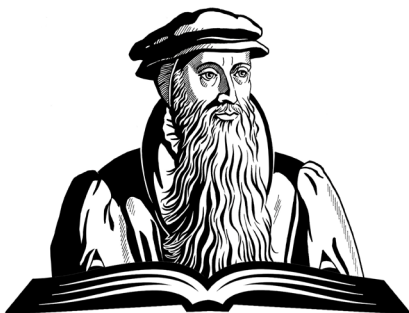
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1:

INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Lecture 1

INTRODUCTION (1): METHODOLOGY



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 1

Introduction:

- 1. Methodology**
2. Creeds and Confessions

The Doctrine of First Principles:

3. Scripture
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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 1

Introduction (1): Methodology

Have you ever put together a jigsaw puzzle? If so, then you know that a completed puzzle usually makes a picture of something, perhaps a beautiful landscape with mountains and pastures, forests, rivers, and with lots of details like trees and animals and blue sky and clouds above it all. But when you first open the box you discover lots of little pieces of various shapes, each one having only a tiny part of the picture printed on them. Every piece is important, but your goal, of course, is to figure out how the pieces fit together in order to form the whole picture.

The Bible provides us with all of the doctrines that we are to believe and all of the duties that God requires of us. We need the whole of Scripture to have the complete picture of what that includes. As you read each chapter of the Bible, you discover pieces of what we are to believe on a wide range of doctrines. Those pieces connect and fit together with truths that you read about elsewhere in the Bible.

The purpose of these modules or courses on systematic theology is to equip you with a deeper understanding of how the pieces—that is, the individual truths drawn from passages of Scripture—fit together to form the complete, coherent, whole body of doctrine that the Christian is to believe. So if you wish to gain a clearer grasp of biblical doctrine, these lectures aim to benefit you. The seven modules that comprise this series on systematic theology are introductory, not exhaustive, but they are intended to furnish you with a foundation that you can build upon in your further studies.

Since these modules are designed to take you through the whole of what we call “systematic theology,” defining those two terms may help clarify our pursuits. “Theology” has to do with the study of the knowledge of God and all that He has revealed for us to believe and do. One of the best definitions was provided by Petrus van Maastricht, a seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, who said that “Theology is the doctrine of living unto God through Christ.” So theology addresses both our thinking and our living.

The word “systematic” is related to the word “system.” It refers to the fact that the Bible contains a whole system of doctrine. As we will see in the remainder of this lecture, systematic theology organizes the themes of Christian doctrine by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and providing an ordered presentation of what the Bible teaches on each doctrine.

So when you put the two words together, systematic theology answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach about each individual doctrine?” Systematic theology assembles and collates the biblical material into coherent and logical categories in a manner that can be clearly taught, comprehended, and retained. So as you can see, every Christian must have an interest in

the study of systematic theology.

But before we start laying out an overview of all that we hope to cover in this series of seven modules, let me begin by illustrating how these courses may be of real help to you. Consider what the Bible teaches about the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. When you open to the Gospel of John, you read in the first verse, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” You note that Christ, who is called the Word in that passage, is God. Christ is God. Reading further in John, you find that many more passages teach the same doctrinal truth, confirming that the Lord Jesus Christ is truly God. And as you widen your search to include the whole Bible, you discover many places that reinforce this truth, each text providing another piece.

But you also read in the Scriptures about Christ being born, growing in wisdom and stature, eating, drinking, even weeping, sleeping, dying on the cross, ultimately shedding human blood, and ultimately of his body being buried and raised on the third day. Again, you discover that many passages from Genesis to Revelation confirm that Jesus was truly man.

So systematic theology looks at the whole Bible, comparing Scripture with Scripture, and considers all of the pieces that God provided regarding any one single doctrine, and puts them all together into one coherent whole, so that we can see all that God has revealed about any one doctrinal truth, like, in this example, the person of Christ.

In the fourth module, you will learn more of the details about the doctrine of the person of Christ and discover that the Bible teaches that Christ is one person—not two persons, but one person with two distinct natures—both a divine nature and a human nature. And you’ll learn why this truth is so important, where we must distinguish it from false doctrine, and how it has huge practical implications for the Christian life.

The first two lectures of this course, both this one and the next one, provide an introduction to the whole of all seven modules. The remainder of this first module is devoted to the first of the seven sections of systematic theology—what we call “the doctrine of first principles,” which covers the first doctrinal truths that are necessary for studying theology. We’ll begin to take up the doctrine of first principles in our third lecture and in the remaining lectures of this course.

When you approach the study of any subject, it’s helpful to start with considering the method that you will use in your studies. So for example, the study of biology usually begins with discussing what is called the scientific method. You begin with a question, then you have an hypothesis—kind of an educated guess, then you do scientific experiments and use empirical observation to either confirm or deny that hypothesis, reaching a conclusion. So for example, to determine when water turns from a liquid state to solid ice or, on the other end, to vapor or gas, what do you do? Well, you cool it down or you heat it up to discover at what temperature it freezes or boils. That method works for science, but not for other areas of study. But you can see that method is important. So in this first lecture, we will lay out the basis for the methodology used in systematic theology generally, but especially focusing on the particular method that we will be employing throughout these courses.

So we begin in this address with the scriptural basis for the method of systematic theology. And we’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the method that we’ll be employing. Paul wrote, in 1 Timothy 6, the latter part of verse 2 through verse 4, and he said this, “These things teach and exhort. If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing.” Well, this passage provides warrant for our definition of theology as “the doctrine of living unto God through Christ.” Notice four components that are

included in this passage.

First of all, when Paul says “these things,” he’s referring to the truths that he’s been teaching, not only in the preceding verses, but more generally in all of his apostolic teaching. He is pointing us, in other words, to the Scriptures. The content of the Bible furnishes us with divine truth, and we are called upon to see, know, receive, and believe what God has said. So the first component of our method includes grounding all of our doctrine in the Scriptures themselves. Our ultimate authority is God’s Word.

Secondly, and next, he tells Timothy that he is to use these truths to “teach and exhort” others. The word “doctrine” means “teaching.” Notice that he says those doctrines are both for teaching and exhorting. So teaching informs the mind, whereas exhortation addresses practice, or application of truth to the life. So the second component of our method includes a doctrinal exposition—that is, identifying and defining and clarifying the biblical components and even distinctions in each doctrine.

Thirdly, he warns that not everyone consents to the doctrine found in Scripture. Some will refuse the truth, distort the truth, and teach false doctrine. Both the Old Testament and New Testament repeatedly warn us about corrupt teachers, who Paul says in our text are “proud, knowing nothing.” God calls us to reject false doctrine. So the third component of our method should include knowing how to distinguish truth from error, and how to refute what is false. We will call this the polemical component.

Fourthly and lastly, he speaks of “doctrine which is according to godliness.” What we believe impacts and influences how we live. True doctrine aims at producing godly practice. We must not limit our interests to merely correct formulation of the truth in our thinking. The text says that we must also be diligent in the application of that truth to our living. So the fourth component in the method that we’ll be using includes practical application.

Remember these four components—the scriptural, doctoral, polemical, and practical—because we’ll be returning to this fourfold method again in a few moments. But we’ve begun by introducing the biblical basis for them in this text from 1 Timothy 6.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview. We’re concerned in this lecture with the method employed in systematic theology. Our method concerns the path that we follow. If the method is wrong, then the path will not lead us to the right destination of sound doctrine. So we must derive the method we employ in systematic theology from Scripture, as we have already noted. God is not the God of confusion, and the Scriptures teach the unity of the truth. So systematic theology traces each of the individual threads of truth in the Bible to see how they’re woven together into one large beautiful tapestry of biblical doctrine.

So let me provide a doctrinal map of our method, so that you can see the overview of where we are going in these seven modules. We will work from the big picture down into the details, so from a brief overview of all seven modules, to the layout of each module, to the organization of each lecture.

Overview of the seven modules—consider that. Systematic theology is divided into seven large sections, each section addressing a different set of doctrinal topics. In this series on systematic theology, there are seven modules or courses, each devoted to one of those specific topics or categories of systematic theology. They include the following:

1. The doctrine of first principles; and this current module will be covering that. It includes the doctrine of Scripture and other matters.
2. We have the doctrine of God.

3. We have the doctrine of man.
4. The doctrine of Christ
5. The doctrine of salvation
6. The doctrine of the church
7. And lastly, the doctrine of last things

So if you go through all seven modules, you will have covered all of systematic theology. So that's an overview of all seven modules.

But let's also think about an overview of each module, because each module is then divided into lectures that address specific subjects within that doctrine. So an example may help to illustrate this. The module on the doctrine of salvation—well, that will include individual lectures on doctrines such as union with Christ, and effectual calling, and regeneration, and a lecture on faith, and another on repentance, and justification, adoption, sanctification, the doctrine of perseverance, and assurance, and so on. Doctrines such as these comprise the doctrine of salvation.

But then, to go even into more detail, let me describe an overview of each lecture, because in each lecture, the material will follow the fourfold structure that we highlighted earlier from 1 Timothy 6. That is, the lectures will provide a scriptural, a doctrinal, a polemical, and a practical exposition of each topic. This method was also employed by Reformed theologians of the past. But let's consider further the basis for this fourfold exposition.

So we begin with the scriptural exposition. The biblical foundation and proof for each doctrine must be a priority. If you're not grounded in the biblical basis of a doctrine, then your convictions will be easily toppled. We read in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." The Bible provides God's own inspired words to equip us with both a knowledge of the doctrine, and duties that we so desperately need. Elsewhere, in 2 Timothy 2:15, he says, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." So there is a right dividing of the Scriptures in contrast to twisting them.

As God has included doctrines throughout the whole of the Bible, so it is important to gather and arrange them according to a consistent method. First Corinthians 14:40 says, "Let all things be done decently and in order" within Christ's church. So we have the scriptural exposition.

Secondly, the doctrinal exposition. This consists of the exposition of the true doctrine. So under this section, categories and distinctions within a doctrine will be explained, drawing on the various truths provided throughout the Bible. Think of the words of Acts 20:27, where the Apostle Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders, and he says, "For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." Paul tells Timothy elsewhere, "Thou hast fully known my doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:10). In other words, Paul taught the whole of Scripture and all that is contained therein. All of that is mutually consistent and ordered, never contradictory or tangled. And so our method of studying theology must reflect these realities too.

Thirdly, we have the polemical exposition. Systematic theology not only provides us with a clear grasp of the true doctrine, it also distinguishes that truth from various errors and equips the believer with answers for combating falsehood. Errors abound, as the Bible warns, and we must separate the pure from the vile.

In 1 Timothy 6:3, Paul warned of those who do not consent to right doctrine. Well, the Old Testament had false prophets, and the New Testament speaks of false teachers. They often appear, mind you, as wolves in sheep's clothing, claiming to hold to the truth while in reality undermining

that truth. Peter warns that those that “are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures.” In other words, some men twist and distort what the Scriptures teach. They may take one verse detached from the rest of Scripture and draw false conclusions from it. It’s for this reason that Jude 3 says, “It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” We must contend for the truth and defend it against false doctrine.

We can also draw on the history of the church for help here. There’s nothing new under the sun. Most doctrinal errors are recycled old errors that appear in a new form. By studying the biblical and theological arguments marshaled against heretical teachings in history, we’re better equipped to recognize and reject them in the present day. So the third category is our polemical exposition.

Fourthly, we have the practical exposition. The study of theology should never end with merely theoretical knowledge, or what John Calvin referred to as “truths that are flitting about in the brain.” We noted earlier that in 1 Timothy 6, Paul speaks of “the doctrine which is according to godliness.” Similarly, in Titus 1:1, Paul speaks of “acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness.” So the doctrines must be practically applied or they lose their power. Christ said, “If you know these things happy are you if you do them,” in John 13:17. Or, you’ll remember, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7, that very vivid picture that Jesus gives us. He speaks of one man building his house on shifting sand and the other building his house upon a rock. And when the storms and the winds come, the one who’s built his house upon the sand will have his house collapse, whereas the house that is built upon the rock will endure. And he says that those who build their house upon the rock are those who do or apply or practice the truth that the Lord Jesus Christ delivers to us. Similarly, we read in James 1:22, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

So we have these four categories of scriptural, doctrinal, polemical, and practical, and as you may have noticed, we have been already employing this fourfold method even in this first lecture. After the introduction, we began with establishing our direction from the consideration of a passage of Scripture, 1 Timothy 6:2–4. Then, we have been laying out a summary of doctrinal truths while drawing on other supportive Bible passages. Now we will turn, thirdly and very briefly, to the polemical exposition, followed by the practical implications.

So thirdly, the polemical exposition. As we noted earlier, it is necessary to answer objections and to refute attacks on the truth. Regarding this first lecture, some may object to using the kind of method employed in systematic theology. They might insist that the logical order and presentation of doctrine detracts from or distorts doctrine. But clearly, in answer to that, clearly the organization of truth does not change the truths themselves. Rather, it brings together all of the truths concerning one doctrine into one place, comparing Scripture with Scripture, which in fact aids clarity, comprehension, and conviction regarding the truth. In fact, the Bible itself warns about the failure to use right method. In 2 Peter 3:16 and 17, Peter speaks of Paul’s writings and says “as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness.”

Fourthly, the practical implications. Even in the matter of method, we can draw practical application to ourselves. A deeper and clearer knowledge of the truth leads to spiritual maturity. Hebrews 5:13 and 14 say, “For everyone that useth milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason

of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” You see, the study of systematic theology entails a humble act of devotion to the living God, which leads to worshiping Him and serving His glory.

So we should be convicted, if we are guilty of any sloppy and disorderly handling of God’s truth, which breeds confusion and prevents holding the truth in our memory. Instead, we should strive to be workers who are “approved” and “not ashamed” in “rightly dividing the word of truth,” which is a benefit, of course, to our own souls. Christ prayed, in John 17:17, “Sanctify them through thy truth: Thy word is truth.” In teaching others the truth, whether they be young or old, and whether teaching them formally or informally, we should aim for clarity in our communication to needy souls. We read in Ecclesiastes 12:11, “the words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies.”

In conclusion, Proverbs 23:23 says, “Buy the truth, and sell it not.” And the study that we’re engaged in is really an act of buying the truth, recognizing that biblical truth is a precious treasure. As the Bible says, it is to be valued more than gold and silver and precious stones, that it is sweeter to our taste than even “honey and the honeycomb,” that we should esteem it more than even our “necessary food.” Well, in this course of modules and lectures, we’re engaged in the pursuit of buying that truth and holding fast to it.

We should also note that John Knox Institute also provides a module entitled Biblical Theology. And if you have not worked your way through those lectures, I would recommend that you consider listening to those before proceeding to go through these modules on Systematic Theology. Biblical Theology looks at the linear chronological development of theology, and the unfolding of redemptive history within the Bible, starting in Genesis, and concluding in Revelation. Systematic theology then begins with the whole of Scripture and takes up one doctrine at a time, pulling together and organizing everything the Bible says on that one doctrine. The material in Biblical Theology will equip you with a solid understanding of the Scriptures, which may increase the benefits that you will receive from these courses on Systematic Theology.

In the next lecture, we will consider the biblical role of creeds and confessions, which will complete our general introduction to these seven modules on Systematic Theology. Beginning in the third lecture and for the remainder of this first module, we will be focusing our attention on the doctrine of first principles.