

# Building Systematic Theology

LESSON  
THREE

Propositions in  
Systematics  
Discussion Forum



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# Building Systematic Theology

## Lesson Three: Propositions in Systematics

### Discussion Forum

With  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students  
Michael Briggs  
Rob Griffith

#### Question 1:

#### What is a proposition?

**Student:** Okay, Richard, we just covered a lot of information in this lesson, and some of it's hard. But I know we're going to sort these things out at this table. So, let's start off our discussion by just laying the groundwork again. What is a proposition?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, this is all about propositions. And you'll remember that I'm suggesting, although it's a little artificial, that systematic theology starts with these technical terms, and then the technical terms are used in propositions, and then the propositions are used in doctrinal statements, and then all that's combined into this big comprehensive system. So we're basically at step two. Even those all those work together all the time, we artificially are saying, now step two, propositions. And you can define propositions very simply in a very straightforward way, by saying that they are an indicative sentence that says as directly as possible a factual theological claim, at least one of those. You can have more than that, but at least one.

Let's break that out for just a minute. An indicative sentence, I think we know what that is. That's just where you have a subject and a predicate of some sort. And then the next part is that the proposition has to be made as straightforward or as directly as possible, which means that you don't use figures of speech usually, like hyperbole, or like a metaphor, a simile, and things like that, because those kind of cloud the issues. And remember, for a systematician, the goal is clarity, and so you get rid of, as much of you can, issues like metaphors and those kinds of things. And then you take this indicative sentence that's stated as directly as possible one factual claim, one theological factual claim, and so it's not an expression of thanks, it's not really an expression of praise or lament, it wouldn't be a question. It wouldn't be those kinds of things, it would be a statement of fact. For example, that cup is on the table. That is a proposition. Okay? You are here in the room. That's a proposition. Now to make that theological, we've have to say something like God is in the room with us. That's a theological claim. We have not used metaphors in that. We've not used figures of speech. We've tried to say it just as straightforwardly as we possibly can. Does that make any sense at all? Okay. I mean, that part of it is not so complicated, but it is

important... if you don't have that clarified in your mind, then the rest of this falls to pieces as we go because it does get more and more complicated.

So let's test it out a little bit. Let me give you some statements. I'll give you some Bible quotes and then I'll give you some other kinds of statements, and you tell me whether you think it is a theological proposition or not, okay? How about this one? In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Yes or no? Yes. Yes, it's an indicative sentence. It's stated straightforwardly, and it's making a theological claim about God or something in relation to God. Okay, so it passes. If we were to take a passage like John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life," is that a proposition? Yes, that's a proposition, too. Okay. If we were to take something like Jesus' Great Commission, it starts off this way, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." Is that a proposition? Yes, that part is a proposition. But the next part goes, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit." Is that a proposition? No, it's not, because it's a command.

Now let's go again. Let's think about the 23rd Psalm. This will a little bit sneakier here, okay, so be careful. "The Lord is"... sounds like a proposition... "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. There's a metaphor in there. Yeah, there's a metaphor that God is a shepherd. And so that makes it a little... it is propositional in one sense, in the sense that it is an indicative sentence, but it's not straightforward. Okay? It's using the metaphor, and heavily using the metaphor of the shepherd. "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

**Student:** That seems like another metaphor to me.

**Dr. Pratt:** It could be. Okay, you'd have to figure out whether it is or not. Okay, good. And so what systematians do is they take everything they find from the Bible and they reduce them down to theological propositions. Now please don't be confused at this. This doesn't mean that their writings and their books are just one proposition after another after another after another, because for stylistic flair and for literary quality, they'll do all kinds of things as they write. But the reality that's behind their writing is a propositionalizing where they have taken the Bible and they have turned it into straightforward propositions. And so if we were to say, God is one essence and three persons, is that a theological proposition? Yes. Yes. Okay. If I were to say to you, we should praise the one God, the three Persons, is that a proposition?

**Student:** Well, it depends on if there's an "ought" there, but probably not because you're giving a command.

**Dr. Pratt:** I am, I'm giving a command. We are obligated to. If I were to say, Halleluiah, is that a proposition? No. So you can imagine that those kinds of expressions that are biblical expressions are not going to be found usually in the arguments that systematic theologians make. Does that make any sense? Yes, it does.

So a proposition is an indicative sentence that states as plainly and straightforwardly, directly, as possible, one or more theological claims, factual claims. And if we can get that solidly in our minds, we can see how then systematic theologians use those things.

### Question 2:

#### Why are propositions so important to systematic theology?

**Student:** Richard, why are propositions so important to systematics? I mean, haven't there been other theologians that have done propositions in other ways?

**Dr. Pratt:** There have been and there will be... there are, and this, of course, is one of the things that troubles people that are troubled by how reductionistic systematic theology can be sometimes. The early Church Fathers under the influence, remember, of their mysticism, would often produce theological works in the genre of prayer, and so they would be talking to God — Augustine did this, Irenaeus did this — they would be talking to God as they did what we would call very serious theology. I can't imagine anyone disagreeing that hymns, for example, or sometimes extremely... traditional hymns are extremely theological. They've been very well thought through, they've been expressed in very careful ways, and they're very biblical and those kinds of things. So it can be done. It can be done. The reality, however, is that systematic theology as we know it today is highly influenced not only by Neo-Platonism but also by Aristotelianism or scholasticism, and in scholasticism, the operating genre was that of argument. Okay? Logical argument. And if you're going to do that in theology, then your basic working tool, your building block, has to be propositions. It can't be nice sweet hymns or poems or other sorts of things. It just can't be.

### Question 3:

#### What can we lose if we focus only on propositions?

**Student:** Richard, can you give us an example right up front of one of the things that we have to be careful of losing by focusing just on the proposition and not incorporating things in our systematic theology like prayer?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, you lose emotion very easily, which is of course one of the reasons why systematics is usually accused of being stark and cold. You lose a lot of the devotional aspect, that is, the personal encounter with God in doing theology. It becomes rather abstract and God becomes an object that you talk about rather than an object with whom you engage. The separation becomes rather big, and the distance grows. The more you do it, the more the distance grows I'm afraid, sometimes. You can imagine just in your own mind what's the difference between singing a hymn that's a good hymn that does what the Bible does... between that and giving propositions out of that hymn? And you can get a sense of it very quickly that it lacks

the intuitive, it lacks sometimes imaginative reflection, it lacks emotion as we said before — those kinds of things. And that is on the one side the strength of systematics. If you're looking for how to argue your way into truth, that's a strength. But at the same time, it's a great weakness, too.

#### **Question 4:**

#### **Do Protestant churches tend to overemphasize propositional truth?**

**Student:** Richard, would you say that our emphasis in Protestant circles, at least in our worship with our emphasis on preaching, that we focus maybe too much of propositional truth?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, I guess in some Protestant circles that would certainly be true. Because if you think about it this way, if you have a worship service and it goes on for an hour, an hour and 15 minutes, and 45 minutes of that is the sermon, that will tend to be a giveaway that there's a lot of emphasis on the propositional nature of doing theology, because typically in those circles, the sermons themselves will be two or three or four propositions that are then explained. Here's my first point, you make the proposition, explain it. Second point, it's a proposition, you explain it. I have to confess that's basically the way I preach. But that's just my tradition, and that's the way that that kind of preaching is done. But in every service, there are also other elements that use theological language in other ways. I mean, think about the way the worship service goes. You have a call to worship which is basically an invitation to come and worship God. So there's no proposition in that unless we slip one in somehow. There is the invocation of God, you pray to God. So you're using language in prayer. You have the pastoral prayer which is usually requests and petitions to God. You have thanksgiving. You talk about the offering and dedicate it to God. You have the benediction at the end. So we do a number of different things.

But to be perfectly frank, I think that you can tell a lot about a church by whether or not it looks at its worship service as a whole as leading up to the preaching. There are churches where everything that's done in the worship service other than the preaching is just preliminary to the preaching, and there will be a tendency in those kinds of churches for them to be a lot like systematic theology; their thinking will be a lot like systematic theology in that they will be propositional in the way they focus. Now, I have to say that I believe that the Bible does give us propositions, and so we have to hold onto that and never let go of it, but also gives us other things, too.

#### **Question 5:**

#### **Why is it important not to abandon propositional truth?**

**Student:** Okay, Richard, we're talking about an overemphasis on propositional truth within a worship service. But what about other traditions that may lean more

**heavily on worship or on prayer? Can you talk about the necessity of not abandoning propositional truth?**

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, there are churches that do that, obviously. There are some, for example, liturgical churches, high church, will often have a lot of liturgy, a lot of ceremony, and then they'll just have a short homily maybe... some I've seen as short as 5 or 6 minutes. That's probably, from my point of view, a little too little. Other churches, maybe low-end churches, lower churches, will have singing and dancing for a long, long time, and then they'll have a relatively short sermon. You know, everybody's going to do these things in different balance points. I mean, definitely that's going to be true, and traditions tend to have a different sense of what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. But the fact is, and I think this is what we have to reckon with, is that the Bible has all of those kinds of statements, those kinds of language of theology, and we've got to just live with the fact that all of them should be there in our worship service. Now you can vary one to another from time to time, but you've also got to remember, it seems to me, that the way you do your worship service is not just going to reflect your priorities, it's going to create priorities, and the people are going to begin to feel that this is the most important element. And so in churches — what I would do if I were king of a church — if I had a church that was emphasizing propositions, I'd pull the other way and worship at least for a while, and if they were on the other end of it, I'd pull them back toward propositions for a little while. And so it's the kind of thing where we have to remember not to go overboard with the importance of theological propositions, because as valuable as they are — and the Bible does give them to us and so they are important — as valuable as they are, they can be overemphasized, and that can have devastating effects on the ways people live their Christian lives and the way they do theology. We should be more fully orb'd than that.

**Question 6:****What genres does Scripture use to teach theology?**

**Student:** Richard, what are some of the genres that Scripture uses to help us learn theology?

**Dr. Pratt:** Other than propositions? Yeah, I guess that would be good. Well, genre, of course, is a sort of flexible or slippery word, but let me just give you some, okay? Some of them involve propositions but not just propositions. Narrative is obviously one of the big ones in the Bible. You think of that at the beginning of the Bible especially. But mixed in with that are genealogies, and then you have laws, and then you have ritual directives and things like that in a book like Leviticus. If you move on forward, you know, you have a number of books that have a lot of narrative following that, the so-called historical books. Then you get to Job which is poetry plus a little bit of prose narrative. Then you get the Psalms which are all poetry, and Proverbs which is probably, strangely enough, a very diverse genre because the book of



Proverbs represents things like adages, but it also represents things like riddles and jokes. There are jokes in the Proverbs as well. Then you get the sort of philosophical reflections of Ecclesiastes, and then you get to the Prophets and you've got a mixture of prose speeches plus a lot of historical narrative and then a lot of poetic materials where they give their speeches in poetry.

You know, frankly, we have some of that in a typical Protestant worship service, some of that diversity. You get, for example, poetry in the hymnody, but I'm afraid that it's lost usually; people don't get much sense of that because, you know, the typical thing in a church of my sort anyway, is that the minister will stand up and say, now pay attention to the words, and what he means by that is pay attention to the theological propositions that are hidden there, and you're not really dealing with the poetic dimensions of it.

But all of those different genres, and we've only named a few of them, not all of them, have different ways in which they communicate, and that's what's important — different ways they communicate to God and different ways they communicate to people. And as you deal with all of those different kinds of genres, they will touch different aspects of the human condition, and I think that is why the Bible as well as Christian liturgy and Christian theology has been expressed, they've all been expressed, in these various genres. It's because we don't want to be reduced down to one kind of theological reflection. And again, the main reason why systematicians have reduced down to propositions is because of the tradition of scholasticism where theology was primarily conceived of as an argumentation, and to do argumentation, you've got to have propositions.

### **Question 7:**

#### **Can systematic theology be done with other types of statements than propositions?**

**Student:** Richard, it seems like if we have a Scripture that is full of things other than propositional truth, I mean just straight propositional truth, and then we do our systematic theology just with straight propositional truth, first of all, it seems like systematic theology could be a little, you know, less practical for our uses, but at the same time, what does systematic theology look like if it incorporated all these other genres?

**Dr. Pratt:** It wouldn't look like a systematic theology. That's the problem, is that it's become such a genre of its own that you almost have to do it that way in order for it to fit, for people to call it a systematic theology. Now there is a recent systematic theology that has at the end of some of its chapters a hymn, a traditional hymn that's actually printed there. And knowing the author of that systematic theology, what he's trying to do is to bring more of the doxological, more of the affective, more of the poetic into it. But it's still just an appendix at the end of every chapter. And the

reason for that is because it wouldn't be called a systematic theology if he wove poetry in and out of it. You see? It just wouldn't work. It's a little bit like preaching in that sense. Every branch of the church has a definition of what the genre of preaching is, and so if you were to get up and tell a story in many Protestant churches, they would not consider that a good sermon, because even though you have storytelling in the Bible, and even though Jesus preached that way just by telling a parable or telling a story, people would feel like, well, that's an odd thing, why are we calling that a sermon? Where's the sermon today? And the reason is because people are just used to that, and that's what they've become accustomed to, that's the genre that they expect. Well, when you talk about systematic theology, that's the genre people expect. And so in this series, of course, we're talking about traditional systematic theology, and that's why we went through the history from Neo-Platonism to Aristotelianism to modern rationalism and that kind of thing, it's to say that this is what we're talking about. So it would make it very different, and the more you brought in other genres and different styles of talking theology, the less it would be identifiable, I'm afraid, as a systematic theology.

**Student:** But it could be a legitimate next step. We've talked about this progression, and I'm thinking of Augustine and much of what he wrote was written in the form of prayer, and maybe something like that would be a next step.

**Dr. Pratt:** It would certainly be refreshing. I mean, there are some people who have written narratives that are very theological and very good, but unfortunately, they're taken as narratives as opposed to theology with a capital "T". And again, that's just the genre expectation. But someone with the credentials of being a systematician needs to sort of step into that and just let things fall as they may so that it can open the door for that kind of multiple expression.

### **Question 8:** **What are some examples of factual reduction?**

**Student:** Okay, Richard. Let's talk about factual reduction. You gave a few examples in the lesson, but I'm still not quite getting it. So could you give us some more? Could we talk about that a little bit?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, we can do that. Let me just tell you in general, the idea is that no matter what you have in the Bible, whatever form of the text may be, whatever genre it may be, what a systematician does basically is to take what's explicitly said and what's implied in it and get out the factual content that he or she wants to get out of it. That's basically what they do. But that's not just something that's just what systematicians do. Bible figures do that, too. I've got some Bibles here. Let's take a look. If you'll look at Romans 15, I think you'll be able to see the kind of thing I'm talking about, and I'll try to find it, too. But in Romans 15, we can see that the Apostle Paul actually goes through the process of factual reduction. Sometimes we,

you know, you use a word like reduction and you go, well, that must be bad because you don't want to reduce God's Word, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. It can be a bad thing.

Let's look at Romans 15, and maybe a good way to do this would be starting at verse 8. What I'm going to do... let's just walk through the whole process here, and let me just read to you and ask you a question as we go along. Okay? Now be careful, here we go. [Romans] 15:8: "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of the truth to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." Now, is that a proposition? No. Why not? I think the right answer is yes. Okay. So let's go back and I'll start reading it again. So let's read again. We'll start at verse 8, and I'm going to read it to you along with verse 9. You tell me if this is a proposition or not, a theological proposition. "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy."

Now that's a complicated sentence, but it's basically a proposition. Okay? He's basically saying there something about Christ, that he became a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm a promise made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy. Okay. Now what Paul does in the verses that follow here, is he proves this. Okay? He proves it by, as it were, quoting some Bible passages, but he's making a reductionistic use of these proof texts, and we'll be able to see that I think in just a moment. He says in verse 9, "as it is written: 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.'" And here he's quoting from Psalm 18:49. Now if you take a look back at Psalm 18:49, this is a psalm of praise. Okay? He's honoring God. He's saying I'm going to praise you, which is another way of saying, I'm praising you. I'm praising you now before the Gentiles, I'll be rejoicing, I'll be happy. So in its original context, it's more than just a proposition. It's actually a statement of praise, right?

But here, the only point that Paul's trying to make here is that the Gentiles will glorify God for his mercy, and what he's saying there... what's the salient point that he's drawing from this verse? He doesn't do it explicitly by implicitly. He's saying that Gentiles will see someone praise God, right? The inclusion of Gentiles in this. Now look again at verse 10. "Again it says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.'" This is at the end of Deuteronomy, a quote from Deuteronomy 32. Is this itself a proposition? It's a command, so it's not a proposition from Deuteronomy 32, but what's the salient or essential idea that Paul is getting out of this? It is... that Gentiles will be included. Right, that Gentiles will praise him, too. "And again, 'Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.'" That's from Psalm 117:1. Is that a proposition? No, that's a command. It's a call to praise. And again, what he's saying... basically what Paul's saying is, because of this call to praise to Gentiles, the fact is that Gentiles will praise him one day. Okay? God wants that, or however you want to say it. You can summarize it in many ways. And in verse 12, "And again, Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.'" Now is that a proposition? Several

of them, I think, right? Several propositions from Isaiah 11:10 where this is at the end of that very famous passage about the rising up of a son of David who will rule over the world and that the Gentiles will one day worship God along with the Jews. And so what Paul does here, he has this proposition in verses 8 and 9, saying that... concluding that the Gentiles will glorify God for his mercy because of what Jesus did with the Jews, and then he supports this — as it is written, again it says, and again, and again Isaiah says — he supports it with implicit propositional statements of fact that come from these different kinds of passages.

And so it's not as if this is something that's wrong to do. It's something that we ought to do based on this example if none other, and there are plenty of them in the Bible, where they'll take a different genre, in this case many of them Psalms, worship songs, things like that, or a prophesy, and they will draw out a proposition from that, a factual conclusion from it, that they'll use in support of some factual belief that they have, which is what Paul's doing right here.

So factual reduction is not an evil thing. It's just a way in which we can handle the Bible, and it is the way in which systematicians tend to handle the Bible all the time. That's very important. And why do they do that? Do you remember why? Because of scholasticism, theology is...

**Student: Theology is a system of propositions.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Uh huh, and arguments. And you have to have propositions to make the argument. And that in effect is what Paul's doing here. He's making an argument for this idea that Jesus came to the Jews in a particular way as the servant of God's truth and then for this reason that the Gentiles may worship. And then he uses these as his proof text as it were. So he's operating a lot like a systematician would in this passage. The only thing he doesn't do is make it very explicit. And so you can see verse 13, his sort of conclusion, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Now that, you see, is a blessing, a benediction. So he feels like he's made his point, he's proven his point, so now he's blessing them and saying, now be happy about this. Now that I've proven it to you, be happy. So I think that's a lovely example of how propositional reduction happens in the Bible itself.

### **Question 9:** **What is factual collation?**

**Student: Richard, I think I've got this whole idea of factual reduction, but you also talk about factual collation, which is a whole other concept. Could you go a little bit more into that?**

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, collation. Let's talk about what collation is. You know, when you make copies of something and you want each set to have the same pages in it? That's collating. It's just sort of bringing things together, batching them together in certain ways. And systematic theologians, because they are dealing with a Bible that has its doctrines taught in many different places — in other words, there's not just one place where any doctrine is taught in the Bible; it's taught a little bit here, a little bit there, a little bit here, a little bit there — what they have to do is go out there and find those places and bring them together, collate them, match them up. And that's really all I mean by collation.

But they do that in different ways. One of the ways they do that is what I call... I believe the terminology is called composite collation or compositional collation. And that means you take one little piece, you take another piece, you take another piece, and you sort of bring all those pieces together like pieces of a puzzle, and then you get a whole picture. Another way they did it in traditional systematic theology is to find repetition, so it's repetitive collation. So that you find the truth one time, but you want to reinforce it, so you find it another time, you find it another time, and another time, and you draw from different verses by doing that too, and piling them up on top of each other. And both of those approaches are perfectly fine, because the Bible does it also. And I tried to give some examples in the actual lesson of the Bible doing this kind of thing.

But let's look again at Romans 15 because this is a great example, and I'll ask you at the end of this, is this repetitive collation or is it compositional collation? Remember, the proposition he's trying to prove is verse 8 and 9: "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." There is the proposition. Now he's going to prove it, and he's going to prove it by doing these implicit factual reductions of these four different verses. And he gives first that the Gentiles will come and sing and rejoice and they'll praise the Lord, Gentiles, and the Gentiles will hope in him. So would you call that compositional, or would you call that repetitive? Or is he basically saying the thing over and over and over? Is that what these verses are doing? Or are they giving you this side of it, that side of it, that side of it, that you had to bring together?

**Student:** It seems like he is reinforcing the same idea, but he's using kind of different facets.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, remember, no biblical passage except the very same biblical passage will say exactly the same thing, but somewhere in between and probably more toward the repetitive. Okay? Because the point is basically, this is true. The Gentiles are going to praise him, the Gentiles are going to praise him, the Gentiles are going to praise him, and if you didn't get it yet, the Gentiles are going to praise him.

**Student:** And then he says let's all praise him.

**Dr. Pratt:** And now let's all praise him for that. So it's a wonderful thing, because really, in some respects, factual collation is little more than making sure that your Bible doctrines that you're creating, the propositions that you're creating, are based on more than just one passage of the Scriptures. Okay? And if you don't make sure of that, if you don't make sure that your beliefs, your propositions, are based on a variety of Bible passages, then you run a very serious risk of misunderstanding the one verse that you're stuck on.

Let me take an example. Romans 3:23 is one of those typical examples of how Christians will say the Bible says it, therefore it's true, but when they compare other Bible passages, they find out it's not quite to be understood the way they did. Now you know Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Now if we were to just take that verse alone from the whole of the Bible and stick it out here without any kind of verses impinging on it, then we would have to conclude that every human being that's ever lived is a sinner. Okay? And that just seems to be straight up. And in fact, we could probably have people agree to that. Most Christians would say, yeah, that's true. Every human being is a sinner. But it's not true. It's not. What's missing? There has been one. There has been one who was not a sinner, and that's Jesus. Well, he wasn't really human. Yes he was too... that's a whole other issue. He was really human, and he did not sin, which is what makes him the Savior. It's that fact that he is purely righteous in and of himself. And so when Paul said that in Romans 3:23, he was not meaning that as a categorical statement, and the only way we can make sure that that's true, the only way we would know that that's true is to get into Paul's brain as it were by means of other verses. And so the composite of various verses would make us want to say something like, every human being is a sinner except Jesus.

### Question 10:

#### Is proof-texting a responsible practice?

**Student:** You highlight a very important point. I don't have a problem with Paul doing this, but what we need to do is we need to read these in context. And where I see a problem arising is in somebody having an idea that they just want to prove it, and so they do what we call proof-texting, and they find as many verses out there that they can that supports their theological position. And how do we avoid that danger?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, I think proof testing at its best is just sort of a short-hand. At best, when it's done well, it's a reference to a verse or to part of a chapter in a book of the Bible that is sort of a quick way to refer people to it. But hopefully, the people who are using those proof texts have read more than just the one or two lines, and they are sure that this is what the verse means by reading the larger context. But unfortunately, sometimes they don't, and so proof-texting really can sometimes misrepresent what the Bible says. And that is not done by Bible writers, and it shouldn't be done by us

either. We need to make sure that when we quote part of a verse or use a verse as a proof of something, that we are reading that verse in context along with other verses in the Bible, and that's the way to avoid the negative proof-texting. Yeah, I think that's very true. So when we talk about factual collation, we're simply saying that systematicians of course are going to reduce Bible passages to propositions, but to make their propositions sound and truly reflective of the Bible, they're going to either find other passages in Scripture that repeat the same idea to confirm it, or they're going to find composite pictures they're going to make by bringing this aspect of that verse, this verse, this verse, and creating a whole that will qualify. And so that repetitive and composite collation is what we're going for in systematics.

### **Question 11:**

#### **Should preachers ever reduce biblical texts to propositions?**

**Student:** So Richard, now I'm thinking about being in the pulpit, and I'm wondering how much should we propositionalize the Bible for our preaching?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a hard one, because from my point of view anyway, what you do in preaching depends a lot on what you have been doing in preaching. Because, from my point of view, or what I'm trying to get across in this series and even in the Building Your Theology series, is that the goal of doing theology is not just to teach people true statements or truth propositions that they need to endorse... which are still important. Right, they're important. But orthodoxy is not the only goal, but orthopraxis is also the goal, the goal of doing the right thing, and orthopathos is also a goal of theology, of feeling the right way. And frankly, if you've had a preaching ministry that tends to be more propositional, it's going to be oriented more toward the orthodoxy side. You can see that, right? Because you're teaching facts and propositional facts, and that's going to push you up toward, the most important thing for you to get today from my sermon is, what's the truth of the matter? Now, typically that's where young preachers begin, because they're sort of fascinated with the truth statements of the Bible and what they're learning in theology, and so they tend as young preachers or inexperienced preachers, to think that that's what their congregation will be fascinated with, too, or that that's what they need. And perhaps they do to some extent. And then typically what happens to younger preachers as they mature a little bit, is they realize that telling people the truth and people understanding the truth doesn't do enough. So they often become a little embittered, and then they start moving over toward orthopraxis. Now what would you think would be the normal genre or style of language that you would use if you were going to emphasize the practice of theology, doing theology?

**Student:** How you would apply this today, or thou shalt.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, you'd give a lot of rules. So then the preachers start laying out rules all the time, and they feel like now I'm being practical. Before, I was being

intellectual because I'm talking about orthodoxy, but now I've got 6 rules at the end of every sermon, so now I'm being practical. Okay. Well, they are perhaps being practical to some extent, and there is an important place for rules in the Christian life. The Bible gives us plenty of them, that's for sure, and so preachers ought to be able to give some too, at least every once in a while. But the thing that's still missing is that orthopathos, or at least the full range of orthopathos, right feelings. See, because you get a certain kind of feeling if you get the doctrines right or if you get the orthodoxy, the propositions right. You get certain kinds of feelings if you get the commands out, guilt and those kinds of things if you're hearing a lot of rules or frustration. Those are emotions that are appropriate for Christians to have. But what you're not going to get a lot of is joy and exuberance and delight and hopefulness, and things like that. You're not going to get a lot of that side of the fruit of the Spirit by orthodoxy and by orthopraxis. Orthopathos is what gives you that, and that takes certain kinds of speech, certain kinds of theologizing, too. Now what kinds of things have you ever heard ministers do that allow people to be happy? To experience joy? What kinds of things have you ever heard them do? I guess they don't do it much, eh?

**Student:** Well, no. Tell jokes for one. I've heard that.

**Dr. Pratt:** Sometimes... that's right, they'll tell a joke or two.

**Student:** Often times there'll be a big buildup to something about reminding us of our salvation or reminding us of our faith. So it may be a more dramatic statement of that.

**Dr. Pratt:** Okay. Or a testimony or his own personal experience that has a good, positive, joyous ending. Those kinds of things are the sorts of talk that normally get us there. Sometimes propositions do, and sometimes even rules can do it. But they tend not to be the things that emphasize the fuller range of orthopathos. And so when you ask the question of how much should a person use propositions in preaching, the reason I answer, well that depends on what you have been doing, is that I think that preaching in some ways has to deal with the fact that the ship is rocking all the time and that the balance point is depending on where the ship is tilting this way or tilting that way. And that depends a lot on what you've been doing up to that point. So it could very well be that rather than always thinking, well, what I need to do is make sure that I emphasize all the orthodox teachings, so let me give the six propositions from this passage. Maybe what you need to do is something a little different than that. Or rather than six rules all the time, maybe what you need to do is something a little different from that. And some of the techniques of, for example, storytelling, or testimonial, or painting pictures for people, those kinds of things often will bring out a fuller emotional experience of the passage for people.

You know, propositionalizing is very important, in our day especially, because there are groups that are now so repelled, even repulsed by systematic theology. They think of it as artificial, it's rationalistic, it's not valuable, it makes people heady, it makes people proud, it makes people arrogant, and so they want to back away from all these



sort of doctrinal commitments, these propositional commitments, into a sort of nebulous let's all feel good with each other. Well, in that kind of context, that needs to be corrected with more theology or systematic theology.

**Student:** Now, one of my professors in seminary has a statement where he says theology is practice. What do you think about that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Are you thinking about theology as application? Yeah? Well, that's good. We talk that way a lot. I talk that way a lot, too. And I think it means at least two things. I think this is the way most students hear all theology is application, or all theology is practice. A lot of students will hear that and they'll think, okay, what he's saying is that all theologizing, all talk about God ought to be applied. In other words, if you don't apply it, then you are missing... you're just taking step one and not step two. Okay? Well, that's true enough. Okay, I'll buy that. But I think he is saying — and here we have in mind John Frame I assume? — he is saying something a little more profound than that. He's actually saying that every time you do theology, no matter what kind you're doing, whether it's propositions for orthodoxy, commands, rules for orthopraxis, or storytelling perhaps for orthopathos, that you are in fact applying. Because we do have to remember that the application of Scripture involves the changing of the way we think, not just the way we do and the way we feel. And I think that's very important, because sometimes we can get, even in an educational environment like this, we can become very anti-intellectual, and we can make a distinction between theology which is impractical and high and abstract and just affects the mind, it doesn't affect the heart — you know, you hear those things all the time — but the reality is that that part of applying the Bible to life is applying it to the ways we think, because thinking is a part of living, and it's all wrapped up in your practices and your emotions. And so it's not as if we do systematic theology and that's impractical. It actually is very practical at least in this one sense of orthodoxy. It gets you to think the right ways. And we need to go further into praxis and pathos, but nevertheless, it's a very practical thing. So all theology, whether it's systematic theology or not, whether we call it practical theology or not, is practical in that sense.

### Question 12:

**Are propositional statements less manipulative than emotional appeals?**

**Student:** Richard, what will you say to the pastor who is really focused on the orthodoxy part, and when he looks at the pathos part, he may think that might be a bit manipulative? How would you address a concern like that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, manipulative is a negative word isn't it? I think it means sort of deceiving people, doing things to people that they don't realize you're doing to them. Would that be fair? Is that basically what we mean by manipulative? I don't think people ought to be manipulated in that sense in a sneaky, conniving way, but there is as much manipulation going on when you're talking about orthodoxy as when you're

talking about orthopathos. Okay? Because what you are trying to do is to get people to change. You're trying to get them to appropriate the Word of God. And if you can do that honestly, if you can do that forthrightly, and admit that that's what you're doing, that you're trying to get people to appropriate the Word of God intellectually, and appropriate it in their behavior, and appropriate it in their emotions, there's absolutely nothing wrong with this. I mean, when Jesus said, pluck out your eye if it offends you, that was quite emotional. Sure, shocking. Okay? And was he manipulating them? I don't think so. He was trying to get the truth over to them in a way that would change them emotionally. And in fact, it was the emotional impact that he was hoping would bring out the truth of the matter. What? Pluck my eye out? And so I think all things always work together.

And I agree with you that sometimes people will say that, oh, he's weeping from the pulpit and he's just trying to manipulate us. Well, no he's not. He is trying to communicate on a different level. Now if he's faking that weeping, that's just fake. And that would be something like telling a truth, a doctrinal truth, a proposition that you don't really believe, but you just say it in order to get people to play up to it. And that you don't want to do. You want it all to be sincere, which does mean, of course, that if you're going to preach in ways that go beyond propositions, you've got to go beyond propositions yourself first so that it seeps down into your heart.

But I think the reality, to come back to what you asked at the beginning, is that preaching, everyone's preaching tends to go one way or the other because of who they are and what their natural tendencies are, and what we have to do is guard against allowing our natural tendencies to be the default to which we always go, and to push ourselves to move in other directions as well.

### Question 13:

#### **Do propositions contribute both to unity and to disunity in the church?**

**Student:** Richard, in the video you talk about how propositional truth can bring about unity and sometimes even disunity. Could you go into that a little bit more, how that plays out?

**Dr. Pratt:** I think it's really important to see that there can very positive effects on interacting and community with each other, and very negative effects from this part of systematic theology. Maybe we should start with the negatives... let's start with the negative and then we'll come to the more positive and end up with that. When you think about the negatives, I would have to say that probably the worst part of is that once a group of people, or sometimes even individuals, come up with the way they think a doctrine of the Bible ought to be stated, that if you don't match that statement word for word, then they're not going to have anything to do with you. That is just so sad because the reality is that... Remember how we said in the earlier lesson that one term can mean many concepts and one concept can be expressed in many terms? The

same is true on the propositional level. You can have one concept that's expressed by a variety of propositions, and there won't be much difference among them except just the wording. But unfortunately, people sometimes aren't willing to give and take on that much. And it's just terribly sad because we have so much to do other than nit-pick each other to death on the little phrases that we use this way or that way. I mean, there are favorite ways that different groups will say things, and you can just let people have their favorite ways to say them and flex with it a little bit.

But the more positive side of it is that propositions can give us ways of summarizing what we believe that are very succinct, very straightforward, and we can work at them and agree on them and then move on to other things. I mean, I think of the Apostles' Creed — we mentioned that in the lesson — that the Apostles' Creed is a series of propositions, I believe in God the Father, I believe in Jesus Christ, so on, so on, and so on. And, you know, we may have things that we would like to add or take away from that here and there, but the reality is, those are propositions that establish unity among us. It's a very convenient and helpful and good, historically speaking, way of doing that. I don't know. Have you ever seen proposition differences between different churches become a hindrance to the unity of the church?

**Student:** Oh definitely, within a church.

**Dr. Pratt:** Within one local church? Yeah, it happens because people are just sort of stuck, and we have to just get to the point that just because someone doesn't say things exactly the way we do, it doesn't mean that they don't believe what we believe. And if we can learn how to do that, within limits, of course, but if we can learn how to do that, it will help us focus our attention on the more important things of life. And I think once again we just sort of face what Paul said in I Corinthians 13, We know part, so don't take it so seriously. Now that's my paraphrase, okay? We know in part, so don't get puffed up by your knowledge, because the most you know is, only a little bit. And that would be true of every proposition. No proposition we make is, as it were, sacred or indisputable or unrefinable. They're all refinable. Every proposition that's not just a straight quote from the Bible is refinable, and it's not a quote from the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, it's refinable as we know because translations even change over time.

**Student:** Wow, Richard, it seems like doing systematic theology requires just a ton of humility, and it reminds me of Christ's prayer, his priestly prayer in John 17. He prays for unity in the midst of him knowing full well that we're just going to be a bunch of boneheads sometimes and argue about these things.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, the truth is important to Jesus. In John 17, he says, "Sanctify them by the truth; your Word is truth." But then practically in the same breath he goes on to say make them one, Father, as you and I are one, so that the world may know that you sent me. And even there, we can see a balance between a concern with precision and truth, propositions, and the love we're supposed to have and the unity we're supposed to have with each other. It's not by the truths that we proclaim that the world would

know that Jesus was sent. Not according to that passage. It's by the love we have for each other, and that involves give and take on propositions at times.

### **Question 14:**

### **What perspectives on propositions are most beneficial for Christian living?**

**Student:** Richard, at the end of this lesson, you talk about the impact of propositions on Christian living. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**Dr. Pratt:** It's one of the worst things, one of the worst results, of people entering into the study of systematic theology, and it is this reduction of the Bible and then eventually the Christian life to propositions — statements, I believe, I believe, I believe. And what it tends to do is something that's almost predictable. Especially if a person has come to the Christian faith from outside the church, they've usually not been very indoctrinated, and they don't have very many beliefs that are set up for them already, categories and statements, this or that's true, that's true, that's true. And then they start studying systematic theology and they become overwhelmed by how many things they're supposed to affirm as true. So as they're trying to plod their ways through these reams and reams and reams of propositions that they get out of typical systematic theology, their eyes are turned away from what used to be very important to them. What used to be important to them was that relational dimension, that existential dimension of their relationship with Christ, and now they're pulled into something that's good, which is the truths of the matter, but pulled too much. Have you ever seen that?

**Student:** Wow, I've seen that in my own life. As you know, I not too long ago finished my time in seminary, and I thought I had a pretty good grasp on Scripture actually before going to school, and then I showed up and sat through classes where we're discussing, you know, the nuts and bolts of these types of theological questions, and I tell ya, it's a struggle. It's a struggle to focus on these issues and really tear them apart and keep the heart, keep that devotion, keep the love and the excitement about worshiping in the Lord when you're got all these facts floating around in your head. And I know I'm not the only one. I know a lot of my fellow students in the seminary struggled with the same thing.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, I did. I certainly did and still do to some degree. You know, we can always feel free to talk about sins in the past, but I'll just go ahead and admit that I can do it now, okay? Not just in the past. I guess, for myself, one of the things that helps me, keeps me from going too far into this propositionalizing of my faith is the realization that even the best propositions that I can come up with or that anyone else has ever come up with that express our faith, falls short of the reality. And when you realize that's the case, that they are, as it were, pointers to something that's beyond themselves. Like the doctrine of the Trinity points beyond itself to God himself, or

when you say Jesus is Savior of the world, that points to Jesus beyond itself. It always reminds me that my faith is not in the ways I formulate these teachings and state these teachings and propositions, but my faith is in the person behind it. And that is something that requires a severe dependence on the Holy Spirit, and it makes it a very spiritual thing rather than just an intellectual sort of thing. Because we can analyze a radio and tear it apart and make all kinds of propositions about it, but there's no person behind it that we're trying to get to. But that's not true in theology. It's always a matter of me facing the Lord Jesus, me facing God the Father, me facing Holy Spirit. And if we depersonalize it and leave those people, those persons I should say, out, then we are missing the mark completely. And that's the only thing that helps me in it; it's just to realize that these propositions are pushing us beyond.

Think about that with you and your wife. Can you propositionalize your wife? Well, sure. Okay. To the point that you maybe are missing the mark of her?

**Student:** Absolutely. I can think more about the things that she does or certain things about her character, but then actually forget to actually love her in the process.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right, to love her as opposed to like those qualities that she has, or those statements that you've made. And that I think is kind of the picture here, because we're not commanded to love the propositions, we're commanded to love God. And while propositions are important in that process, they're not the endpoint. The endpoint, the goal, the *telos* of all of this is to love God more and our neighbor as ourselves. And we can end up propositionalizing people out of existence, we can end up propositionalizing God out of existence, and that is a serious problem for Christians when they become students of theology.

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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*.