

# Building Your Theology

LESSON  
FOUR

Authority in Theology  
Faculty Forum



THIRD MILLENNIUM  

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# Building Your Theology

## Lesson Four: Authority in Theology

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students  
Melanie Webb  
Kevin Gladding

### Question 1:

#### Does the modern church overemphasize the divine origin of Scripture?

**Student:** In this lesson you talk about how the medieval Catholic Church overemphasized the divine meaning of Scripture and minimized the human aspect of inspiration. I was wondering how you see that happening in the church today.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a great question because it's not something new. In fact, the medieval Roman Catholic Church were not the first ones to do this either. You can trace it all the way back into early Jewish interpretations of the Bible and medieval Jewish interpretations of the Bible, especially in the Kabbalah and those sorts of groups, where they would look for hidden divine meanings in the Bible, formulas for this or statements about that. And unfortunately, that's true even in the Christian church today and not just among Catholics. It comes in different forms today. Sometimes people will do that in terms of the way they handle prophecies. They'll find a phrase, or a catch phrase in a prophecy and they'll say, "You see? Right here it says the word 'chernobyl.'" This is a great example of this because the Russian word for "chernobyl" means wormwood, so then they attach that to Chernobyl — in the last couple of decades when we had this crazy meltdown of the nuclear facility in Chernobyl — and see that as a sign of the end times. So you find these kinds of secret clues all through prophecies in some groups.

But I think probably the most extreme version of this today is when you find people using computers to analyze and try to find patterns. With computers, you know, once you enter in all the data of the Hebrew Scriptures into it, then you can start doing these random searches and come up with patterns. In fact, I've seen people do that even with an English text. There are articles written where they've taken a book like Moby Dick or something like that and they have actually done random computer searches for patterns of letters in those things as well. And so you'll find people, serious people, I mean people that are pastors of churches, large churches, saying that if you'll just count three letters forward and jump a line and go three letters back and do the same pattern over and over again, you'll find all kinds of secret meanings from God. And this takes the Bible right out of the hands of the original human writers and lifts it up into this realm of the secret, the mysterious, the divine. And that's widespread all around us.

**Question 2:****Doesn't downplaying the human origins of Scripture make the Bible more exciting?**

**Student:** Don't you feel, though, that this mindset of playing down the human side gives more excitement to the text, or more excitement to the people reading the text?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well it does. That's why these books sell a lot, because it excites people. The unfortunate thing, though, is that while it excites people it also allows that Bible to become the tool of whatever person wants to use it in whatever way they want to use it. And in some ways, that was part of the problem with the medieval church. They would find secret divine meanings in the Bible that supported their aberrant doctrines. And so today — usually they're not supporting the kinds of things that the medieval church did — but today they will do the same sort of thing. They'll have a particular need or a particular issue they want to talk about. They'll comment on the war in the Middle East, or they'll comment on China, or they'll comment on this event or that event, and they'll find a secret message in the Bible that talks about it. That's when it gets very dangerous, because if the Bible's not originally designed to talk about that event, then we should not pretend as if it is. And it takes the Bible out of the hands of the authoritative, inspired people who wrote it and puts it into the hands of pastors, or current church authorities, or great leaders, and then it becomes a tool of manipulation. And the only way to protect from manipulation by church leaders, both in the medieval period and today, is by putting the Bible back into the hands of the people who first wrote it. And that's the great danger of it.

**Question 3:****When Christians are illiterate, is it helpful for the church to make authoritative decisions?**

**Student:** Richard, in the lesson you talk about the lack of literacy during the medieval Catholic period. So isn't there a need for the church to be very authoritative in order to convey the Scriptures to the populace?

**Dr. Pratt:** I suppose a case could be made for that, yes. Because most people in medieval Europe did not read. If they did, they barely read. And, of course, remember the Bible was in Latin, so that was a big problem. And even if they could read, they couldn't read much in Latin, at least not enough to discuss theology and things like that. So I think we would have to admit that, yes, it was sort of a natural thing, maybe even a necessary thing, for the church to take its teaching and let it, as it were, almost substitute for the Bible. There weren't very many Bibles available. You were lucky to have a Bible in a cathedral. So people couldn't get ready access to Bibles like we

have today, and if they did, they couldn't read them. If they could read them, they couldn't understand them. So on and on it goes. So, yes, there was a serious need for it in many ways like there's still a serious need in our own day. As we find people having less and less biblical literacy in Western culture today, there is even more need for people to sort of shortcut the process and get the message out there.

I think, though, that the danger was this, and that is that they did not spend enough energy on, well, making sure that what they taught was what the Bible taught — I think that's the critical thing — and constantly making sure that they stuck with the teachings of the Bible as authoritative and explicitly submitting themselves to it. This is what the Reformers were concerned about; not so much that churches had strong teaching ministries or even authoritative ministries, but that they did not openly and they did not constantly and unquestionably keep their teachings in line with the Bible and keep their people thinking about the Bible, but rather sort of treated them in very paternalistic ways — It's okay, you can't understand that Bible but we can. And then they ended up telling them whatever they wanted to tell them.

#### **Question 4:**

### **Is it legitimate for the church to use images to teach illiterate Christians?**

**Student:** But in that, wasn't the church conscientious about helping people who were illiterate understand the stories of the Bible in the artwork, such as the iconography, or what we think of as stained glass windows, that told the stories of the Bible?

**Dr. Pratt:** Like the Stations of the Cross?

**Student:** Right.

**Dr. Pratt:** Exactly. And in fact, we have contemporary examples of that, too. I know of ministries for illiterate or preliterate cultures where actually the evangelists are given sort of flip charts, and the flip charts have pictures on one side, but then you flip it over and it has on the back side written text, because the preacher can read but the people to whom he's speaking can't. So as he reads this little text, they're looking at these primitive, in many respects, pictures of the Bible story. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. In fact, I'm convinced that we ought not do that simply with children today. We do that still with children — have little Bible pictures and that sort of thing. I think that pictures are good even for adults because they give more life to it and keep it from being so abstracted.

But once again, I think that the issue is, if you look at the iconography, it's not very biblical. That's the problem. You know, you have images of patriarchs, and you have images of Mary, and you have images even of Jesus with halos glowing around their

heads. You have all kinds of bizarre angels and cupid dolls floating around doing things, shooting arrows at people and tickling people under the chin, and little babies lifting prophets up into the sky. I understand that was more or less artistic license, but at the same time, it gave people very false impressions, so that today you can find in traditions that are still very much attached to the iconography, they believe that that's the way it was done in the Bible, that that's what the Bible actually said about these things. And so they're shocked when they find out that Mary didn't glow when they read the Bible that it never says that she did. Or they read the Bible and find out that Moses didn't look like this particular kind of person, or Jesus didn't look like this iconographic example of him. And that's where it becoming seriously dangerous, when people take a teaching tool and either subconsciously or consciously start identifying it with what the Scriptures themselves actually teach. And I think that's what I, as a Protestant, am mostly concerned about, not the iconography per se. Though, of course, worshipping icons and the like, those bother me. But for educational purposes, when we do iconography, we need to do it as true to the Bible as we possibly can. Even if the style of art in the day is not realism, that's fine. It doesn't have to be that. It doesn't have to look like a photograph. But at the same time we should not be dressing biblical figures in medieval costumes, for example, which you find in many situations, and we should not be exalting them beyond the real so that Jesus and other saints look as if they're not real human beings. Because the Bible is an earthy, real thing, and the details of the Bible need to be reflected in the artwork that is designed to communicate the Bible.

### Question 5:

**Did classical polyvalence always ground the figurative meanings of Scripture in its literal meaning?**

**Student:** In the lesson you introduce the idea of classical polyvalence. You talked about John Cassian's *Quadrigena* with the allegorical, anagogical, tropological and literal meanings of Scripture. I was wondering, do you see these four as parallel ways of reading the Bible, or do you see maybe the literal meaning as being central with the other three as spokes coming off of that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Do you mean how do they conceive of it?

**Student:** Right.

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, it's very difficult to say because Cassian's fourfold meaning is just one example; it's sort of the pattern that won the day. There were many others that had twelve, thirteen, nineteen, seven, six, three, you know, those kinds of things. And so I'm really not trying to focus there so much on how that particular expression took place and how people worked it out, but simply to say that they did not look at the literal meaning as the basis of anything, and they found themselves going and finding meanings that went well beyond, and far beyond, in fact sometimes I guess we could

even say perhaps contradictory of the literal meaning. In fact, it's sort of like this. If you remember the background of the medieval period rising out of Neoplatonism — and there's where the root really actually is — that early medieval Christian theology was influenced by this notion that what we have to do as Christians is to move beyond the ordinary, beyond the physical world, beyond the spatial world or the temporal world we're a part of, and to use reason first to get us a little bit beyond the sort of fleshly passions. But then even reason was sort of limited to get you to where you really wanted to go, which was to reach the heights of God himself through mystical experience and mystical supra-rational experiences. And this is the way the Neoplatonist Christians actually thought of salvation, was that you would become one with God. In fact, you can still find some of those kinds of themes in Eastern Christianity today, because they didn't really go through a lot that we went through in Western Christianity.

So this idea of the higher you can go from the ordinary up into the divine is the background in many ways of this multiple meanings of the text. Because, as we know, God is far above us, far transcendent, so when he even uses human words, he means much more than what would appear to an ordinary bloke walking down the street. So what we do as human beings is, as we become filled with Spirit and we rise up out of that mush that we're part of down here in this physical world, we begin to get those divine insights, too. And it is very esoteric, it is very mind-expanding, and so it wasn't as if these folk typically would say, "This is the literal meaning, now let's draw implications from that to this topic, and let's draw implications to that topic, or that topic." Instead, the multiple readings were relatively free of the original meaning. And, in fact, the literal meaning was, for the most part, considered quite irrelevant. Anyone can read a text that says that the cow went down the street and realize it says, "the cow went down the street." Now who couldn't understand that? Right? Even the farmer could understand that is the way they would look at it — the sort of lowly farmer. Now the mystic could read "the cow went down the street" and understand that this is talking about the son of God walking down the streets of gold in heaven, and those kinds of things. They could see things that the ordinary person couldn't see. And so there wasn't this attempt to draw logical implications out of the literal meaning, to come up with these new more insightful meanings. It really was much more mysterious, much more mystical, much more ecstatic, that allowed them to do this. And then these themes, as it were, were codified by writing them down, by finding a hint here in the father, or this father saying it, that father saying it, using something sometimes by analogy that they would then say, "See, this is a great mystical insight." And then once the mystical insight was propagated enough, then it became the most important to way read that text.

### Question 6:

#### How does a polyvalent approach differ from a search for literal meaning?

**Student:** Regardless of whether we're using the actual *Quadrige* or three or nineteen as you mention, how does that compare to or differ from the way we read the text now and try to get a literal interpretation?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a great question because I think it's very important to understand that when we read the Bible, we're not simply reading "the cow went the street" and leaving it at that. That's way over-simplifying even what we, as Christians, want to do today. What we want to do is to know "and so what?" Okay? What are the implications of that? What are the theological implications of that? What does it tell us about God? What does it tell us about life or us today? What does it tell us about Jesus coming back? What kind of expectations should it create? There have been books written in recent years that argue that there's a close analogy to what we do as Christians today with the Bible and to these kinds of mysterious, mystical readings of the medieval period. I don't think those books are entirely wrong, but there is something I think that is very important to distinguish here, and that is that Protestants work very hard to draw out those applications of the Bible from the original meaning, to show that there are logical connections, that there are implications or deductions from these passages. The Westminster Confession says that either things are expressly taught in Scripture or they are by good and necessary deduction to be brought out of the Bible. And so there's the sense in which if you read a text and it says something like, "the cow went down the street," well that does have all kinds of logical implications for other things, like God made it, and that one day there will be cows in the new world, and all kinds of things, okay? But it probably doesn't talk about Jesus going down the streets of gold, because it would be hard to draw that kind of theological connection. And that's the difference. We look at original meaning as sort of the foundational key understanding that sets a trajectory, and from that trajectory, then we build out and we add, as it were, or we draw out the implications of what that text originally said.

### Question 7:

#### Were there good aspects of the medieval Roman Catholic Church?

**Student:** Richard, from some of the earlier questions that we've already asked, people might get the impression that the medieval Catholic Church was all bad, it was all evil, there was nothing redeeming about it. How would you respond to that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well if people get that impression from me, let me just make it as clear as I can, I don't think that's true. The medieval Roman Catholic Church was a huge thing with all kinds of different variations and different kinds of people in it. There

are many firm, solid, and godly believers in the body of Christ from the beginning and to the end, and I think that's just something we're promised from God, that we will have good, well-intending Christians. The difficulty, of course, any time you talk about any period of history of the church is that sometimes you just have to make generalizations. And if you are wanting to make a generalization that sort of sets you up for the next generalization, then you go one way or the other, which is what this lesson is about. But, yeah, it's certainly true that there are pockets of Christians all over the medieval church right up to the time of the Reformation. It's not as if the great theologians of the church of the past were all evil or that they were all trying to deceive people, and that all of them were just trying to make the Bible say what they wanted it to say.

We've already mentioned that there were certain sorts of practical elements that almost made it necessary for them to substitute the teachings of the church for the teachings of the Bible. It's easy for us in our day to think that, well, why didn't they just let people read the Bible? Well the answer to that is there were no Bibles to be read, and that's why they didn't do it. And when they did have Bibles to be read, they had to protect them because they had to keep them out from the public because they would be destroyed and that sort of thing. I mean, can you imagine today if we lived in this country or some other modern country and you only had one Bible in a church, would you pass it around? I don't think so. What you'd do is stand in front maybe and read a little bit of it and hope that maybe somebody could memorize a phrase or two from it.

If you want to put the best spin on it, that's what the medieval church was trying to do. They were, again, with the best spirit — the ones that were honest and honorable — they were trying to minister to people who just were locked out of the possibility of having Bibles in their hands. And that's really not very different from the early church. The early first century church also did not have a proliferation of Bibles. And you know why? No printing press, no moveable type printing press. So here we are in the modern world where we can make books by the bazillions without even thinking about it, for pennies, and we think that's the way it always has been. Many Christians I know have multitudes of Bibles on their shelves — of course we don't read them, we just look at them — but we have them. And so we can't even imagine a church that doesn't have the Bible all over it. It's an odd thing. It's an oddity in history for people to go to church with Bible in hand, because people just didn't have it.

And when you also have a constituency, a congregation, that's uneducated, that can't understand the sorts of things that we talk about in church today, let's face it, even though many churches are very sort of low, or say, dumbing down the gospel, they're still by comparison talking to people who are highly literate and highly educated if they're in the West. Now that's not true everywhere in the world, but they are in the West. And so we have this sort of inability to connect to the realities of the medieval period, where magic was everywhere, where superstition was everywhere, and where the common folklore was everywhere, and that this was so prevalent among people that the church had to, in many respects, speak to that, and speak to it in ways that

people that were wrapped up in that kind of folk religion could understand. So it's not entirely evil, but now that we're past those days, we've got to be careful not to make mistakes like they made back then. I think that's the critical thing.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How does the modern Roman Catholic Church interpret the Bible?**

**Student:** It sounds like you're saying that the danger is being anachronistic in our critique of the medieval church.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right.

**Student:** So what you say today in the Roman Catholic Church... In your view, how does the Roman Catholic Church handle Scripture in relation to the original meaning of the authors if the medieval church failed to do that?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's very interesting, because when you think of the Roman Catholic Church today, worldwide, it is as broad on the theological spectrum as the Protestant faith is. You have people who we would call in circles liberal, who don't believe anything happened in the Bible that the Bible says because they've been influenced by higher criticism, and so they use all the techniques of liberal theologians that are Protestant. In fact, these people get together in societies and feel as if there is not big difference between them, because they're looking at the Bible scientifically now rather than looking at it as a religious text. For instance, the Jesus Seminar has not only Protestants in it but Roman Catholics in it, and their job, of course, their goal is to figure out what Jesus really said and to strip the Bible of all the additions that Bible writers put on it. So you'll find extremes in that end.

But you'll also find across the spectrum extremes on the other end that look a whole lot like the medieval period, and this is where you'll find Roman Catholics ministering in, shall we call them, preliterate or sub-literate cultures where you still have in this world places where people are not reading, or if they're reading at all they're not reading very much. And even though most countries now have Bibles — even the Roman Catholic Church does — in the majority language of a country, with tribal peoples, they're often not speakers of the majority language. You can go to places like Central and South America where there are still tribal people that don't have a Bible in their language that's approved of by the Catholic Church. Now they may have a Spanish or a Portuguese Bible, but they can't understand that, and so what you find is as the priests minister in those arenas, they continue the practices of the medieval period. That question may be raised, why should we do this? The answer is because the church has always done this; the pope says we should do this; this is the way the body of Christ has always done it — appeal to the authority of the church rather than the authority of the Scriptures. And again, why? Largely because they have no option.

Now there are in the middle Roman Catholics who are a lot like Protestants who try to orient everything they do to what the Bible says. A lot of charismatic Catholics will be this way. They like Bible study, and in fact, Pope John Paul actually encouraged small group Bible studies in the Catholic Church during his reign. I don't know what's going on at this point, but he did. And this caused great revival movements. In fact, I was involved in some of those in Poland and the like where they would have small group Bible studies. And so it's a fascinating thing that the Catholic Church is all over the spectrum. But it is interesting, isn't it, that when you go to a place where they are preliterate you still have the same old techniques being used; you've got to have somebody explain these things that the Bible — which is unavailable to them — they think teaches. And you've got to speak with authority: I am the priest, I am representing the Church, I am representing apostolic authority, I am representing papal authority — and so it ends up in many respects becoming much like they had in the medieval period.

### **Question 9:**

#### **Did the Reformers really get their methods of interpretation from the Renaissance?**

**Student:** You mention in the lesson that the early Reformers got their way of reading Scripture from the renaissance period. Can you tell me a little more about that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, it's a little known fact actually and one that Protestants don't like to admit, because we want to say we got our way of reading the Bible from Jesus. That's what we want to say. But historically speaking, it's not quite that simple. The medieval church had such a hold on how to interpret the Bible — because again, the Bible wasn't much available — that it really wasn't as simple as people saying, "Okay, now we're doing to do it a different way." Certain cracks had to be made in that hold, and the crack started happening when during the Renaissance, just prior to the Reformation, people began to discover old texts of the Greek writers, for example, and Latin texts of Roman writers, some of them religious texts, others of them just poetry, lyrical poetry and things like that. And in those days, wealthy people would often be sponsors or patrons of scholars unlike today where schools generally speaking sponsor scholars. In those days, wealthy people would. If you had lots of money, you always wanted some scholar attached to your manor or something like that. And prior to the days of the Renaissance, most of these scholars were paid by their patrons to work on biblical things, to work on theology, and to do that within the confines of the church because this was a way in which you actually got good standing in the church, you know, you'd pay for some priest to work on some text or something like that related to the Bible.

But then as these other texts began to be exposed, Greek texts and Latin texts, these wealthy patrons began to become very interested in that. Because during the medieval period in Europe, there was this sort of underground Christianity that was actually pagan, and they were discovering in these old texts different attitudes toward morality, toward sexuality, things like that, that they liked — to be perfectly frank — and they liked it more than what the official Catholic line was; the unofficial line was probably more like what they were doing. And so when they would find these pagan texts and they would read them, they wanted to know more, and so wealthy people began to support the translation of, and the commentary, on those kinds of passages.

Well, what's a scholar to do? The scholar who works on those kinds materials does not have the church canons to guide him. There's no right way to interpret; you don't lay the fourfold interpretation on it; you don't have any way of getting the church's authoritative stamp on it. So what you do is you begin to try to uncover what these texts meant, and the basic technique was you read it as it was originally intended to be read. So rather than reading in the light of the theology of the church, you began to read the Greek text as if it were Greek. Imagine that! As if it were written by pagans back in their day. And the Latin texts the same ways. And the Latin translations of the Greek texts the same ways. It wasn't until the Renaissance that we even began to have in Europe anything but Arabic translations of Aristotle. They began to uncover fragments here and libraries there that had old Greek translations or records of it, as well as Latin, but up to that point, basically it was Arabic and you had to read Arabic in order to even understand Aristotle. So it was very interesting how this happened. And it opens the door for the influence of Aristotelian philosophy in the church later on during the medieval period.

So you get this whole movement then that scholarship is no longer subservient to the church, subservient to the laws of interpretation and the ways that the esoteric interpretations of the church had laid out. But rather, it's much more realistic — it's what we would call realistic. You would start interpreting a passage like it was meant to be interpreted by the original writer as much as you possibly could.

### **Question 10:**

#### **How did the interpretive methods of the Reformers accord with Scripture?**

**Student:** Richard, you seem to be saying that we got our ability to interpret and even read Scripture in sort of the modern way that we do now from the Renaissance, but why was that necessary as opposed to simply using the Bible as the Bible?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's good. That's a great question because you could get that impression from me that it simply came from the Renaissance. So what's better about the Renaissance than Neoplatonism for that matter? The Renaissance was the

historical cause of this in many respects in that it broke the stranglehold that the church had on the interpretation of text. Prior to that time Aristotle, Plato, all these texts were always interpreted by the church. But once that stranglehold was broken, a new method developed. But it wasn't a method that was entirely new. That's the point. It wasn't something that everyone said, "Well we must do this now because of the influence of neo-paganism in Europe now and the reading of these ancient pagan texts." Rather, it simply began to open the door.

Take Martin Luther as the example. We all know that Martin Luther read Romans 1 and this was his big conversion, you know, that justification comes by faith unto faith, righteousness from God as revealed in the gospel is from faith to faith, and that line "faith to faith," what did it mean? Well the Catholic Church during the medieval period, they had plenty of ideas of what that meant. Plenty! And it wasn't as if Martin Luther was without an interpretation of that passage. But his problem was he read the passage, and he read it as if he were a Renaissance scholar. In other words, he asked what did Paul mean by this? He didn't want to know what the church meant by it. They had dealt with it sufficiently in their minds, but he wanted to know what Paul meant by it. And historically that motif came largely, not entirely, but largely from the sort of momentum of the Renaissance, and then it made him realize that what the church had said this passage meant wasn't right because the church was in effect saying faith unto works. And he was saying, "No, no. What Paul says here from beginning to end is faith unto faith, faith by faith," and so on and so on as you variously translate the passage in Romans 1.

And so it's fascinating to see that and then to realize that people like John Calvin was trained in law, and by this time the study of law was also deeply influenced by the Renaissance. And so you were concerned with Roman law, and you were concerned with Greek law and how they organized their societies, and not just ecclesiastical law, not just what the pope said, not just what the church said. And so even he had that kind of mentality of the way to get at what a text means is by asking, what did it mean originally? What did it mean back when it was first written? And we give proper credence to what the church has said, but we don't give them absolute authority to interpret it for us. And so in many ways, the method of the Reformation goes back earlier than the Renaissance, and it never disappeared completely even in the medieval church, but it was highlighted; it was opened up; it was prepared for by the Renaissance movement.

### **Question 11:**

#### **How did first-century Christians interpret the Bible?**

**Student:** Richard, there's a lot of talk nowadays about the possibility, or even the necessity of returning to a first century hermeneutical approach as being superior to the reformers. What is your take on that? How would you respond?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, of course that would be a lovely thing to be able to do if in the first place we could do it. But there are lots of problems with all that talk that's going on these days about how to understand how Second Temple people, or first century Christians in fact, as well as Jews, were interpreting the Bible. Basically the story goes like this, that we can look at the ways that different Jewish communities in Palestine interpreted the Old Testament, and then we can see some parallels in the New Testament, and then we ought to see that as a Christian endorsement of those approaches, and therefore, that ought to be our standard. Well the difficulties in that scenario are enormous. In the first place, to say that there are certain ways to interpret the Bible among the Jews is a different thing to derive. The fact is that there were many different ways that Jewish people interpreted the Bible before Christianity came, and even after Christianity came. And it's almost as diverse as you could possibly imagine, almost like vegetable soup it's so diverse.

But then also, if you think about Christianity and the New Testament, what we have in the New Testament are things that do look at least superficially a little bit like the kinds of things that went on among the Jews in Palestine during the first century B.C. and before. And this is true, but they are very superficial. It would be like taking something that I wrote today and finding people a thousand years from now looking back on it and finding that something I said looked like something that some cult said in America during my day. And on the basis of the fact that I had said that thing and they had said that thing, that our theologies were the same, or that our approaches were the same. It's just tidbits that we have to begin with, and to reconstruct a whole method of interpretation on the basis of that is very weak to say the least. I think it's fair to say that groups like at Qumran, at the Dead Sea, in their book the *Peshet Habakkuk* — the commentary on Habakkuk — that was wild, crazy interpretations. It was very eisegetical. They were reading lots of things into the prophecies of Habakkuk to support their particular religious sect. There's no question that's the case. I mean, it's wild and crazy readings of it. But at the same time, I don't think we should say the same kind of thing about the New Testament.

The New Testament was very concerned about what we are calling the literal or the original meaning. They were very concerned about this. Now they didn't say things that are obviously in accord with the original meaning, but with a little bit of work, for the most part anyway, we can show why Matthew did what he did with the Old Testament, or what Paul did with the Old Testament, and how it does look a lot like — maybe not absolutely identical with, but a lot like — what the Protestant Reformers were trying to do, where you uphold the authority of the Bible itself and of the inspired writer himself, and you use that as your ground for other kinds of applications or implications that you draw from it. And that's what's critical, it seems to me, as we think about the Reformation hermeneutic versus the first century hermeneutic.

### Question 12:

#### Was Matthew concerned with the original meaning of Hosea?

**Student:** So how, if they're drawing on prophecies of the Old Testament, say, in Matthew, drawing off of Hosea — “Out of Egypt I have called my son” — when he applies that to Jesus, how is that not assuming there's only one original meaning?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's one of those classic passages that people point to because Hosea 11:1 says, “Out of Egypt did I call my son,” and clearly from reading Hosea 11, Hosea the prophet was talking about the nation of Israel coming out of Egypt. It wasn't even a prediction. Okay? But Matthew says that this statement, “Out of Egypt did I call my son,” was fulfilled by Jesus when he as a child came out of Egypt and came back to Nazareth. Well the problem there is that in many respects what we're doing is reading our own ideas of what fulfillment is and those kinds of things into that passage. And what you have to do is set Hosea within its larger context of what Israel represented for him as the people of God, and then think of Matthew and what Jesus represented for him as the King of the Jews and how kings act on behalf of their nations and those kinds of things. And with just a little bit of understanding of what Matthew was intending there and what his audience would have understood him to be saying, we can tell that Matthew was now reading into the Hosea passage but rather simply drawing out an implication, applying the Hosea passage to the life of Jesus. He's saying Jesus is the King of the Jews, and so he notices that Jesus actually went through the kind of experience that the Jews themselves went through.

### Question 13:

#### Did the Reformers believe that Scripture could have multiple meanings?

**Student:** You talked in the lesson about original meaning in Scripture. The Reformers, though, did seem to believe that Scripture could have multiple meanings, the way we talked about with the medieval Catholic Church. Could you comment further on that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well they certainly did in some respects. We mustn't think of this as if people were looking at multiple meanings in the Bible and then suddenly one day there a reformation and nobody ever did that again. That's not the way it happens. We're overgeneralizing when we say this is more of a stream of movement that actually took place away from looking for esoteric meanings to reorienting ourselves back to the original meaning or the literal meaning. Because if you look, for example, at Luther's commentaries on the Psalms, he'll actually use the terminology of the medievalists to refer to various ways in which this passage has implications for the church. But I do think there was a genuine shift away from the notion that these are secret meanings that are hidden from the populace, from normal eyes, and only we

the priests understand it, to, these are implications of the original meaning even though they use the same terminologies. You don't find that as much, though, in Calvin. You don't find much reference to that kind of thing in Calvin at all. It's more or less Luther in his early days of his work. I think that it's an amazing thing, really, that they were able to break as free as they were from the stranglehold, in many respects, that that fourfold meaning or multiple meaning approach had on them.

### Question 14:

#### Why did the church move away from a polyvalent view of Scripture?

**Student:** We seem, though, to have moved as a church and as a body of Christ to have moved even further away from that sort of multiple meaning set even than the Reformers did. What is the reason for that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's a good question because as you know, lots of times that's not the case, right? I mean there are, like we've even said, there are Christians that still sort of have their own versions of secret meanings in the Bible. But I would say that by and large it's the result of the influence of modern science. I don't what else you could say. The influence of modern science even on orthodox, conservative, Protestant believers is enormous. A scientific mentality basically says you've got this text and it must be read within its historical context, and it must be read according to its original meaning. And that's what is most important — getting back to the original, getting back to the origins, that kind of thing. And it's an important feature of contemporary approaches that really does downplay multi-meaningfulness, with some exceptions, though, not just in radical groups but in more mainline groups in fact. Like you were mentioning, prophecy. Many times people will resort to this with prophecy; they'll sort of make a special plea for prophecy being multi-meaningful. I personally don't think that's necessary. I think there are better ways to approach it, but that's just the way it is. Have you experienced Christians that do this, that still look for multiple meanings?

**Student:** Well I don't even know so much if it's Christians as much as with the shift culturally in the postmodern sort of era. It seems to have a tendency to try to open up texts to further meaning and deeper meaning. So I was curious.

**Dr. Pratt:** Good, good. That is another issue altogether. You're right. You're bringing up something that I didn't even think of. And that is that nowadays we are in this sort of what's called post-structuralist hermeneutic where people are looking at any text, not just the Bible but any text, apart from a sort of scientific model. I'm thinking about evangelicals who are sort of stuck back fifty years ago. They're still looking at the Bible from a more grammatico-historical or scientific approach. But now we're sort of in a post-structuralist or post-scientific approach to texts. And that, as you know, in the postmodern vein has to do with the fact that people are looking at any text including the Bible as a power play, as somebody's power play over you,

potentially. And the best way to resist the power or the influence that the text is trying to have over you is to discount the original meaning and to say, “Oh no, this text — whatever it is, a poem, a story, a riddle, whatever it may be — can have many, many, many meanings and I can show you that it can. In fact, I can even destroy the meaning that the original writer wanted it to have by deconstructing it and then by reconstructing it with my own frame of reference.”

Now that’s a much more contemporary way of doing things. Happily, that has not entered into evangelical hermeneutics very much yet. It probably will in the future, but it’s really not there yet. But broadly speaking, you’re right. We’re in a post-scientific, post-structuralist, but it’s a new kind of polyvalence. It’s not classical polyvalence as based on God having given us the Bible and therefore it has this sort of overflow of meaning, of secret divine meanings, but it’s rather a polyvalence that comes from the fact that every reader ought to be able to read this exactly as he or she wants to read it according to their approach. And no one reading has priority over another. And of course what I would say to that is you have to give priority to the original meaning. And it is true that the Bible is a will to power. Would you say that’s true? Is the Bible a will to power over us?

**Student: Probably. A little uncomfortable to admit, depending on what you mean by that. But not all power is bad.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Exactly. Because the fact is that Bible writers were trying to influence their readers, and they were trying to influence us. The difference is, of course, that they speak on God’s behalf; they’re inspired by Holy Spirit and therefore they have a right to do that. That’s the difference between us, say, and *Mein Kampf*. Okay? That’s the difference. The Bible was given to us by God and so it’s attempt to influence, or its will to power over the reader is not something we’re supposed to resist, but it’s something we’re supposed to submit to, and rightfully so, because it’s given to us by our creator. And so that makes a big difference. But you’re right to say that contemporary Protestant evangelical hermeneutics has shifted further away from the early Reformers, away from the multi-meaningfulness but now with this added feature that you bring up of contemporary post-structuralist hermeneutics as well.

### Question 15:

**Is every passage of Scripture limited to one, unified meaning?**

**Student: Richard, there seems to be this line of thought that certain passages, or maybe even all passages of Scripture should have only one unified and coherent meaning. What is your particular stance on that?**

**Dr. Pratt:** That’s a traditional way of putting it, that every passage has one meaning. I like that. I think there’s some truth in that. In fact, it’s in the Westminster Confession of Faith and so I sort of affirm that that’s true. There’s a sense in which

every passage has one meaning. But I do want to argue that the coherent unitary meaning of a passage, of any substantial length anyway, is manifold. That is, it's multifaceted. It's like a ruby with many different sides to it. And so it's not simply to say that when you say that one passage has one meaning, it doesn't mean that it's a simple meaning or a noncomplex meaning, but that it can have great complexion. In addition to the complexity of the original meaning, you know we also need to make a distinction, as is very common, of the difference between the original meaning which is one and the fact that every passage has many applications to life. You've heard that kind of thing before, right, that every passage has many implications even though it has just one meaning?

**Student: Right, maybe even thinking about the commandment to love God. That looks different for different people. For some people that'll look like — selling their possessions. We see that even in Jesus' ministry. He doesn't command everyone to sell everything and go and follow him in the same way. Some people follow him having their possessions, using their possessions to benefit the poor. Or even like maybe for contemporary Christians, for some Christians loving God might mean reading their Bibles more, learning more about him. For some Christians we get stuck assuming, okay, the daily devotion is the most important thing. Maybe some of us need to step back and say, okay, I need to get more involved in the community, I need to express my love for God through more acts of mercy, more acts of service. It's sort of that balancing you talked about elsewhere with our thinking, with our actions and with our emotions, and that loving God happens in all of those things.**

**Dr. Pratt:** And you can't do them all at once.

**Student: Right, right.**

**Dr. Pratt:** And not every single person needs to do it in exactly the same way. The same principle that's derived from that one meaning can have many applications. Now when I talk about the original meaning being multifaceted, I want to make a slightly different approach to this, because it's very common to hear people saying today among Protestants, "one meaning, many applications." But I want to complicate that just a little bit, and that is to say, there is one meaning but there are many summaries of that meaning, many legitimate summaries of that one original meaning because no summary can embrace the entire thing, can be comprehensive of everything that that passage meant. So you'll get this summary, and that summary, and that summary, all of which many be perfectly legitimate, perfectly right, but then out of those multiple summaries of the original meaning come even more applications.

If you take a passage like John 3:16, I mean, how many ways could you summarize John 3:16 and still tell the truth? You could say John 3:16 teaches us that God loves. You could say that it teaches that Jesus died for sinners. You could say that anyone who believes in Jesus will be saved. That's at least three ways we could summarize John 3:16, all of which are true to the original meaning. But from those multiple

summaries of the original meaning then come even more manifold applications as you apply that to different people, because everybody needs to understand God's love different ways for their lives as they live their lives before Christ. And so it's true that confessionally we speak in terms of one meaning, a unitary meaning, but if we can remember that that doesn't mean it's simple or just the kind of thing you can put in one tiny little phrase, but rather that it's a manifold thing that has multiple legitimate summaries which then lead to even more applications in the modern world.

### **Question 16:**

#### **Did the Reformers base their theology entirely on their exegesis of Scripture?**

**Student:** In an earlier lesson you referred to the resources used for forming archeology, the exegesis of Scripture, the interaction in community, and our personal experiences. How do you see the Reformers using those? Do you see the Reformers using those?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a great question because a lot of times what you get is the impression that what the Reformers did was they simply went to the exegesis of Scripture and ignored everything else, right? Let's get back to the Bible and that they rejected the church, and that they didn't care about their religious experience, their personal Christian living, that kind of thing. I don't think that's fair of them. It is true that there was an emphasis in the Reformation on, let's look at the Bible again, and we've said that. Let's look in fact at the original meaning of the Bible in its own context, its own history. Let's go for that. Let's do more careful exegesis than we did before. But the Reformers did not ignore their personal experience, that's for sure, because it was Luther's conversion experience that was so dramatic in propelling him forward. And so they did rely on their own sense of conscience, their own walk with God, the filling of Holy Spirit. In fact, John Calvin was known as the theologian of the Holy Spirit because he emphasized the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit so much. What do you think? Do you think that the Reformers ignored the church?

**Student:** I don't think so. Both Calvin and Luther appealed to St. Augustine at times.

**Dr. Pratt:** They did, that's right. Because the Reformers did not just go back to the Bible. It wasn't like many people today where they said, "All I need is the Bible and Jesus and me and I've got it all together." I mean, that's just not the way they thought about things. They did emphasize the authority of Scripture as the only infallible, the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and life. And so that's true, but they also appealed to the church. In fact, as different editions of Calvin's Institutes were made, there were increasing numbers of references to the patriarchal period of the church, the patristic period of the church, and the early Fathers were very important to him. And of course Christian living was as well. So it's all three of these resources that

we're to use — that the Holy Spirit normally uses to bring us to understand truth — were at the very heart of the Reformation. And they need to be again today.

This is part of the problem here. It's that we're in a situation where you have some people who say all I need is the Bible. No, that's not true. You do need the church. You do need the church of the past as well as the present. And many Christians are saying I don't really need my religious experience anymore. Well, yes you do. It's not an intellectual thing. It's an experiential thing. And so all three of these, exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and Christian living are essential to finding truth, and it was essential to the Reformation as well.

### **Question 17:** **How clear are the teachings of Scripture?**

**Student:** Richard, can you elaborate a little bit on the areas of clarity, I think you call it.

**Dr. Pratt:** The degrees of clarity.

**Student:** The degrees of clarity. Can you elaborate on that from the lesson a little bit?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well there are these extreme where some people would argue that nothing in the Bible is clear. Now that can be done traditionally, and then it can also be done in a contemporary way when people now say nothing is clear. That's one extreme: no clarity in the Bible. The other extreme is to say everything is crystal clear. What's wrong with you? Can't you see it the way I see it? Which is what it usually amounts to, because there are people that just go crazy over how much they think they understand about the Bible over here. So you've got those extremes. And the traditional Protestant view is that there are degrees of clarity in the Bible so that not all of the Bible is as clear as other parts of the Bible. And again, the sort of traditional way of thinking about that is that what's necessary or essential for salvation is clear in one part or another in the Bible. You see, that's saying a whole lot right there, because you're saying first that what a person needs to know to be saved to everlasting life is clear in the Bible but not clear everywhere; it's clear in one place or another. And so that's very interesting to me because it's the sort of thing where you end up sort of saying, okay, well then exactly what parts tell us what part of salvation.

**Student:** But aren't there areas though that are clear but don't really have to do with the dogmatic, if you will, tenants of salvation, for instance, the creation. Is it fairly clear that God created the world? Isaac is the son of Abraham?

**Dr. Pratt:** Those are good examples, yeah. And I think that's one way I wish we in many respects could sort of modify the traditional Protestant view. What's essential

for salvation is clear in one place or another, but then there is a ton of other things that are clear, too. Like you say, who was the son of Abraham? Well, that's pretty clear. And so I would want to argue like you're saying here that there are lots and lots of things in the Bible, but the focus has been on what's essential for salvation.

But let me say this because I think this is important. We do live in a day where people are going to these extremes. We run into people who say everything in the Bible is clear, and then you run into people who say that nothing in the Bible is clear. So let me talk about the people that say nothing in the Bible is clear for just a minute because I think it's important to realize this. You know, we have this little nursery rhyme that goes something like, "Mary had a little lamb whose fleece was white as snow, and everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go. It followed her to school one day which was against the rules." Okay? I don't know the rest of it, but that's basically what it says. Now there are parts of that little nursery rhyme that are unclear. They're problematic, because the last line I just quoted was, "It followed her to school one day." Well, I thought the lamb went everywhere that Mary went. So why did it follow her to school *one day*? That's a problem, right? I mean, was that the first day of school? Is that the reason? Had Mary never been to school before? Was the lamb a new purchase or something? There are all kinds of answers to it, but it's a difficulty. So there's a crack in that little nursery rhyme. It's something that's not real perfectly clear. But I think most of us would agree that the nursery rhyme is saying this to us: there was a little girl, and her name was Mary, and she had a little lamb. Now it wasn't that this lamb was large and that Mary was just a giant. Okay? She's a little girl whose name is Mary, a little schoolgirl, and she had a lamb. Now we might not know exactly how to take "It followed her to school one day," but we can get the core. We can get the core of what that nursery rhyme was telling us. And that's what Protestants mean when they say that there are degrees of clarity. You may not know the answer to every single thing in the Bible, but you can know the core issues of salvation and, as you added, other things as well. I mean, are there things in the Bible you can think of that are not clear?

**Student:** Well, even the imagery used in Revelation to communicate apocalyptically with what John writes there.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right. Exactly. If there's anything that's unclear, it's the book of Revelation. Though aren't we surprised at how many people think they know exactly what it means! But of course, over and over again, their interpretations of Revelation fail which is, I think, telling, isn't it? So we have to be careful not to go to these two extremes. Early Protestants sort of over-stated the amount of clarity there was in the Bible because they were resisting the Roman Catholics who were arguing nothing's clear, that's why you need the church to make it clear. And they resisted that by going sort of to the other extreme early on saying, "No, no, no, it's perfectly clear. Any fool, any farmer can read it." Of course the problem with that was that the Reformers started finding themselves disagreeing among themselves. It didn't take long, just a few years before they couldn't agree on what the Bible meant about certain things like the meaning of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. I mean, that's a

perfect example of how they disagreed with each other. And so eventually, certainly by the time you get to the Puritans, you get this notion that, okay, the Bible is clearer in some things than in other things so that the learned and the unlearned alike can understand the essentials of salvation. But then there are some things that can only be understood by the learned — to use the old term, the scholar. And then there are some things that even the scholars can't understand, can't fix, can't put together, like the book of Revelation. And so I just think we have to learn to live with that and not be thrown off by that.

A lot of times when young students hear that for the first time, they're concerned because they are afraid they are going to be thrown into this abyss of skepticism and cynicism and that they won't be able to say anything about the Bible anymore because it doesn't all just come at you crystal clear. But it's not the case. Even "Mary Had a Little Lamb" is not crystal clear. And yet we can get the core, the center of what it means without any problem. The competent reader of the Bible can also get the center that salvation comes in Christ and Christ alone. And that is what we mean when we talk about degrees of clarity in the Bible.

### Question 18:

#### Should we use clear passages of Scripture to interpret unclear passages?

**Student:** Richard, I've heard the principle that when we come upon unclear passages of Scripture we should use clearer ones to interpret those. How do we decide in this principle — I've just been confused by this — how do we decide what qualifies as a clear passage of Scripture and what qualifies as an unclear passage? How do we do that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, because people disagree. That's right. They disagree over which one's clear and which one's not so clear. That's exactly why we have different denominations. Because everybody's going to latch on to the verses they think are clear — perfectly clear, anybody can read it, anybody can see this. And then you have another group that says well that verse is not so clear. And so in some ways, while we can affirm the principle that the clear passages ought to be used to interpret the unclear passages, the reality is that you have to decide which ones you think are clear. Okay? And that's the problem, because we have to work very hard and be very responsible not to simply rely upon what we sort of have as an intuition of what's clear. My own experience anyway, and I'm sure you've had this, too, is that I've thought that certain verses were clear and then came to find out later that they weren't so clear after all. And that's just the reality of it.

Now what I suggest to people as a basic principle is you have to work at this using all three resources that we've talked about before. If you want to decide if a verse is really clear, then you have to do first very careful exegesis of it. You have to work at that, just looking at the text and working at its context and those kinds of things — so

doing exegesis of Scripture. But you also then have to rely on the body of Christ — interaction in community — to know whether or not a passage is clear. If we believe that the church is where Holy Spirit lives in his fullness, and Christians disagree over what the meaning of a passage is — and I don't just mean a little bit, but I mean a lot, and that this has been something that's been going on for thousands of years, that Holy Spirit-filled Christians have disagreed over what this verse means — it's very unlikely that your clear understanding is going to trump what the church has thought for two thousand years. But if there's a unanimity about it among Christians, then you can have more confidence that it's clear. And then the third thing — Christian living — is that when you start trying to apply your understanding of a verse to your Christian life, then perhaps that thing will clarify whether or not the passage is as clear as you thought it was. That's just the reality of it.

### Question 19:

#### Is John 3:16 a clear passage?

**Student:** Now you had mentioned a couple of questions ago, John 3:16. Can you go back to that? Is that a clear passage for readers?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well that's great. Way to go. Because I think that's really important. It's how you define what a passage is. Okay? Any passage of substantial length, like a verse, will have aspects of it that are clearer than others. This also complicates it. It kind of messes it up a little bit here. I would say the three of us would probably agree that the passage does teach clearly, I mean crystal clearly, that those who believe in Jesus will not perish but have everlasting life. Okay, fine. But we know that Christians disagree over certain aspects of that verse, like what does it mean to say that God loves the world? Does that mean that he loves everybody the same way? Does it mean that he has the same affection for every single person that has ever walked on this planet? Some Christians say "yes" and some Christians say "no." I don't know how you can say that looking at the planet, but that's what they do. I don't know how you can say that he does have the same love when he seems to treat some people better than others, but that's just my opinion. But that's the way people do it. They disagree over that aspect of it.

Here's another aspect of John 3:16 that they would disagree over, and that's the word "eternal life." What's the nature of eternal life? Some people, well-meaning Christians, believe that eternal life is living in heaven forever as a ghost-like figure playing a harp and singing in the choir. Well, I don't think that's what the Bible teaches, so when I hear the words "everlasting life" I think of the new heavens and the new earth, the physical earth that Christian is going to bring us, and not just for a thousand years but forever. So when I hear "everlasting life" it means something a little bit different to me. And then the reality is that Christians have disagreed over that aspect, and so we have to sort of lower our confidence about the clarity of it.

But do you remember that “Mary Had a Little Lamb” thing that I did? It’s very important to realize that even in a verse as short as John 3:16, there are features of it that are clearer than others. And so, as you start interpreting one verse in light of another based upon its clarity, in the extreme cases that’s fairly easy to do. Okay? In the extreme cases. Like we don’t have to worry that James was telling us that we’re saved by our works — and that would be, of course, a bad interpretation of James. Now let’s admit that when James says that Abraham was not justified by his faith alone but also by his works that that could lead someone to be confused about that. So we tend to read that passage in James in light of the clearer passages about how works flow from saving faith rather than works being added to saving faith. Okay. So that’s fine. In extreme cases that’s okay. But then there are some things where you’re going to find a relatively similar degree of clarity and unclarity in given passages, and then you have to be very careful not to just let your prejudices push you into thinking, “This verse is clear and this verse is clear,” because then you’re just sort of allowing your prejudices to run roughshod. So that’s why I think that careful exegesis, interaction in the Christian community both in the past and present, and then your Christian living have to be factored in and brought together to help us understand which passages are clearer than others, and then to use that principle that you mentioned.

### Question 20:

#### Should we hold all our beliefs with equal conviction?

**Student:** Richard, you were very clear in the lessons on the video, but as you spoke about these things and about the obscurity and the differences in clarity, I was starting to feel as though a lot of the things that I believed, and many of the things even that I believed, became less and less clear and less and less believable, if you will, due to the uncertainty factors involved.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right, right. That’s often a reaction people have, especially at first, because sometimes, I think sometimes as evangelicals we’re told that if you believe something, then you’re going to have this sort of utter conviction that it’s true, and that the way you’re thinking about it right now is the way you should always think about it. And so it’s this kind of extreme of dogmatism. And people often give you the impression that your choice is either that or skepticism — “I don’t know anything. Ahh! I’ve lost everything.” I think the reality is that we live in the middle and that a responsible way of dealing with ourselves and our knowledge and our convictions, our theological formulations, is somewhere in the middle; sometimes a little toward the skeptical, sometimes a little toward the dogmatic, but never out there in those extremes.

Think of the problem of saying that what I think about something is utterly dogmatic, and I’m going to be that way about it, and that means it cannot be improved upon. Now we believe that only the Bible has that status. Only the Bible is something that

cannot be improved upon. Okay? And so that means that every interpretation that I give to the Bible, even if I'm just quoting the Bible — even the meanings that I'm attaching to it in my mind — it doesn't equal the Bible in its status. It's slightly short of that. And so it's important for us to just sort of accept the fact that we're part of the human race, and this is part of what it means to be the human race. It's that we don't have everything that God has, and so we don't have utter knowledge of anything. We know that Jesus is our savior, but I am hoping that you have grown in your understanding of that, and I'm hoping that you'll continue to grow in your understanding of that.

So while it's true, you can't be utterly dogmatic as to what you mean when you say Jesus is your Savior. But knowing that doesn't throw you into the abyss of skepticism. This is the problem. You know, we have many things in life that we deal with that way. In fact almost every single thing every day our lives, we can't be absolutely sure we know everything that we need to know about something, but that doesn't throw us into skepticism and immobilize us. In fact, if you do, if you are immobilized by it, we would call it a psychological disorder. And I think we know that's true. Are there things in your life that you don't know everything about, you can be utterly dogmatic about, but you can still function?

**Student:** There are a lot of things in my life I don't know everything about, but as you sat there and said that, I was just thinking of the example of driving a car. To be honest with you, I know virtually nothing about auto mechanics or engine work or anything else, but I can drive one.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. Sometimes that funny noise starts happening and it doesn't make any difference. You sort of go, "Well, it's got a funny noise." Other times it's dramatic in effect and your car stops. But the reality is that most of the time in life that's the way it is. I mean, think of just a spark plug. You know, after about ten miles a spark plug is not functioning at 100 percent, but does that mean your care is not running anymore? No. Your car continues to run. Your body is not functioning at 100 percent and hasn't for many, many, many years — I could tell you that — but does that mean you're not alive anymore? No. How long have you been married?

**Student:** Almost four years.

**Dr. Pratt:** Four years. Okay. Do you know everything about your spouse?

**Student:** Absolutely not.

**Dr. Pratt:** How long have you been married?

**Student:** About three and a half.

**Dr. Pratt:** Three and a half. Do you know everything about your spouse?

**Student: No.**

**Dr. Pratt:** No. Okay. Does that mean you nothing about them?

**Students: No.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Now sometimes you are surprised. I've been married thirty-five years. I don't know everything about my spouse. And sometimes I'm still surprised. But that doesn't mean that I don't know anything. And that's just the way life is. That's being a human being. And we don't do something special when it comes to understanding the Bible or understanding theology. It's a similar thing. You don't have to be absolutely confident about every detail of something to believe it. And if you're unsure about something, it doesn't throw you into utter skepticism. We've got to begin to assess how confident we can be, how far we can go, whether we need to shave the edges or fuzz up the edges a little bit, that kind of thing. That's what we need to do.

**Student:** Well it seems like we would be able to do that with what you've talked about earlier with the different resources that we're given, like the exegesis of Scripture, the interaction in community, our Christian living, and see how what Scripture teaches works out in life in light of other Scripture passages, and as we were talking with the clarity and unclarity, using clear passages to exegete less clear passages, and also just historically. I think you mentioned at one point that Calvin and Luther relied on Augustine and we can follow that example in how we formulate our doctrines to see what the church believed before. And with what we believe about Jesus, that he was both God and man, we get that terminology from the early church.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right, not straight from the Bible.

**Student:** From early counsels, from the creeds, that those were theological formulations that throughout church history have been affirmed as true, as true summaries of what Scripture teaches.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right. And then our Christian living, too. Our personal Christian living is another resource that we have. You know, that's just the way you do things in life. We draw on many different resources. We kind of compile them together, and that helps us understand whether I can walk out on that ice on that lake or not. And sometimes you don't do it right. Sometimes you over-assess. Or sometimes you walk around the lake when you didn't have to. I mean, that's just the reality of living in this world. And until we're perfect, that's the way we're going to have to live with theology. But again, the danger, the fear that people have is what you expressed at the beginning, and that is, well, does that mean I can't know anything? No! You can know all kinds of things. This is the wonderful thing about it.

But as we tried to say in the lesson, the funny thing about learning more is that it exposes you to things that you don't know, and the more you learn about God from the Scriptures, the more you understand that you don't know things. What used to be very simple now becomes more complex. It's just like blowing up a balloon. As the balloon of knowledge grows, the surface area increases. Okay? It increases much faster than the volume inside, and so as you learn more things, you're awareness of your ignorance is also growing. Now that doesn't pop the balloon and mean that you don't know anything. It simply means you're more aware of how much you don't know. And in many respects, that's Christian growth. What I have found is that especially young students of theology, what they tend to do is they think of theology as something you get that gets bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and you're just going to cover everything and eventually know everything that you need to know. Well it's just not true. If your knowledge of the Bible and your knowledge of theology is growing, as I hope it is, then what it's going to do is expose you to the fact that you know even less than you thought you did. We're dealing with a big God here, and while it doesn't destroy what we know, it does expose us to what we don't know. And that's one of those great things about avoiding the extreme of dogmatism and avoiding the extreme of skepticism and living here in the middle with different degrees of certainty and different degrees of conviction about what we believe.

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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*.