Welcome to week 3 *How to Study and Teach the Bible*. This week we’re going to be talking about biblical and systematic theology. If you’re not used to that terminology, I’m going to explain it to you. Next week, if the Lord wills, we’re going to talk about the different genres of Scripture and how we are to understand each of them.

Before we talk about biblical theology and systematic theology, I should probably say what I mean by theology. At its most basic level, theology is the attempt to answer the biggest questions of life—Who am I? What is God like? How do we make sense of evil? As Christians, we can refine this a little bit more—“Theology is the attempt to understand the truth God has revealed to us in the Scriptures.” You’ll sometimes hear people talk as if theology is something dry and distant from the Christianity of the heart. Nothing could be further from the truth. When Jesus cried out in agony on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he is asking a theological question. When David wrote in Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” he was making a theological statement. Theology is a matter of the heart and mind together.

And all of us are naturally theologians. You don’t have to write a book or get a seminary degree to be a theologian. However, none of us are naturally good theologians. We want to improve. We want to grow in our knowledge of God and his truth.

This morning, we’re going to look at some concepts that will help all of us to be better theologians. And not just better theologians—in case that sounds abstract—more faithful Christians and students of God’s word. We’re going to look at two specific ways of doing theology—biblical theology and systematic theology.

II. WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?
So let’s start with biblical theology. **Does anyone want to hazard a guess as to what I mean by biblical theology?** I mean something more than just “theology that agrees with the Bible.” I would hope that all of our theology is biblical in that sense. No, by ‘biblical theology’ I am talking about something different.

This is my definition of biblical theology: **Biblical theology is the attempt to explain what the wonderfully diverse parts of the Bible mean and how they fit together into one grand story centered on Christ.**

**In what ways do we see diversity in the Bible?** There are different authors writing in different languages in different literary genres in different historical situations and cultures. The different biblical authors also have different concerns and emphases. So Mathew, Mark, and Luke talk a lot about the kingdom of God, but Paul almost never does. The different parts of the Bible are different, but they complement each other. So biblical theology tries to look at the big picture—the whole storyline of Scripture—as well as the wildly diverse pieces that form that big picture.

**What do we mean when we talk about the story of the Bible? In what sense is the Bible a single story?** The Bible is meant to be read as a whole story. It is the story of God’s actions in history centered on Christ. We can summarize it by talking about the four great plot movements of history—Creation/Fall/Redemption/New Creation.

That brings me to four characteristics I want to talk about that mark biblical theology.

1. Biblical theology deals with ... **the whole storyline of the Bible.**

   So, this summer Julie and I have gotten in to Agatha Christie books. Have you ever read anything by Agatha Christie? She was a great writer of mystery novels. Her books are very clever, but they follow a pattern. You’re introduced to some characters, there is a murder, an investigation ensues, and finally you discover who the true murderer is. There are always some twists and turns along the way, but each book has a straightforward plot which isn’t hard to follow. The Bible isn’t like that. It’s not just one book, it’s 66 books
and it isn’t always easy to see how they fit together. But the Bible has a plot too. It begins with creation—God makes all things and all people. And he doesn’t just make them, he rules them as the king of the universe. Then we come to the Fall—Adam and Eve rebel and plunge the world into sin and death. And it isn’t just them, the Fall is replayed over and over again in Israel’s history and in our history. We sin and the result is death. But God is redeeming a people for himself—this is the third plot point. It begins right after the Fall when God promises to crush the serpent and then when he chose Noah and Abraham and David and finally, chiefly, Jesus. God would redeem his people, paying for their sins and giving them new life. And then we finally look with anticipation for the great conclusion—the New Creation when Christ returns and makes all things new. It has already begun in the church where God is making individual believers new through his Spirit, but it will be finished one day in glory.

So the 66 books of the Bible are all really different, but they all fit into this great story. It is this story which holds the Bible together and makes it something more than just a collection of religious books. Andy has been preaching through Hebrews in the main service. Hebrews is really an example of biblical theology. The author of Hebrews is looking at the Old Testament and explaining how it fits together with this whole storyline of Scripture. Who was this guy Melchizedek and why does he matter? Well, he was a type of Christ, pointing ahead to the coming of our savior.

2. Biblical theology deals with ... *progressive revelation*.

**What does that phrase “progressive revelation” mean?** The Bible is the record of God’s revelation. God has revealed knowledge about himself and his plans to his people, but he hasn’t done it all at once. He has done it progressively, in stages. So imagine an artist had painted a beautiful mural on a wall, covered it with a curtain, and then invited the public to come see what he’d done. He could drop the curtain all at once or he could draw it back slowly so you could take it in bit by bit until finally the whole thing was revealed. God has chosen to reveal himself and his plan for history in this second way. We know more about God’s plans than the patriarchs did because we live at a time in which God has revealed more of his plan. In fact, other than the exact timing and circumstances of Christ’s return, we have
received the fullness of God’s plan. Jesus was Immanuel, which means God with us. There can be no fuller revelation of God than God in the flesh.

Given that we know God’s plan, why do we need to pay attention to progressive revelation when we study the Bible? In the first week of this class, we said that our first goal is to discover the author’s intent. Sometimes we can lose the authorial intent of an early part of Scripture if we ignore where that author stood in the line of revelation. Let me show you what I mean. Turn to Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is perhaps the saddest Psalm in the Book of Psalms. Would someone read Psalm 88:10-14?

Psalm 88:10-14  

10 Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Selah
11 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon?  
12 Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?  
13 But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.  
14 O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?

Now what strikes you about this passage? Well, it sort of seems like the Psalmist is denying the resurrection! He asks this rhetorical question, “Do the departed rise up to praise you?” and we sort of want to answer, “Well, yes, actually.” So is the Psalmist just wrong? No, we have to remember that one of the things that God revealed progressively was what happened after death. So we know that we will die and go to the Lord and then one day be raised from the dead bodily. But the ancient Israelites didn’t know all that, so they spoke of life after death vaguely. There are hints, but it doesn’t get really clear until Jesus. So we keep that in mind when it comes to Psalm 88 and we realize that the psalmist is speaking from an ordinary human perspective here without the aid of revelation about life after death. From an ordinary human perspective, death is the end and the grave is silent. He’s saying, “I can’t see how me dying does any good.” Now, we have the advantage of knowing more than this Psalmist. There is hope and joy even in death! But we need to keep the progressive quality of God’s revelation in mind as we read the Bible.

3. Biblical theology deals with ... the Bible’s own categories and concerns.

One of the things which will strike you as you read the Bible is how culturally distant some parts of the Bible seem. There is a temptation to just ignore what a biblical text wants to talk about and make the Bible talk about what
we’re interested in. So let’s take an example. In the Book of Galatians, Paul is very concerned about this

4. Biblical theology deals with ... *the diversity of the Biblical texts.*

We’ve already talked about the diversity of the biblical texts. The books of the Bible were written for different reasons. So Leviticus was written to instruct Israel on how to be holy. John was written so people would believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. Jude was written to counter false teaching in the church. We could go on. Moreover, different authors use terminology different. Each book has a different voice and a different message. We want to pay attention to each distinct voice.

I want to look at one particularly important example of this diversity. Turn with me to Galatians 2. **Would someone read Galatians 2:15-16?**

**Galatians 2:15-16**  
15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

So Paul clearly says that a person “is not justified by works of the law but through faith.” Now turn to James 2. **Would someone read James 2:20-24?**

**James 2:20-24**  
20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"--and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

So James says a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. He even quotes the verse from Genesis 15 about Abraham that Paul uses regularly to argue that we’re justified by faith. Now that is some diversity ...

**How do we make sense of these two passages?** James and Paul aren’t actually contradicting each other at all. They are addressing different situations and they are using the words “justification” and “faith” slightly differently. Paul is addressing people who thought they could be in the right before God by keeping the law, and he insists, “No! It’s only by faith that
we’re justified.” James is addressing people who think they can simply believe in Jesus and never have to do anything and he says, “No! Your faith will only be shown to be real through your works.” Both of them agree that faith is supposed to show itself in works. But James uses “faith” here to mean something like “mere belief” and justify to mean “show to be righteous.” Biblical theology pays careful attention to the differences between biblical authors. We want to let James speak for himself and Paul speak for himself.

So biblical theology lets the diverse parts of Scripture speak with their own voice and works to see how each of those voices fits into the choir of Scripture.

Any questions about biblical theology?

Now, I have a book I’d like to give away. It’s on this topic of biblical theology. I’ll give it to anyone who’ll read it.

III. WHAT IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

Let’s move on to systematic theology. This might be a little bit more familiar. We’ll define systematic theology this way: **Systematic theology is an attempt to present the whole teaching of the Bible, organized and applied.**

So I want to focus on four characteristics of systematic theology and contrast them with biblical theology.

1. Systematic theology features ... **systematic, logical organization and terminology.**
   This one is probably pretty obvious. Think about how messy the Bible is. All these biblical authors running all over the place saying all sorts of different things. The Bible is like an overgrown garden exploding with flowers and fruit. It can be kind of chaotic, but it is beautiful and fruitful. Systematic theology tries to bring a degree of order to Biblical truth. So it is arranged topically rather than chronologically. Systematic theology doesn’t contain stories or parables. Truths are stated propositionally in an orderly fashion.

   **What would be some of the advantages and disadvantages of systematic theology?** We love stories and poetry. They have a great deal of emotional
impact. After all, we don’t just want to learn truth, we want to be changed by it. But we gain clarity and organization. And for that matter, not all systematic theology is dry and boring. It is very important to remember that we aren’t choosing between systematic and biblical theology. We’re choosing both. We need both. We’ll talk about how they relate in a moment.

2. Systematic theology deals with ... *completed revelation*.

We talked a few minutes ago about how God revealed his truth progressively. Well, systematic theology is interested in the whole. So systematic theology isn’t interested so much in the process of the curtain being drawn back across the mural—it wants to see the whole mural all at once so it can figure out the message. So, biblical theology might ask a question like, “What does the Psalmist in Psalm 88 say about death?” The systematic theologian asks, “What does the Bible as a whole say about death?” Of course, to answer that question, systematic theology is going to use of the fullest revelation available. So we know that there is a resurrection from the dead. So systematic theology takes all of this knowledge and organizes it into a whole.

3. Systematic theology employs ... *some limited reasoning beyond Scripture*.

This sounds dangerous, and it can be. But there are things the Scriptures explicitly say and other things the Scriptures clearly imply. So, the Bible teaches us a lot about the identities of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They are clearly all divine. But it is the work of systematic theology to think about how the biblical data fits together. From very early on, Christians began using the word Trinity to refer to God who is three and one. The Bible doesn’t contain the word Trinity, but the Trinity is clearly implied by Scripture. It is systematic theology that thinks about this data and formulates the whole.

I’ll give another example. People sometimes ask whether church membership is biblical. After all, there is no Scripture that says you need to join a church, right? So is church membership biblical? Certainly! The NT is
very clear that some people were part of local churches and some weren’t. Some people were even removed from the church. This must mean that there was a process of church membership, even if it wasn’t called that.

So there is a place for using reason to figure out the implications of what the Bible teaches us. **What are some ways this could go wrong?** There are lots of ways we can make mistakes. People run far ahead of the Scriptures all the time. We are all prone to fall into error; it is just a sad result of our fallen condition. God gave us minds and we’re meant to use them. But we should be very careful not to drift into speculation. We want to learn what the Bible clearly teaches and then we want to make necessary inferences from what the Bible teaches. We shouldn’t go beyond that. We must always be willing to be hauled back in.

4. Systematic theology deals with ... *contemporary concerns and problems.*

**Why would this be something systematic theology is better at then biblical theology?** Biblical theology strives to stick as closely as possible to the concerns of the biblical authors, and our concerns are sometimes different. We face many of the same challenges believers faced in the time of Paul, but some different ones as well.

I’ll give you a few examples. **What does the Bible tell us about taking care of the environment?** Nothing directly. The biblical authors weren’t concerned about pollution or endangered species. Those just weren’t issues in their cultures. But the Bible does give us a theology of creation and our responsibilities to creation. We can reason from what the Bible does say, to develop guidelines for how we are to treat the created world in a very different context.

So let’s think through one of these issues together. Let’s take another contemporary example and think through it. The Bible says nothing about Islam because Islam didn’t exist. **How should we think about Islam? How can systematic theology help us think through this?** Should we view it as an Abrahamic religion worshiping the true God?
Now, I have a book to give away. It’s a brief, very accessible systematic theology called *20 Truths Every Christian Should Know*. I’ll give it to someone who will read it …

IV. HOW DO BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY RELATE?

So we’ve looked at biblical and systematic theology. Let me give you those definitions one more time. We defined biblical theology this way: *Biblical theology is the attempt to explain what the wonderfully diverse parts of the Bible mean and how they fit together into one grand story centered on Christ.* We defined systematic theology this way: *Systematic theology is an attempt to present the whole teaching of the Bible, organized and applied.*

I’ve already said that we need both of them. **How should we relate them?**

**Should one have priority over the other?** Both are critical. We aren’t trying to choose between them. We need both if we’re going to be faithful to the Bible. But we need them in a certain order. It’s important that we begin with biblical theology. Biblical theology helps us understand the text on its own terms before we bring our own concerns to bear. It is the foundation upon which we build our systematic theology. In week one, we talked about the process of interpretation. The first thing we do in interpretation is exegesis—we ask the question, “What does this mean?” We want to build our doctrine and our application on what the text says. We’ll have to think about the implications of the biblical message and pay attention to things like progressive revelation. But biblical theology will give us a firm foundation. We start with biblical theology and then work our way to systematic theology, trying to understand the whole message of Scripture and how it relates to the world we live in today.

V. CONCLUSION

I hope that didn’t sound or feel too technical. I want to close by talking about how you can use these concepts in your own study and teaching of the bible. **What are your thoughts on this? How can what we’ve learned today be helpful in your studying and teaching the Bible?**
• Train yourself to listen to the Bible on its own terms before you bring your questions to it.
• Recognize that the Bible is one story. Think about how the individual part you are studying fits in to that whole.
• Always think about application. Scripture speaks to every area of life, but it doesn’t speak to every area directly. We have to think about how Scripture speaks to present day problems.