

Church and Theology

Where the Bible and the Local Church Meet

Soteriology: What the Bible Teaches about Salvation¹

Topic #1 (Audio #1)—Introduction

Paul S. Karleen

I want to read to you 18 statements or ideas that we often hear. See if you have heard them and if you think they are true or false.

1. God loves everyone, wants everyone to be saved and has provided for them to be saved. Isn't this what Jn. 3:16 says?
2. When we do evangelism, we should tell people that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives.
3. We must receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
4. Since God wants everyone to be saved, but not everyone is, it must be that he allows people to reject the Gospel.
5. I have free will that allows me to choose to come to God or not. If I didn't have free will, then I'd just be a robot.
6. I searched for God (and found him).
7. I decided for Christ.
8. We must first exercise faith and then God causes us to be born again. It's up to us to start the process.
9. In eternity past God saw who was going to believe and then chose them for salvation (called them one of the elect).
10. God loves everyone and loves the elect more than the rest.
11. God wants everyone who hears the Gospel to be saved.
12. Since he infinitely gracious, God shows grace to everyone who ever lives.
13. We can be declared righteous at salvation but must do good works to finally enter heaven.
14. If God has a plan for the universe, it could not include bad things or evil acts.
15. There is evil in the world, because sometimes God simply allows bad things to happen.
16. God would never have wanted the Cross to happen. It was some kind of accident.
17. God is really sorry that bad things happen, but cannot control them.
18. God's plan from eternity past includes everything that ever exists or happens.

In Romans 3:23 the Apostle Paul states in a striking way the central problem that faces all human beings: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We all start life separated from God. The resolution of this problem comes entirely from God. This resolution is found throughout the Bible; it is the central point of the Bible. God's written Word tells us our problem and also tells us how God fixes that problem. This is the Bible's teaching about salvation. This study is the first in a series on just that: what the Bible teaches about salvation.

By the way, in this series we will see that 17 of those ideas are false, because they simply do not match what the Bible says. Only one is true.

Here are some key features of my approach in this series to what the Bible teaches about salvation:

- It will be systematic and therefore part of systematic theology.

¹ Copyright 2023 by Paul S. Karleen. Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.](http://www.biblica.com)® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

- It will be Calvinistic and, with regard to the overall plan of God, will be what some call “High Calvinism.” This is not at all the same thing as Hyper Calvinism. I appreciate Robert Reymond’s approach, where God’s purpose is not to fix humanity after the Cross happened, but by means of his plan to save a subset of humanity to bring glory to him, with Rom. 9:22-24 being a key text.
- My approach will be centered on the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace: Salvation is dependent on God in every possible way. I freely state that I changed my position starting about 35 years ago as I was enabled by God to shed the error of Amyraldianism that I was taught at Dallas Theological Seminary. In changing I owe a debt to Gary Long and S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., who himself changed from Amyraldianism to be an adherent of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace in the 1970’s. His adoption of this biblical position led to his being dismissed from the Seminary. Before that he was simply the finest scholar at that school.
- I will provide a bibliography and samples of books and a notebook and strongly encourage you to read as you are able in some of the books as we proceed through various topics.
- While this series will be Reformed and Calvinistic regarding God, scripture, anthropology, hamartiology and the meaning and application of the cross, it will differ from Reformed teaching where it may touch on the universal Church, the local church and the plan of the ages and eschatology. In studying for this series I am consciously trying to take a fresh look at all the areas that I will cover. I see this as an opportunity to correct previous errors in my understanding. Similarly, using terms such as Reformed or Calvinistic does not mean that I have consciously started with established theological positions or schools. I have attempted to be hard on myself in analyzing the biblical text and stating theological conclusions. I will be re-examining and attempting to refine what I believe the Bible says as I prepare studies. In the final analysis, I am certain that, because I am human, limited, weak and sinful, I will fail to come to correct understanding of many of the topics that I attempt to treat.

1. Introduction to Theology

Since this will be a series of studies in the theology of salvation, we need to remind ourselves at the outset of what theology in general is and what systematic theology is.

A theology is a system of belief about God or a god or even multiple gods. Everyone has a theology. The Buddhist has a theology. The Christian Scientist has a theology. The atheist has a theology (it’s very concise: “I believe that God doesn’t exist”). For the person who claims to be under the saving work of Christ, however, the question is whether or not his system of belief matches what the Bible says. David Wells has written a powerful and perceptive book on the devaluation of theology among evangelicals—*No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* Concerning the universality of theologies he says:

We all have our theologies, for we all have a way of putting things together in our own minds that, if we are Christian, has a shape that arises from our knowledge of God and his Word. We might not be conscious of the process. Indeed, we frequently are not. But at the very least we will organize our perceptions into some sort of pattern that seems to make sense to us. The question at issue, then, is not *whether* we will have a theology but whether it will be a good or bad one, whether we will become conscious of our thinking processes or not, and more particularly, whether we will learn to bring all of our thoughts into obedience to Christ or not.²

Some people believe that there is something unbiblical about doctrine or theology. They say something like, “Just give me the Bible. Don’t give me human opinions.” The problem with this is that, as soon as anyone speaks about the Bible (unless he simply reads verses, in which case he is reflecting the decisions of translators, which in turn involve opinions about the Bible), he is rendering an opinion. When a person says “Don’t give me doctrine” he is really saying “Don’t give me your doctrine, for I prefer mine (although I won’t call it that).”

² David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth Or What Ever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 3.

My purpose in this series of studies will be to help you to make your belief system come into line with what the Bible actually says about salvation.

The definition of systematic theology

‘Systematic theology’ is a frightening term to some people but it’s just the attempt to draw together in our own words all that we understand about the Bible and its relation to humanity. Here is a definition:

Systematic theology is the organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.

A theological statement or point organizes and summarizes what we believe the Bible says. All of these together become a whole theology. Done carefully and with organization, it is systematic theology.

The practicality of systematic theology and its value in the evangelical world today

Systematic theology was once called the queen of the sciences but it has long since fallen on hard times. It is not that people are not talking about spiritual things. They are. It is not that they are not writing books and making formulations of beliefs. They are. What we don’t see enough of are 1) a respect for the Bible as revealed truth, 2) the organized study of what the Bible says and 3) the willingness to apply conclusions to life. Satan is always active and is most happy when we disregard what the Bible actually says. The results of this neglect for the life of an individual and for the lives of all those in the evangelical world are the same: increased conformity to the world and decreased love for God and effectiveness for him. Because we always want to believe *something*, we fill the biblical theology vacuum with what the world tells us to believe.

Wells’ key point about theology is that

[It] is disappearing in the sense that while its articles of belief are still professed, they are no longer defining what it means to be an evangelical or how evangelicalism should be practiced. At its center there is now a vacuum into which modernity is pouring, and the result is a faith that, unlike historic orthodoxy, is no longer defining itself theologically.³

Speaking of the detail of biblical theology and its neglect today, which he labels a “disappearance of conviction”,⁴ Wells says:

In an extraordinary fashion, then, the theological wheel has turned full circle. Evangelicals, no less than the Liberals before them whom they have always berated, have now abandoned doctrine in favor of “life.” . . . Evangelicals today only have to believe that God can work dramatically within the narrow fissure of internal experience; they have lost interest (or perhaps they can no longer sustain interest) in what the doctrines of creation, common grace, and providence once meant for Christian believers, and even in those doctrines that articulate Christ’s death such as justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation. It is enough for them simply to know that Christ somehow died for people.⁵

The result of the lack of biblical theology in the lives of Christians is that

³ Wells, 109.

⁴ Wells, 132.

⁵ Wells, 131.

The virtues of the old privacy, such as reticence and modesty, are looked upon today as maladies. What was once unseemly is now commonplace. What was once instinct is now truth. What was once feeling is now belief. Then the best were always people of conviction; now they seldom are. Then self-control was virtue; now it is bondage.... In short, whereas once we were directed by a culture that had originally learned its habits from the Christian faith, we are now being directed by a culture that has learned its habits from the psychologists—and evangelicals in large numbers have come to assume that this is actually what faith is all about.⁶

Where self is dominant as it is in our culture, the effect on Christians is profound:

Where God's place in the world is reduced to the domain of private consciousness, his external acts of redemption are trimmed to fit the experience of personal salvation, his providence in the world diminishes to whatever is necessary to ensure one's having a good day, his Word becomes intuition, and conviction fades into evanescent opinion. Theology becomes therapy, and all the telltale symptoms of the therapeutic model of faith begin to surface. The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one's self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self.⁷

The Bible clearly links sound teaching with lives that please God. Perhaps the most powerful passage on this is 2 Tim. 3:14-17:

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. points out that "Christian morality or Christian life, if you like, is the fruit that grows from the tree of Christian doctrine. In other words, it is doctrine that is responsible for right living. If you have wrong doctrine—wrong living; right doctrine—right living."⁸

Key related terms

The word doctrine is used by some to describe systematized statements about the Bible. This word can actually be used with regard to any subject. It simply denotes any portion of a system of ideas, belief or study. There is doctrine in the field of sociology, in particle physics, in microbiology and in literary criticism. In a sense, doctrine (when it refers to biblical studies) and theology amount to the same thing. Both are concerned with making organized summary statements about what we believe the Bible is saying.

There are different uses of the word theology. Systematic theology, as defined by a conservative Protestant, attempts to organize data from the Bible about God and his activities. It may draw from history, philosophy and other fields, but the Bible is at the center. It is important to note that in the last hundred years or so many non-conservatives have attempted to write about God without significant reference to the Bible. The word theology may be used for this, but its connection with the Bible varies, and sometimes it is not biblical at all, dealing almost exclusively with philosophical, linguistic or sociological matters. Anyone can label as theology anything he wishes. But for our purposes it is important to realize that theology, as the field that ought to make

⁶ Wells, 168-169.

⁷ Wells, 183.

⁸ Recorded message; transcript available at http://www.sljinstitute.net/sermons/doctrine/systemtheo_pages/systemtheology1.html

comprehensive statements about God and his activities, is most fruitful if it centers on the revelation he has given of himself in Scripture.

Some have spoken of *exegetical theology*, which in its summarizing and explanatory work consciously keeps the careful examination of minute parts of Scripture in the center of its attention.⁹

We would be practicing *biblical theology* if we studied Paul's theology as opposed to Luke's, or just Isaiah's alone.

Historical theology is the field that traces beliefs, particularly in the Christian Church, through the centuries. It attempts to form a history of conclusions about the Bible.

On hearing the term *practical theology* some might conclude that it is simply the useful application of otherwise dry studies. But this term denotes the employment in life of what is concluded from the Bible, and is used especially of ministry in the Body of Christ. It is, in the highest sense, the fruitful outcome of what the mind has concluded about the Bible, the everyday application of systematic theology.

There is at least one other term using the word theology that we should note—*theology proper*. This refers to a narrow portion of theological study that is centered on the nature of God as a trinitarian Being.

The divisions of systematic theology

Systematic theology as presented by evangelicals is often divided into the following sections:

1. Bibliology: the study of the nature of the Bible
2. Theology Proper: the study of God
3. Christology: the study of Jesus Christ, his nature and works
4. Pneumatology: the study of the Holy Spirit
5. Anthropology: the study of human beings as creations of God
6. Angelology: the study of angelic beings
7. Hamartiology: the study of sin and its effects on the human race
8. Soteriology: the study of the provision and application of salvation and the life of the believer before God
9. Ecclesiology: the study of the universal Church and the local church
10. Eschatology: the study of last things; usually includes the study of the covenants and the plan of the ages

The need for systematic theology and the biblical bases for organization

Jesus himself set the pattern for us with regard to systematic presentation of the Scriptures when he took the disciples on the Emmaus Road through the whole range of the Old Testament, explaining to them what was written about him. In Romans 6:15-17 Paul speaks of "the form of teaching to which you were entrusted"—a specialized system of truth. Paul had a form of teaching and he was interested in what people in the churches believed. There was a pattern that was to be understood and applied to life.

Ephesians 4:11-16 forms an exhortation to grow to maturity and unity in doctrine. This implies that there is a body of teaching that is to be passed down from one generation to the next. This is the content of biblically sound systematic theology. Passages such as the following teach the existence of a body of truth that is to be

⁹ For an excellent example of wedding exegesis and theology see S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Romans 5:12—An Exercise in Exegesis and Theology," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 298-316.

studied, understood and lived out: 1 Cor. 15:2; Col. 2:6; 1 Tim. 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; Tit. 1:9; Heb. 2:1; Jude 3.

When we make doctrinal summaries that together make up our theology, we are organizing in our own words what we believe the message of the Bible is. This is a great aid to our understanding, because we have difficulty grasping or considering many things at once. Further, we can compare points more easily and find out where we are inconsistent.

Any field of study demands summaries, comprehensive statements and practical overviews. For example, a physicist works with little pieces of information to begin with, attempting to understand what he has observed, but eventually at some point has to make organized conclusions about all his findings. A summary of all the areas of physics would include all that is believed to be true in the realm of physics. It should be up-to-date, orderly and cover every area touched on by physics.

The place of theological teaching in the local church

Systematic theology is crucial for the vitality of the local church. Errors in theology lead to errors in the local fellowship of believers. I recall Lewis Johnson pointing out many years ago that many apparently sound local churches have declined significantly after well-known preachers have left, often because people have not become grounded systematically in the truths of Scripture. There is everything right about studying systematic theology in the local church.

And so, in the next session we begin the systematic study of what God does to save sinners.

Valuable reading for this study:

- Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998). The Introduction is useful for this first study in the series.

Key resources for all studies in this series:

- Reymond, Robert L. *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998).
- Packer, J. I. "Introduction" in John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007). Available at <http://www.apuritansmind.com/armenianism/introduction-to-the-death-of-death-ji-packer/>
- Steele, David N., Curtis C. Thomas and S. Lance Quinn. *The Five Points of Calvinism Defined Defended and Documented* (P&R Publishing: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2004).

Valuable readings for the next topic, Predestination and the Plan of God

- Boettner, Loraine. *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, available at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/boettner/predest.html>
- Clark, Gordon H. "Determinism and Responsibility," available at <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/PDF/077DeterminismandResponsibility.pdf> . This provides almost the same important content as Clark's *God and Evil*.
- Clark, Gordon H. *God and Evil: The Problem Solved* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2004).
- Clark, Gordon H., *Predestination* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2006).

- Crampton, W. “Clark’s *God and Evil: The Problem Solved*,” available at <https://www.thebluebanner.com/pdf/bluebanner8-11&12.pdf> and http://dr94bacon.bluedomino.com/blue_banner_articles/godandevil.htm
- Pink, A. W. “Objections to God’s Sovereignty Answered,” available at http://www.the-highway.com/objsovereignty_Pink.html
- Pink, A. W. “The Sovereignty of God,” available at <https://reformed.org/books/pink/index.html>

Questions for further study

1. Study Rom. 5:1-11 and write down at least five theological points. Examples: Justification is obtained through faith; Jesus died for his enemies.
2. Give at least three features of Peter’s theology of suffering
3. Give at least three theological points that are important for the local church.