



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

TRANSCRIPT

“Introduction, or the Idea, Material and Method of Systematic Theology”

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for the privilege of studying together. And we ask as we consider the teaching of the word of God that the Holy Spirit may take of the things of Jesus Christ and show them unto us. We pray that Thou will give us an ability to understand the word and to organize the information that we possess so that we think the thoughts which Thou wouldst have us to think. Enable us to think logically and systematically above all under the Spirit's teaching. Commit each one present to Thee and ask Thy blessing upon us.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

[Message] Tonight is an introductory study. And so the subject for tonight is “Introduction, or the Idea, Material and Method of Systematic Theology” -- “Introduction, or the Idea, Material and Method of Systematic Theology.”

May I also say this before I begin? I'm very delighted to see a number of you have your notebooks and you are going to take a few notes. I would like to see those notes by the way one of these days, so take good ones. However, I'm not going to conscript them so keep on bringing your notes and perhaps you'll be the only one to look at them, ever. But for those of you who do not have a notebook, I think it would be good for you

to get yourself a notebook and a pen and note down a few things as we go along. And I will try to give you the outline. In the future, I’d like to put in on the board so that you have it there and I can just refer to it. But I’ll try to give you the outline at least the major points as we go along.

But first tonight, as we open our study of Systematic Theology, just a word or two of introduction. Not long ago Systematic Theology was known as the queen of the sciences. I do not know why it was called the queen rather than the king. Perhaps some of the ladies could answer that for me. But at any rate, it was known as the queen of the sciences.

But prejudice against doctrine and dogma has changed all that. We have seen this not only in the cults, some time ago I noticed in one of the hymn books of one of the cults that “Just as I Am” that great gospel hymn had a new stanza. And it was this – “Just as I am Thou wilt receive though dogmas I may n’er believe nor heights of holiness achieve. O God of love I come.” Now the sentiment of that stanza of “Just as I Am” is that it doesn’t make a great deal of difference what we believe, it’s just that we come to a God of love and he accepts us.

Well let me assure you of this, that a man may reach God without dogma in one sense; that is in the sense of some special doctrine that the church may have believed or a segment of it, but one can never reach God without doctrine. In other words, if you really think that you can come to God, you cannot come to God apart from some teaching about God. And therefore to say, as some have said, that doctrine or dogma used in that sense is unimportant, is one of the greatest of errors, and I am quite sure that the originator of that is probably Satan himself.

One of the reasons for the distrust of doctrine is the pragmatism of our present day. Men have rejected a revelation from God, therefore, there is no final truth; everything is relative. All that we have are really working hypothesis. We cannot really know anything absolutely and therefore, dogma is very unpopular. So instead of

theology being the queen, relativism has become king and the queen as been divorced and put away.

Well let’s consider first tonight, in our study, the idea of Systematic Theology. Now will you turn with me to our first passage in Romans chapter 6? The idea of systematic theology, Romans chapter 6 and let me read verse 15 through verse 17 -- Paul says, “What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered to you.” I want you to notice that the Apostle Paul refers to the teaching, which the Romans had received as a pattern or form of doctrine. In other words, it was a specialized system of truth so far as he was concerned.

Now, we of course do not have Paul’s system of theology. We have letters that he wrote to churches. But in these letters he refers to the fact that he did set forth and proclaim and teach a certain form of teaching. It is incorrect to say that the apostle did not really care what his converts believed, what his churches heard; he was very interested in that. He spoke about the pattern of truth or the form of teaching, which he had committed to them. Now that is not the same as saying Systematic Theology but I think it is surely true to say that he taught them definite truth.

Now, when we think about the idea of Systematic Theology, I want you to think with me about some specific problems that come before us. And let’s begin with a definition. Theology comes from two Greek words, *theos* which means God, and *logos* which means word, utterance, sometimes discourse; it has several other meanings too. So that theology is discourse about God or reasoning about God, rational discourse about God. Sometimes we use theology in a very narrow sense, the teaching about God the Father. But generally speaking, theology is used in a very broad sense. It is used about or to refer to the teaching about God in the fullest sense. Theology and Systematic

Theology of course is the systematization of the truth that we learn about God from the word of God.

Hooker, one of the Puritan preachers defined theology as, “Theology is the science of things divine.” Charles Hodge, one of the great Presbyterian theologians, said, “Theology is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in proper order and relation with principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves which pervade and harmonize the whole.”

Now you’ll notice from that definition that what he’s saying is that theology is the facts of Scripture exhibited in a logical and coherent way so that you understand the relationship of these facts of Scripture to one another.

On Sunday in our churches and in our Sunday schools and in our Bible classes, we turn to specific passages of the word of God and we open them up and we expound them. Some of the passages are very devotional in content, some of them are very doctrinal in content; some of them have both types of teaching within them. In Systematic Theology we look at the facts of Scripture, we perceive their meaning, we collect them, we arrange them, we set them in order so that you understand their relationship one to another, and we exhibit them. So that Systematic Theology is the orderly exhibition of the facts of the word of God and the principles that flow out of the treatment of these facts of the word of God. It is doctrinal study of course. That’s theology, a definition.

Now, the aim of the theology. Theology’s aim is very much like the aim that we have in the natural sciences. In the natural sciences we have as our aim the perception of the knowledge that we wish, the arrangement of it, the systematizing of it, and so in Systematic Theology the same process. We perceive the facts of the word of God, we arrange them, and then we systematize them, and of course involved in that is the setting forth of this resultant teaching. So strictly speaking, you study systematic theology as you

study biology or physics. You perceive for facts, you collect and arrange the facts, and you arrange them in such a way that you see their relationships one to another.

Now, the possibility of theology. Is it really possible for us to know theology? Is it really possible for us to have a theology? Well we, of course, say it is possible, and we say it’s possible for these reasons. Systematic Theology grows out of the existence of God. If God did not exist there could be no theology. But if God exists, now that’s a beginning, then the possibility of theology grows out of the revelation of God. We have talked about this in some of our Bible classes, of course, and we’ll talk about it later on when we come to the subject of revelation, but the basic position of the word of God is this, that God has revealed himself, and if God exists and if he has revealed himself then we are a long way toward possessing a Systematic Theology. God is not a hidden God according to the Bible; he is a God who has revealed himself.

It’s rather striking that some of the famous skeptics have at points in their lives acknowledged the fact that there was a God, a God about whom they were very skeptical. David Hume, who was one of the greatest of the skeptics, an outstanding philosopher, was walking one night with Adam Ferguson late in his life, and they were walking out under the stars and the moon and suddenly he turned to Ferguson and he said, “Adam there is a God.” And Hume, the skeptic, acknowledged almost spontaneously what comes by intuition to most men that there is a God and that he has revealed himself in some way and you can see evidence of it in his creation. Even Voltaire, one of the greatest and most noted of the skeptics, is reported to have been in a thunderstorm in the Swiss Alps and suddenly found himself praying. I’m sure he was embarrassed about it afterwards, but nevertheless he is supposed to have done it.

And finally, Systematic Theology is possible, not only because of the existence of God and the revelation of God, but it is possible because of the endowments of man himself. For example, man has been given mental endowments. He has reason; some of us have reason, at least. Some have more than others, not all together with one sex

either, in spite of what we men might think. But men are given mental capacity, they have reason, they have the capacity to judge, they have the capacity to evaluate, they have the capacity to organize; all of these things are given by the way by God in order that we might judge and organize and evaluate and systematize the truth about God.

He didn’t give us this reasoning faculty so that we might learn simply biology or chemistry or physics or insurance or law or medicine. I feel very sure myself that he gave us these faculties primarily that we might know him and understand him and understand him in a systematic way. And from these faculties, of course, we have other realms of knowledge, which we may investigate. And he has also given us spiritual capacity by the teaching of the Holy Spirit we are able to perceive spiritual truth. So theology is possible because of the existence of God, the revelation of God, and the endowments of man.

The necessity of theology. Will you turn with me to a passage in the word of God, Ephesians chapter 4. Now, I want to read two passages, but I want you to notice in these passages that what we have implied is that there is a body of teaching which is to be committed to men. Now, in Ephesians chapter 4, the Apostle Paul states that God has given gifted men to the church of Jesus Christ. He has given several different kinds of gifted men. He says, verse 11, “And he gave some apostles.” We know the apostles there were twelve of them. They went out to found local churches all over the ancient world. “and some prophets.”

Now prophets, in the New Testament era, were men who had the ability by direct contact with God to take the truth of God and bring it to the churches of God before they had the word of God. Now you see we can come together in a class like this with sixty-six books, the thirty-nine of the Old Testament, the twenty-seven of the new, but the early church did not have the sixty-six books that we have. As a matter of fact it is probably doubtful that any one of them had all thirty-nine of the Old Testament. But at least the only thing that they really had was the Old Testament.

Then later on some of them may have had some random writings of the Apostle Paul or they may have had some of the gospel accounts. But so far as we know, the New Testament was not collected until much after the apostolic age. So the only thing they had was the Old Testament, therefore, they needed men who would meet with the local church and who were in touch with God to give them the truth that pertained to the new age, that which we have in the New Testament now, so God gave prophets. And the prophets were given for that very purpose.

We don’t have any prophets today. I know we often have men say, what we need is a prophet today. They mean by that they need someone to speak with some authority. Well of course we need men who speak with authority, most of all we need men who will preach the word of God. But we don’t have any prophets today. That was a temporary gift given for a special age of the local church when they needed just such a man. We don’t need that man today because we have the completed revelation of God in the Bible. That’s why prophets are not longer necessary.

“And some evangelists.” Men who preach the gospel and build up the church not only spreading it over the then known world by specializing in certain areas and preaching the word there, evangelists. We still have evangelists. Men like Billy Graham, who is best known to us perhaps and others.

“And some pastors and teachers.” Probably those two words should be together and this is one gift with two aspects. Pastor/teacher, that is the shepherd who teaches, all shepherds should teach. Paul lists the gift of teaching separately in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, so I would presume that some men might teach but who do not shepherd. But pastor/teachers now these men are given to the church. Why are they given? In order to instruct us? Well yes, but more for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Now, I don’t have time to talk about that verse, but I just want to point this out that what Paul says is that these men have been given in order to perfect you who are the

saints, if you believe in Jesus Christ, perfect you for the work of ministry. In other words, the work of ministry is not done by the minister, as we know; the work of ministry is done by the saints. So when you talk about a man you say he’s a preacher, he’s in the ministry. Well you’re not really fully harmonious with the teaching of Paul because you see you are in the ministry too, every one of you. And it is my duty as a teacher, for example, or a pastor/teacher to build you up so that you do the work of the ministry. Paul says in verse 13 that all of this has a natural aim “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

In other words, there is a pattern toward which the church is moving and Paul calls it the unity of the faith. I would gather from this that the idea of the faith is a body of truth in Paul’s mind and he’s looking and working toward the day when the whole church of Jesus Christ reaches its intended aim and at that time there will be the unity of the faith. I would take that faith there as the content of Systematic Theology.

So is Systematic Theology necessary? Of course it’s necessary. I think its necessity is found in these things and let me just quickly state them. First, in the instinct of the human mind for systems. Every one of us has within our minds a desire to systematize the knowledge that we possess. One of the beautiful things about expository preaching is that by preaching the text of Scripture, soon a lot of the doctrines begin to fall into place. And one of the terrible things about topical preaching, that is preaching on this text in this book and this text in the next book and another text in some book in the Old Testament and still another text in another place and all you get are just texts that are floating around in the breeze, one of the results of that is the audience that listens to that kind of preaching never really has anything solid and substantial.

Have you ever felt that way? I felt that way for a long time. I listened to that type of preaching for twenty-five years that is when I listened; it was that type. I never had anything really definite. I had a text over here and a text over there and a text

somewhere else and I wasn’t really sure they were true to the context. When I listen to the text, one of the beauties of expository preaching is that sooner or later it all begins to make a little sense. But it’s possible even to be more systematic than that and study Systematic Theology, take these truths and systematize them. And I do believe that every one of us has in our mind a natural instinct for order, for system. That is we like to take what we know and put it together so it makes sense. It is necessary because Systematic Theology is important for definite and balanced views of the truth.

I have been a Christian for a lot of years now. I’ve noticed this in new Christians and some old ones too, when they get a hold of a truth, they are very very enthusiastic about it and almost inevitably they carry it too far. And then they get hold of another truth and they are very enthusiastic about that and almost inevitably they take that truth too far. They are not able to guard that truth by other truths which they have not yet learned, and so the result is they don’t really have any just view of the biblical truth and they somewhat misrepresent it, very frequently.

For example, a Christian becomes a Christian and of course he’s been raised in an atmosphere in which the law was proclaimed. And he becomes a Christian and he discovers from the study of the word of God that he’s no longer under law and so, so filled with the joy of the fact that he’s no longer under law, he now is on the verge of living as he pleases and becoming what theologians call an antinomian, one who’s against law. Now, it’s possible for Christians to fall into that trap.

Or on the other hand, it is possible to recognize that there is a definite teaching in the word of God which regulates Christian conduct and Christian life and to look at it as a law and to err that way and to fall in the trap of legalism and seeking to get merit before God and all of the other distasteful things that characterize so much of Evangelical Christianity today. Thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not do that, thou shalt not do the other thing, and all the time, all these things building up human pride. Now Systematic Theology is necessary because it enables us to look at both sides of truths, and I hate to

say this because of its implications, but we can arrive at a consensus of what the word of God teaches on so many of the doctrines.

Systematic Theology is necessary too because of its importance to the Christian life. Christian morality is the fruit that grows from the tree of Christian doctrine. Will you let me say that again, because I think it’s important? 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.

Now, let’s turn to a passage. I wish I had time to support everything I’m saying by Scripture but if so we would be just looking up Scripture and I wouldn’t be able to cover as much ground. You’ll have to trust me in some things. If you want to ask questions afterwards, of course, feel free to do it. 2 Timothy chapter 3, verse 14. Paul writes to Timothy and he says, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them. And that from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Now the Scriptures are able to make you wise unto salvation thy faith in Christ Jesus. Then he says, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine.” In other words chief and paramount in Paul’s thinking is that the Scripture is profitable for teaching. Notice, teaching.

Now, “for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished on to all good works.” In other words, the good works proceed from the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Scriptures are profitable for salvation. So you see the order is very plain. If you wish to know salvation, it is through the teaching of the word of God, which ultimately brings you to the place where good works come. Christian morality is the fruit that grows from the tree of Christian doctrine. That’s why it’s important that you learn the doctrines of the word of God. That’s why for us to say doctrine is not important devotion is, is to miss the

boat. That’s not to be very systematic. You see that’s to see something that’s important. Your truth must be the devotional and to go overboard.

This often happens to college students. They are wonderfully converted and now they have all the joy of the Lord and somebody comes along and says, you know doctrine is not very important, the person of Christ is and just cling to the person of the Lord, this personal relationship that’s the greatest thing in the world. And so he’s so thrilled with that and the idea that he can have a personal relationship with the Son of God himself. He’s so thrilled that he forgets that God gave us the Holy Scripture, sixty-six books to instruct us in the things of our faith. And so he flies off in to the ether of devotion to a person whom he doesn’t really know a whole lot about because he doesn’t know anything about the Scriptures. For this is where you obtain knowledge of him.

Now of course it is possible to say, “you know I heard Dr. Johnson the other night and boy did he stress Bible doctrine. From now on I am going to apply myself to what the Bible teaches.” And so we learn all of the things that the Bible has to say and we’ve got all this doctrine arranged in our minds, but very little of it is very practical in our lives. And so we’ve gone off the other end to the other side and that of course is wrong too, to be so occupied with doctrine and doctrine and doctrine that there is not reality and vitality of the devotional life in the Christian at all. Systematic Theology preserves you from those two errors before. But doctrine is supremely important. It is the first thing that we should spend our time learning when we become Christians.

And finally, Systematic Theology is necessary because it is important to the power of the local church. Defective theology leads to defects in the local church. That’s not the only source of defects in the local church of course. But when a local church has not applied itself to discover what God teaches about it, the local church is bound to be defective. Some churches are so hamstrung by the doctrine or lack of it, which they have concerning the local church that they are unable to carry out God’s work. When for example the doctrine is such that one man who stands in the pulpit does everything, it’s

obvious that church is not going to be a healthy church. It will look healthy if he’s healthy. It will look very bad if he’s unhealthy. But you see the New Testament sets forth for us in the word of God the teaching for the local church. And it has its theology of the local church. And if we do not the theology of the local church, you can be sure that our local church is going to suffer.

One of the saddest things in the history of the church of Jesus Christ has been the fact that so many churches have gone down the drain having been the recipient of the preaching of outstanding preachers. For example, Joseph Parker was one of the great English preachers. He was the pastor of the great City Temple. But unfortunately, Joseph Parker was a textual and topical preacher. He was known all over the country as a great preacher. He has written some interesting books, but when he left because the people were not grounded in the truths of Holy Scripture, systematically that congregation fell prey to a man who was the leader in the, it was called New Theology in his day, R. J. Campbell. DeWitt Talmadge had a tremendous ministry in Brooklyn, but his ministry was not expository. As a result when he left, his church fell into the hands of the Russellites. Imagine that -- a man who was an outstanding evangelist but he preached topical sermons. He did not instruct the congregation in the truths of theology, the truths of Bible doctrine. So when he left, the Russellites moved in and took over. You know it might happen in Believers Chapel. If you don’t learn some theology, no telling what might happen.

A word about the limitations of theology -- quickly. They are found in number 1 - the finiteness of the human mind. By the way, if you hope to discover everything in this class, you needn’t come back because you won’t. The human mind is finite and God could not give us everything. Theology is not only limited by the finiteness of the human mind, it is limited by the blindness of sin. We’ll not know everything as long as we are in the flesh. It’s limited too by the silences of Scripture.

Have you ever wished that you had had a hand in the writing of the Bible? I have. Do you know what I would have written? I would have written just a little verse about how our Lord looked -- just a little one. I would have said something about his height, his complexion, his hair, his hands, his feet and a few other things. Unfortunately, we don’t know our Lord’s appearance. I think I know why now, because you see if we had pictured him or if we knew how he was, we might really wonder if we were not like that if he really was one in whom we could trust. It’s very fortunate I think that we don’t have any such picture of our Lord.

In fact I’m going to get you to turn with me to a passage in the Old Testament which it seems to me it expresses a general truth that we need to bear in mind when we study theology. Chapter 29, verse 29 of the Book of Deuteronomy, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse 29, isn’t it nice that it’s 29:29. You can just remember this and tonight as you are lying in your bed and you’re thinking over all the things that have been swimming around in you mind, Deuteronomy 29:29 that’ll put anybody to sleep. [Laughter] Deuteronomy 29:29 but this is a very important verse. Will you listen to it now? “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

In other words, Systematic Theology is limited by the silences of Scripture. There are some things that God has not seen fit to reveal to us. He has not revealed to us very much about the life and death of the Virgin Mary. He has said nothing to us about the Lord’s appearance. He has not told us a great deal about our state after we die. There are some things that I would love to have put in there too if I could have gotten the information in some way. He has not told us about politics. The Bible doesn’t really tell us whether we ought to be a conservative or a liberal in politics. Now, many of us have very strong opinions about this and we think that if you follow the Bible you must be a conservative. Well that may be true, but so far as the Bible itself is concerned it does not

say anything like that. It doesn’t really tell us what kind of government is preferable. I may startle you but it really says, so far as I can tell, that democracy is not the best form of government. It really says that ultimately Jesus Christ is going to come and we are going to have a theocracy, which is really the finest form of government isn’t it. So there are so many things you see that the Bible doesn’t really say anything definite about.

Now, we may infer from the statement in Scripture and that’s legitimate, but many things it does not really give us definite information about. Theology is limited then by the finiteness of the human mind, the silences of Scripture, the blindness of sin. It is also limited by the imperfect state of science itself. You see when we study Systematic Theology we are going to see that we must know a little something about science as well as something about the Bible for we are seeking truth from all sources. And the truth of God is seen in the revelation of God and nature, but unfortunately science is in a fluid state and it always is.

I have a very good friend; he’s one of America’s outstanding scientists. He is a man who has been working with the United States government in the most secret of its operations in its space program for a number of years. He has written 150 very, very scholarly articles. I want to assure you that I could not read the first paragraph of them and understand them. Ten, fifteen, twenty pages of mathematical formulas that’s all they are. Couldn’t possibly understand them. He’s written now, I suppose, almost 200 articles in the most scientific of our scholarly journals.

But this man is a very devoted Christian. He’s in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I remember asking him a question once. “How do you answer someone who asks you does the Bible agree with science?” He said, “Lewis, this is what I always tell them. When they come to me and say does the Bible agree with science? I always say what science are you talking about science 1880, science 1890, science 1900, science 1920, science 1950, science 1960, science today?” He said science has never been the same. He said then, “I say Lewis,” he said this to me, “you know if the science ever agreed with the

Bible I would wonder if the Bible was true because I know science is going to change."  
If anyone ought to say this and he is an outstanding scientist.

He said, "You know really we don't know enough to question the word of God."  
He said, "most of us who are scientists know" and then I can remember using his hands  
just like this, he raised up and he said, "most of us know out of all the truth that is to be  
known, most of us know a sliver of the truth. In fact to tell you the truth Lewis; I think  
almost all scientists know just a sliver about that big of all truth." Now he said, "I think  
we know that. I think we really do know this. But he said we don't know so much else.  
And we know so little really that there isn't a man that is intelligent enough to question  
the truthfulness of the word of God scientifically in this way." So I don't think we shall  
every fully understand Systematic Theology while we are in the flesh because you see one  
must know not only the word of God, his revelation in Scripture, but his revelation in  
nature itself.

Science is also limited by time, and let me just state these things and I'll pick this  
up next time. The incompleteness of our knowledge of Scripture, our Systematic  
Theology is limited that way. It is limited by the inadequacy of human language perhaps.  
Paul at times seems to suggest that he just couldn't put words together to say what he  
knew about the Lord. And Systematic Theology is also limited by the illumination of the  
spirit. In the final analysis we can only understand what God wishes us to understand.  
You know Daniel was given a great revelation of future things and then after he had all  
his revelations, do you remember what God told him. Now seal it all up Daniel until the  
latter days. Now we are beginning to understand some of the things that Daniel didn't  
understand; which he wrote. Systematic Theology could not have been completed until  
then.

All right. We'll pick it up from there. Let's close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father we thank Thee for the privilege of study together. And we pray  
that Thou will make us diligent in the study of the theology of holy Scripture. Help us to

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remember how important it is to listen to the teaching of the word of God. To  
systematize it’s teaching and by the help of the Holy Spirit to carry it out. We commit  
ourselves to Thee now for Jesus sake. Amen.