Building Systematic Theology

Technical Terms in Systematics
Discussion Forum

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Building Systematic Theology

Lesson Two: Technical Terms in Systematics

Discussion Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

<u>Students</u>
Joe Creech
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
Are theological technical terms an unnecessary hindrance?

Student: Richard, in this lesson we're talking a lot about some very technical language, that it seems, really, that that distances theology from the person in the pew. How can we relate this to the listener in the church?

> **Dr. Pratt:** That's a tough one, because systematic theology exists to create technical terms, and that is just the reality of its history, and it's even the reality of today. When people do systematic theology, it's all about finding and creating sometimes a jargon, a shorthand. That's all technical terms are, just shorthand. And unfortunately, one of things we see in this lesson is that one of the biggest problems with people that are really into systematic theology is a sort of spiritual pride in their ability to handle big words that have Latin derivatives and things like that. And that's not the kind of thing that of course I'm going to promote or that I want people to promote, but there is a certain level of understanding that if that every church community and every Bible study every denomination has of a sort of technical jargon that they use. I mean, it's a shorthand. We all do it. Families do it, churches do it, denominations do it, the body of Christ worldwide does it. We have ways in which we use words. So it's not, as it were, something that's unusual or unique to systematic theology, but it does sometimes get very harried when you get into it. I think it's a reality.

Question 2:
How can pastors help their congregations understand technical terms?

Student: Richard, you mentioned church communities. I'm a pastor in a local church. How can pastors really help their people really understand these terms?

> **Dr. Pratt:** How do you do it?

Student: I don't use terms all the time. Sometimes you just use Scripture. But terms are important and I understand that, but sometimes I see others in the church, and I do too… I use the terminology and people glass over. They don't understand what is

being said, and it's easy to expect people to be on your understanding. And some are way beyond me and some don't understand those things.

 Dr. Pratt: And you know, it gets down to where it's things… especially today in our culture, where people are largely unchurched… You know, if you stand up and sing the doxology, there are going to be people out there that don't know what a doxology is. Or even… I've found this to be true just traveling around, some people do not even know what the Lord's Prayer is. And these are all technical terms that we use. And if you add to that things like or *ordo salutis*, or you add things like effectual calling, or eschatology, and things like that, well now you're getting a list that's so long that it works as shorthand for professionals, but not for people that aren't professionals. I think that, I guess if I were pastor of a church, I would limit myself very much to just a handful of technical words, because you can find ways to communicate things shorthand without using sort of classical terminology. Like rather than saying eschatology, or this is the eschatological significance of such-and-such or such-and-such, you can say last days, or you can say end of the world. You can say all kinds of things like that other than eschatology, because all it does is just put people off, and there's no reason for it.

Now, don't you hate it when you go to a doctor and the doctor says, well, you have such-and-such and such-and-such, and you can't even pronounce the words? You say, well, can you explain that to me? So then they use more technical of a vocabulary to explain it to you. I hate that… I look at them and say, now look, just talk to me like a human being. Your heart's not working, your brains not working. Alright? That I can understand, but I can't understand all the other things you said. I think the purpose of theology, if you remember even from the last lesson, the purpose of theology and the reason it's changed through the centuries, is to fulfill the Great Commission, it's to communicate the teachings of Jesus to people. And it's not doing that. If technical terms are getting in the way of it, then we need to stop the technical terms and speak in new technical terms, or new jargon. Because the initial technical terms that we've sort of inherited were designed to facilitate communication originally, and sometimes they don't do that anymore.

Question 3:
Should we all encourage Christians to learn theological technical terms?

Student: Well, Richard, I'm wondering, though, if there really is a problem in teaching it. And what makes me think that is, look at the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a catechism that was designed for children, and it has questions in there like what is justification, what is sanctification? Have we lost something in our modern culture as we've shied away from teaching those questions?

Dr. Pratt: Well, we've lost what I call "traditioning." We lost some ability to create unity of language among us, and that's one of the issues. You just mentioned justification and sanctification. That's one of the things this lesson talks about is the difference in the ways different churches use that terminology and the way the Bible uses it. And it's caused controversy recently in my own denomination and in a number of others. There is some value in that, but I think most of that probably needs to stay on the level of the ministers and the elders and the church leaders as opposed to every single person, because you can find other ways to say it. And you can find other ways to communicate it in ways that work better for contemporary culture. At least I think you can.

Question 4:
Should we use technical terms when we teach and preach in church?

Student: What's the balance? Because the words are so full, the theological terms, and they have such meaning, and you are able to answer questions. I mean, in your teaching, you talked about the Trinity. Well, a lot of people don't understand the Trinity, and they're still wrestling with all those concepts. So, what is the balance between how much do we use and how much do we not use?

Dr. Pratt: That's just wisdom. There's no answer. I guess my answer would be: watch their eyes. When they glass over, stop. Because there is great value in these terms, in these traditional terms, and then there is also they can become an obstacle. The same words can be both obstacles and opportunities for people to learn the bible. We can become idols, too, as we force them and try to force people to understand them without understanding the heart behind them. That's a great point. I think also it could be very freeing for pastors and your preachers to understand that they don't have to use those terms, because some think they have to appear a certain way. That's right. As if the ideas and the terms meet together, and in this lesson we emphasize that a lot, that the difference between a word and a concept, or terms and concepts, are loose to say the least.

Question 5:
Why did God make language ambiguous?

Student: Richard, I understand that one word can have a number of different meanings, but it seems like that's because of that, language becomes obscure. Why would God put language together like that?

Dr. Pratt: I wish I knew why he did that that way, because it's caused all kinds of problems for us. And I don't think that that's something that's the result of the fall. Some people would say the obscurity of language, or maybe you could even say the elasticity of language, that words can be used in a variety of ways even though they

do have some limits, that they see that as the result of sin. I don't know why we would do that, because I just think it's a matter of the limitations that human beings have as finite creatures that the words we use are chosen, and they are developed by convention. I mean, basically, that's all language is. The way that words mean is by people agreeing that certain sounds or motions or whatever will represent certain ideas. And the task of people reading the Bible or doing theology is to figure out the conventions that govern that particular author or that particular time and that particular language, and so on and so on, and there's fluidity, there's elasticity among them. It does make for difficulty, but it also makes language fun. You wouldn't have a joke without it, that's for sure. You know, the turn of a phrase, those kinds of things that you get in the Bible. Not just in normal conversation, you get them in the Bible, too. And it's one of the wonderful things about language that it can have that elasticity but at the same time actually communicate. Actually, when you start thinking about how many meanings or how many concepts get associated with one word, you can sometimes wonder how in the world do we ever communicate with each other. And in fact, some people have gotten to that point in recent history, the sort of deconstructionist mentality that language is too obscure to communicate. Well, we communicate just fine, but sometimes we don't, too. I just think that you have to realize that that's true.

Question 6:
How can we be confident that our understanding of Scripture is correct?

Student: Richard, theologians commonly talk about how Scripture is understandable to just about any mind whether it's a young child — my 3-year-old has a certain comprehension of Scripture — up to the most brilliant of minds. God is still able to communicate through Scripture. How can we be confident that what we're reading is an accurate understanding?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's not exactly what we believe about the Bible. We believe that what's necessary to be believed and obeyed for salvation is clear in one place or another to the learned and unlearned alike. That's not saying that the Bible is clear enough to be understood by everybody, because in some parts the Bible is impossible to understand, I'm convinced, and certainly hasn't been understood up to this point. But I think that, you know, sometimes this mentality that systematic theologians have that comes from their heritage — okay, it comes from that neo-platonic heritage and especially the Aristotelian heritage — that we've got to have a way of talking about God and about the Bible and things in relation to God, we've got to have it in a way that is so rigid and so artificial that these words can mean only one thing and one thing only, and that would be just fine. In fact, there have been people who have tried to do that. Early in his career, Ludwig Wittgenstein tried to do that. He tried to create a perfect language in which there were no ambiguities whatsoever. He gave up on it, okay? He and Bertrand Russell both gave up on it, and that was a wise thing for them

to give up on. But they tried to do it because they realized that if you could do that, then you would create all kinds of clarity and you'd get rid of all kinds of confusion and things, and I wish we could do that in theology. But here's the problem. If you base your systematic theology on the Bible, then you are dealing with at least the Bible that doesn't treat language that way. Even if you could in your systematics make it perfectly, solidly one word, one concept all the way through — which you can't do, but if you could — you're still dealing with a Bible that doesn't do that. The Bible isn't written in that kind of formal style. It's not an attempt to create what we would call a systematic theology a la Neo-Platonism or Aristotelianism, or even modern mentalities. It's instead written in very common language for the most part for relatively uneducated people for the most part; there are parts of the Old Testament that are not that way, but it is nevertheless not a technical book. And what we're trying to do in systematic theology is take an authoritative Scripture that's not a technical theology book and turn it into technical theology, and that's where the mess begins.

Question 7:
Do problems arise when technical terms are translated into new languages?

Student: Let me ask something. We've been dealing with these theological terms for a few centuries in our language. I have friends around the world that I'm beginning to wonder, how do they take our terms and put new words into theological terminology now and have it mean the same thing?

Dr. Pratt: Right. Recently with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a dictionary created of theological terms for Russian, because the only technical terms they had were Orthodox terms. And so the Protestants came up with a dictionary. The same kind of thing is sort of happening in Arabic these days. They're trying to get a sort of pan-Arabic dictionary of theological terms. And it's very hard to do this because every tradition, every branch of the church uses the same set of words with few exceptions but mean very different things. I mean, this is why we have books like The Four Views of Sanctification. Well, yeah, one word sanctification, yet four views in the one book. You've got four views on baptism. One word baptism, but you've got four different concepts of baptism. It's a problem. And what probably is going to happen in the majority church out there where most Christians are now and certainly will be in the future, is that they'll end up this group will create this technical vocabulary, this group will create that technical vocabulary, then they will argue with each other over words rather than concepts just like we did. And that's very sad. I think the only way to avoid that is to get these groups together early on, and for some of them it may be too late already. But if you can get groups together and help them become self-conscious that their technical meanings are not Bible meanings necessarily, that will help. But we'll talk about that a little bit more.

Student: Which is more important, the terminology or the concept?

Dr. Pratt: The concept. Absolutely.

Question 8:
Are some concepts identified by multiple technical terms?

Student: Richard, we just talked about one term and many concepts, but what about one concept being described in many terms?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it works both ways. I know it's confusing because usually that's not the way we think about language. You know, when you're teaching a child how to speak, and when you're learning another language, you do things like tape the word on the refrigerator that says refrigerator in Spanish, whatever, and here's another word for window, here's another word for this object, that object. But while that's true enough, while it works enough that you can learn languages that way, you quickly learn that languages are much more flexible than that. So that one word can have many concepts associated with it. You can tell that easily by looking at a dictionary because a dictionary will have the word and it'll have meaning 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, however many it may have, and those are in the order presumably of the most frequently used, and that's why it changes so much. But it works the other way, too, that you can have one concept, one idea, and it can be expressed in many different ways. And even though each expression may have different nuances to it or slightly different emphases, as you say the same idea in different ways, it'll fundamentally or essentially be the same thing. Tell me this: what do you call your wife?

Student: Christy. I also call her my love or sweetheart, my bride.

Dr. Pratt: Well which is she?

Student: She's all these things.

Dr. Pratt: Okay. So how many different wives do you have? You just said four terms. Does that mean you have four wives?

Student: Oh no, one's enough.

Dr. Pratt: You have one wife; you've got four terms for her, right? Yes. And it's the same kind of thing in almost every single realm of language that a concept can be described in different ways. It can be talked about in words and phrases that are different, and sometimes this becomes extremely important in Christian theology, because if we act as if one word and one concept are always connected to each other, then we think that a person disagrees with us if they don't use the same word that we're using. And the reality is they can actually be in agreement and not use the same

words with us. Here the problem is that different traditions in the Christian church have gotten used to using words with association with certain concepts, and so as traditions in the body of Christ have sort of come apart from each other, they've developed like language dialects. Okay? They've developed their own special terminology, and then when they try to talk to each other, they're talking past each other. Very often, not always, but very often, we have a lot more conceptual unity even though our vocabulary many not reflect it. Have you ever seen that happen? You've been on the mission field before. You ever seen groups that talk right past each other? I have certainly. That's for sure.

Student: But I even see it in the local church because you have a variety of age groups there where words have different meanings, and so what's the role of the pastor in that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, the pastor's got to know what the various dialects are, doesn't he? Do you know what most Americans today when they're asked on the street what's the definition of gospel, do you know what they say? A genre of music. It's a type of religious music. And so when you stand up in the pulpit and say, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if the person isn't indoctrinated into your jargon, they're not going to know what you're talking about. They're using the same word as you, but their concept is very different from your concept of what gospel is. And so now you've got a problem. And when you take Christian denominations and you're trying to get them to come together, they are not — I can almost guarantee this — they're not going to give up their words because these become sacred items, and we get to the point where we think that the words we use, the phrases we use to describe an idea, are locked in and they're inseparable. And so they're not going to give up the words because they feel like they'll be losing their ideas then. But if we can start learning how to say these same ideas in different ways, then we may find ourselves a whole lot better off cooperating with each other, which we need to do a whole lot more in the way that the world is going these days.

I mean, take for example the word sanctified. You know, are you sanctified? If you as a Christian that, they're going to answer yes or no, maybe, depending on what denomination they're from. And that's a big problem, because a lot of people will say very sincerely, no, I'm not sanctified. And other people well say, yes I am sanctified. And they'll mean all kinds of different things by that. That's the one word having many meanings. But now, if you ask the concept question the opposite way, if you look at it the opposite way, you could ask somebody, do you struggle with sin even though you're a Christian? Well, I don't know a Christian that wouldn't say yes to that to some degree, in some way. All of a sudden, we've got a unity. Now we're not going to call that sanctification because different Christian groups use the word sanctification in different ways. So you can't use that term to describe it. You might call it the Christian struggle with sin. Alright, now we're talking a little more unity about this. And so it's just a matter of the flexibility creating opportunities for Christians to communicate across lines that seem impenetrable, and it's often just because of that vocabulary difference.

Question 9:
Should we vary our language in order to communicate to different people?

Student: Okay, I'm being really challenged here. I've been in the local church in a pastoral role for 30 years. Are you saying that I need to figure out how to preach differently, how to communicate differently today than I did then?

Dr. Pratt: That's exactly what I'm saying. Because I'm saying that what you want to do, unless your job is simply to reach the people that have already been reached and just dig them in deeper into the hole that you've dug them into already. If your goal is to reach the lost, if your goal is to reach people who haven't been churched in your own church forever, then you have to preach to people on a conceptual level and not so much on the technical term level. Because they will all have terms for these things. I'll give you an example. I did an evangelistic week (actually, I did 2 weeks) in a rural village in England, and the vicar there of an Anglican church who was a good friend of mine, he said, "Richard, don't use the word sin. I said, well, how am I going to have an evangelistic campaign and not use the word sin? And he said, you don't understand. In England, the word sin for most people simply means murderer, rapist, horrible things like that. Most people don't associate the word sin with the normal foibles that people have, of shortcomings that they have. They would call those shortcomings or just being human. And so he said, if you say you're a sinner, those people out there are going to say, no I'm not, I haven't murdered anybody, and very sincerely. They're not trying to avoid the issue, just very sincerely.

So what I had to do was find ways to talk about the shortcomings of people and how people don't measure up to God's standard of perfection and things like that, that brought the concept out rather than sticking with the traditional term, because the traditional term is just an English word. That's all it is. And happily, they were speaking English so I could use it. But I would have been miscommunicating because their concept of what a sinner is and what sin is, is so different than what my church and what my branch of the church says sin is, because we say sin is any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God. Well, great. Put that definition out there and see how it goes. But when you talk about sin being an imperfection, okay, even the British will agree they're not perfect and that God only accepts perfection, and that Jesus was perfect. Alright? We finally found a term that related to a concept that was a whole lot more fruitful than me just standing up there defining what the word sin means over and over and over by my catechism or whatever.

Question 10:
How can we communicate to diverse groups without using technical terms?

Student: Okay, I don't want to leave here depressed today. In our church, people generally come in from maybe three or four different backgrounds or churches, denominations, and then new people. To communicate to all of those people seems like an impossible task. Is there more to it?

Dr. Pratt: It's not an easy task, especially if you're trying to reach across age barriers, too. My own personal goal for preaching is that the 10-year-olds can understand it. If they can't understand it, I assume nobody else can. And I know that's kind of a low threshold, but I do believe that is for me the threshold. I mean, that's where I feel comfortable with it. I try to avoid any technical terms or any special definitions that go beyond about what a 10-year-old can get, because I figure that that means most of the adults might be able to tune in too if they want it. It is hard, but it's why pastors have to know their people. They have to know and diagnose their people, and they can't stand up there and be effective for their people if they're just preaching to themselves and to maybe the handful of other pastors and trained professional theologians that are out there. This difference between words and concepts is very important. One term can be many concepts, and one concept can be represented by many terms, and that reality is the reality of human language, and if we don't buy into that and learn to handle that — it's not just a matter of theory, it's how to handle that reality — then we're going to be sunk.

Student: And I think that perhaps we can have comfort, too, that God the Holy Spirit takes the word and the concept and applies it to the heart even when I don't communicate it.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, of course. All communication is weak apart from the power of the Spirit to do it. Thanks for saying that, because that's very important. You do the best you can, and then you trust God to go beyond it. How's that? That's effective preaching. That's right.

Question 11:
Does the Bible have its own theological technical terms?

Student: Richard, I think we agree that theologians are all trying to create technical vocabulary, but what makes us think that the Bible's not doing that also?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question, because you would, we would think anyway, that that's the way you do good theology, right? And we would assume the Bible has good theology, so what makes us think it's not consistent having one meaning for every word and just leaving it at that and working through it? Well, let me say first, even

though theologians try to do that, they don't do it. Okay? And this is where the slipperiness starts coming in, because you'll see them use a word and then qualify it in some way, and then drop the qualifier. Like, for example, the word election. Let's just take that… that's a hot one. You know, a typical systematic theologian will talk about elect to an office or official election, or they'll talk about national election, or covenant election. And they'll stick those words on there, and then they'll say election unto salvation is another one. Then all of a sudden, the next paragraph, all they're talking about is the word election and they're not putting any qualifiers on it. Which one are they talking about? Well, you have to watch and see and sort of figure it out. And so it's sort of slippery even on the theology side, but it's even slipperier on the Bible side. And I think part of the reason for this is that the Bible was written over thousands of years… thousands of years, and vocabulary changes in every language over that amount of time. It was written by lots of different people who lived in different periods of time and in different places. It's by people that have different personalities and different styles of thinking about things.

Just consider the contrast that we have just in the New Testament between Peter and his background and Paul and his background. I mean, Peter was fisherman, and we all know that fishermen don't know how to speak very well. And we know that Paul was a trained rabbi. So the difference between the two of them educationally and technically and those sorts of things is so enormous, we really can't expect them to go hand-in-hand with each other, walking step-by-step and defining the words exactly the same way. And the fact is that early Christian theology in the time of the New Testament did not develop in one central place where some big wig was establishing definitions of terms and came up with a whole long list of technical terms that everybody was going to adopt. Those words just kind of grew here and there. A lot of it was from Old Testament vocabulary, but the Old Testament vocabulary is different. And so the Bible is at time rather technical, but usually the Bible is very ordinary, the way we normally speak or write letters to each other, or write a novel about something; we won't be zeroed in on particular technical meanings of words, but rather we'll be much more flexible and elastic in the way that we use words. So it's more ordinary language.

Question 12:
How can we tell when the Bible is using multiple terms to refer to a single concept?

Student: So Richard, given the fact that there are so many differences among the writers of Scripture, what cues can we look for in Scripture that help us be confident that there is consistency in these concepts?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it's important to remember… it really is important. I don't know how to say this more strongly, that while there is not consistency in terminology — in fact, we say that Bible writers had liberty or freedom or flexibility in the terminology

they used, a wide flexibility. They did derive some from the Old Testament and that sort of narrowed things down, but the wide variety conceptually they did not differ from each other, at certain deep levels. We need to even think about concepts in this respect. Concepts are not just simple things themselves. The ideas we have in our minds are very complicated, even things that we think are simple are complex, and sometimes you have to go fairly deeply into the conceptual mindset of a person to find commonality with another. But when it comes to Bible writers, we don't think that they contradicted each other. That's our commitment and our belief because we they all spoke on behalf of God, and were inspired by Holy Spirit, so you can read them, and if you read them carefully enough on the conceptual level, you'll find they don't really disagree with each other, but they on the surface level of the words that they use. I mean the Apostle Paul said, I think it's fair to say, a summary, that a person is justified by faith alone. Now if you take that as a fair summary of what the Apostle Paul said in the book of Romans, then we have to say on a level of language that James contradicted him flat out, because James says that a man is not justified by faith alone. Now it could not be said any plainer than that. And on the level of the words that they're using, they sound like they are contradicting each other just toe-to-toe. Now what we believe is, because both of these people are speaking by the inspiration of Holy Spirit, is that while the words they're using seem to be contradictory, the concepts that are beneath them are not contradictory.

So let's talk about that for a minute. What did Paul mean by justification? Okay, that's the question. Well, I think in Romans where he's talking about it being by faith alone, he's using the word made righteous or justified, he's using that to indicate what happens initially when a person comes to Christ in faith. That person is rendered righteous in the eyes of God, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him. Well, James is not talking about what happens initially in a persons' life, obviously, because he talking about Abraham sacrificing Isaac and all those kinds of things and how faith without works is dead. And so he's talking about the ongoing Christian life and how justification occurs over and over and over and over again, and that would drive Paul crazy and most theologians crazy, most Protestants anyway, but that's the way he's using the term. And so in terms of normal Pauline understandings, what James is using the word justification for is what we think Paul would say sanctification is. Okay? Even though Paul uses the word sanctification to mean justification, too, but anyway, the idea of the ongoing. This is once again you see the need for sometimes pushing the technical words aside and saying what are we really talking about here? Are we talking about what happens initially to a person when they come to Christ? Or are we talking about something that's ongoing? Well, Paul's talking about what happens initially, and then James is talking about what's ongoing. And, of course, Paul and James are not disagreeing at that level, because the old adage is, we're justified by faith alone, but faith that justifies is never alone. And so that's a theological way of saying that Paul and James are right.

We have to hold that I think as Christians, because we believe in the inspiration of Scripture, and we believe that God wouldn't tell us one thing and then tell us the opposite of it. But it is difficult at times. And the cues that we find in the Bible… You

know, the question is how can you identify the concepts even though they're using words that seem to be contradictory? And the only answer to that is careful exegesis. That really is it, careful interpretation, where you take big chunks of the Bible and you try to understand, say, all the writings of Paul. You would want to look and see how Paul uses the word justification everywhere and then notice that there are different meanings that he attaches to that at different times and in different concepts associated with it in different context. And you'd look at James to see if James really believes that justification is something that happens over and over and over again, or if that's just his way of talking about what we would tend to call sanctification.

Question 13:
How important is it to understand the differences between biblical writers?

Student: Help me here. I'm really trying to come to grips with the importance of understanding the writer. So many different writers, you know, writing in scripture over so many different years, but you know, sometimes I'll hear someone preach and they never mention the writer, his background, anything about him. How important is it for us to understand and to help our people understand the differences of the writers?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think if you want them to go beyond the very basics of Christianity, they've got to grapple with the fact that the Bible was not written directly by God, as if it is a sort of flat book that has only one set of vocabulary that came right from the mouth of God, that God did what we call organic inspiration. And we've talked about that in other series. The organic inspiration means that Holy Spirit used human beings and used their backgrounds and personalities and vocabulary in this case… like Peter and Paul, like Isaiah and John, or Moses versus John of Revelation. You know, the concepts are different, but they are in harmony. The language can be sometimes very much disharmonious because the meanings of the words change through time. And so it's just important that we do help people on some levels anyway, depending on where they are in their understanding of the Bible, because it can be confusing. But here's the problem. If you don't allow them to see that to some extent, then what they're going to do is they're going to start taking the words that you teach them, the technical words that you and I give them, and they're going to start reading them back into the Bible everywhere they see the word. And that's real trouble, because they're going to find the same meaning, they're going to plug that meaning in every time they see the word, and when they do that, we're in trouble because this is one of the biggest problems that people have when they cannot distinguish between the word that is used and the concept that's being meant. And that freedom allows us to understand the Bible in its own terms in ways that we will not be able to do if we are forcing the technical meanings that we have every time we find that word in the Bible.

Question 14:
How are theological technical terms created?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you talk about the church or theologians creating new terms to help define concepts. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Dr. Pratt: Let's review what the options are. Basically, what theologians, systematic theologians usually do, is they'll take a Bible term that's used relatively frequently. They want to do that because, you know, the more you make your theology use Bible words, the more authoritative it sounds, and the holier it sounds. So they'll tend to do that. But the ones that do this either wittingly or unwittingly, because I think sometimes people do it without even realizing what they're doing, they'll narrow the meaning of the word down from all the varieties of meanings that are out there in the Bible. So maybe the Bible will have the word say sin, and maybe it will use that word in 10 different ways. Well, the theologian will narrow it down and say, now I'm going to use it just in this way. So that's one way, you refine a Bible term that's used in many ways into one meaning. So that's one way we create technical terms.

Another way we do it is we will take technical terms from the Bible and we'll use that word that's in the Bible, but we'll use it in a way that it's never used in the Bible. And that happens, too. It's quite remarkable how often that kind of thing happens, as a matter of fact. Maybe the people when they first did it thought it was the way the Bible uses it, but not in reality. And so you can refine the definition from the way the Bible uses it, picking one definition out of many, or use a Bible term that never is used in that way. And the third way is just to import a foreign word in. Take for example, the word Trinity. That's a foreign word. It's not a Bible term, it's nowhere in the Bible. You cannot even find the word person in the bible. You can't find the word essence in the Bible either, or substance in the Bible. Well, the doctrine of the Trinity is all about three persons, one substance or one essence. Okay? And none of those terms are in the Bible. So you've got a whole doctrine of Trinity that is developed out of technical terms that came from somewhere. Where'd they come from?

Student: The culture.

Dr. Pratt: The culture, that's right. The philosophical context that they were trying to address. In that case, it was Neo-Platonism, and they were trying to speak Christian talk according to the categories that people thought in terms of — the academics, the intellectuals did in that day. And so they came up with all these terms that they used. And this is why many times even ministers will say they believe in the Trinity, but they don't have a clue what they're talking about. I mean, they really don't. It surprises me. And people sometimes say, well what shall we do about that? I say, nothing, just keep repeating the formulas over and over again even if you don't understand them. That's a joke! Maybe we should try to understand a little more what

they meant by it. But the idea is just that technical terms do sometimes come from outside the Bible.

And the issue here is which of those is better? Which of those is more helpful? And the answer to that is it just all depends on what issue you're talking about. There is a danger when you take a word that's used many times in the Bible and just say we're only going to use it this way, and we mentioned that one already, and that is that you'll start reading that one meaning back into all the other passages. There's another danger when you take this Bible word and you give it a new meaning that's never in the Bible. Same danger. You can stick your concepts into the Bible real easily that way. And there's a danger of bringing eternal words in because now these words are loaded with all kinds of meaning that may not even be biblical, and all of a sudden you're jamming the Bible through the grid of that extrabiblical concept, and it doesn't necessarily need to be put that way.

Student: But don't some of the Bible writers actually do that? I'm thinking in terms of John utilizing the word *logos* in the opening of his gospel.

Dr. Pratt: That's the justification for using extrabiblical terms in theology. It's that fact that Paul was able and did quote Greek philosophers. We don't know about the particulars of the origin of John's *logos* because that's a debated item. But nevertheless, he certainly isn't using it exactly like Genesis chapter 1 used the word "*amar*" or to speak. Okay? There was a little something else going on there. But that's right. In fact, even when you start refining the word like messiah down, messiah gets refined in the New Testament teaching because it was refined by the inter-testamental use of the word messiah. I mean, you tell me, whom does Isaiah call my Messiah, God's Messiah? Well he calls the king of Israel that, but he also called Cyrus this. So, you know, Cyrus is called the messiah of God, my messiah, my anointed one. Alright, now of those two options, when we say Messiah, which do we pick? Cyrus? No, son of David, okay? So we're throwing out Cyrus, forget that. We're not even going to think about it. And that's a problem, of course, because sometimes people go back and read passages about Cyrus and think that he's Jesus or something, and he's not. And so we always wrestle with this because of the ways that languages work back-and-forth like this. So, New Testament writers are picking up on the ways that languages changed and shifted even in their own day and accommodating those both by the ways they narrowed down Bible use and then used extrabiblical terms as well.

Question 15:
Is there a continuing need to create new technical terms in theology?

Student: Richard, we as Protestants have a theological background of reimaging the use of theological terms. In light of "*semper reformata*", should we constantly be redefining and even coming up with new words?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I think you're right. I think people sometimes don't realize this, that if the Reformers, for example, had stuck with the traditional terminology, technical terminology and definitions, we would not have a Protestant church today. They broke with those, and they thought that they were going back to Bible uses of those terms. Now, centuries later, sometimes we wonder whether they really got that close to the Bible or not, and maybe they created technical words in ways that we've said before people do this. But it does raise the serious question that, yes, of course, it would seem to me anyway, that if our job and that the purpose of theology is to communicate the Gospel of Christ, to teach all nations, we have to be ready to re-up the definitions of words, to review what we mean by these things, and make sure that the terms we're using communicate to people that we're ministering to. But then part of the question is, well, what do we aim for. What are we really trying to get at? Are we trying to make our terms equal to the way the Bible uses the terms? Well, it's just not going to work, so what are we aiming for? In my opinion, theology has a tension, theologians have a tension, that as their technical terms get further away from the Bible, they may be more relevant to people, but they're going to get further away from the Bible, which is a problem. And the closer you get to the Bible's use of terms, the less people commonly use those terms, especially if you're in a post Christian culture like ours where Bible terms are not used much. So it's a tension there that I think takes pastoral wisdom to know how far to go in whichever direction.

Question 16:
Do we risk changing our concepts when we create new technical terms?

Student: Richard, we've been talking about terms and concepts. And if we start changing our terms quite a bit, do we run the risk of adjusting our concepts? And maybe do our concepts need to change?

Dr. Pratt: Absolutely we risk changing the concepts inadvertently, not even realizing we're doing it, because connotations come with these terms. There is a certain amount of indoctrination or traditioning that has to happen in any organization, whether it's the church or not, but especially in the body of Christ. You know, people use that word contextualization a lot these days, and sometimes they mean by that simply as missionaries go from one country to another, they need to adopt the language and the culture of these various groups that they meet. And that's a noteworthy and notable and honorable way to do and way to think. But at the same time, we have to always remind ourselves that we are trying to get people to think like the Bible. We are not trying to get them to think like North Americans or Western Christians — that is irrelevant — but we're trying to get them to think like the Bible. That makes all of us have to leave our common vocabulary and concepts that we grew up with in our culture and go back to Bible concepts. And yes, concepts have to be refined, too. This is always the tension, because we're not just changing words and keeping the concepts the same, but as we learn more about the Bible,

we're also trying to elucidate the concepts and clarify them, and a lot of that will be in the biblical theology series that follows. It shows how in modern Christianity we're changing the way we even think about the Bible's theology because of this different way of approaching it. But yes, we have refinement to do in those sorts of ways, and there are dangers at every turn.

Question 17:
Should we work with Christians in other cultures to develop technical terms?

Student: You know, sometimes it seems like we just talk to each other in our country. It seems like it might be really helpful to be talking to those from other cultures also about these very issues and concepts.

Dr. Pratt: Uh, huh. When you think about the mission field, I sometimes wonder, does it help us to understand that the things we believe are culturally driven, culturally influenced, or biblically influenced and biblically defined. And I think what we have to do is stop separating those two from each other, and rather than thinking of this is Bible, this is not, always remember that, assuming that we are getting the Bible right, that they're always together. I mean, there's no way to escape the fact that when we think biblically, we are also thinking our way of thinking biblically. And those two always work together. Now it is possible to be non-biblical or against the Bible, but if you are even doing the Bible, if you're doing it right, you're still going to be mixing in things that you and I have from our own culture. And so when you go on the mission field, you have to start realizing that and help people learn how to reinvigorate the language and reinvigorate the concepts for themselves where they are. And it even comes down to what you're going to emphasize, what priorities you're going to have. I mean, keep in mind that traditional systematic theology doesn't just give us concepts and terms but actually arranges those things in particular ways, and all of that is part of the package we are delivering to people. I hate to say it this way, but I think it's true, that sometimes what was important to us and what was important to our ancestors in Western culture and the priorities that they set up, may not be the priorities that other groups set up other places in the world. And this is going to cause tension, especially as Christianity continues to move outside of Western culture.

Student: Do you think it's easier for our brothers and sisters in an Eastern culture to grasp these concepts out of the Bible than it is for us?

I would assume that there are some things that are easier. But I would also assume there are probably some things that are more difficult. You'd have to ask them. You know, it's just, every culture is affected by sin and by redemption, by God's common grace, and the mixing of that is different in every situation. And that's what I think sets us up or makes the Bible difficult for us to know.

Question 18:
Is it wrong to assign new meaning to biblical terms in order to use them as technical terms?

Student: Richard, earlier we were talking about taking a biblical term but investing it with new meaning that's not necessarily a biblical meaning, and you used the concept of the covenant of grace. How would you respond to those who object to doing this form of theology?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think the first thing that I would say is, I'm sorry. In other words, I would admit it. A lot of people work very hard to try to show that the words that they are using are Bible words, and they're using them exactly like the Bible uses them. I just think we have to sort of admit to each other that we're not doing that. Depending on the context, I might even help them see that they're not doing that either, that no one is consistent in that ideal, that that's an impossible ideal to meet. And what that does, in my experience, is it sort of lowers the rhetoric a little bit. It lets people say, Okay, you do it, we do it, now let's just see if we can't work towards mutual understanding of what's going on. A great example of that is the ongoing battles, at least they used to be and I'm glad to see that they've slowed down a little bit, between dispensationalism and covenant theology. It used to be that you could say the word dispensationalism and it meant one thing, and you could say covenant theology and it meant one thing, and they would throw bombs at each other.

Well, now, happily, what we're doing is we're talking beyond those words. It's not just simply are you a covenant theologian? Or are you a dispensationalist? Now what's caused that I think is that there have been changes on both sides. The people on the covenant side like to talk about the changes in dispensationalism and never admit that their stuff has changed, but it's changed too. And dispensationalists like to talk about the changes that have occurred in that. And so what you're talking about now in the current situation is propensities. Okay? Just merely that. You're talking about propensities towards more unity or less unity for the Bible. That's really what you're talking about, because everyone realizes that the Bible, religion, faith changes through time, and everybody realizes there is a measure of unity to it all. Now we're getting down to the details. Now we're getting down to the real concepts that are underneath this rather than arguing, are you a covenant theologian? Are you a dispensationalist? I think that is bringing about a great deal of unity at least on the scholarly level at this point, and the pastoral level at this point, whereas, I can remember 30 years ago where that wasn't the case. Can you remember that Joe? You know, you just sort of wrote somebody off if they were on the other side of that issue. And happily, that's not happening anymore.

Question 19:
How can we make sure that we understand biblical terms rightly?

Student: I wonder as a pastor what concepts and words I'm using and giving unbiblical meaning to. How do I even check myself? Where do I go?

Dr. Pratt: I think, you know, everybody has to do this in different ways. But when you are a part of a body of Christ, you're a part of a branch of the church and that's become your family — we talked about this in the Building Your Theology series — if that's your family, then you learn the language of your family. I can remember that the definition of making up your bed was different in my childhood than it is now. And what makes the difference is just one family or the other family, and you sort of get the definition by learning the hard way usually, and now defining what it means to make up my bed is different than it was 40 years ago for me. Alright? Well, that's fine. And that's the way churches are. They develop this sort of family talk, and once you've identified your family, then you work within it and you reach back into its heritage, but not just on that linguistic or language level, but on a conceptual level, and ask, what were they trying to say? What were the ideas that they're presenting here? And hold on to those more tightly than the language. I just think we have to get to the point we can do that, and as we do, we're refining ourselves down to the important things because that really is the Bible task also. The task of reading the Bible and interpreting it is not to get the words right. The task is to get the concepts. So as we do that in theology, that sometimes will strip away some of the obstacles, and then when we do it with the Bible, they get stripped away as well, and we get down to that more conceptual level. Have you ever found your terminology changing, Rob?

Student: Oh yeah, definitely. Well, it changes between conversations. I can have a conversation with my wife and then turn around and have a conversation with my son. I'd better use a different terminology at that point.

Dr. Pratt: And even if you're talking about the same concept. I think that's really true. Theology is a lot like that. We will inevitably always be introducing things that are wrong. We're sinful people. And so when we use expressions like covenant of grace, you mentioned that earlier, and the Westminster Confession of Faith says "commonly called the covenant of grace," which indicates it's not a Bible term. It's just a theological convention, and they had to stick that in there probably, I don't know for a fact, but probably to get people off their backs. Where's the word covenant of grace used in the Bible? They said, well, it's commonly called that, and everybody goes, okay. And that's the way we've got to get with this, learning how to give and take on what words we use, sticking with the concepts, pushing the concepts. I think it will unify the church, and I think it will bring a lot more focus to where the true battle is, and that the battle is not between these isolated, small, secondary and even tertiary differences among Christians. The battle is with the world, and a lot of times we spend our energy, as one famous person put it, "we make

war with each other as if we are at peace with the world." And that is often the Christian theologian's motto: let's make war with other Christians. And the war is usually over the phraseology rather than even the concepts. And sometimes on the conceptual level, it's just subtle differences. And we need to learn with subtle differences. You have differences from me, and you have differences from me, but we're sitting here at this table and we're quite at peace, and I hope we will be afterwards, too. But that's the way theology has to be done, otherwise, we're going to lose the battle with the world.

Question 20:
Can believers from other cultures help us understand biblical concepts?

Student: Richard, it seems as I've matured in the ministry to the point I am now, that it's been helpful to understand that I have one perspective from my culture on things that I'm teaching. Recently I've taught some on *koinonia* and on fellowship and on community, and I bring one perspective. But I think sometimes I've thought that I'm giving everybody everything there is to know. And yet, as I've interacted with some of my African American brothers or Hispanic brothers and sisters, or even some Middle Eastern friends that I have who are followers of Christ, that their perspective brings so much richness to my understanding of these concepts.

Dr. Pratt: Isn't if funny how that happens? Because, you know, you do. I mean, I do it all the time, too. I think I have exhausted the subject. You know, I've taught everything there is in the Bible about this particular subject, say *koinonia*, and then you realize somebody that comes from a different culture, their concept of that is so strikingly different, and you realize you've barely scratched the surface of it. That's my experience over and over again. I have friends that were talking about the rituals that you go through in the Christian environment in the Middle East that when someone dies, the family, even extended family, will come and spend 3 or 4 days at the house. They go away at night, but they come and spend the whole day from morning until sunset every single day doing nothing but just sitting there. Nothing. Like Job's friends. You don't play football. What we'd be doing is putting the kids on some kind of video game or something, sticking them in the back room, and we then feel like we've got to talk about it.

And our rituals, which we have none, I think what it does is it sometimes exposes the superficiality of the Western Christian concept of what *koinonia* is. Because what do we do with sick people? We might visit them in the hospital. Because we have, unfortunately, drifted into the way secularists in our culture deal with sickness and death, and that is, get them out of here, get them away. We don't want to think about this. I gotta keep moving, kind of keep going on. My personal growth, my economic well-being. That's what's most important. And so we get rid of it really fast and go forward. And I think sometimes even some of the psychological problems people have with death or tragedy comes from the fact that we don't even have rituals of

mourning anymore. We're expected not to. But, yeah, I think… I mean, you've been in Latin America a lot. I've been in the Middle East and seen these kinds of things. And it's quite remarkable how your cultural background defines the concept and even becomes like lenses that keeps you from seeing things in the Bible. That's just amazing. And then if you can get out of your own skin a little bit and get into somebody else's skin by being forced into another culture, you might even see things that are in the Bible, but you just weren't able to see them before. I think that happens a lot with things like music, styles of music. I think it happens a lot with older people dealing with younger people, younger people dealing with older people the same way. You know, parents and children. They've got their set of things and they think, even if they're trying to be biblical, they've got their set of things, and they think they have exhausted the Bible because it matches their set of things, their criteria. And that distinction between the words and the concepts is so important.

Student: That's so true. You know, I think that one thing I've learned from other cultures is they value relationships far more than we do. I remember one time in a Middle Eastern country asking a taxi driver if tomorrow morning will you take me to the airport, and he says, well sit down and let's have some tea and we'll talk about it. I'm going, I just want to know if you'll take me to the airport. And then I stop and say, they've got it right. And the followers of Christ there put so much importance on relationship, but I've really been challenged with that.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I think that we have… when we realize those kinds of things, we begin to understand how non-Christian we are in the ways that we adapt the Bible to our culture. And that's the really sad part, isn't it, because we often think we've got it together because we've had a long tradition of this and we're Christianized, and these other cultures aren't. That's right, we're the experts. Then we realize that the concepts and the terms don't equal each other. Just because we're using Bible terms doesn't mean we're dealing with Bible concepts.

Student: And so there's even an importance of our, you know, teaching others to really do what we're trying to do right now, so that they might in turn teach us.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Exactly.

Question 21:
Do we really need a complex system of theology in addition to Scripture?

Student: Okay Richard, let's pull this down out of the clouds because we've been talking about a lot of stuff that's just very conceptual. On the other hand, if Scripture is sufficient for salvation, isn't it sufficient enough for our theology, or do we need this vast, seemingly complex system of theology?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's a hard one, because we never want to say that the Bible is insufficient. We always want to says it's sufficient, but once again, there's a difference in word and concept. What do we mean by sufficient? And I would say with regard to theology, that the Bible is sufficient to be our only absolute or unquestionable authority in theology, but it is not sufficient to tell us exactly what to say at every situation. I mean, I remember that in the great commission, Jesus said go ye therefore and teach all nations. He didn't say go ye therefore and read the Bible to all nations. And why? I think because there's a difference between teaching people and reading the Bible to them. And what's the difference? It is taking what's authoritative — that's the Bible, that's the absolutely unquestionable thing — and then communicating it to people. And communicating it is a whole other task. When you look at the ways or examples of the apostles doing this in the book of Acts, they didn't just read the Bible to people. And they didn't even just summarize the Bible. They actually took the Bible and put it in terminology that people would understand.

Hans Bayer in his series of lectures on the book of Acts talks about how different the language of Peter is from Paul and how Stephen's language is different. These speeches are representing different sorts of audiences. And so they were concerned with communicating to their audiences. And I think that's our concern in theology, too. If we try to make the Bible sufficient for our terminology and every single detail of every concept we have in theology, then what we're going to end up with is a theology that is as confusing as the Bible. So what was the purpose of having theology to begin with, if you're going to end up not knowing from one page to the next how a term is used, or what angle they're giving on this particular subject or that particular subject? That's what you end up in the Bible. You have to be very flexible in being able to move with that when you read the Bible. But if you're theology is that diverse, then it's going to end up becoming just as confusing as the Bible was, and the purpose of theology to begin with was to take the Bible and make it clearer to people. And so it's sort of a contradiction of motive here. If we try to take the Bible as sufficient for everything we do in theology, it is our authority, it is sufficient as the only absolute authority, but it is not sufficient to give us the terminology and the ways to communicate it to everyone.

Question 22:
Is it wrong to get theological technical terms from extrabiblical sources?

Student: What about the extrabiblical philosophical terms that some people use? Are those good?

Dr. Pratt: Well, they can be. Because, remember, we believe in general revelation also, and we believe just like Paul did apparently in Acts 17 that it's okay even to quote the Greek philosophers. So if unbelievers out there observing nature and science or philosophy, whatever it may be, psychology, whatever, if they are stumbling upon the truth because of God's common grace, then yes, we can use those

things. And we ought to use those things. I mean, that's the model. Jesus teaching in parables is frequently a reliance upon nature. Okay? Like the sower and the seeds. And so he's depending on general revelation as he teaches these lessons. And so to interface with general revelation in ways that are illustrative and bring the concepts out more clearly, and maybe in some respects purposefully ambiguous at times, this can be very helpful to theology. And happily, theologians have always done that. They sometimes break with their sort of scientific mentality and actually lean over into things like that, and all of a sudden, their theological works become lively and engaging, and you're not bored to death by some Latin term. But it's rare, unfortunately. But it is the thing that preaching is made of and teaching is made of, especially when you're talking about lay people.

Question 23:
How can technical terms answer deep questions about the Bible?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you claim that technical terms can sometimes answer some pretty deep questions that we have about the Bible. Help me understand that a little bit more.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, they can do it really quickly. It's really an issue of convenience. I think that's what I mean when I say that theological terms, concepts, are like shorthand. I mean, if you were to ask somebody… if you were having a conversation with a Muslim and they were to ask you do you believe God is one or three? Well, you can he's one, and without a bit of lying or a bit of hedging the issue at all, because we do believe he is one in essence, one in substance. Then you could turn around and talk about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit to them, too. That would be a problem. But nevertheless, that comes up in conversations. So that's a very complicated issue that's often summarized by that one word Trinity. And so it becomes a convenient way of us talking to each other, Christians talking to Christians, sort of in-house conversation. But as soon as you move out of that house, or whatever family you happen to be identified with at that point, you are going to cause confusion, and there's the huge danger of it, the confusion of quick answers to hard questions and people not knowing what you mean by them and what you think about them for real. I mean, many times people will, if they're being examined or something like that, they will give the "right answer," and by that we mean they give the right words. And if they always give the right words when they're being examined, say for ordination or something like that, if they're always giving just the perfect right word answer, it's going to make somebody in the crowd suspicious, and they're going to stand up and examine a little further.

Well, what are they asking about? They're not interested in can you recite the words. They want to know what does that mean for you, what concept do you have of it. Recently that issue has come up with inerrancy. Okay, we used to speak of the infallibility of Scripture. Then it got narrowed down to inerrancy because people

realized that some people were using the word infallible simply to mean it was infallible in that it accomplished all that it was intended to accomplish, meaning telling us about salvation and morality, but not about factual and historical things. So many evangelicals got around the concept of inerrancy. Okay, well that lasted for about two decades, and it was a fairly safe term, until then you had people that were saying the word inerrancy but meaning something different. What they meant was infallible, and that's all they meant by it. So all of a sudden, people are surprised that, even though seminary professors had to sign statements that they believed in inerrancy, that they were meaning something different, that the concept was different. So it becomes convenient, but with time, this sort of slippery slope of what the concept is gets in the way, and we have to be very careful about it. Have you seen people like at presbyteries or ordination exams and things like that get nailed for saying the right words but not knowing what it means?

Student: Well no, but I can think in my own experience early on in my seminary days where I had been asked to write on this particular assignment, and I have not been fully figure out, you know, where I stand on this, but I pretty much know what he wants to hear, and I can read the text and assemble a good paper and turn it in and get a decent grade one it, but still walk away thinking, you know, I didn't really fully understand that.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, you got the right words but not the right concepts. That happens to all of us. And that's where I think sometimes we really have to honest and frank about what we believe rather than just saying the right words. I remember in this recent controversy sort of even going on as we speak about what does inerrancy mean and things like that, it got down one day for me in a seminary where I was teaching to, Richard, do you believe in inerrancy? That was always the question, and everybody would say yes, yes, yes, because they wanted their job the next year. If you didn't say yes, you didn't get your job. But I knew that another person on faculty did not agree with what I believe inerrancy meant. And so he said, how do you sign this paper? What do you mean when you say, yes, I believe in inerrancy? So I had to say to him, I had to say, when I say yes I believe in inerrancy, what I mean by that is, if the board of this seminary knew what I believed, what the concept was, they would find it acceptable. And that's what I meant by it, that in good faith, I mean what I think would be acceptable to them. I wasn't going to check out every single time every single issue. That would be a lifetime to do that. And so I challenged the other guy who was using the word but using it differently, I said, would they accept your definition of it? And I think that's the way we have to do as we work with each other theologically. We have to ask the question in good faith. Are we establishing trust or are we involved in subterfuge? And you can go both and you can get away with it, but I think that really what we need to do is to be honest and faithful and in good conscience present our views as best we can to people.

Question 24:
Is it sometimes more efficient to avoid technical terms?

Student: We started talking about the one technical term that gives you an instant understanding about the concept, but it seems just from our conversation that it would take just as much time to explain the definition of this one new technical term to your people as opposed to just depend on Scripture and what it says, and just go straight to that, and let's not worry about creating new terms.

Dr. Pratt: It could. So long as the terminology is new, there is a learning curve. Yes, that's right, and it becomes a task in itself to communicate what we mean by a new word like inerrancy of Scripture. But if it's a longstanding technical term that comes from the history of theology, then it's a very convenient thing, and I think in many respects is already agreed upon as to what it's basic parameters are, what it's meanings are, the different dimensions of it, and then it becomes very convenient and easy to use.

Student: Until the language starts to change…

Dr. Pratt: Until somebody changes the concept the under your nose and you don't realize it. That's right. And that's why if you can't talk about the Bible and theology honestly, if you're more concerned about keeping your job in your church, or you're more concerned about keeping you seminary job, or your reputation, and your ideas really are different, then, you know, it's just flat out deception. It's not a good thing. We have to be able to trust each other not just on the linguistic level, but on the conceptual level and agree that there's enough flexibility or we can allow these differences and know in good faith that we're doing that before Christ. Otherwise, we're just killing ourselves. We're just hurting the church. Why would we want to do that?

Student: You know, I really love the tradition that we stand in and the theological terms have really helped me put so much of Scripture together. And what happens now is I find myself using those terms sometimes with people that I haven't ever explained that to, assuming they understand it. So it's incumbent upon me to put meat on the bone for these people when I do use it.

Dr. Pratt: Right, exactly. I mean, I had somebody just the other day.. we were talking about inerrancy in a situation with a lay person, and he said to me, well then you believe that every word that the gospel says that Jesus said, he said every word, every single one of those words, don't you. And that was his concept of inerrancy. And I said, well, that's a hard one to hold given that the different gospels summarize Jesus' words in different ways, and he didn't speak Greek and things like that, or at least he didn't normally speak Greek. And so that sort of messed up his notion of what inerrancy is, and so that caused the conversation to have to go deeper. But you're right. I mean, that's an example of me just sort of throwing the term out with

somebody I thought was right there with me, and then all of a sudden I realized, no, there's a big difference here, and that's where we have to back up. And I think that's just a learning… We do that with people in ordinary conversations all the time. You know, we'll talk and we'll use conventional talk until the person goes, what? Did you mean by that… Then all of a sudden you realize you have to back up and define what you meant. And I think that's just the kind of thing we have to do in theology, too.

Student: It seems like we just have to remember that our goal also has to be their growth and their maturity rather than our using the right words.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Spiritual gifts including doing theology is for the edification of the church. It's not for our personal edification. If you want to do your own theology, then do it all at home. We do theology in community. You remember how Paul said speak in tongues at home if you're not edifying people. Well, that's the way it is here, too. We do theology in church for the church and not for us. And I think that that's extremely important, and it does involve that give-and-take.

Question 25:
How do we help believers work with technical terms and concepts?

Student: Richard, in all honesty, this is hard, because there are a lot of theological terms out there, a lot of concepts. For those of us who are teaching, how do we work through it all? How do we really help our people?

Dr. Pratt: I wish there were an easy answer to that. I don't really think there is. I think that we do need to be more self-conscious and more deliberate in the ways that we revert to technical terms. I mean, I do think that, to be sure. Because people who are professional ministers, let's say, or people who have studied the Bible a lot and studies theology a lot, they've had an opportunity that most Christians don't have. Most Christians do not have even the time much less the interest in learning these kinds of things. And so I think that it's very important to be deliberate in the ways that we choose and rely on technical vocabulary as we do Sunday school lessons or Bible studies and things like that, and if there isn't a common consensus about that terminology, don't just pick up on some old word that you heard thrown around or read in a book by somebody, and a Latin phrase, or something like that, and feel as if you are somehow communicating with people. Frankly, when people do that, and I know a lot of those kinds of phrases, but when people do that from a pulpit or in a lesson, I don't think that they're trying to communicate at all except that they are superior to everybody else around them. I mean, this is one of the greatest dangers in using technical terms, is that you present yourself as better than the other people, more informed than the other people, and you're above them, and they can't understand these things because they haven't studied these phrases and those sorts of things for years like you have. And I just think that's a travesty.

Serving people in teaching means serving them in ways that can help them, and there's no dumbing down when that happens. Let me tell you a Jonathan Edwards quote that is really appropriate for this situation. Jonathan Edwards said, "An intellectual who cannot preach so that a farmer can understand, is not an intellectual, he's only a halfwit." You see, the hard work… the true intellectual is somebody who can think through the whole process, who can learn the technical vocabulary and then reinvent how to say that for the farmer, being used as someone who was illiterate, I assume, in his day. And if you don't do that, you're not an intellectual, you're just a halfwit, and you are really building yourself up just like Paul talks about in Corinthians, puffed up with knowledge because you don't have love, and that's the most ridiculous thing in the world, because all we know is in part, and I don't' care how many Latin phrases you stick on it, you only know in part. And so I think it takes a bit of humility and a devotion to people, a caring about the people you're serving to make it work for them. And, you know, gradually through time and that sort of thing, hopefully you can shorthand some of it here and there, but you don't want to do that too much too quickly because it will turn on you. It will destroy the teaching ministry.

Have you seen people destroy the teaching ministry by using that kind of thing? I surely have. You know, in the middle of a sermon you get a Latin phrase or something. Everyone goes, whatever. I can remember even as a student, professors of mine reading whole pages in German to the class. You know, most of us could do fairly well in German but not quite that well. And so as we were sitting there listening to him read a page and a half of German and then expecting us to understand it all, we were just looking back-and-forth at each other like, okay, whatever he thinks, and we'll hope that he says something in English afterwards. And that was nothing more than just a ploy. That was just a power play against the students to let us know that we weren't quite as bright as he was. And I'm afraid sometimes preachers have that problem. It may be they don't even intend to do that. Maybe they just to it because they've seen others do it. And to be plain-spoken is a gift, and it's the true intellectual who can do that, who doesn't show off, as it were. That's just half-wittedness.

Student: It seems as if the greatest love that we can show our people is to have a clear grasp of these concepts in their terms, and know how to parse them, and know how to work through them and discuss them and hash them out, but then, get in the pulpit or on the couch next to the grieving widow and say, "God is good," and have behind that all these things that we understand about big words — aseity, covenants, and all these — but be able to hold their hands and minister to them and truly believe how good and know how good God is, and then trust the Lord, whatever way he can speak through us to that need, to give us those words to comfort them in what ways they need.

Dr. Pratt: Exactly right. If you can't talk to a child, and talk to a weary grandmother, a very sick person in ways that mean to them, then you haven't learned the Bible yet. Joe, you've been through serious illness, close to death, a couple of times, huh… and when pastors came and visited you, did they give you Latin phrases?

Student: I don't think so, and I was really blessed with those who did come. But to know that someone loves you and… you know, some of those people that visited me knew all the terms, but they weren't trying to build themselves up. They were trying to love me as a brother in Christ. And I think that's what we have to do with other people. If we love people and put meaning behind these words that we've learned for God's glory, that's so cool.

> **Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's the key, isn't it? Caring about the people you're teaching. I'm afraid that often we don't, and then when you get into a situation like a surgery or some deathbed situation, if you have not practiced at it, you don't know what to do. And that's really serious then. I spent 8 hours with some good friends in another city as they were standing there watching the father of the family, the patriarch of the family, die. And I was there with them for 8 hours. They were looking to me to say the right thing, to have things to say that would comfort and sustain them, and it had nothing to do with the highfaluting theology. Nothing.

Student: I tell people all the time…they'll come to me and they'll say I'm going to visit so-and-so in the hospital, what do I say? I'll say, don't worry about saying anything, just be there.

> **Dr. Pratt**: That's right. Bring it incarnationally.

Student: There will be another time to say things.

Dr. Pratt: That's exactly right. So I think that that's the answer in many respects. Yes, it is hard to learn the technical terms, it takes a lot of effort, and we just need to be patient with other people. But we also, again, as people that are teachers of the Bible, we need to put the hard work in there so we can have the ability to do more than just be caught and entrapped by those words and by those terms, but also to be able to re-express, to be free of them as well, in ways that will meet the needs of people. And when we do that, we are using technical terms well.

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