



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Chapter 1 Introduction



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Lesson 1.1 – Introduction

Introduction

As we begin a study of Bible teachings, it is important that we first state the doctrinal position which we hold as a result of our studies of Bible teachings. The doctrinal position of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) is summarized in Article III of the CLC Constitution, as follows:

We accept without reservation the canonical Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments as the verbally inspired Word of God and therefore as the sole and only infallible rule of doctrine and life.

We confess the Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds and the Particular Symbols of the Lutheran Church as published in the *Book of Concord* of 1580, because they are a true exposition of the Word of God.

We also subscribe to the *Brief Statement* of 1932.

Because of differences that arose within the Synodical Conference we have found it necessary to define our position in a particular statement entitled *Concerning Church Fellowship* as well as in *Theses on the Relation of Synod and Local Congregation to the Holy Christian Church* and *Theses on the Ministry of the Keys and the Public Ministry*. [Note: These two sets of theses are printed and explained in the pamphlet entitled *Concerning Church and Ministry*.]

It is our position that what we confess in these historical documents agrees with the Holy Scriptures, and that all the doctrines that they teach are derived from the Bible. In short, we want to teach only what the Bible teaches, without adding or subtracting or altering anything.

The Religions of the World

The idea of a higher power or powers is found throughout the world because God has written His law in the hearts of all human beings.

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things of the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them (Romans 2:14-15).

Gentiles are non-Jews. God did not reveal Himself to the Gentiles by means of a written record, as He did with the Jews. Nevertheless, all Gentiles have a sense of morality; all Gentiles have a conscience, that is, an awareness of a higher power; all Gentiles have excusing thoughts when they do right and accusing thoughts when they do wrong.

Because of this natural knowledge of God, human beings throughout the world are religious and follow various religions. In general, these religions are of three kinds: they center on either morality, mysticism, or speculation. A religion centering on **morality** believes that the way to God is to follow certain rules of behavior. A religion centering on **mysticism** believes that the way to God is to have an emotional spiritual experience of God through various rituals or practices. A religion centering on **speculation** believes that the way to God is through the use of the brain, that is, through logical thinking.

All of these religions have one thing in common: they believe that the way to God is through man's own efforts, either by obeying God, by experiencing God, or by imagining God. This is the best that man can accomplish without a special revelation from God.

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Christianity is the only religion revealed by God Himself. In contrast to all the religions of the world, which stress man's efforts to attain the favor of God, Christianity teaches that man cannot earn God's favor by any of his own efforts, whether by obedience, experience, or thinking. Christianity is the only religion in which God comes down to man and saves him entirely by grace. We are saved entirely by God's work, not our own. This is the message of the Bible from beginning to end.

Questions

1. What are the three types of false religions in the world?
2. How does Christianity differ from all other religions of the world?
3. What is our source for doctrine?
4. What is the message of the Bible from beginning to end?
5. Give an example of a religion that teaches that the way to God is through obedience.
6. What are in reality the only two religions in the world?
7. Why is Christianity the only true religion?



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Lesson 1.2 – Introduction

The Divisions Among Christians

There is only one God. There is only one way of salvation. There is only one God-revealed Bible. With this divine unity, there should be no divisions among Christians. But since the devil is still active in this world to mislead Christians and since all Christians still have a sinful flesh, some who profess Christ are led off course. They try to mix God's truth with human ideas of morality, mysticism, and speculation.

For example, instead of teaching and believing that we are saved by God's grace alone, as God's word teaches, some claim that that we are saved by grace and by works. Some people prefer to put their trust in their experiences of God rather than be guided only by what God says in His Word. And some follow what their own reason tells them is true, instead of accepting every word from God as the absolute truth.

God has revealed Christianity to us in the Bible. Christianity is the perfect religion. It is the only true religion, and it leads to a perfect salvation with a perfect God.

The Church of the Lutheran Confession professes that: *"We believe that the many differences in the teaching of the churches are due only to man who, in his perversity, refuses to take his reason captive under the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5), desiring to be a master over Holy Scripture (1 Timothy 1:7)" (Concerning Church Fellowship, #13).*

"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

"Some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm" (1 Timothy 1:6-7).

Questions

1. Why is it correct to call Christianity the perfect religion?
2. How is Christianity different from all the other religions of the world?
3. In America, one common slogan says: "Attend the church of your choice." What is wrong with this slogan?
4. What is the only proper source for Christian doctrine?
5. Why are there so many divisions among Christians?



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Lesson 1.3 – Introduction

The Various Kinds of Doctrines in the Bible

The two main teachings of the Bible are the Law and the Gospel. It is especially important that we know these two teachings and the differences between them.

Our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious...how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory (2 Corinthians 3:5-9).

In this passage, the Law of God is given different names:

- “the letter,”
- “the ministry of death”
- “written and engraved on stones,”
- “the ministry of condemnation.”

The Gospel, on the other hand, is called:

- “the new covenant,”
- “the Spirit”
- “the ministry of the Spirit”
- “the ministry of righteousness”

The Law refers to the commands God has given to all human beings. These are summarized in the Ten Commandments given to Moses on two stone tablets. The Law comes from God and therefore it is good. The Law would be a way of salvation if we could keep it. But because of our sinful nature, no one has been able to keep the Law perfectly. Therefore, the Law kills us. It is the ministry of condemnation and of death. Since we cannot keep the Law, the Law condemns us to the punishment of death. This is the ministry of condemnation and death

The Gospel, on the other hand, refers to those things God has done for us, specifically the things He has done for us through His Son, Jesus Christ. We, who are disobedient, are saved by Jesus’ perfect obedience in our place. The Spirit works through this Gospel of Jesus and leads us to trust in it for our salvation. The Gospel gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ and the Spirit leads us to trust in Jesus’ righteousness for salvation rather than in anything that we can do.

Because the distinction between Law and Gospel is so important, we will explain it more thoroughly in a future lesson.

Everything the Bible teaches is a doctrine of God. We should accept every teaching that God gives us. But some teachings are more important than others. For example, it is more important to know that Jesus rose from the dead than that Noah had three sons. Both teachings are true because they are given to us by the Holy Spirit in the Bible. But the knowledge of Jesus’ resurrection is more important for our salvation. For this reason, we distinguish between fundamental doctrines, non-fundamental doctrines, and open questions.

Fundamental doctrines are doctrines we need to know and believe in order to be saved. For example, is fundamental that we know and believe that:

1. we are sinners who deserve death
2. Jesus saved us by living a perfect life for us, dying for our sins, and rising again from the dead.

Anyone who denies or rejects these teachings is lost.

On the other hand, knowing the names of the two angels mentioned by name in Scripture (Gabriel and Michael) is not a fundamental teaching of the Bible that we must know in order to be saved. We call such a teaching a non-fundamental doctrine, that is, a true teaching of God's Word but not something that we must know and trust in in order to be saved.

An open question is a question that God does not answer in the Bible or anywhere else. Since God does not answer such questions, we should not try to answer them ourselves. We may have an opinion about them, but we cannot insist that our opinion is correct. For example, we know from the Bible that there are vast numbers of angels, but we do not know exactly how many angels there are. Therefore, we have to consider the number of angels as an open question that we cannot answer.

Questions

1. What are the two main teachings of the Bible?
2. What is the main difference between these two teachings?
3. What are these two teachings called in 2 Corinthians?
4. What is the main purpose of these two teachings?
5. Why is it especially important to know the fundamental teachings of the Bible?
6. What is the difference between a fundamental teaching and a non-fundamental teaching?
7. Why is it still important to teach non-fundamental doctrines correctly?
8. What is the difference between an open question and a non-fundamental doctrine?
9. Give an example of each of these three things: a fundamental doctrine, a non-fundamental doctrine, and an open question.



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Lesson 1.4 – Introduction

The Basis for All Our Theology

The only basis and source of all our theology is the Bible, because it is God's Word. From time to time, teachers who claim to be Christians have gone astray and have based their theology on things other than the Bible. For example, some Lutherans have made the Lutheran confessions found in the *Book of Concord* the basis for their teaching. They say that they will teach what the *Book of Concord* says, but not necessarily what the Bible says. This can lead to false teaching because the *Book of Concord* does not contain every teaching found in the Bible. For example, the *Book of Concord* does not say plainly that God created the world in six ordinary days. When Lutheran confessions were written, no one doubted this fact, so it is not mentioned in the Lutheran confessions. Those who base their teaching only on the *Book of Concord* might think that they are right to teach that God created the world by means of evolution over millions of years because the *Book of Concord* does not specifically condemn the theory of evolution. The basis for their theology has become the *Book of Concord* rather than God's Word, the Bible. We must teach everything that God has given us in the Bible, not just the teachings mentioned in the *Book of Concord*.

The Bible must be the basis for our teaching. Our teaching is based only on God's word, not on words of man, such as the teaching of a pastor, the resolution of a congregation or synod, or a decree from a church officer such as the synod president, a bishop, or the Roman Catholic pope. We cannot base our teaching on traditions, even traditions that have been held by a group of Christians for hundreds of years, because traditions may be contrary to the Bible or go beyond what the Bible says.

We also must not base our theology on human theories, such as theories on matters of science, sociology, psychology, or education. For example, many educators believe that a human being is a blank slate at birth, neither good nor bad. This cannot become a basis for our thinking, because the Bible teaches that a human being is not neutral at birth, but sinful. Some educators teach that physical or corporal punishment of a child is always wrong, but God tells us in His Word that He does not agree with that philosophy. We always need to put God's Word above every human idea, even when all the so-called experts disagree with what the Bible says.

One church teacher, John Wesley, taught that there is a four-fold basis for our theology: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This is dangerous teaching, for tradition, reason, and experience do not always agree with Scripture. And tradition varies from place to place. Human ideas about what is reasonable change from time to time. And one man's experience differs from another's. But Scripture remains always the same. Only what God tells us in the Bible provides a solid basis for our doctrine and life.

John Calvin was a younger contemporary of Martin Luther. He was a Bible teacher who allowed reason to lead him away from what the Bible teaches in some cases. For example, he could not accept the Bible teaching that in the Lord's Supper we truly receive the Lord's body together with the bread and the Lord's blood together with the wine. Calvin taught that a human body has to occupy a certain space and therefore cannot be located in many different places in the world where the Lord's Supper is celebrated; therefore, he taught that Christians receive only bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, not the body and blood of Jesus. In his view, the body and blood of Jesus had ascended to heaven and could not be present anywhere else except in heaven. So instead of accepting God's Word as it reads, he understood it to mean something different from what the words actually say.

Others have disagreed with things the Bible says because they seem to disagree with their own experiences. What they feel in their hearts has become the basis of their theology, rather than the written words in the Bible. A popular American song from a few years ago included the words: "It can't be wrong when it feels so right." In this song, the person was apparently trying to justify her adultery because it felt good, even though God's Word condemns adultery. A number of people approach theology this way.

In the very beginning the devil tried to get Eve away from the Word of God as the basis for her thinking. Satan suggested that God did not really say what Eve knew He said. She believed the lie of the devil rather than the truth of God. In the same way, the devil tries to make us doubt God's word, the Bible, and ask, "Did God really say...?"

Questions

1. What is the basis for all the theology that we teach in our churches and schools?
2. Why is it important this basis must always remain the same for us?
3. What did John Calvin sometimes put above the Word of God?
4. What did John Wesley present as the four-fold basis for his teaching?
5. How can our feelings lead us away from the Word of God?
6. In what way does the blank slate theory disagree with God's Word?
7. How should every Christian test the teachings of his pastor or synod?
8. Explain how the devil in Genesis 3 led Eve away from the Word of God.



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Lesson 1.5 – Introduction

The Conflict between Theology and Reason

The ability to think is a gift from God, but this ability is abused when it is used to find fault with God and what He has revealed to us in the Scriptures. When man's mind and reason submit to God and His Word, man's reason is being used in a God-pleasing way. But when man's mind and reason is put above God and His Word, then man's reason, mind, and his thinking ability have become an idol. The apostle Paul shows us the right way to use our reason and thinking ability in these words:

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Many of the teachings of the Bible do not make sense to man's reasoning and logic. For example, we cannot understand how God can be one and three at the same time. Yet God's Word is clear. **"There is one God"** (1 Corinthians 8:6). At the same time, the Bible teaches us that there is a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are distinct from each other. How then can there be one God? All we can do is proclaim the truth that the true God is the Triune God, one God in three persons, even though we cannot fully understand how this can be so. To anyone who objects to what God says about Himself, we must say with Paul: **"O man, who are you to reply against God?"** (Romans 9:20).

One of the teachings of God's Word that is often attacked by man's reason is the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. This teaching does not make sense to human reason. We eat the bread; it tastes like bread; it looks like bread; in fact, it is bread. But Jesus' Word teaches us that the bread we are eating in the Lord's Supper is, at the same time, His body, given into death for our sins. Who can understand this? Yet this is what Jesus said: **"This is My body"** (Matthew 26:26), and everything else God has revealed to us in His Word about the Lord's Supper fully agrees with this declaration of our Savior.

The Bible teaches that everyone who is saved is saved by God's grace alone, but everyone who is lost is lost through his own fault. This is another teaching that seems contrary to human reason, but there can be no doubt that this is what God teaches. Paul says: **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God"** (Ephesians 2:8). But at the same time, Jesus said to those who rejected His teaching: **"How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!"** (Luke 13:34). Man's reason says that this doctrine does not make any sense. Man's reason says that if we are saved alone by God's grace, then it must be God's fault if we are lost. Or, if it is our fault that we are lost, then it must due to our own efforts if we are saved.

In general, those who err by human reason are divided into two camps. On the one hand, the followers of John Calvin teach that God has chosen some to be saved and God has chosen others to be lost. If we are saved, we are saved by God's grace. But if we are lost, it is because God has not chosen us, that is, God did not want us to be saved. This makes sense to the human mind, but it is contrary to what God says in many places. For example, God's word clearly tells us: **"The Lord ... is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:8).

On the other hand, Jacob Arminius and his followers taught correctly that it is not God's fault when men are lost – it is their own fault. But then, following human reason, they taught that if a man is saved, it is because he chose to be saved. But if that is true, then God's Word is lying when it says that we are saved by grace alone.

When we try to figure these things out in our human minds, we will find ourselves contradicting God's clear teaching in His Word. That is why we must make our thoughts and thinking obedient to God's Word even though there are times when we cannot fully understand it. God is God, and we are not.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! (Romans 11:33)

We are neither Calvinists nor Arminians. We follow a third option, which is what God's word teaches. We confessional Lutherans who simply take God at His Word, even if it contradicts our human logic.

Questions

1. What is the right way and the wrong way to use the minds God has given us?
2. Why does the teaching that God is triune cause a problem for our minds?
3. How does the teaching of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper cause a problem for our minds?
4. What did John Calvin teach as the cause of man's salvation and damnation?
5. In what way does this teaching contradict what the Bible teaches?
6. Why is it wrong to say that we are saved because we chose to believe in Jesus?
7. In what way do confessional Lutherans differ from Calvinists and Arminians?