

Bible Basics

Bible Basics

*An Introduction To
Christian Beliefs*

By

Don Stewart

Bible Basics: *An Introduction To Christian Beliefs*

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About The Author

Bible Basics:
An Introduction To Christian Beliefs

Before we engage in our study of what the Bible teaches on a number of vital subjects, it is important that we know some basic things about the Christian faith. This includes understanding certain truths about Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching. There are several issues that must be explored before one goes about studying what Christians believe.

In this book, we will look at these important matters. They include such things as: why it is important to study Christian doctrine, the necessity of having some type of system into which we can place the doctrines, and a look at the various ways, or categories, in which Christian doctrine has been studied.

We will also discuss the great statements of faith, or creeds, that the church has produced in the past, as well as looking at some of the popular systems of theology that believers embrace today. This will give us a basic overview of how Christians have stated what they believe.

These simple facts should help put into perspective everything else we learn concerning the truths of the Christian faith.

Consequently, this introductory book will serve as the basis for all of the various books that will follow.

Question 1

What Is Christian Theology?

As we begin our course of study, it is important that we have a correct understanding of some basic concepts. First on our list is the definition and explanation of the word “theology.” What do we mean when we use the word theology?

Theology Defined: The Study Of God

Theology is the science of God. The term “theology” literally means, “the study of God.” It is derived from two Greek words. Theos is the Greek word for God, while the word logos can mean “discourse,” or “the study of.” Theology, therefore, is thinking, or studying, about God. It is important that we realize that there is no higher activity that a person can pursue than the study of God.

The Bible says that every Christian begins to personally know God the moment they believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said:

This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and the One You have sent--Jesus Christ (John 17:3 CSB).

The Christian life is a relationship between the believer and the Creator. This relationship grows and matures as the believer learns more about the God in whom they have trusted. The apostle Paul spoke of believers being made rich in their knowledge of God. He wrote the following:

For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind (1 Corinthians 1:5 NRSV).

We can become spiritually rich when we learn about Him. Therefore, it is important that we learn as much as we can about the living God.

Some Important Points About The Study Of God

There are a number of important observations that we can make about theology; or study of God. They include the following:

1. Everyone Has Their Own Beliefs About God

Those who study theology for a profession are known as “theologians.” However, in a sense, everyone is a theologian for every human being has his or her own theology; that is we all have our own beliefs about God. This includes the atheist who believes that God does not exist. Therefore, you do not have to have a degree in theology to be a theologian; neither do you have to be a minister or someone in full time Christian service.

Some people have carefully thought through what they believe, or do not believe, about God. Others have not spent much time at all thinking about what they believe. Some people never think about it.

Whatever the case may be, all of us have a theology, or a set of beliefs, in which we embrace. Therefore, the key question for the believer is this, “How good of a theologian are we going to be?” To what degree are we going to think through our beliefs?

2. Our Beliefs Affect How We Live

These opinions that we hold about God affect the way in which we live our daily lives – it is not merely an academic pursuit that is removed from real life. Each of us will live in accordance with what we believe about God’s existence or His non-existence.

For example, if we believe that God exists, and that we can personally know Him, then we will try to do those things that please Him. However, if we reject the idea that God exists, then we will act in whatever way that pleases us; with no thought of having to answer to a Supreme Being.

Consequently, our theology, or our personal beliefs about God, has enormous practical implications.

The Apostle Paul wrote that true belief, or doctrine, leads to godliness in living our lives. He said the following to a man named Timothy:

Some false teachers may deny these things, but these are the sound, wholesome teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, and they are the foundation for a godly life (1 Timothy 6:3 NLT).

Correct belief should lead to godly living.

3. Christian Theology Is The Study Of The God Of The Bible

While the word theology simply refers to the rational study of God, “Christian” theology is unique. It is the intelligent study of the “Christian” faith. It limits itself to the study of the living and true God of the Bible rather than the gods of other religions; for He is the only God who exists.

Christian theology is thus to be distinguished from the theology of other religions, as well as the beliefs of the secular culture. It is what sets Christianity apart from all other belief systems.

4. The Term Theology Is Used In Two Different Ways By Christians

The word theology, in Christian usage, is used in two ways. There is a narrow sense of the term as well as a wider sense.

The Narrow Sense Is The Doctrine Of God

In a narrow sense, the term theology refers to the specific study of the doctrine of the God of the Bible. It explores His existence, His character, and His works. In this sense of the term, the idea of theology limits the

study to God alone. This is also known as “theology proper,” or the “doctrine of God.”

The Broader Sense Is All Christian Teaching

In a broader sense, theology refers to the sum total of Christian teaching. Used in the broadest sense, theology can be described as the science that deals with our knowledge of the God of the Bible, and His relationship to humankind. This is the sense in which the term is most-often used.

5. Our Job Is To Study The Facts About God That Already Exist

Since Christian theology is a science, it does not create. The job of those who study Christian theology is to discover the facts about God that already exist. Therefore, all of the relevant passages on a particular topic are collected and analyzed. Like the scientist, those who study Christian theology look at all of the available evidence and draw conclusions based upon the evidence.

It is an investigative process; not a creative process. God has already revealed Himself, and this revelation is found in the Scripture. It is, therefore, our responsibility to understand what He has revealed.

Therefore, the study of Christian theology is limited. It studies the facts about God as God has revealed them. God has determined the subject matter—it is not the determination of human beings.

We can only know as much about God as He has chosen to reveal to us. It is impossible to discover truths about God apart from the things that He has revealed--we are not able to fill in the gaps.

If human beings want to understand God, then we must study His written Word.

6. The Only Infallible Source Of Christian Theology Is The Bible

Some people limit the study of Christian theology to the information found only in Scripture, while others believe that all facts, from every source, should be considered when studying this subject. It is clear that the only infallible source for doing Christian theology is the Bible. Information that is discovered from sources outside the Bible must be evaluated in light of Holy Scripture.

7. God Has Revealed Things To Believers Because We Are His Friends

There is another thing which we need to emphasize. The Bible says that those who believe in Jesus Christ are “friends of God.” Jesus has revealed His truth to us because we are His friends.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, He said the following words to His disciples:

I no longer call you servants, because a master doesn't confide in his servants. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me (John 15:15 NLT).

A master, or person in authority, does not confide in those who are his slaves, or his servants. Although believers are servants or slaves of God, we are also His friends.

Consequently, He has revealed His truths to us because we are His friends. What a wonderful truth this is! What a friend we do have in Jesus!

8. Only Believers Can Truly Understand And Appreciate God's Truth

There is something else that is important. The truths that He has revealed to us are not really understood by those who do not believe in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote the following to the Corinthians:

I did this so that you might trust the power of God rather than human wisdom. Yet when I am among mature Christians, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world, and not the kind that appeals to the rulers of this world, who are being brought to nothing. No, the wisdom we speak of is the secret wisdom of God, which was hidden in former times, though he made it for our benefit before the world began. But the rulers of this world have not understood it; if they had, they would never have crucified our glorious Lord (1 Corinthians 2:5-8 NLT).

The truths of the Christian faith have been revealed to all humanity. However, it is only those who believe in Jesus Christ that will truly understand and appreciate what God has said. There is a spiritual dimension to the truths which God has revealed.

Therefore, the believer has the advantage over the unbeliever when it comes to understanding the truth of God because the Holy Spirit, who dwells inside every believer, is our Teacher.

9. Jesus Christ Is Our Standard

This brings us to our final point, and in many ways, our most important. Christian theology revolves around the Person and teachings of Jesus Christ; God the Son and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. The Bible says that He came into the world to reveal what God is like.

We read in John's gospel the following:

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1:18 NRSV).

Jesus Christ is the final standard for all matters of faith and practice. Whenever Jesus speaks on an issue, He speaks with finality. There is no higher court of appeal.

Therefore, it is absolutely essential that we discover Jesus' views on the various topics with respect to Christian theology. We start with Jesus Christ and develop our system of doctrine, or theology, based upon what He taught. Christian theology is all about "Christ." We must never forget this.

Conclusion: The Study Of Theology Is Of The Utmost Importance

These facts that we have briefly considered should help us gain a better understanding of the subject of Christian theology. We should now have an appreciation of the importance of holding on to a theology that is correct; for we will live out our beliefs in our daily lives. The theology, or belief system, that we do hold, does indeed matter.

While our understanding of divine truth will always be incomplete, we can know certain things about God. Therefore, we should be highly motivated to learn what we can about the living God who has done so much for us.

Summary To Question 1 What Is Christian Theology?

Theology is not a bad word. It means the "study of God." In fact, everyone is a theologian in the sense that we all have beliefs about God and we all live our lives in accordance with those beliefs. If we believe that God exists, then we will live differently than those who reject His existence. Therefore, it does matter what we believe.

Christian theology is a study of the God of Scripture; as opposed to the God or gods of other religions. The term theology, as Christians use it, can be defined in the narrow sense as the study of the doctrine of the God of the Bible. It can also be understood in a wider sense to refer to the sum total of Christian teaching. This is the usual way in which the term is used.

The job of those who study Christian theology is to discover the facts as they are – it is not to create facts. The subject matter of the study of Christian theology is something that God alone determines. Therefore, we can only understand as much about God as He has chosen to reveal to us.

The Bible is the only infallible source of Christian theology. Though certain truths about God can be derived from a study of things outside of the Bible these truths must conform to that which is recorded in Scripture.

Also we are told that God has revealed these truths to us because we are His friends. He wants His friends to know the truths about who He is, who we are, and what He requires from us.

In addition, the Bible makes it clear that only believers can truly understand and appreciate the message of Scripture; it is to be spiritually understood. Unbelievers can never fully appreciate the truth of the Word of God.

Finally, we must realize that Jesus Christ is our infallible standard by which we derive our belief system. He came into this world to make God known to humanity. Consequently, He is the final authority on all matters of faith and practice.

With all these truths in mind, we can see how important it is to make a serious study about the living God. This is what Christian theology is all about.

Question 2

What Is Christian Doctrine? (Christian Teaching)

What is Christian doctrine? The English word “doctrine” comes from the Latin word *doctrina*. It can be defined as, “teaching or instruction.” Christian doctrine simply means the beliefs of Christians.

A Christian doctrine is what the entire Bible has to say on one particular subject. Therefore, we speak of such things as the “doctrine” of Christ, the “doctrine” of God, and the “doctrine” of the church. This refers to what Christians believe about these subjects based upon the teaching of the Bible.

Doctrine Is Different From Theology But The Terms May Be Used Interchangeably

Sometimes the word “doctrine” is used interchangeably with the word “theology.” While this is not necessarily wrong, there is a difference between the two terms. Theology, or Christian theology, is the more general term. It refers to the study of the God of the Bible. Doctrine refers to the specific teachings about God that are found in a study of theology such as the “doctrine” of salvation or the “doctrine” of the afterlife.

Some New Testament References To Christian Doctrine

While the word theology is not found in the Bible, there are over forty New Testament references to Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching. Christian doctrine consists of the teachings of Jesus Christ, as found in the four gospels, as well as the teachings about Jesus Christ, which is found in the remainder of the New Testament.

We will cite a few of the passages that refer to Christian doctrine in an attempt to get an overview of what Scripture says on the subject.

The following are some of the important passages that refer to the “doctrine of Christ” or Christian doctrine.

1. We Are Told That The People Were Amazed At Jesus’ Doctrine (Matthew 7:28,29)

When Jesus completed the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible says that the people were amazed with His teaching:

When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed by his teaching [doctrine], because he taught them like one who had authority, not like their experts in the law (Matthew 7:28, 29 NET).

The Contemporary English Version translates these verses as follows:

When Jesus finished speaking, the crowds were surprised at his teaching [doctrine]. He taught them like someone with authority, and not like their teachers of the Law of Moses (Matthew 7:28, 29 CEV).

The teachings of Jesus were given with divine authority, and the people recognized this authority; He was obviously in a class by Himself.

2. The Source Of Jesus' Doctrine Was God The Father (John 7:16,17)

Jesus told the religious leaders where His doctrine originated – it was from God the Father. John records the following:

Then Jesus answered them, “My teaching [doctrine] is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own” (John 7:16,17 NRSV).

The Message translates the verses in this manner:

Jesus said, “I didn’t make this up. What I teach comes from the One who sent me. Anyone who wants to do his will can test this teaching [doctrine] and know whether it’s from God or whether I’m making it up” (John 7:16-17 MsgB).

According to Jesus, His doctrine, or teaching, comes from the One who sent Him - God the Father. This is a constant theme in the teachings of Jesus – His doctrine is from heaven above.

3. The Early Church Was Devoted To The Apostles' Doctrine (Acts 2:42)

We find the early church devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. This teaching centered on what Jesus said and what He did.

In the Book of Acts, we read the following account:

They were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching [doctrine] and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42 NET).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching [doctrine] and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer (Acts 2:42 NLT).

The first Christians were constantly studying, as well as putting into practice, the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

4. The Apostles Were Ordered By The Religious Authorities Not To Teach Jesus' Doctrine (Acts 5:27, 28)

As Jesus' apostles spread His teachings, many people were converted to the faith. This caused the religious leaders to order the apostles not to teach His doctrine. We read about this in the Book of Acts:

And when they had brought them [Peter and John], they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching [doctrine] and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us” (Acts 5:27, 28 RSV).

The Message paraphrases these verses as follows:

Bringing them back, they stood them before the High Council. The Chief Priest said, “Didn’t we give you strict orders not to teach in Jesus’ name? And here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching [doctrine] and are trying your best to blame us for the death of this man” (Acts 5:27-28 MsgB).

Although the apostles were commanded to stop proclaiming the teachings of Jesus, they would not stop; neither could they stop. They had to tell others what they knew to be true.

5. The Doctrine Of The Lord Caused People To Believe In Him (Acts 13:12)

We are told that the doctrine of the Lord caused people to believe in Him. We read the following in the Book of Acts about the conversion of a certain governor:

Then when the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, because he was greatly astounded at the teaching [doctrine] about the Lord (Acts 13:12 NET).

The Contemporary English Version translates the verse as follows:

When the governor saw what had happened, he was amazed at this teaching [doctrine] about the Lord. So he put his faith in the Lord (Acts 13:12 CEV).

The doctrine of the Lord, when believed, was life-changing. This is still true today!

6. The People In Athens Wanted To Hear Paul’s Doctrine (Acts 17:19)

When the apostle Paul went to Athens, the people wanted to hear his doctrine. The Bible explains the situation as follows:

So they took Paul and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching [doctrine] is that you are proclaiming?” (Acts 17:19 NET).

The people of Athens had heard that Paul was proclaiming a new teaching. They wanted to hear what he had to say.

Paul then taught them the doctrine of Jesus—how God became a human being in the Person of Jesus Christ.

7. Christians Are To Obey The Doctrine Of Christ (Romans 6:17,18)

Paul wrote a letter to the church at Rome concerning the doctrine which the believers in the church were obeying. He said:

You used to be slaves of sin. But I thank God that with all your heart you obeyed the teaching [doctrine] you received from me. Now you are set free from sin and are slaves who please God. (Romans 6:17,18 CEV).

The doctrine, or teaching, of Jesus sets people free from sin. Therefore, correct doctrine should lead believers into holy living. If this does not happen, then something is wrong.

8. Believers Are To Advance In Their Knowledge Of Jesus' Doctrine (Hebrews 6:1-3)

The writer to the Hebrews wrote about the need for believers to go beyond the basic teachings, or doctrines, of the Christian faith. The Bible says:

Therefore we must progress beyond the elementary instructions about Christ and move on to maturity, not laying this foundation again: repentance from dead works and faith in God, teaching [doctrine] about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1-3 NET).

The Contemporary English Version reads as follows:

We must try to become mature and start thinking about more than just the basic things we were taught about Christ. We shouldn't need to keep talking about why we ought to turn from deeds that bring death and why we ought to have faith in God. And we shouldn't need to keep teaching [doctrine] about baptisms or about the laying on of hands or about people being raised from death and the future judgment. Let's grow up, if God is willing (Hebrews 6:1-3 CEV).

Our knowledge about Jesus Christ should continue to grow as we mature in the faith.

**9. The Importance Of Correct Doctrine Is Emphasized
(2 John 9, 2 Timothy 4:1-3)**

Scripture emphasizes the absolute importance of correct doctrine or teaching. John wrote the following to believers:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not remain in the teaching [doctrine] of Christ does not have God. The one who remains in this teaching [doctrine] has both the Father and the Son (2 John 9 NET).

In the same manner, Paul wrote about the importance of Christian doctrine. In a letter written shortly before his death, Paul said the following to Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching [doctrine], but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings (2 Timothy 4:1-3 RSV).

Knowing that he was about to die, Paul ended his last letter with the emphasis of holding on to correct teaching. Again, we find the New Testament emphasizing the importance of sound teaching.

**10. Jesus Spoke Of The Source Of All Error—
Wrong Doctrine (Matthew 22:29)**

Finally, we note that Jesus told the religious leaders of His day the source of their errors. It was wrong doctrine. Matthew says:

But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29 ESV).

Among their problems, the religious leaders did not understand the Scriptures—they did not really know the doctrine, or teaching, that came from God. If they had known what the Scriptures taught, they would have accepted Him as the promised Savior, or Messiah, instead of crucifying Him.

Conclusion: Christian Doctrine Is Highly Important

From this brief survey of selected verses in the New Testament, we find that Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching, is of the utmost importance.

When we get our doctrine right, then all other things will fall into place. On the other hand, if we get our doctrine wrong, then our lives will be affected in a negative way. Therefore, we cannot overemphasize the importance of right belief because this should lead to right living.

Summary To Question 2 What Is Christian Doctrine? (Christian Teaching)

The word doctrine means “teaching” or “instruction.” While some use this term interchangeably with the word theology, there is a difference between the two. Christian Theology is the study of the God of the Bible. It is a general term.

Christian doctrine refers to the specific teachings of the Bible on various subjects. This includes the “doctrine” of Christ, the “doctrine” of the Holy Spirit, and the “doctrine” of the Trinity.

The New Testament has a number of references about the importance of Christian doctrine. For example, we find the people amazed at the doctrine of Jesus. Jesus Himself told the religious leaders that His doctrine came from God the Father.

The early church continued teaching the doctrines of Jesus. The doctrines were causing many people to believe in Him as the Savior. This led the religious leaders to command the apostles not to teach the doctrine of Christ to anyone.

When the apostle Paul came to Athens the people wanted to hear his doctrine. When the opportunity arose, he preached Jesus Christ to them. Paul wrote to the believers in Rome about the importance of following the teaching or doctrines that had been given them.

The writer to the Hebrews listed some of the basic doctrines or teachings of the Christian faith and encouraged believers to proceed beyond these elementary truths. We also find an emphasis on correct doctrine from the writings of the apostle Paul and the apostle John.

Finally, Jesus told the religious leaders of His day that the source of all error was their lack of understanding the doctrines, or teachings, that God had revealed in His Word.

From these references, we find that the study of Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching, is crucial if one wishes to properly understand the Christian faith.

Question 3

What Source Or Sources Should Be Used To Compile Christian Doctrine? (The Bible Or The Church?)

From where do Christians derive their beliefs? What is the infallible source, or sources, of authority in which doctrines, or teachings, are based? How are these issues of what to believe finally settled?

This question is primary. Before any spiritual issue can be resolved, it is absolutely necessary that we know where we can go to find out the authoritative answers. Much misunderstanding will be cleared up if people can agree as to how these issues may be resolved.

Observations About Where Final Authority Rests

There are a number of observations that need to be made about this important issue. They include the following.

1. There Is A Big Difference Of Opinion Among Professing Christians As To Where Final Authority Rests

With respect to the source of authority for Christian doctrine there is a big difference between the two major branches of Christianity - Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. They do not agree as to where final authority rests.

In fact, the two positions cannot be harmonized. It is crucial that we understand this. In fact, the word Protestant means one who is protesting the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

2. The View Protestantism Holds: The Bible Alone Is The Final Authority

Protestant Christianity places its ultimate source of authority in the Bible alone. It is plain that the Scriptures, by direct statements and indirect statements, testify to their divine origin and authority. Of this there is no doubt.

The Scriptures, therefore, are the final authority on all matters of faith and practice. There is no church leader, or council, who makes decisions that affect the entire church. It is the Bible and it alone that settles all questions concerning spiritual truth. No other source has any authority whatsoever. Holy Scripture alone is the infallible guide.

3. The View Of Roman Catholicism: The Church Is The Final Authority

The Roman Catholic Church, however, believes that ultimate authority does not reside in the Bible, but rather in the church—the Roman Catholic

Church. It is an intermediary, or go-between, between God and each individual human being.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that we do not have all that God says on any particular subject in the Scripture alone. Therefore, we must listen to the church. The church, they contend, has the final say on all matters of faith and practice. It has the infallible authority to interpret that which is contained in Scripture. It also has the authority to add to what has previously been revealed.

They believe that written Scripture and unwritten church tradition are in total harmony. The Roman Catholic Church argues that all the doctrines they teach are in accord with Scripture.

The Roman Catholic Church believes that Jesus gave this infallible authority to one of His disciples; Simon Peter. Peter's authority has been transferred to a continuous succession of human beings since that time. The person who holds this authority is the Bishop of Rome, or the Pope.

The Pope supposedly has the same authority as Christ. The Roman Catholic Church believes the present Pope, as well as all past Popes, speaks infallibly on all matters of doctrine.

4. The Roman Catholic View Is Rejected By Protestants

Protestants reject the doctrine of apostolic succession, the authority of the Pope, and the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church. They believe none of these ideas are taught in Scripture. Indeed, they argue that many of the teachings and practices of the church have been contrary to Scripture.

Protestants believe that church history may help understand what God has said, but it cannot add to His Word. Since the time of the apostles, God has not added anything to what we should believe. Scripture alone is sufficient for us.

Jesus gave unique authority to those whom He personally taught. They were able to faithfully preach and teach His Word. However, this unique authority ended when they died; it was not passed on to others.

5. Protestants And Catholics Both Cannot Be Right About Where The Final Authority Rests

Consequently, there are wide differences of opinion between Protestants and Roman Catholics as to where ultimate authority comes from. They both cannot be right about this issue. Someone has to be wrong.

Although many have tried to forge some sort of compromising position between the two; it simply will not work. The Roman Catholic Church has the final authority, or the Bible alone is the final authority—it cannot be both.

6. There Is No Biblical Evidence For The Roman Catholic Position

We must emphasize that there is no biblical evidence for the Roman Catholic position. Scripture does not give the slightest hint that the church on earth is to have the same infallible authority as Jesus Christ. The New Testament emphasis is on the Word of God, written and spoken. It is the only infallible authority, not the church. The church is to submit to the Word of God, the Word of God is not to submit itself to the church.

7. The Differences Between Protestants And Roman Catholics Need To Be Understood

It is absolutely essential that differences on matters of final authority be understood by those from both Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds. Otherwise, we will not understand many of the issues that have been historically debated and are still presently being debated.

8. Believing In Scripture Alone Does Not Mean Christians Can Come Up With New Doctrines Or Belief Systems

While the Protestant position is that the Scriptures alone are the final authority on all matters, there must be some qualifications made to the idea that each Christian should be able to read the Scriptures on his or her own. It does not mean that each individual believer can read the Bible and come up with teachings that are unique to the historic faith.

When the Holy Spirit is leading a person, He is leading them into the truth of God. We must remember that we have two thousand years of godly people studying, interpreting, and discussing their findings with others.

We also have a number of great creeds or belief statements that sum up the central doctrines of the faith. Private reading of Scripture does not give anyone the right to deny what Christians have always believed.

In fact, those who argued for the Scripture alone as the final authority on all matters assumed that those who read it would subscribe to the “faith that has been once and for all delivered to the saints.”

There is an old adage that says, “If it’s true it’s not new, and if it’s new it’s not true.” This is certainly the case when it comes to the understanding of the central teachings of the Christian faith.

Summary To Question 3 What Source Or Sources Should Be Used To Compile Christian Doctrine? (The Bible Or The Church?)

When it comes to final authority concerning spiritual matters there is a difference of opinion among those who profess to be Christians. While Protestantism believes final authority is derived from the Bible, and the Bible alone, Roman Catholicism teaches the final authority resides in the Roman Catholic Church.

This is a crucial issue. Because of the wide differences between the two groups, they both cannot be correct at the same time. Either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism is wrong as to where ultimate authority comes from. There is no meaningful middle ground.

The Roman Catholic position of authority cannot be sustained biblically. There is no evidence that when Christ left the earth He gave His followers continuous infallible authority until He comes a second time.

The Bible alone, the written Word of God, is the ultimate authority for all matters of faith and practice. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

However, the idea that Christians can and should study the Scripture on their own does not mean that they have the right to come up with new teachings that are at variance with the consensus of Christian believers for the last two thousand years. The faith has been delivered and believers have agreed on the essentials.

Question 4

What Basic Assumptions Should Be Made Before Studying Christian Doctrine?

Before one begins the study of Christian doctrine there are a number of basic assumptions, or starting points, that need to be made. They include the following.

1. The God Of The Bible Exists

The first assumption must be that the God of the Bible exists. This is primary. We cannot properly study Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching, unless we assume that God actually exists.

In addition, it must be assumed that He is the only God who exists. There is no other God, either lesser or greater than He. This is our starting point.

2. God Has Spoken In The Bible

Not only does the God of the Bible exist, it should also be assumed that God has spoken to humanity by means of a number of sacred writings. These writings have been collected into one Book, the Bible.

3. God Has Spoken Truthfully

It is essential to believe that God has spoken truthfully to humanity. It is not enough to believe that He has spoken. Indeed, one must also believe that everything God has said is truthful for He is not a God who would lie in His communication to humanity.

4. The Old Testament Is Interpreted By The New Testament

One basic rule of the interpretation of the Bible is that the Old Testament must be fully interpreted in light of the New Testament. The New Testament is the later, fuller, revelation from God. It fulfills what the Old Testament predicts and anticipates. Consequently, the Old Testament must be viewed in the light of the New Testament to understand its complete meaning.

5. It Is Proper To Cite Proof Texts To Establish Doctrine

When establishing Christian doctrine, it is proper to cite individual verses, or proof texts. This is an acceptable practice. The idea is to collect all the passages that deal with a particular topic and then summarize the results.

There Are A Number Of Questions To Be Asked When Citing Proof Texts

While it is acceptable to cite proof texts to establish Christian doctrine, a number of questions need to be asked. They include the following.

Is God, Or One Of His Spokesmen, Doing The Speaking?

To begin with, it must be determined if God is actually speaking, or one of His hand-picked spokesmen. The Bible contains the speech of hundreds of people and not all of them were speaking God's truth. Only certain individuals were chosen by the Lord to speak His truth.

For example, in the Book of Job, the discussion between Job and his three friends was called, by God, "words without knowledge." Scripture says:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:1-2 NIV).

Consequently, all the statements made in this section of Scripture cannot be used to derive doctrines about who God is and what He does. There is truth mixed with error in what these people said. Therefore, their words must be evaluated in light of other portions of Scripture where we know that the Lord has spoken.

Is The Spokesmen Actually Speaking For The Lord?

There is also the need to determine whether one of God's prophets, or spokesmen, was actually speaking for the Lord when the statement was recorded. We know that on one occasion the prophet Nathan spoke presumptuously when he claimed to speak for the Lord. The account can be summarized as follows.

David asked Nathan if he could build a temple for the Lord. Nathan told David the Lord wanted him to go ahead. That night the Lord appeared to Nathan and told him that He did not want David to build Him a temple.

Therefore, the original word of the prophet was not divinely given. Thus, the context will determine whether the statements in any part of Scripture are to be accepted as God's divine truth or merely the thoughts of humans.

Does The Verse Clearly Teach The Doctrine?

When looking at a particular verse as a proof text, it should be determined if the verse clearly teaches a doctrine. The verses that contain clear statements can, and should, be used to compile Christian doctrine.

Is There A Clear Inference In The Text?

If there is not a clear statement about a particular doctrine, then is there a clear inference? When a passage clearly infers Christian truth, then it can be used as a proof text.

Is There Some Type Of Inference In The Text?

After the categories of clear statements and clear inferences, comes the category of general inferences. Does the text infer some Christian truth?

Passages in this category do not lend as strong a support as those that have clear statements and clear inferences.

We must be careful about using these types of statements to compile Christian doctrine. Thus, we must ask ourselves, “Does the passage really infer something, or is there some other possible way of understanding it?”

Doctrine should, therefore, be compiled from clear statements and clear inferences. Inferences that may or may not be that clear should be used cautiously.

The Scriptures Must Be Interpreted In Their Normal Sense

Finally, when interpreting the Scripture to establish Christian doctrine, we must interpret the language in its normal sense. This has also been called the “historical-grammatical method.” Simply stated, it means that we interpret the Bible as we would any other writing. We understand the words in their normal sense unless something in the context tells us otherwise.

These are some of the basic assumptions that believers should use when attempting to put together a system of Christian doctrine. While not exhaustive, this list provides a good starting point for establishing what the Bible teaches about the subjects it deals with.

Summary To Question 4

What Basic Assumptions Should Be Made Before Studying Christian Doctrine?

Before establishing Christian doctrine, it is important that we make a few basic assumptions. They are as follows. First, we should assume that the God of the Bible exists. This is primary. In addition, He has spoken to humanity in one Book alone; the Bible. Indeed, no other source, written or oral, can rightfully be called the Word of God. Furthermore, He has spoken truthfully in Scripture. Everything He teaches is the truth. There should be no question about this.

When examining the Bible to compile doctrine, the Old Testament should be interpreted in light of the New Testament. The Old Testament is incomplete and the New Testament is based upon the Old. In other words, we need both. Proof texts from Scripture, can and should be used to compile doctrine. There are statements in the Bible which we can trust. However, these proof texts must come from statements of the Lord or from His chosen spokesmen. Statements of unbelievers have no divine authority. In addition, these statements should be meant to teach God’s truth.

Doctrines should only be compiled from clear statements of Scripture or clear inferences. We should not attempt to compile doctrines out of obscure teachings.

These are some of the basic starting points that should be used when someone wants to study the Scripture and compile Christian doctrine.

Question 5

What Is The Place Of Tradition In Determining Christian Doctrine?

An important issue that must be considered is the place of “tradition” in the determination of authoritative Christian doctrine. What role, if any, does tradition have? Does tradition have the same authority as written Scripture?

Tradition Defined

The word “tradition” comes from a word meaning, “to hand over.” It has the idea of accepting beliefs or practices that have been handed down from others. Any group that exists for a period of time will develop its own traditions. From the Bible, we learn the following about the right and wrong use of tradition.

1. The Bible Says There Are Good Traditions

Before the New Testament was put into writing, the message was conveyed by word of mouth, or tradition. For example, Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the traditions which had been passed down to him. He said:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread (1 Corinthians 11:23 NET).

Paul taught Timothy to hold on to the traditions that he had been taught. He emphasized that these traditions present a divine standard for belief and practice. He said:

Hold to the standard of sound words that you heard from me and do so with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:13 NET).

The Contemporary English Version translates the verse in this manner:

Now follow the example of the correct teaching I gave you, and let the faith and love of Christ Jesus be your model (2 Timothy 1:13 CEV).

Once these oral traditions were committed to writing, there was an authoritative source for all Christians for all time, the New Testament.

2. Scripture Says There Are Bad Traditions

The Bible also mentions traditions that are not good. Jesus warned against such traditions that contradict the Word of God. Matthew records the following episode:

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do

not wash their hands when they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:1-3 ESV).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

Some Pharisees and teachers of religious law now arrived from Jerusalem to interview Jesus. “Why do your disciples disobey our age-old traditions?” they demanded. “They ignore our tradition of ceremonial hand washing before they eat.” Jesus replied, “And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God?” (Matthew 15:1-3 NLT).

In this case, the current traditions of the religious authorities violated the express commands that God had previously revealed.

3. New Traditions Arose After The Time Of Christ That Differed From Scripture

Eventually a “new” testament was written by those whom Jesus had specially chosen. Consequently, it was no longer necessary to pass on traditions about Christ; the written Word was the final standard on all matters of faith and practice.

However, after the time of Christ and His apostles, there arose a number of church practices that differed from the truths taught in Scripture. These non-biblical traditions brought a strong reaction from those who accepted the authority of Scripture. These traditions were rejected because they contradicted what the Bible clearly said. Again, Scripture was the final test.

4. All Traditions Must Be Tested By Scripture

Tradition, therefore, can be either good or bad. Scripture must test them. The traditions that have been passed down can be helpful in understanding biblical truth. However, the light of God’s Word must test them all. The psalmist wrote about seeing things in God’s light:

For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light (Psalm 36:9 NKJV).

The Contemporary English Version says:

The life-giving fountain belongs to you, and your light gives light to each of us (Psalm 36:9 CEV).

To conclude, we emphasize that traditions are neutral. They can be either good or bad.

However, once the Scripture was completed, tradition has no place in determining Christian belief, or practice. Christian belief and Christian practice are determined by the Scriptures alone.

**Summary To Question 5
What Is The Place Of Tradition In Determining Christian Doctrine?**

The word tradition has the idea of “handing something over.” Scripture has things to say about the subject of tradition.

The New Testament speaks approvingly of certain traditions about Jesus. Therefore, some traditions are good.

However, Jesus Himself warned of traditions that were contrary to the Word of God. Consequently, we may also have some bad traditions which are against God’s Word.

In the history of the church, a number of traditions have risen that are at odds with the Bible. These must be rejected.

Accordingly, traditions can be either good or bad. The key question about any tradition is, “Does it match up with Scripture?”

Now that we have a Scripture that is complete, tradition has no place in determining what Christians should believe or how they should behave.

These questions can only be settled by the teachings found in the Word of God.

Question 6

What Is The Difference Between Theology And Religion? (Belief And Practice)

Is it possible to make the distinction between religion and theology? Yes it is. Theology is concerned with what people believe, while a person's religion refers to ones conduct – how they behave. We can make the following observations about these two terms.

1. Theology Is What A Person Believes While Religion Is What A Person Practices

Theology consists of what a person believes about God. Thus theology is more like a science while religion is more like the practical application of the belief. Theology analyzes the truth while religion attempts to live it. Therefore, religion is practice, while theology is knowledge.

2. There Should Be A Balance Between Theology And Religion: Between Belief And Practice

There should be a balance between what one knows about God, and how a person conducts their life. Unhappily, this is not always the case. Many theologians, who have much intellectual knowledge about God, do not live a spiritual, or religious life. On the other hand, there are those who live a godly life who do not have a large amount of knowledge of biblical truth.

Consequently, one can be a brilliant theologian without being spiritual, and one can be spiritual without being much of a theologian. However, each of us should strive to know as much as we can about God, and then live consistently with what we know.

We must appreciate the fact that our mind is only one part of our total makeup. Too much emphasis on the intellectual can be dangerous. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

About food offered to idols: We know that “we all have knowledge.” Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1 CSB).

We need to be careful that we do not become proud of our increase in knowledge.

On the other hand, too much emphasis on the heart, or the personal side, is also wrong. Our heart can deceive us. Jeremiah wrote:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9 RSV).

If we ignore our mind and let our emotions guide us, we also run the risk of pride and an attitude of self-righteousness. A balance between the two is certainly needed. Our desire should to “live in the truth.”

The Apostle John wrote about people who were doing this:

Some of the brothers recently returned and made me very happy by telling me about your faithfulness and that you are living in the truth (3 John 3 NLT).

We are to know the truth and live in the truth. John wrote elsewhere about doing the truth. He put it this way:

But those who do what is right come to the light gladly, so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants (John 3:21 NLT).

John wrote about the necessity of living in the light and not in darkness. He said:

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (1 John 1:6 NASB).

There must be a passion to obey God's truth as well as to study and know His truth. Believers should be passionate about both.

3. Believers Are Commanded To Study God's Truth

The message to those who are spiritual consists of what Paul wrote to Timothy, study. He wrote the following:

Do your best to present yourself to God as a tried-and-true worker who isn't ashamed to teach the word of truth correctly (2 Timothy 2:15 God's Word).

The New Living Translation says:

Work hard so God can approve you. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 NLT).

All who believe in Jesus Christ should study the Scripture. There are no exceptions to this command.

Study of the Scriptures takes work. The Bible was written in languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, that most of us are unfamiliar with. It describes experiences of people who lived thousands of years ago in a different culture.

In addition, there are constantly new discoveries being made that throw light on the background of the Bible. Therefore, if we are to correctly interpret the Scripture, we will have to work at understanding some of the history and background of the times in which it was written.

Whatever is profitable in life usually takes effort.

4. Christians Are Also To Do These Things That The Bible Commands

The message to the theologian is found in the words of Jesus—do the truth. Jesus said the following to His disciples:

If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:17 NET).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

You know these things-- now do them! That is the path of blessing (John 13:17 NLT).

It is not enough to know the truth; we must also do the truth.

The Apostle James wrote about the practical aspects of the Christian faith. He stated the truth in this manner:

But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves. For if someone merely listens to the message and does not live it out, he is like someone who gazes at his own face in a mirror. For he gazes at himself and then goes out and immediately forgets what sort of person he was. But the one who peers into the perfect law of liberty and fixes his attention there, and does not become a forgetful listener but one who lives it out—he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:22-25 NET).

The New Living Translation translates the verses in this manner:

And remember, it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don't obey, you are only fooling yourself. For if you just listen and don't obey, it is like looking at your face in a mirror but doing nothing to improve your appearance. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you keep looking steadily into God's perfect law—the law that sets you free—and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it (James 1:22-25 NLT).

Again, we have the emphasis in Scripture of both knowing the truth and doing the truth.

5. Christianity Is Devotion To A Person – Jesus Christ

We must emphasize that the essence of the Christian faith is not a set of teachings, or even a lifestyle; it is the devotion to a Person —Jesus Christ. Jesus made this clear when He prayed to God the Father on the night of His betrayal. He said:

Now this is eternal life—that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent (John 17:3 NET).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth (John 17:3 NLT).

The main message of the New Testament is that an individual can have forgiveness of their sins and a right relationship with the living God. This comes about through a personal relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. This is the heart of Christianity!

We can only know Jesus Christ through the study of the Word of God. The way we know the genuine Jesus is by means of what is revealed in Scripture. If we truly want to know and love Him, then it is important that we find out as much about Him as we possibly can. This can only come through a study of the Scripture.

**Summary To Question 6
What Is The Difference Between Theology And Religion?
(Belief And Practice)**

Simply stated, we can define theology as the “study of God’s truth” and religion as “the practice of God’s truth.” Theology describes belief, while religion describes the practice of the belief. There should be a proper balance between the two in the life of a Christian.

It is important to know what the Christian faith stands for, and it is also important to live consistently with ones beliefs. The Bible encourages both.

Thus, we must know the truth of God’s Word, and we must put the truths into practice. It is not enough to simply know the truth; the Bible also commands us to do the truth. We should have a passion to know God’s truth as well as live it out in our lives.

Above all, Christianity is devotion to the Person of Jesus Christ. It is a love relationship between the Creator and His creation. This truly is what Christianity is all about.

Question 7

Does The Bible Attempt To Teach Specific Truths About God That People Have To Obey?

Does the Bible attempt to reveal precise or exact truths about God? Can it tell us specifics about who God is as well as what He wants for us? Are the writers of Scripture trying to teach precise doctrines? Many people deny this. They do not believe that it is proper to try to discover specific things about God from the Bible. However, the evidence says otherwise.

The Bible Teaches Specific Facts About God For Which People Are Held Responsible

It is clear that the Bible is attempting to teach specific factual truth about God. This includes particular things about His nature, or Person. Of this there is no doubt. From both testaments, we find a number of specific things that God revealed that were taught to His people in order to be obeyed. We can give the following examples.

1. Because God Revealed Who He Is, There Were Serious Consequences For Worshipping False Gods (Deuteronomy 17:2-5)

In the Old Testament, the identity of the one, true God was revealed to the children of Israel; His chosen people. As His people, God gave Israel a set of rules, or laws to follow.

For one thing, they were to worship Him and Him alone. In the strongest of terms, they were forbidden to worship any false god. We find that there were serious consequences for those who practiced any type of worship that was contrary to what He commanded. We read the following in the Book of Deuteronomy:

In one of the cities the LORD your God is giving you, there may be a man or woman among you who is doing what the LORD considers evil. This person may be disregarding the conditions of the LORD's promise by worshiping and bowing down to other gods, the sun, the moon, or the whole army of heaven. I have forbidden this. When you are told about it, investigate it thoroughly. If it's true and it can be proven that this disgusting thing has been done in Israel, then bring the man or woman who did this evil thing to the gates of your city, and stone that person to death. (Deuteronomy 17:2-5 God's Word).

The point is clear. God revealed specific truths concerning who He is, and how He, and He alone, is to receive worship. He severely judged those who disobeyed His commands. In this case, it was the death sentence.

On the other hand, the Lord promised to prosper Israel when they obeyed His words. We also read in the Book of Deuteronomy:

The LORD your God will make you successful in everything you do. He will give you many children and numerous livestock, and your fields will produce abundant harvests, for the LORD will delight in being good to you as he was to your ancestors. The LORD your God will delight in you if you obey his voice and keep the commands and laws written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul (Deuteronomy 30:9,10 NLT).

Clearly, we have the Scriptures teaching blessings for obedience and judgment for disobedience. The people were held responsible to obey the words of the Lord.

2. There Was An Apostles' Doctrine Or Apostle's Teaching (Acts 2:42)

We find the same sort of thing in the New Testament. There was such a thing as the apostles' doctrine or apostles' teaching. We read about this in the Book of Acts:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42 RSV).

While we are not told exactly what the apostles teaching consisted of, we do know that there was a body of truth that was being taught to believers by the apostles of Jesus.

The Christians were expected to believe the truths and obey the commands. Again, they were held responsible to obey God's Word.

3. The Faith Was One And For All Delivered (Jude 3)

Scripture speaks of the faith that was given once and for all to the believers. Jude wrote about this. He said:

Dear friends, I had intended to write to you about the salvation we share. But something has come up. It demands that I write to you and encourage you to continue your fight for the Christian faith that was entrusted to God's holy people once for all time (Jude 3 God's Word).

Again, the content of this faith that has been "once and for all delivered" is not precisely given. Yet, it is clear that there were certain truths that made up "the faith." Jude was one of the last New Testament books to have been written. Consequently, he likely knew of three of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and perhaps even John.

He would have also known of the letters of Paul, as well as First and Second Peter. Indeed, Jude cites the exact words from the Book of Second Peter several times in his letter. Therefore, by the time Jude wrote, all the believers were aware of divinely-given truths which would make up the New Testament.

We also note that “the faith” which Jude instructs his readers to “fight hard for” had already been entrusted to them. This speaks of a known body of truth to which he could refer without having to specify exactly what he was talking about. This gives us further reason to believe that certain teachings had already been considered authoritative and binding for all believers.

4. There Were Elementary Truths Of The Faith (Hebrews 5:12)

Scripture also speaks of elementary, or basic, truths of the Christian faith. We read about this in the Book of Hebrews:

You have been Christians a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures. You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food (Hebrews 5:12 NLT).

This suggests that there are a set of foundational beliefs that all new Christians were to be taught.

5. There Were Revealed Truths Of The Christian Faith (1 Timothy 3:9)

Paul wrote to Timothy about elders being committed to the revealed truths of the faith. He said:

They must be committed to the revealed truths of the Christian faith and must live with a clear conscience (1 Timothy 3:9 NLT).

The revealed truths are specific things that all believers are to embrace.

6. Paul Made The Contents Of The Gospel Clear (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

There was a specific content to the gospel, or good news, about Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church and explained what it is. He said:

Brothers and sisters, I’m making known to you the Good News which I already told you, which you received, and on which your faith is based. In addition, you are saved by this Good News if you hold on to the doctrine I taught you, unless you believed it without thinking it over. I passed on to you the most important points of doctrine that I had received: Christ died to take away our sins as the Scriptures predicted. He was placed in a tomb. He was brought back to life on the third day as the Scriptures predicted (1 Corinthians 15:1-4 God’s Word).

There was clearly a set of truths that represented the good news of Jesus Christ. These include Christ died for the sins of the world, that He was buried, and that He was raised from the dead on the third day.

7. There Were Specific Teachings Of The Faith (1 Timothy 4:6)

There were “words of the faith” which were also called “sound teaching.” Paul wrote to Timothy:

If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed (1 Timothy 4:6 RSV).

The translation, God’s Word, puts it this way:

You are a good servant of Christ Jesus when you point these things out to our brothers and sisters. Then you will be nourished by the words of the Christian faith and the excellent teachings which you have followed closely (1 Timothy 4:6 God’s Word).

The phrase, “words of the faith” or “teaching of the faith” suggest some sort of standard beliefs that all Christians were to hold.

8. There Are Spiritual Realities That Exist (1 Corinthians 2:13)

Paul wrote about spiritual realities that existed. He said the following to the Corinthians:

We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people (1 Corinthians 2:13 HCSB).

Again, these spiritual realities were specific truths that the Holy Spirit taught believers.

Conclusion: The Bible Sets The Boundaries Of The Christian Faith: People Are Held Responsible To Obey Them

It is clear that the Bible does set the boundaries for the Christian faith. There are certain truths that are absolutely essential or central to Christianity. These things were revealed to cause people to believe in Jesus. John wrote:

He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows he is telling the truth (John 19:35 CSB).

God has given to humanity a number of particular truths about who He is, who we are, and what He requires of us. Therefore, believing the specific truths taught in Scripture is the same as believing God. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance that we study them and believe them.

The last commandment from Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew, is to go into the entire world and teach all nations:

Then Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20 CSB).

Obviously, in order to teach them, there must be some content to teach. This content is found in the written Scripture.

Therefore, there is a place of final authority in which we can go to discover what we should believe, and why we should believe it.

Summary To Question 7

**Does The Bible Attempt To Teach Specific
Truths About God That People Have To Obey?**

While some attempt to deny the Bible reveals specific truths about God, this is not the case.

From the first page of the Bible until the last, Scripture gives a number of precise truths about God and humanity.

Moreover, humans are expected to act upon these revealed truths. Indeed, the Lord holds us responsible to obey these truths.

Furthermore, God promised to bless those who obey His truth and to judge those who disobey.

Consequently, the truths of Scripture must be diligently studied for it sets the boundaries of what Christians are to believe.

Question 8

Why Is It Necessary To Study The Beliefs Of Christianity?

It is extremely important for everyone to make a serious study of Christian doctrine or Christian teaching. This is necessary for a number of reasons. They include the following.

1. We All Have Intellectual Needs That Must Be Met

Since human beings are rational as well as emotional creatures, there is a need for a rational understanding of the things of God. To meet these intellectual needs, one must understand Christian doctrine. Jesus recognized this truth.

We read the following account in Matthew's gospel of Jesus answering a question from an expert in the Jewish law. It says:

After Jesus had made the Sadducees look foolish, the Pharisees heard about it and got together. One of them was an expert in the Jewish Law. So he tried to test Jesus by asking, "Teacher, what is the most important commandment in the Law?" Jesus answered: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the first and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like this one. And it is, "Love others as much as you love yourself." All the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets are based on these two commandments (Matthew 22:35-40 CEV).

Jesus summed up the entire Old Testament teaching in this manner: we are to love God with all of our being; this includes our minds. Consequently, we are not to stop thinking, or cease using our reasoning process when we investigate the claims of Jesus Christ.

2. The Bible Alone Give Answers To Our Ultimate Questions

All of us believe in something. A person will live their life according to what they believe. Life is basically a journey from time to eternity. Consequently, it makes a big difference whether one believes life is an aimless and meaningless experience, or that they believe there is a personal God who has a destiny for each of us beyond this life.

As long as humans think about the questions about God's existence, and the meaning of life, there will be a need to have the biblical answers to these questions.

Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching, will always be necessary as long as people want to know who they are, what life is all about, and what will happen to them when they die. A study of God's Word will clearly answer these questions with finality; there is no other place to find authoritative answers.

3. We Need A Correct Definition Of The Christian Faith

A study of Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching, is necessary in order to provide a correct definition of the Christian faith. Since God has revealed truths to the human race that we would not otherwise know, it is important that these truths are properly defined and understood. This can only come from a serious study of God's Word.

John wrote the following to believers about the need to test the spirits:

My dear friends, do not trust every spirit, but tests the spirits, to see whether they are from God; for there are many false prophets about in the world (1 John 4:1 REB).

The Message puts it this way:

My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world (1 John 4:1 MsgB).

All claims need to be weighed and examined.

4. Faith And The Faith

There is something else. There is a difference between "faith" and "the faith." Faith is trust. It is our response to God. Faith is the instrument by which God's divine revelation and blessings are grasped. The Bible says without faith it is impossible to please God. In the Book of Hebrews, it says the following:

And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6 RSV).

"The" faith refers to the sum total of Christian teaching, the body of truth that has been once-and-for-all revealed to the world and entrusted to the believers. Jude wrote:

Dear friends, although I have been eager to write to you about our common salvation, I now feel compelled instead to write to encourage you to contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3 NET).

To the Galatians Paul wrote about his own testimony. He reminded them how he previously persecuted those who believed in Jesus; those who held on to "the faith:"

Then I left for the regions of Syria and Cilicia. I was still unknown by sight to the Christian congregations in Judea; they had simply heard it said, 'Our former persecutor is preaching the good news of the faith

which once he tried to destroy,’ and they praised God for what had happened to me (Galatians 1:20-24 REB).

Paul wrote about “one faith” to the church at Ephesus. He said:

[There is] one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:5 KJV).

It is important to understand “the faith” before one can exercise personal faith toward God. Getting our doctrine right helps getting everything else right. Living right begins with thinking right.

5. Believers Are Commanded To Defend The Christian Faith

Christian beliefs have been challenged. It is important to study Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching, in order to defend the faith against attack. Thus, one must know exactly what faith they are defending. Peter wrote:

But set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess (1 Peter 3:15 NET).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it (1 Peter 3:15 NLT).

Consequently, we find believers are commanded to know both what they believe about God and why they believe it. We are to understand the faith, and then defend it from attack.

6. Believers Are To Promote The True Faith

Christianity is a missionary religion—it attempts to make converts. Before He ascended into heaven, Jesus commanded His disciples to do the following:

When Jesus came near, he spoke to them. He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So wherever you go, make disciples of all nations: Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to do everything I have commanded you. And remember that I am always with you until the end of time” (Matthew 28:18-20 God’s Word).

In order to properly promote the faith and make disciples, it is essential that we understand what the faith is all about.

7. Christian Leaders Must Be Able To Teach Biblical Truth

Those who lead others are to have the ability to teach God’s truth. One cannot teach others – either adults or children – until they understand the truth for themselves.

Paul wrote that an overseer must be able to teach God's Word. He said to Timothy:

The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher (1 Timothy 3:2 NET).

The translation, God's Word, puts the verse this way:

A bishop must have a good reputation. He must have only one wife, be sober, use good judgment, be respectable, be hospitable, and be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2 God's Word).

Leaders in the church must be able to teach others.

They Must Also Be Teachable

There is another nuance to this word. Leaders are to be teachable as well as apt to teach! This is crucial.

Teachers Are To Equip The Believers

To the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote about the necessity of teachers equipping other believers for the work of the ministry. He said:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11,12 ESV).

The purpose of sound teaching is to make the believers ready to do the work of the ministry. Paul wrote to Titus about the qualifications of a Christian leader:

He must have a strong and steadfast belief in the trustworthy message he was taught; then he will be able to encourage others with right teaching and show those who oppose it where they are wrong (Titus 1:9 NLT).

Again, we have the emphasis that Christian leaders must be able to teach.

The Revised English Bible puts it this way:

He [the Christian leader] must keep firm hold of true doctrine, so that he may be well able to appeal to his hearers with sound teaching and to refute those who raise objections (Titus 1:9 REB).

To be able to teach others in a proper way, one must first understand what they are teaching. God has provided the church with certain individuals who have the gift of teaching. We should take advantage of their gifts.

8. Christian Experience Must Be Based Upon Sound Doctrine

Some people have an inadequate view of the study of Christian doctrine. They believe the Christian faith consists of how we live; it is not seriously thinking about what we believe. It is personal experience, not belief that is important.

However, Christian experience must be built upon a solid foundation. Experience does not produce truth; truth produces the Christian experience.

Paul emphasized this as he warned Timothy about false teachers and false teaching. He wrote:

If someone spreads false teachings and does not agree with sound words (that is, those of our Lord Jesus Christ) and with the teaching that accords with godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing, but has an unhealthy interest in controversies and verbal disputes. This gives rise to envy, dissension, slanders, evil suspicions (1 Timothy 6:3,4 NET).

The translation, God's Word, puts it this way:

Whoever teaches false doctrine and doesn't agree with the accurate words of our Lord Jesus Christ and godly teachings is a conceited person. He shows that he doesn't understand anything. Rather, he has an unhealthy desire to argue and quarrel about words. This produces jealousy, rivalry, cursing, suspicion (1 Timothy 6:3,4 God's Word).

We again find the emphasis that our Christian lives must be based upon the solid foundation of God's Word.

Some would like to make a distinction between intellectual knowledge and spiritual knowledge. They contend the Bible is only interested in spiritual knowledge.

However, the Bible makes no such distinction between the intellectual and the spiritual. To the contrary, Scripture says that after His resurrection Jesus opened the minds of His disciples so that they would understand. Luke records the following:

Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures (Luke 23:45 KJV).

Jesus wanted His disciples to clearly understand God's written truth.

Thus, the Scripture does not present faith and knowledge as things that are opposed to each other. The believer grows in his or her faith in Jesus by gaining an understanding of Christian doctrine and then applying the truths in daily living.

This is another important reason for studying Christian beliefs. Of course, knowledge alone is not enough. One must certainly practice what they know to be true. However, correct doctrine is the basis for correct living.

The Example Of Paul

The Apostle Paul is the primary example of one who can have great Bible knowledge and spiritual passion at the same time. His credentials were impeccable; as he himself acknowledged. He wrote the following to the Philippians:

For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Philippians 3:3-10 ESV).

This man, the Apostle Paul, with great intellectual credentials had a heart for the things of Christ like no other person. It illustrates the fact that one can have both the heart and the mind. It does not have to be either/or.

9. Wrong Ideas Will Appear If Christian Doctrine Is Not Studied

For those who reject the study of Christian doctrine, unhealthy and unbiblical ideas will appear. The only corrective to this is a proper understanding of what Christianity stands for. Paul stressed this in his letter to the Ephesians. He wrote:

So we are no longer to be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who craftily carry out their deceitful schemes (Ephesians 4:14 NET).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth (Ephesians 4:14 NLT).

It is not possible to refute “false” doctrine unless we first have an understanding of “true” doctrine. The study of Christian theology, or Christian doctrine, is the best remedy against being deceived or blindly accepting what anyone teaches.

10. The Bible Is Not Anti-Doctrine

The Bible does not promote an anti-doctrine or anti-study attitude. It does not give the impression that serious study is unnecessary for the average believer or that discussion of biblical topics will hinder spiritual growth. To the contrary, spiritual growth comes from understanding and applying Christian truth.

A correct knowledge of what the Bible teaches on a particular subject will safeguard against error. Jesus chided the religious leaders of His day of their ignorance of the Scripture and the power of God. Matthew records the following:

But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29 RSV).

Paul warned the Galatians about the possibility of following after another gospel. He put it this way:

I can’t believe your fickleness-how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ by embracing a variant message? It is not a minor variant, you know; it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God. Those who are provoking this agitation among you are turning the Message of Christ on its head. Let me be blunt: If one of us-even if an angel from heaven! - were to preach something other than what we preached originally, let him be cursed. I said it once; I’ll say it again; If anyone, regardless of reputation or credentials preaches something other than what you received originally; let him be cursed (Galatians 1:6-9 MsgB).

The Apostle Paul also warned Timothy about the time when people would not accept true, or sound, doctrine. He wrote:

I solemnly call on you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge those who are living and those who are dead. I do this because Christ Jesus will come to rule [the world]. Be ready to spread the word whether or not the time is right. Point out errors, warn people, and encourage them. Be very patient when you teach. A time will come when people will not listen to accurate teachings. Instead, they will follow their own desires and surround themselves with teachers who tell them what they want to hear. People will refuse to listen to the truth and turn to myths (2 Timothy 4:1-4 God’s Word).

Doctrinal error can lead to all types of problems. A correct view of what the Bible teaches exposes false views about God. The correct view only comes through serious study of Scripture.

11. New Teachings Will Always Arise

We must appreciate the fact that there will always be new teachings that arise. Knowing what the Bible says about a particular topic will allow the student to respond effectively to these new teachings. If the new teaching does not conform to that which has been previously revealed, then it should be rejected. However, one must first know what the Scripture says, and this only comes through studying the Bible.

12. Heresy And Orthodoxy Defined

At this point, we should introduce the terms “heresy” and “orthodoxy.” The word heresy is used by believers to indicate false doctrine. This is teaching that is contrary to what God has revealed in His Word. True doctrine is often called orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy refers to the beliefs of the historic Christian faith as has been affirmed by the great creeds, or belief statements. Study of the Scripture helps the believer know the difference between heretical teachings and orthodox teachings.

13. Studying The Scripture Aids In The Development Of Christian Character

Studying biblical teachings can help develop Christian character. When a person strongly believes something, he or she will attempt to live what they believe. As people develop convictions as to what the Bible teaches on a subject, their character will begin to conform to those beliefs. While it is more important to live the Christian life than to merely know what the Bible teaches, there would be no basis for Christian experience without the teaching of the Bible.

The Apostle Paul wanted to see an increase of the knowledge of the truth in believers. This increase would help them live godly lives. He wrote to Titus:

From Paul, a slave of God and apostle of Jesus Christ, to further the faith of God’s chosen ones and the knowledge of the truth that is in keeping with godliness (Titus 1:1 NET).

Paul also wrote to Titus:

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1 ESV).

Healthy beliefs should result in healthy living. Paul prayed that the churches would increase in their knowledge.

I pray that your love will keep on growing and that you will fully know and understand how to make the right choices. Then you will still be pure and innocent when Christ returns. And until that day, Jesus Christ

will keep you busy doing good deeds that bring glory and praise to God (Philippians 1:9-11 CEV).

Paul wrote to the Colossians about the same truth:

For this reason we also, from the day we heard, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please him in all respects (Colossians 1:9,10 NET).

Paul spoke of doctrine bringing about the obedience of faith. He wrote the following to the church at Rome:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Romans 16:25-27 ESV).

Therefore, in the Scripture, Christian doctrine is linked to Christian character. It is necessary for believers to have sound doctrine in order to live godly lives.

14. The Study Of Scripture Is Commanded By God

Finally, there are passages in Scripture that directly and indirectly command the believer to know God's truth. Jesus said to the religious leaders of His day:

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me (John 5:39 RSV).

Jesus recognized that the religious leaders did search the Scripture. While He disagreed with them on many issues, He did not condemn them for searching the Scripture. To the contrary, Jesus emphasized that the Scriptures spoke of Him; He is the main theme of the Old Testament!

In a number of places, the apostle Paul wrote about the importance of teaching the Word of God. For example, he wrote the following to the Colossians:

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ (Colossians 1:27,28 ESV).

Paul encouraged Timothy to study the Scripture. He wrote:

Make every effort to present yourself before God as a proven worker who does not need to be ashamed, teaching the message of truth accurately (2 Timothy 2:15 NET).

The New King James Version translates it as follows:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 NKJV).

Studying Christian beliefs is not optional; it is a command for all believers.

Some Final Thoughts About The Need For Christian Doctrine

With the above truths in mind, we can make some final observations on the importance of Christian doctrine. They are as follows.

Observation 1: Christian Doctrine Is Not Uninteresting Or Irrelevant

The study of Christian doctrine should not be uninteresting and it is certainly not irrelevant. Nowhere does Scripture encourage ignorance. Some feel it is a matter of pride that they are ignorant of Christian doctrine. They believe the study of Christian beliefs consists of things that are remote from real life experiences.

However, Christian doctrine is important. Scripture emphasizes the necessity of the understanding of Christian belief. Paul wrote:

And that is why I am suffering here in prison. But I am not ashamed of it, for I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return (2 Timothy 1:12 NLT).

The Revised Standard Version translates the verse as follows:

And therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me (2 Timothy 1:12 RSV).

Paul knew what and why he believed; he was not ashamed of his beliefs. These beliefs guided his daily conduct.

Observation 2: Studying Christian Doctrine Is A Lifelong Task

The study of Christian doctrine is indeed a lifelong task. No one will ever come to the place where his or her study is complete. There are always new things to learn, new truths to discover. At the end of his life, the Apostle Paul could say the following:

All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised him to life. I want to suffer and die as he did, so that somehow I also may be raised to life (Philippians 3:10,11 CEV).

There will always be more to learn. We will never come to the place where we no longer need to study. Learning about Jesus Christ is an ongoing process.

Observation 3: All Believers Should Make A Serious Effort To Study Christian Doctrine

Therefore, with these above facts in mind, the student should make a serious effort to learn what the Christian faith stands for. There is much to be gained from such a study. In doing so the student should not merely rely on what others have said but do their own personal study of Scripture. The benefits are unending.

**Summary To Question 8
Why Is Necessary To Study The Beliefs Of Christianity?**

The study of Christian doctrine is necessary for a number of reasons. We can note the following.

To begin with, human beings have intellectual needs that must be met. A study of the Scripture can meet these intellectual needs. Jesus commanded us to love the Lord with our mind. We should obey His command and study that which God has revealed.

In addition, every human being asks the same questions about their origin, purpose, and destiny. Answers are needed for these ultimate questions. These answers are only found in Scripture. A correct definition of the Christian faith is likewise necessary. This can only come about from a study of Bible doctrine. The Christian faith needs to be defended.

Consequently, it is important to know what should be defended, and what should not. This can only come about from an understanding of what the Bible teaches.

Christianity is a missionary religion. It is crucial to understand the faith that is being promoted. Wrong ideas will appear if there is no sound biblical teaching. For Christian leaders, it is absolutely necessary that they be able to teach.

It is also important to understand there is no distinction between intellectual and spiritual knowledge. All knowledge about God is important. Christian behavior must be based upon sound teaching. We have to first know the rules before we can obey them.

Correct understanding of biblical truth will also safeguard the believer against doctrinal errors. Sound doctrine provides a basis to evaluate new teaching that will arise.

Bible Basics

In addition, sound doctrine is the basis for the development of Christian character. Finally, the study of Scripture is commanded by God – it is not an option for believers.

Studying Christian doctrine should not be something that is boring and clearly it is not irrelevant. Thus, studying the Scripture should be a lifelong task for all believers.

For these reasons a study of Christian doctrine is absolutely necessary. All believers should make a serious effort to know Christian doctrine.

Question 9

Why Is There The Need For A System Of Christian Doctrine?

There is definitely a need for putting together a system of Christian beliefs, or a system of Christian doctrine. Placing Bible doctrines into various categories is known as “systematic theology.” There are a number of important points that need to be made about why we have the need for a system of doctrine. They include the following.

Doctrines Are Not Classified In Scripture

The reason systematic theology is helpful is because the Bible presents God’s revelation in a variety of forms. The great teachings of the Bible are not presented or classified in any systematic way.

For example, Scripture records the voice of the prophets, as well as the experiences of the believer. We also find God’s providence in history revealed in the pages of Scripture. This includes interaction with both individuals and nations.

In addition, the truths of Scripture are scattered throughout its pages. While certain passages may give extensive treatment on a particular doctrine or teaching, there is no passage that fully treats any one doctrine.

Therefore, we must study all of the relevant passages on each particular topic. Consequently, the way the Bible has been written lends itself to the need for classifying Christian doctrine into a system.

Systematic theology classifies all these different forms of revelation into an intelligible system, and into logical categories. The aim is to have a clear classification of the major beliefs of the faith.

Systematic theology also takes into account the understanding of doctrine throughout the history of the church. In doing so, our goal should be to say no more, and no less, than what the Scriptures say.

There Is A Human Need To Put Truths Into A Logical System

Many people come to believe in Jesus Christ through some religious experience rather than through a study of the Bible. The person then reflects upon their decision and attempts to rationally understand it. As one begins to reason out what they have believed, a theological system is then formed. Thus, there is the need to put these truths into a system.

Some Important Things To Keep In Mind When Establishing A System Of Doctrine

While it is necessary to put together a system of Christian doctrine, there are a number of important things to keep in mind. They include the following.

1. There Are Special Terms That Used In Systematic Theology: They Need To Be Understood

Systematic theology often uses concepts and terms that are not explicitly found in Scripture. These include words like Trinity, theology, ordinance, substance, and inerrancy. Although these are not Scriptural terms, they do explain biblical concepts. It is important that we understand the precise definition of each of these terms, and how they are used to explain biblical truth.

2. We Should Attempt To Be Accurate In Our Terminology In Describing What We Believe

It is necessary that we are accurate in our terminology. We should attempt to properly employ terminology that has been used in Scripture, and in the history of the church. Those who study the Christian faith should be as accurate as possible in describing the essential doctrines. It is important to use careful definitions, and to use special terms with their exact meaning.

3. We Are Not Adding To Or Improving Upon What God Has Revealed

Systematic theology is not adding to, or improving upon, what God has revealed to humanity. It is merely taking what has already been revealed and placing these truths into understandable categories for further study and reflection. It is doing what the Bible commands us to do – study God’s truths. Paul wrote:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 CSB).

Consequently, our categorizing of doctrines that have been revealed in Scripture is, in actuality, obeying the Lord’s command to study His Word.

4. No Doctrine Is To Be Studied In Isolation To The Others

There is no such thing as one biblical doctrine which is in isolation to all of the others. In fact, all of the teachings of the Bible are interrelated. This is another reason a system of study is necessary. It helps us understand how the individual truths of Scripture are related to the totality of God’s truth.

Consequently, one should not become a specialist in one particular area of systematic theology for all parts are interrelated and important. On the contrary, we should be like the apostle Paul who desired to teach “the entire counsel of God.” He said the following to the elders in the city of Ephesus:

For I did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole plan of God (Acts 20:27 CSB).

Like Paul, we ought to study and proclaim everything that God has revealed.

5. There Is No Perfect System Of Christian Doctrine

While we need a system of Christian doctrine, we must be careful not to take our classifications to extremes. In attempting to have a completely perfect system of interpretation, many have forced the Bible to say things that it does not say. We must appreciate that every system of interpretation has unavoidable gaps where our knowledge is imperfect. We must accept that fact rather than attempt to force verses and passages into some already-made system.

6. We Should Not Speculate Concerning Things That Not Have Been Revealed

Furthermore, we should avoid speculation where the Bible is silent. If the Bible is silent on a matter, we should likewise be silent. It is better to reverently admit our ignorance rather than make some unprovable speculation.

In addition, we should not attempt to answer questions that the Bible does not answer. It is better not to try to do something that the Bible itself does not do.

7. Good People Differ On Their Understanding Of Christian Doctrine

It also must be appreciated that good, Bible-believing, Christians differ on their understanding of Christian doctrine. While believers agree which doctrines can be labeled “Christian,” they do not all agree on how these doctrines should be understood. There are well-known differences among believers on such topics as water baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the sovereignty of God, and the responsibility of humans.

Therefore, it is important that we should examine the best arguments for the various positions on these topics before we make a decision concerning what we believe. Since all of us are still learning, there is no written work on any biblical subject that should ever be considered as the final word. This certainly includes the work which we have done on biblical questions.

All of these points underscore the fact that a system of Christian doctrine is something that is absolutely necessary. Yet our system of Christian doctrine will never be as complete as we may want it to be. There are some things which God, in His wisdom has not revealed to us. We should accept this fact and be thankful for the information that He has revealed.

Summary To Question 9 Why Is There A Need For A System Of Christian Doctrine?

Systematic theology is necessary for a number of reasons. We can mention the following.

First, the teachings of Scripture have been given to humanity in a variety of forms. There is no real classification of these truths in systematic form.

Bible Basics

Since our minds look for a system to help classify things, systematic theology is a necessity for a better understanding of Scripture.

There are also special terms which are used to explain the truths taught in the Bible. While these terms are not found in the Bible they do portray spiritual truth. Consequently, there is also the need for accuracy in terminology when explaining the truths of God's Word.

In doing so, we are not attempting to make the message of the Bible more clear or understandable. We are merely taking its truths and putting them into an organized form. Since the truths of Scripture are all interrelated, they need to be brought together into some unified system.

When a doctrine does not fit into our system we should change our system –not the doctrine.

Finally, we should not speculate, or go beyond, what the Bible has revealed to us. Our system should reflect what God has revealed to humankind – nothing more and nothing less.

Question 10

What Are The Necessary Requirements For A Correct Understanding Of Christian Doctrine?

To gain the maximum out of a study of the Christian faith, a number of things are absolutely necessary. They include the following.

1. A Person Must Be A Believer In Jesus Christ

The first qualification that is necessary to gain a correct understanding of Scripture is that a person must have a relationship with God through the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus said that no one could enter the kingdom of heaven except by means of a spiritual rebirth. We read in John's gospel:

Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (John 3:3 NRSV).

It is only by means of the new birth, being “born again” or, more properly, “born from above,” that a person has the right spiritual equipment to correctly understand God’s truth.

While there are those people who do not believe in Jesus Christ that may intellectually understand the great doctrines of the faith, there is a certain spiritual element that they will always miss. Therefore, to get the maximum benefit out of a study of Christianity, a person must be in a right relationship with God.

2. A Person Must Completely Submit To The Authority Of Scripture

It is not enough that a person has been spiritually reborn, it is also essential that those who study God’s Word must submit to its authority. The Bible has the final word on every matter and we must willingly acknowledge its authority in our belief and in our practice.

3. The Totality Of Scripture Must Be Our Textbook

The Apostle Paul told the elders from the church at Ephesus that he taught them the entire counsel of God. In his farewell address to the leadership he said the following:

I didn’t avoid telling you the whole plan of God (Acts 20:27 God’s Word).

Likewise, for a correct understanding of Christian truth, we must consider everything that the Bible says about a particular subject. Therefore, we must collect all the relevant passages on a topic and then summarize what they teach. We want to know what the entire Bible teaches about the subject.

4. The Holy Spirit Must Be Our Teacher

Ultimately, it is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, who leads and guides us into all truth. A person must allow His teaching ministry to work in their lives. This may mean changing our view about a particular doctrine or practice that we have previously held.

It is imperative that the truths of God's Word be understood as God intended them to be understood. The only One who can accomplish that is the One who is the ultimate author of Scripture—God the Holy Spirit:

We don't speak about these things using teachings that are based on intellectual arguments like people do. Instead, we use the Spirit's teachings. We explain spiritual things to those who have the Spirit. A person who isn't spiritual doesn't accept the teachings of God's Spirit. He thinks they're nonsense. He can't understand them because a person must be spiritual to evaluate them. Spiritual people evaluate everything but are subject to no one's evaluation. "Who has known the mind of the Lord so that he can teach him?" However, we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:13-16 God's Word).

To correctly understand biblical truth, we must submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit; He is our Teacher.

5. We Must Personally Search The Scripture Not Merely Rely Upon The Teachings Of Others

God has given the church godly teachers to instruct believers in the faith. However, it is not enough that a person reads and studies the teachings of others. Each of us must personally search the Scriptures. In the Book of Acts, we read about the Jews in Berea. It says the following:

The people of Berea were more open-minded than the people of Thessalonica. They were very willing to receive God's message, and every day they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11 God's Word).

Like the Jews in Berea, it is important that we make a personal study of the Scriptures. No one should rely solely upon what others teach; no matter how godly the teacher.

6. We Must Make Our Study God-Centered, Not Human Centered

This is probably one of the most important points that we can make. It is absolutely essential that our study of theology be centered upon God; who He is, and how we can please Him.

Unfortunately, so much of the study of Scripture is based upon human-centered desires. The student asks, "What's in it for me?" This is the wrong question. Our desire should primarily be to know God and His Word.

When we are obedient to Him, He will take care of our needs. He has promised to do this. Paul wrote:

And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19 NLT).

Therefore, our study of God's Word should be from His perspective with His glory in mind. This is something which should always be foremost in our thinking.

Summary To Question 10
What Are The Necessary Requirements For
A Correct Understanding Of Christian Doctrine?

There are a number of things which are absolutely necessary for a person to get the maximum out of the study of Scripture.

First, a person must be a believer in Jesus Christ. Without that relationship, the results of studying the Bible will be minimal.

Next, the person must submit to the complete authority of God's Word as their only standard for faith and practice. This means that the totality of Scripture needs to be our textbook; not merely parts of it.

Then the Holy Spirit must be allowed to be the teacher. He is the teacher while we are His students.

There is also the personal responsibility of each believer to search the Scriptures for themselves.

Finally, we need to make certain that we are studying Scripture from a God-centered perspective and not from a human-centered one. We study His Word to know Him better and to discover how we can do the things that please Him.

These are some important requirements to keep in mind as we seek to have a correct understanding of Christian doctrine.

Question 11

In What Ways Should Christian Doctrine Be Studied?

It is important that Christian doctrine, or Christian teaching, be seriously studied. There are a number of ways that we should go about doing this. They include the following.

1. We Should Study Christian Doctrine With Intelligence

Christian doctrine should be studied intelligently. In answering the question concerning about the greatest commandment in the Old Testament, Jesus said the following:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37,38 God's Word).

Jesus said that we are to love the Lord with "our mind."

We should use the minds that God has given us to study and evaluate Christian truth. The Apostle Paul used reason and logic when presenting the truths of Jesus Christ to unbelievers. We read the following account in the Book of Acts:

Paul went to the Jews in the synagogue, as he customarily did, and on three Sabbath days he addressed them from the scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and to rise from the dead, saying, "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" (Acts 17:2,3 NET).

Christian faith is not blind faith. Rather it is an intelligent faith where the claims that are made are to be weighed and evaluated. Scripture does not expect people to exercise blind faith.

2. We Should Use All Resources Available

All resources which are available should be used to study God's Word. This includes the work of other teachers. The Bible says that God has raised up teachers in the church. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said the following:

And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:28 NASB).

We should take advantage of the teaching gifts that God has given to certain people. This includes the writings of past and present Bible teachers.

Our theology has, in part, been shaped by church history. In the past, there were a number of occasions where the greatest minds of the church got together and discussed the key issues of the faith.

This includes such matters as the exact nature of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and how a person is saved from their sins. The discussions and conclusions of these meetings should be studied, not ignored. While their conclusions were not infallible, they do represent godly people attempting to wrestle with these central issues.

Therefore, it is important to have some understanding of church history. We cannot live in isolation from the past. Indeed, many of the beliefs and biases that we presently hold come from those who lived in the past. It is important that we understand this.

3. We Should Study With Humility

There should be a humble attitude when approaching the truths of Scripture; there is no place for pride. Jesus spoke of the need for humility. He said:

For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:12 NIV).

Therefore, the way to succeed in the kingdom of God is by humbling ourselves.

Peter wrote about the need for humility. He said the following:

In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5 NET).

When we learn something new from Scripture we should not be boasting about our new-found knowledge. Such pride is condemned in Scripture. James wrote about the sin of bragging or boasting. He put it this way:

If you are wise and understand God's ways, live a life of steady goodness so that only good deeds will pour forth. And if you don't brag about the good you do, then you will be truly wise! But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie. For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and motivated by the Devil. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no partiality and is always sincere (James 3:13-17 NLT).

Glory should always go to God and to Him alone. He is the only One who deserves it. The psalmist emphasized this when he wrote:

Don't give glory to us, O LORD. Don't give glory to us. Instead, give glory to your name because of your mercy and faithfulness (Psalm 115:1 God's Word).

Pride has no place in the lives of Bible-believers. Humility is the attribute which should characterize our conduct, not pride.

4. We Should Have A Thankful Heart When Studying Scripture

Our study of God's Word should be with a thankful heart for what He has revealed to us. The psalmist said that we ought to give thanks to the Lord because of His goodness. He wrote:

Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting (Psalm 118:29 NASB).

God has indeed been good to us in giving us His holy Word. He has not only graciously revealed His Word to His people; God has miraculously preserved that Word for us today. This allows us to understand things about Him which we would not otherwise know.

God did not have to do this; yet He did. We now have the opportunity, and the resources, to learn these marvelous truths about Him. This should cause us to have a continual attitude of thankfulness toward Him.

5. Doctrine Should Be Studied With Prayer

Finally, study of God's Word should be done with prayer. We should pray that God would help us with an understanding of what the Word says. The psalmist asked the Lord to open his eyes to God's truth. He wrote:

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Psalm 119:18 NIV)

Jesus said that we are to ask the Lord for help. We read the following in the Sermon on the Mount:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened (Matthew 7:7,8 NASB).

If we ask God to help us understand His Word, He has promised to answer that prayer. Prayer helps us to be sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit. Learning about God on our knees can certainly be helpful. Therefore, it is important that we take the time to talk to Him.

One other reason we study Christian doctrine with prayer is to remind ourselves that we are not merely educating ourselves about some remote Person whom we do not know.

To the contrary, we are studying and learning about the living God who is our guide, our hope, and our Lord!

It is clear that Christian doctrine should be studied. It is also clear that it should be studied in a number of specific ways.

Summary To Question 11
In What Ways Should Christian Doctrine Be Studied?

Learning about Christian doctrine takes effort. It is a good experience for us to think through the faith. There are a number of ways that people should go about studying the teachings of Scripture.

First, it should be done in an intelligent manner. We should use our minds to weigh and evaluate the truths that have been revealed.

Second, we should take advantage of all sources available for understanding the truths of God's Word. This includes the works of teachers.

In addition, the Bible should be approached with all humility. God has promised to honor those who come to Him with a humble attitude.

Moreover, we should approach the study of Christian teaching with a thankful heart. We should be thankful that God has revealed these truths to us and that we are able to study them, know them, and then apply the truths to our lives.

Finally, a serious study of Scripture should be always done with prayer. We should ask the Lord to teach and guide us as we do our study of His Word. It also reminds us that we are learning about a Person.

These are the various ways in which we should approach the subject of the study of Scripture. It is important that we put them into practice.

Question 12

Why Don't All Christians Agree On Doctrinal Matters? (Why Are There So Many Different Denominations?)

If the same Holy Spirit controls each and every Christian, then why doesn't everyone agree on all matters of belief? Why are there so many differing opinions? Why do we find so many different Christian denominations if everything is so clear? Shouldn't we expect Christians to agree on what they believe?

The Problem Is Not With God

First, the problem of Christians disagreeing among themselves has nothing to do with anything lacking with God or His Word. God is a God of order. Thus, we expect to find be a consistent system of teachings that come from Him.

Furthermore, since God is true, all facts that He reveals will be consistent. Since there is only one author behind the Bible—God—any problems of understanding the Scripture are the problems of those interpreting—not of the Bible itself or its ultimate author.

Why Are There Differences Among Bible Believers?

Why then the differences? There are actually a number of reasons. They include the silence of written revelation, our own lack of knowledge, and the possibility that we have not checked out all the information available. We can make a number of observations.

1. God's Word Is Silent Or Not Conclusive, On The Topic

The silence of God's Word on a number of topics must be recognized. Scripture tells us nothing about certain subjects in which we would be interested. The Bible acknowledges this fact. Moses wrote:

The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29 KJV).

There are secret things which belong to the Lord and to Him alone.

Jesus told His disciples that they would understand certain things at a later date. We read:

You do not understand what I am doing now, but you will understand after these things (John 13:7 NET).

While this statement refers to things that would be revealed later, there are many things that we will not know this side of heaven. At times, the

Scriptures may address a topic, but not in a conclusive or thorough manner. This must be appreciated.

2. It May Be Our Lack Of Ability To Understand

A second problem is our lack of knowledge or lack of ability. The Scripture itself recognizes our lack of knowledge on spiritual subjects. The psalmist asked that his eyes would be open to receiving the truth of God. He wrote the following:

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Psalm 119:18 NIV).

On the day of His resurrection, when the risen Christ appeared to His disciples, we read the following:

Then opened he [Jesus] their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures (Luke 24:45 KJV).

The Bible recognizes that we know only in part. Paul wrote the following to the church in Corinth:

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part (1 Corinthians 13:9 NET).

The Message translates it this way:

We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete (1 Corinthians 13:9 MsgB).

Even the most learned of us will only have partial knowledge. Human beings will never be able to fully comprehend God.

Consequently, we must come to the study of the Word of God with a certain amount of humility. We must appreciate the fact that we are limited in our knowledge.

3. We May Not Have Studied Everything On A Particular Subject

We should be careful to make our doctrinal judgments based upon the totality of Scripture. Often judgments are made by appealing to two or three randomly selected passages, or to some weak translation of a particular passage, rather than to all of Scripture. This type of study will not lead us to firm conclusions.

This is why the Scriptures command us to test “all things.” Paul wrote:

Instead, test everything. Hold on to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21 God’s Word).

The Bible also commends those who check out the truth. In fact, special mention is made of the people in Berea who were constantly searching the Scripture. The Bible says:

And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth (Acts 17:11 NLT).

Although we have done our best to be objective and thorough in putting together these various books, we certainly realize our own limitations.

Therefore, everything that we, or anyone else, may teach should be checked out and verified from the Scripture. It is the only infallible source!

4. All Bible-believing Christians Agree On More Things Than They Disagree

Something else needs to be emphasized. Christians do disagree with one another on certain doctrinal points, and the many denominations illustrate this fact.

However, it must be stressed that Christians agree on much more than they disagree. Bible-believers are united in accepting the main truths of the Christian faith. This includes the following basic truths.

The Bible is God's written revelation of Himself to the human race. In the Bible we find that Jesus Christ is the living God who became a human being. He lived a sinless life while here on the earth, died on the cross of Calvary for the sins of the world, and then rose from the dead on the third day.

He soon thereafter ascended into heaven and will come back some day to judge the living and the dead. Those who believe in Him will have everlasting life in God's presence and those who do not believe will be separated from God for all eternity.

These are a few of the main points which all Bible-believing Christians embrace. In comparison to what unites us, the differences which Christians have, are relatively minor.

Thus, we can conclude that believers in Christ are more united in their beliefs than they are divided.

Summary To Question 12: Why Don't All Christians Agree On Doctrinal Matters? (Why Are There So Many Denominations?)

There are a number of matters in which Bible-believing Christians disagree with each other; the existence of the various Christian denominations illustrates this fact.

However, any problems are not due to God or His Word. He and His Word are perfect. It is our system of interpretation that is fallible.

The reason why believers differ among themselves can be attributed to a number of things. For one thing, God has not revealed everything that we would like to know about Him – only the things which we need to know. Also, He may have only partially revealed truth about a particular subject; His revelation on the subject was purposefully incomplete.

In addition, Scripture recognizes the lack of knowledge that all of us have on spiritual subjects. Even the wisest of us has only partial knowledge about any issue. Because we only know partially, we should test all things that claim to be spiritually true.

There is the possibility that we have not considered everything that the Bible says about a particular subject. Thus, our view may be based upon insufficient information. We may need to study the subject further. It is because of these reasons that well-meaning Bible-believers disagree with one another.

Having said that, it is crucial that we emphasize that Bible-believing Christians are in agreement among themselves on the main beliefs of the faith. There is no disagreement among Christians concerning the sinlessness of Jesus Christ, the fact of His death on the cross for the sins of the world, that He rose from the dead, or that He is the one way to reach the one God.

Consequently, there is much more that unites us than divides us.

Question 13

What Do We Do When Certain Doctrines Seemingly Contradict Each Other? (Paradoxes And Concurrent Truths)

As we study the Bible, we will find that there are some doctrines that seem to conflict with one another. How are we to understand these doctrines that seem to be contradictory? Should we change our view of the inerrancy of the Bible?

A number of points need to be made. They include the following.

1. We Need To Understand The Law Of Non-Contradiction

To begin with, it is important that we understand something about the law of non-contradiction. It is the basis of all logical thinking and reasoning. It states that no statement can be true and false at the same time and in the same sense.

For example, God cannot be both impersonal and personal at the same time. Jesus could not have been born in both Bethlehem and Nazareth. Statements that claim such things are clear contradictions and thus violate the law of non-contradiction. This means that at least one of the two things asserted is wrong; possibly both statements are wrong.

The Bible, however, makes no such contradictory statements. It teaches that God is personal, never impersonal, and that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth.

2. A Paradox Is Not Necessarily A Contradiction

The technical term for something that is a seeming contradiction, but actually is not, is “paradox.” There are also a few Christian writers who use the word “antinomy” to describe statements that appear contradictory but actually are not.

3. Paradoxes In Scripture Are Concurrent Truths

A paradox is not the same as a contradiction. It is two truths that are seemingly contradictory but in reality are not. We may not be able to resolve the statements, but the statements are true, nevertheless. In theology, this has also been called “concurrence.” Concurrence means “running together.” Two statements concur, or work together, without being contradictory.

Examples Of Paradoxes (Concurrent Truths) In Scripture

We find that Scripture contains a number of truths that are paradoxes. They include the following.

Divine Sovereignty And Human Responsibility: God's Controls Everything But We Still Have Choice

An example of a paradox is the Scriptural teaching of the sovereignty, or absolute control, of God and the personal responsibility, and realistic choice, that all human beings enjoy. How can God be controlling all of history while, at the same time, humans have legitimate choice?

Each of these truths is clearly taught in Scripture but each seems to contradict the other. An example of this can be found in a statement of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John:

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away (John 6:37 NRSV).

The Contemporary English Version puts it this way:

Everything and everyone that the Father has given me will come to me, and I won't turn any of them away (John 6:37 CEV).

This passage teaches both the sovereign choice of God as well as the human responsibility to believe. Jesus said that everything and everyone that the Father gives Him will come to Him; this is divine sovereignty. On the other hand, He also says, whoever does come to Him will not be turned away; that's human responsibility.

Only God knows how these seemingly conflicting principles can be fully harmonized. Consequently, we must accept both sides as correct. God chose us and, in some sense, we also chose Him.

The best thing for us to do is to realize these truths are compatible but that we do not totally understand how they can be true at the same time.

The Doctrine Of The Trinity: God Is Both Three And One

Another example of a paradox would be the doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible says that only one God exists. Yet while there is only one God, this one God consists of three distinct Persons, or centers of consciousness; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a paradox. God is both three and one at the same time.

Observations About Biblical Paradoxes

This being the case, we should make a couple of important observations.

1. God Cannot Contradict Himself

When we meet a statement in Scripture that is seemingly contradictory we must recognize the problem is with us, and not with the Scripture. The God of the Bible cannot contradict Himself. Paul wrote to Titus the following truth:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began (Titus 1:1,2 ESV).

We read this same truth in the Book of Hebrews. The writer put it this way:

So God has given us both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can take new courage, for we can hold on to his promise with confidence (Hebrews 6:18 NLT).

Therefore, we should always approach the Scripture from the starting point that it always tells the truth because the God of truth does not lie.

2. The Human Mind Is Limited In What It Can Understand

Paradoxes, in Scripture, are really concurrences; two statements that seemingly contradict but are true in ways that we cannot completely understand.

Therefore, any paradox that we encounter when we study the Scripture will not be with a problem with God, or with His Word—it will be with us. We have these Bible difficulties because of the limitation of the human mind. Because of the limitations of our minds, we find it impossible to completely reconcile these seemingly opposing teachings on the same subject.

Consequently, when we come across one of these paradoxes we must humbly admit our ignorance and not attempt to make some type of forced reconciliation. Instead, we must reverently accept the truths that are taught and go on.

We Need To Realize That These Paradoxes Are Mysteries That Cannot Logically Be Understood

It is important that we appreciate the fact that not everything we come across in Scripture will be understood. There are paradoxes that are beyond our understanding. They are genuine mysteries which cannot be solved this side of heaven.

While the truths are concurrent, or somehow work together, we cannot totally comprehend how this may be so. We should humbly accept this fact.

Summary To Question 13: What Do We Do When Certain Doctrines Seemingly Contradict Each Other? Paradoxes And Concurrent Truths)

The study of God's Word will bring us to doctrines, or teachings, that seemingly contradict each other.

However, Scripture comes from the God of truth who cannot contradict Himself. These statements, known as paradoxes, are true even though we

cannot totally reconcile them. Paradoxes occur because of the limitations of the human mind.

Examples of biblical paradoxes are the teaching on the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humans, as well as the doctrine of the Trinity. These paradoxes are mysteries that will not be able to be solved in this life.

Thus, we must accept the fact that the doctrines are true although we will never be able to completely understand how this can be so.

Question 14

What Does The Term “Mystery” Mean In Reference To Bible Doctrine?

One of the terms that Bible-believers have used in describing some Bible doctrines is the word “mystery.” It is important to have a correct understand of what mystery means since it is used in three difference senses by Christians. They are as follows.

1. The Biblical Use Of Mystery: Something Revealed That Was Previously Hidden

The Bible uses the term “mystery” to refer to a sacred secret. It is something that had been hidden in the past but was eventually revealed. Paul wrote about the mystery of the Gentiles, or non-Jews, becoming part of the church. He said:

God wanted his people throughout the world to know the glorious riches of this mystery--which is Christ living in you, giving you the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27 God’s Word).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

For it has pleased God to tell his people that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. For this is the secret: Christ lives in you, and this is your assurance that you will share in his glory (Colossians 1:27 NLT).

The secret that was hidden during the Old Testament period is revealed in the New Testament. This is the biblical use of the term “mystery.” Mystery is used in this sense a number of times in Scripture.

2. A Mystery Can Be Something About God That Humans Cannot Completely Comprehend

While the Bible uses the term mystery to refer to something that had been previously hidden but later revealed, historically, the church has used the term in two other senses. One of these uses refers to truths about God that humans cannot completely understand or comprehend.

Probably the best example of this type of mystery would be the love of God. Believers can comprehend God’s love for us; but only to a certain degree. The depth of His love is an unfathomable mystery.

While we know some things about the love of God, we certainly do not appreciate everything about it. It is truly a mystery.

3. Mystery May Refer To Something About God That Cannot Logically Be Understood

There is another sense in which the word mystery has used by the church. It is in reference to truths that the Bible reveals about God but humans cannot logically comprehend.

An example of this type of mystery would be the Trinity; God is both three and one at the same time. While the Bible teaches the doctrine of the Trinity, it is beyond our understanding. This type of mystery would come under the category of a paradox; two truths that are seemingly contradictory but in reality are not.

This type of mystery is something that we cannot logically understand. Thus, we accept it by faith because of the nature of God. God is a God of truth; He cannot lie. Therefore, we humbly believe certain truths that we cannot completely understand because of who God is.

Thus, when we encounter the word “mystery” used in a Christian context, it can mean one of three things.

**Summary To Question 14:
What Does The Term Mystery Mean
In Reference To Bible Doctrine?**

The term “mystery” is used in three different ways by Christians in reference to Bible doctrine. They are as follows.

The biblical use of the word mystery refers to some truth that had been hidden in the past but was eventually revealed by God. In this sense it is a “sacred secret.”

The church has used the term mystery in two other ways. It has been used to refer to truths about God that humans cannot completely comprehend; such as God’s love.

The term is also used to refer to truths that the Bible reveals but that cannot be logically or reasonably understood. This type of mystery is a paradox. God is both one and three at the same time. These truths are paradoxical but not contradictory. How that can be true is indeed a mystery.

In sum, these are the various ways the term mystery refers to Bible doctrine.

Question 15

What Is A Major Doctrine? What Is A Minor Doctrine?

Often Christians talk about the major doctrines and the minor doctrines of the faith. What do these terms mean? How can one decide between what is a major belief of the faith and one that is minor?

What Is The Basis For Deciding What Is Major And What Is Minor?

There are usually a couple of reasons given as to why some people divide the Scripture between major doctrines and minor doctrines. They are as follows.

There Are Essential Doctrines And Non-Essentials Doctrines

Usually when people speak about the major and minor doctrines of Scripture they are referring to those beliefs that are the most important (major) and those which have less importance (minor). Some believers categorize major doctrines as the essentials of the faith, while minor doctrines would be considered non-essentials.

For example, the Deity of Jesus Christ - the teaching that Jesus Christ is actually God - would constitute a major doctrine. Also in this category would be the doctrine of the authority of the Bible.

An example of a minor doctrine would be the way in which a person is baptized in water after they believe in Jesus Christ. The Person of Christ and the authority of Scripture are of utmost importance while the particular way in which a person receives water baptism is not that crucial.

The Bible Emphasizes The Major Doctrines

As one studies the Bible it becomes apparent that some topics receive more emphasis than others. The relative importance of each teaching of Scripture can be discovered by the amount of emphasis the Bible gives it. This is another way in which people separate major and minor doctrines.

Important Observations Concerning Major And Minor Doctrines

There are a few observations that should be made when we speak of major doctrines and minor doctrines. They include the following.

1. The Distinction Is Not Scriptural Between Major And Minor Doctrines

First, the Bible makes no distinction between major doctrines and minor doctrines. Any division that is made is not found in Scripture. While Scripture may emphasize some doctrines more than others, it nowhere places them into categories of major and minor, or essential and non-essential.

2. There Are Differences Of Opinion As To What Fits Into Each Category

Second, it is not possible to fit all biblical doctrines into two neat categories. There are some doctrines that certain people would place in the major doctrine category, while others would put it in the minor doctrine category. An example would be the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Some would consider this as an essential belief, while others would consider it to be relatively minor when compared to other teachings.

Admittedly there are some doctrines that are essential to the Christian faith while others are not as crucial. However, there are also a number of doctrines that can be placed in either category and thus should not be labeled either major or minor.

3. We Should Study Everything That God Has Revealed

The Scripture makes it clear that we should study the entire counsel of God. The Apostle Paul said the following to the believers in Ephesus:

For I did not hold back from announcing to you the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:27 NET).

The Revised English Bible says:

I have disclosed to you the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:27 REB).

Everything that God has revealed in His Word is important and should be faithfully studied and taught.

Jesus told His disciples to teach all nations:

Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20 NLT).

Everything that God has revealed has been revealed for a definite purpose. Therefore, we ought to study everything in Scripture.

4. We Are To Pass On All Of The Teachings Of Christ To Others

There is more. Believers are to pass on all of the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts speaks of the things that Jesus began to do and to teach. It says:

I wrote the former account, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after he had

given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen (Acts 1:1,2 NET).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

Dear Theophilus: In my first book I told you about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day he ascended to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1,2 NLT).

Jesus' ministry was not finished when He ascended to heaven.

Therefore, the teachings of Christ are not limited to the four gospels. They would include the entire New Testament.

Conclusion: The Entire Bible Should Be Examined

Therefore, the entire Bible should be studied. In his letter, Peter spoke about the teachings of the prophets (Old Testament) as well as the teachings of Jesus (the four gospels) and those of the apostles (the Book of Acts and the New Testament letters). He stated it this way:

This is now the second letter that I have written to you, beloved, and in both of them I have aroused your sincere mind by way of reminder; that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles (2 Peter 3:1,2 RSV).

John records that Jesus Christ gave the teachings in the Book of Revelation personally to him. The Book of Revelation begins by saying:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must happen very soon. He made it clear by sending his angel to his servant John, who then testified to everything that he saw concerning the word of God and the testimony about Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy aloud, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is near (Revelation 1:1-3 NET).

Consequently, everything recorded in Scripture should be studied and taught. The degree of importance of each doctrine will be discovered by the emphasis that the Bible gives it.

Summary To Question 15: What Is A Major Doctrine? What Is A Minor Doctrine?

People often make the distinction between the major and minor doctrines of Scripture. Yet, the Bible does not do this. It does not make any such distinction.

In addition, there is no consensus of opinion about what constitutes a major doctrine and what constitutes a minor doctrine. There are a number

of beliefs that some Christians would hold crucial to the faith while others would not consider these beliefs to be that vital.

While there are some doctrines that are more important than others, the Bible instructs us to teach all that Jesus taught and commanded. This would include the entire New Testament.

Peter emphasized the teachings of the prophets (Old Testament), Jesus (the four gospels), and the apostles (the remainder of the New Testament). These divisions make up the entire Bible. All of Scripture should be diligently studied.

It is not wrong to emphasize certain essential beliefs but one must be very careful not to neglect other teachings.

The key is to place the same amount of emphasis on a particular teaching that the Scripture itself places.

Question 16

What Are Christian Creeds And Confessional Statements?

From the time of Christ, until the present, Christians have formulated their beliefs in a number of ways. These include summary statements of the belief of the church as a whole, or creeds.

In addition, there are also confessional statements, which are more detailed views of a particular group of Christians.

Creeds Are Belief Statements

One of the terms often used in referring to what Christians believe is “creed.” What exactly are we referring to when we speak of a “Christian creed?”

There have been times in the history of the church where leaders have assembled to state the Christian position on particular matters. This was done in light of false doctrine that arose. The statement the leaders agreed upon is called a “creed.” The word creed comes from the Latin credo meaning, “I believe.”

Some Important Observations About Creeds

There are a couple of important observations that we can make about Christian creeds. They are as follows.

1. Creeds Are Found In The New Testament

The earliest forms of the creeds are found in the New Testament. When we read the New Testament, we find a number of statements that would represent early Christian creeds, or belief statements.

First Timothy 3:16 would be an example of this. Paul wrote the following words:

And we all agree, our religion contains amazing revelation: He was revealed in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed on in the world, taken up in glory (1 Timothy 3:16 NET).

Another example is Philippians 2:5-11. It seems to be an early creedal statement about Jesus Christ. It reads as follows:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name

that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11 NRSV).

Each of these statements was, most likely, recited by early Christians.

2. Creeds Were Written In Response To Heresies

Creeds usually came about as a response to some heretical belief that had gained a certain amount of acceptance. A heresy can be defined, as the conscious willful rejection of any doctrine or belief that is taught in Scripture. The written creedal statements answered these heresies.

Confessional Statements

Confessional statements are different than creeds in two ways. They are as follows.

A. Confessional Statements Represent The Beliefs Of A Segment Of The Church

Confessional statements represent the beliefs of a particular group or denomination; not the entire church. Therefore, the contents of a confessional statement would not necessarily be agreed upon by all Christians.

While creeds are summary statements that testify to the beliefs of all Christians, confessional statements are narrower in scope. They could never be viewed as having the final word on any matter.

B. Confessional Statements Are More Detailed Belief Statements

In addition, creeds are short summary statements while confessional statements are longer documents. While they both testify to the beliefs of Christians they are not exactly the same thing. Consequently, we must understand the differences between creeds and confessional statements.

Summary To Question 16: What Are Christian Creeds And Confessional Statements?

Christians have formulated their beliefs through both creeds and confessional statements. The creeds are statements of belief that have been drawn up by Christians. They would state in summary form what Christians believe. We have examples of creedal statements in the New Testament. After New Testament times, creeds were usually written as a response to some false doctrine that was circulating at the time. Confessional statements are larger in content than the summary statements of the creeds but they are more limited in whom they represent. Not all Christians would agree on all the details of confessional statements.

Question 17

What Are Some Of The Well-Known Creeds And Confessional Statements Of The Christian Faith?

There have been a number of important creeds, as well as confessional statements that were composed after the New Testament was written. It is valuable for people to understand something of their content as well as the circumstances in which they were composed.

The Well-Known Christian Creeds

Four of the significant creeds are the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Chalcedonian Creed. They can be described as follows.

1. The Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed seems to be an elaboration of the confession of faith that believers would make at their baptism. It did not originate with the Apostles but came later in the history of the church (around A.D. 400).

The Apostles' Creed, however, is similar to other statements of belief that were in use in the second century. It was called the Apostles' Creed because some of the early Christians believed that it summarized the basic teachings of the Apostles.

The Westminster Confession of Faith joins the Apostles' Creed with the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments and adds this explanatory note:

It is here annexed, not as though it were composed by the apostles, or ought to be esteemed canonical Scripture, as the Ten Commandments and the Lord's prayer, but because it is a brief sum of the Christian faith, agreeable to the word of God, and anciently received in the churches of Christ.

While this creed has been received by major Protestant groups, such as Lutherans and Anglicans, it is not without its problems.

Problems With The Apostles' Creed

While the Apostles' Creed is probably the most well-known of all the creeds of the church, it has serious problems. Therefore, it is important that we understand some of its shortcomings. They can be listed as follows.

The Creed Is Too Vague

For one thing, the Apostles' Creed is too vague to have any real meaning. For example, while the creed says, "I believe in Jesus Christ," it does not specifically tell us what we are to believe about Him. Nothing is said of His Deity; the fact that He is the eternal God who became human.

Indeed, because of this shortcoming, this creed has been recited by the Arians; those who deny the Deity of Christ. Since they are able to recite this creed, it gives the wrong impression that they believe in the same Jesus which the New Testament reveals. This certainly is not the case.

There is something else. Because the Apostle's Creed is so general, Roman Catholics, as well as Protestants, find this creed justifying their own belief systems. Each can find its own particular beliefs outlined in the creed. This is one of the unfortunate results of a creed which is so general in its makeup; it ends up saying nothing.

The vagueness of other expressions in the creed also causes further problems. For example, the creed says, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church." Roman Catholics see this as a confirmation that true believers are to pledge their allegiance to the Roman Church. They see the creed referring to a visible group of believers who are united under one head, the Bishop of Rome, or the Pope.

Thus, reciting the creed has the believer acknowledging that he or she is under the authority of the Roman Church.

Protestants, on the other hand, can recite the phrase without acknowledging their belief in the Roman Church or the papacy. Protestants do believe that Jesus has established His church upon the earth. It is to be holy, and it is to be catholic, or universal, but it is not to be identified with the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, Protestants can rightly claim to be catholic or universal Christians without being Roman Catholic. This is an important distinction.

There is another phrase in the creed which needs to be explained further. The words, "Christ descended into hell," needs to be properly understood. To most people, hell is the place of torment; the place of final judgment where the wicked will be sent.

To say that Christ descended into hell gives the impression that between the time of His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, He was tormented in hell. Yet, the Bible does not teach this. Jesus was in the grave, or the realm of the dead for three days, but He was not in "hell" as the word is usually understood. In addition, another expression in the creed, "the communion of saints," has also been a cause for controversy. It is not a biblical expression and was not placed into the creed until about A.D. 400.

These problems with the creed make it impossible to establish any certainty about what one believes by merely reciting the creed. In the end, this creed is basically meaningless.

Roman Catholicism Claims The Creed Originated With The Apostles

There is something else that we should note about the Apostles' Creed. One of the claims of the Roman Church is that the Apostles' Creed

originated with Jesus' twelve apostles. They believe that it was written by Jesus' apostles under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. This would mean that the apostles of Christ left us with an additional divinely inspired writing, apart from the New Testament, which carries the authority of Christ. If this were the case, then it would demonstrate that the New Testament, while true and authoritative, is incomplete.

This is consistent with the doctrine of the Roman Church that Scripture, by itself, is not sufficient. Holy traditions, the decisions of the church councils, and the various creeds have the same divine authority as Scripture according to the Roman Church.

However, there is no historical basis for assuming that this creed was actually written by the apostles. In fact, there is no evidence that this creed was known in its present form until the beginning of the fourth century.

For example, the Council of Nicea, which met in A.D. 325, shows no knowledge whatsoever of the existence of the Apostles' Creed. If the Apostles' Creed had been composed by the Apostles, or was in any sense an authoritative statement of belief, then it certainly would have been discussed at this important meeting of leaders in the church. The fact that it was not even mentioned is a clear indication that it did not exist at this time and that it was not considered as coming from the Apostles.

Furthermore, the Apostles' Creed has never been known and never been used by the Greek or Eastern Orthodox churches. It has never been a part of their tradition or belief system. This is yet another indication of its lack of any type of authority among believers.

Therefore, the Apostles' Creed cannot, and should not, be used as justification for other divinely authoritative writings that were made apart from the New Testament as is claimed by the Roman Catholic Church. It did not come from the hand of the Apostles' and was never considered as an authoritative statement of belief by the early church.

Conclusion: The Apostles' Creed Summarizes Certain Truths But Is Not That Useful

Protestants would agree that this creed does summarize certain of the basic truths of the faith. There is nothing in the creed that we would disagree with; when it is properly understood. However, because of its general natural, it can be, and has been, so easily misinterpreted.

These facts point out the need of going beyond the creeds. Believers need to study the Scripture to discover what it teaches on the various topics it covers.

Merely reciting a short creed may give the wrong impression that this is all there is to the Christian faith and to Christian doctrine. As we have seen, nothing could be further from the truth.

2. The Nicene Creed

While the Apostles' Creed is a vague, general statement of certain Christian truths, the Nicene Creed is much more detailed and helpful. It was the response of the church to doctrinal challenges that arose in the fourth century.

In particular, the Nicene Creed responded to the false teachings of Arius, a bishop from Alexandria, Egypt. Arius and his followers taught that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God. According to Arius, God the Father created Jesus before He created the universe. He said there was a time when "Jesus was not" or a time when Jesus did not exist. Jesus, therefore, was not the Creator-God but rather the first creation of the eternal God. This would make Him of a different substance or nature than God.

A council met in the city of Nicea (modern day Turkey) in A.D. 325 to refute this false belief. The Nicene Creed developed as a result of the Arian controversy - the final form of the Creed was written at the end of the fourth century. This creed is important in that it restates in a clear manner the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. It makes it clear that Jesus Christ has one and the same nature or essence as God.

The Council of Nicea also makes important statements about the Person of the Holy Spirit.

3. The Athanasian Creed

A third Creed that is important to know something about is the Athanasian Creed. It comes from the third and fourth century. It is a detailed definition of the doctrine of the Trinity. Although the theologian Athanasius strongly defended the doctrine of the Trinity, the Athanasian Creed has nothing to do with him. Like the Nicene Creed, it is detailed and specific in what it says about God and His Trinitarian nature.

4. The Chalcedonian Creed

A fourth ancient creed comes from the council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). It is known as the Chalcedonian Creed. This statement clearly set forth the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human.

Important Confessional Statements

The history of the church has seen a number of important confessional statements that have been drawn up. The following are some of the more notable ones.

1. The Westminster Confession Of Faith

The Westminster confession of faith is one of the more famous statements of belief in the history of the church. It was written in the years 1643-1646. There is both a shorter and larger catechism. The shorter catechism was

finished and then reported to the English Parliament on November 5, 1647. The larger catechism was delivered on April 14, 1648.

2. The Augsburg Confession Of Faith

The Augsburg confession was drawn up in the year 1530 by one of the followers of Martin Luther; Philip Melanchthon. It is a Lutheran confession of faith. It affirmed the central doctrines of Christianity with a particular stress on the grace of God. It rejected any righteousness that would be based on human works. The Augsburg Confession remains the main statement of faith among Lutherans.

In fact, to this day, they expect their ministers at the time of their ordination to acknowledge that they will interpret Scripture according to this statement.

3. The Thirty Nine-Articles Of Religion

The Anglican Church, or the Church of England, as well as the Methodist Church subscribes to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. This was published in 1571. Anglicanism is a belief system somewhere between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

This briefly sums up the main Christian creeds, as well as the important Protestant confessions of faith. Understanding these documents, and why they were composed, can help us better appreciate the various reasons as to why people hold on to certain beliefs.

Summary To Question 17:

What Are Some Of The Well-Known Creeds And Confessional Statements Of The Christian Faith?

There have been a number of creedal statements in the history of the church that have been attested to by believers. They include the following.

The Apostles' Creed attempts to give a short summary of the teachings of the apostles of Jesus. However, this creed, while true as far as it goes, can actually do more harm than good.

Because the Apostles' Creed is so vague, it can be read as consistently supporting Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, or Arianism; a belief that rejects the Deity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Since Jesus' Deity is nowhere specified in the creed, those who deny this central truth of the faith can recite the creed without acknowledging Him as the eternal God.

Furthermore, expressions in the Creed such as "I believe in the holy Catholic Church," and "I believe in the communion of the saints" cause additional problems. They have been used by the Roman Church as support for their unbiblical beliefs about the nature of the church and the need for all believers to submit to it.

The phrase, “Christ descended into hell” can easily lead one to believe that Christ was somehow tortured in hell with the unbelievers during the three days He was dead. This is contrary to the specific teaching of Scripture.

Though the Roman Church claims that the Apostles’ Creed was actually written by Jesus’ apostles, there is *no* historical evidence for this whatsoever. To the contrary, the Creed, in its present form, was not known until the beginning of the fourth century.

While the Apostles’ Creed can be read as an orthodox Creed, simply stating basic Christian truths, it does not have to be read that way. Consequently, it is ultimately meaningless.

The Nicene Creed in contrast to the Apostle’s Creed, is much more detailed. It responded to the false teachings of Arius and reaffirmed the truth that Jesus Christ is truly God.

The Athanasian Creed states the doctrine of the Trinity in detail. The Chalcedonian Creed clearly stated both the full humanity and full Deity of Jesus Christ.

In the same manner, there have been a number of important confessions of Faith. They include the Augsburg confession, the Westminster Confession of faith, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion.

These creeds and confessional statements are helpful in summarizing Christian doctrine, as well as giving detailed explanations of what certain Christians believe.

Question 18

What Is The Value Of Creeds And Confessional Statements?

Creedal statements, as well as confessional statements, are statements that believers have made in the past concerning what Christians hold to be true. The creeds are general statements of belief while the confessional statements are the more specific views of a particular group of believers. There are several reasons as to why they are valuable.

The Importance Of Christian Creeds

Creeds are statements of Christian belief. These creeds, when properly understood, are important to those who have believed in Jesus for a number of reasons. They include the following.

1. Creeds Summarize Christian Beliefs

First, they provide a summary of the basic beliefs of all the Christians churches at that time in history. From the creedal statements we can know what the consensus of belief was on a number of important doctrinal topics. This gives us a sense of what Christians believed at various times in the history of the church.

2. The Creeds Responded To The Challenges Of The Day

The creeds restate the central beliefs of the Christian faith that, for some reason, were challenged by some at that particular time in history. These beliefs that the creeds restate are still being challenged today. Therefore, their relevance is as important today as when they were first composed.

3. Creeds Are A Reminder Of What All Christians Believe

The creeds are a reminder that Christian beliefs are more than a mere intellectual exercise. The foundations of the faith were attacked and a response in a clear and precise manner was needed.

With the exception of the Apostles' Creed which is too vague, the creeds accomplish this. They also remind the believer that certain truths about the faith are not up for discussion. The truth has been once and for all given.

4. Creeds Unite Believers Behind Common Truths

In the church today there are a variety of beliefs and practices. We find different forms of government as well as different forms of worship. However, we all have certain things in common. This can be seen by the creeds. When they are recited it unites believers to the central truths of the Christian faith.

5. Creeds Give A Basis To Live A Christian Life

Finally, the creeds are a way of stating the basis upon which a person will live their life. By reciting a creed, a person is stating their convictions as to what they believe and how they will behave. In addition, they are identifying with other Christians around the world as well as those who have lived throughout history.

Therefore, the creeds are of some importance. Christians, therefore, should take the time to become somewhat familiar with them.

Creeds Have Limited Value

However, creeds have limited value. For one thing, they are too general and cannot deal with specific questions. As we have seen, the Apostles' Creed, it is so vague that it can be interpreted in a number of ways.

Second, their claim to authority is based upon something else; the teachings of Scripture. While helpful, the creeds need to be studied in light of Scripture.

The Importance Of Confessional Statements

Like the creeds, confessional statements are important for a number of reasons. They include the following:

1. They Give Detailed Explanations Of What Certain Christians Believe

While the confessional statements are not universally accepted by all Christians as are the creeds, they do give more detailed explanations of what certain groups believe. This helps us better understand the reasons as to why certain doctrines are held. They consciously attempt to justify the beliefs through appeal to the Bible.

2. The Confessional Statements Help Explain The Differences Between Various Christian Groups

Another thing that confessional statements accomplish is that they highlight the differences between certain Christian groups. However, it also demonstrates that Christians, despite their differences, have most beliefs in common.

Like creeds, confessional statements have limited value. First, they are the beliefs of one particular group; not all believers would agree with every statement.

Second, like creeds, they appeal to Scripture as their final authority. Therefore, they are secondary statements and should always be viewed in that light.

Consequently, both creeds and confessional statements, though helpful, have only limited value.

**Summary To Question 18:
What Is The Value Of Creeds And Confessional Statements?**

The Christian creeds, or statements of belief, are important for a number of reasons. They include the following.

First, they give a summary of the important doctrines of Bible-believing Christians. This gives us an idea as to what Christians held to be crucial beliefs at a certain time in history.

Second, they restate essential beliefs that were challenged at a particular time in history. We know what beliefs were challenged as well as how believers responded to the challenge.

Third, they remind believers of what the Christian faith is all about. This is something which we do need to be constantly reminded of.

Fourth, they unite all believers past and present. It serves as a reminder that we are one with all believers in Jesus Christ.

Finally, they also provide a basis upon which one can live their life. Again, we are reminded that the study of Christian doctrine is something which is extremely practical.

Consequently, Christian creeds are important documents. However, because creeds are not detailed statements of belief, they are incomplete. The Apostles' Creed, for example, is too vague on a number of important points. Indeed, Protestants, Roman Catholics, as well as Arian, those who deny the Deity of Jesus Christ, can all recite this creed.

The confessional statements are also important. From them, we have a more detailed explanation of what certain Christians believed and why they believed it. These statements also highlight what Christians have in common as well as where they differ from one another.

Therefore, while both creeds and confessional statements are important, each has only limited value. They remind us that we must go to the Scripture itself to discover what it teaches. For it is the Bible alone where we find our ultimate answers to all questions of belief.

Question 19

What Are The Various Ways In Which Christian Theology Can Be Classified?

Christian theology, or the study of God from a Christian perspective, can be classified into various categories. They include the following.

1. Old Testament Theology

Old Testament theology concentrates on what the Old Testament has to say on a particular topic. For example, one could study what the Old Testament says about the subject of sacrifice. The topic would be considered only within the bounds of the Old Testament, and any conclusions drawn would be from that source alone. Therefore, this branch of study deals exclusively on how the entire Old Testament treats a particular topic.

2. New Testament Theology

In the same manner, New Testament theology considers a topic exclusively from what the New Testament says about it. Topics would be examined and summarized solely from a study of the New Testament. No other source is considered.

3. Biblical Theology

Biblical theology is also limited in its scope. It concentrates upon what a particular writer says about a subject or what the belief was in a particular era (such as the time of Moses).

For example, biblical theology might look at John's view of Jesus' nature, Paul's view of Christ's death, or what the letter to the Hebrews says about faith. Biblical theology would also investigate the theology at the time of Abraham or Moses. The concern of Biblical theology is the circumstances that led the writers to compose their work.

For example, "Why did Mark write his gospel? What was the background for Paul writing to the Galatians?" These are the concerns of Biblical theology.

Biblical theology, therefore, looks at a particular portion of Scripture, or at an historical era, and notes how the writer understands a particular topic.

Consequently, a person could discover what the individual authors' of Scripture taught about God, salvation, the afterlife, etc.

4. Systematic Theology

Systematic theology is broader in scope than Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, or Biblical theology. It arranges what the entire Bible

teaches about its various topics in a scientific and orderly manner. The results are placed into a theological system.

The totality of Scripture is considered when setting forth these conclusions. The concern in systematic theology is with the final result of God's revelation—the written Word, the Bible.

Systematic theology attempts to discover what the entire Bible teaches on any particular topic. It examines all passages that relate to a particular topic. The topic is thoroughly examined and conclusions are drawn.

There are differences of opinion among Christian teachers as to the source, or sources, of information one should use in forming a systematic theology.

Some writers contend that knowledge from every source should be considered. However, they believe the primary source is the Bible. Others believe that the facts should only come from the Bible. They do not believe secondary sources should be considered at all.

The Bible is certainly the only infallible source to build a systematic theology. Secondary sources such as the testimony of nature, church creeds, confessions of faith, tradition, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit, have their place in evaluating what the Bible says.

However, any conclusion will have to be based upon what the Scriptures and they alone, teach on a particular subject.

Some Differences Between Biblical And Systematic Theology

There are differences between Biblical theology and systematic theology. They can be summarized as follows.

Biblical theology limits its study to portions of Scripture while systematic theology is concerned with the entirety of Scripture.

Biblical theology gathers information about teachings from specific writers, such as Moses or Peter, or from a particular historical era such as the time of Abraham. Systematic theology gathers its information from the entire Bible.

Biblical theology attempts to discover why a particular belief developed. The concern of systematic theology is on the final product of the writing—the Bible.

Biblical theology is interested in how doctrine progressed throughout time while systematic theology is concerned with what was ultimately written.

These are some of the basic differences between biblical theology and systematic theology.

5. Dogmatic Theology

Although the terms dogmatic theology and systematic theology are sometimes used interchangeably there is a difference between them. Dogmatic theology looks at the basic beliefs of the faith as they have been stated in the various creeds in which the church has set forth. The word “dogma” is used of doctrine that has official church endorsement. Roman Catholics and Lutherans, for example, use the term dogma and dogmatic theology.

Systematic theology is concerned with what the Scriptures actually say about a particular topic without any reference to creeds or official church sanction.

6. Exegetical Theology

The term exegetical come from a Greek word meaning ‘to draw out or explain.’ For example, this same word is used in the first chapter of the Gospel of John to describe the purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world. It says:

No one has ever seen God. But his only Son, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart; he has told us about him (John 1:18 NLT)

Jesus came into the world to “explain” to us what God is like. He has told us about God the Father.

In a similar way, exegetical theology seeks to understand the true meaning of the text of Scripture by explaining what the text says. A thorough knowledge of the original languages of Scripture is usually involved in this task.

7. Historical Theology

Historical theology traces the history of doctrine. It looks at how the interpretation of Christian doctrines developed in the history of the church. This is an important field of study. One should not ignore two thousand years of debates, creeds, church councils, and confessions of faith when attempting to understand Bible doctrine.

History of doctrine, or historical theology, traces how different doctrines have developed throughout the history of the church. It is not the same as studying systematic theology.

8. Apologetic Theology – The Defense Of The Faith

The defense of the central beliefs of the Christian faith is called apologetics. It is mainly concerned with giving reasons why the Christian faith is true and answering the objections that critics may have.

This is not the same as systematic theology although there may be some overlap between these two approaches of study.

9. Contemporary Theology

This is the study of the beliefs of Christian groups that have developed within the last few years. It concerns itself with the latest trends in theology. Consequently, it is a subject that is constantly changing.

10. Practical Theology

Practical theology puts into practice what is learned in the other branches of theology. Under the heading of practical theology would be such things as preaching, missions, and the day-to-day running of the local church.

These categories sum up the various ways in which Christian theology is classified. It is important that we realize the distinction between them.

Summary To Question 19

What Are The Various Ways In Which Christian Theology Has Been Classified?

The study of Christian theology can be divided into a number of categories or fields of study. These include the following.

Old Testament theology deals with specific teachings that are limited to the Old Testament. It deals with what is taught in the Old Testament alone.

Likewise, New Testament theology limits its understanding of specific doctrines to the New Testament. The New Testament is the only source used for this discipline. Biblical theology looks at what a particular author says about a topic or what was taught in a particular era about a topic; such as the Apostle John or Simon Peter.

Systematic theology considers what the entire Scripture has to say about a particular topic. The conclusions are based upon what the Bible says about the subject under consideration.

Dogmatic theology consists of beliefs that have had official church endorsement.

Exegetical theology is concerned with finding the true meaning of the text of Scripture.

Historical theology traces the history of the development of doctrine. It examines how different theologies have developed.

Apologetic theology concerns the defense of the faith. It answers the objections of skeptics as well as giving reasons for faith.

Contemporary theology deals with modern theological developments. Thus, it is constantly evolving. Practical theology puts into practice the things learned from the other branches of theology.

All of these are valid disciplines for the Christian to study.

Question 20

What Are The Major Protestant Theological Systems: Calvinism, Arminianism, Lutheranism And Anglicanism?

As we close our book on the introduction to the study of Christian doctrine, it is important to understand some basic facts about the major Protestant theological systems: Calvinism, Arminianism, Lutheranism, and Anglicanism. In other books, we will go into greater detail about some of the specific beliefs that are held within these systems. As for now, it is enough that we have a basic grasp of what they are and what they teach.

Calvinism Defined

Calvinism is the name given to a system of theology that was developed from the writings of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin. Calvin, who lived in the sixteenth century, developed the teachings of the ancient church theologian Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 353-430).

Calvinism attempts to base its total belief system on the teaching of the Word of God alone. It emphasizes the total sovereignty, or control of God. Human obedience to God's commands can only come to those whom God has chosen and bestowed grace upon. Human beings have no capacity in and of themselves to respond to God's call. Only those whom God has elected are redeemed or forgiven for their sins.

The Five Points Of Calvinism

Calvinism has been simplified to five major points—called “the five points of Calvinism.” To make it easier to remember the acronym TULIP is often used. As an acronym, TULIP represents the essence of the theological system known as Calvinism.

TULIP is also an acrostic in the sense that each letter stands for the first letter of a particular doctrine or theological truth of the Calvinistic system of belief.

The five points of Calvinism can be simply stated as follows.

1. T: Total Depravity Of Humanity

Calvinism teaches the total depravity of human beings. This means there is absolutely nothing in any of us that can merit or gain salvation for ourselves. This includes exercising faith. God must give each of us the faith to believe. Total depravity is better defined as “total inability.”

What it amounts to is this. Sinners are dead, deaf and blind to the things of God. The human heart is deceitful and the human will is under the bondage of sin. Since the human will is not free, none of us have the ability to choose good over evil in the realm of the spirit.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit must regenerate a person to make them spiritually alive and to provide them with a new nature. Faith, from human beings, when it is directed toward God, comes after a person is regenerated; not before. It is the gift from God to the lost, depraved sinner.

Humans, therefore, are totally unable to convert themselves or to do anything that contributes to the salvation process. Consequently, there is no such thing as “free will” among humans.

2. U: Unconditional Election

Since human beings cannot do anything to save themselves, God, without any conditions, elected certain people to salvation. This occurred in eternity past. His choice was not determined by anything to do with foreseen human belief or behavior. It was a sovereign choice of God without any conditions.

3. L: Limited Atonement

Jesus Christ came to die for sins. According to Calvinism, He died only for the elect or those whom He specifically chose to believe in Him. Therefore, His death, or atonement, is limited to only those whom He had chosen. This is also known as “definite atonement.”

4. I: Irresistible Grace

Since humans have no capacity to respond to the call of God, He must draw them to Himself for salvation. Therefore, He sends the Holy Spirit to regenerate them. This work of the Holy Spirit is irresistible in the sense that the elect will always respond to the call. They have no choice in the matter.

5. P: Perseverance Of The Saints

Those whom He has chosen and died for, He will also keep until the end. The elect cannot lose their salvation simply because it is God who saves them, and God who keeps them saved. It is not a human effort.

Calvinism Summed Up

To sum up, “T” stands for the total depravity or total inability of the human race. It involves the implications of the original sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden on Adam himself as well as all of his physical descendants born with his fallen image.

“U” is unconditional election. It asserts that God has chosen, in eternity, certain human beings for salvation. This selection was based up His sovereign choice; it was not anything good or any good work which He foresaw in humans.

“L,” or limited atonement, teaches that the death of Jesus Christ was intended to save only those whom God has unconditionally elected out of the depraved human race.

“I” is the irresistible grace that is aimed at those particular humans whom God has chosen for salvation. They are not able to resist His call to faith in Christ.

And finally, “P” is the perseverance of the saints. Those whom God has sovereignly elected out of fallen humanity and whom Christ specifically died for and who must respond to call of the Holy Spirit will remain in faith or be faithful to Christ until the end of their lives. This sums up the essence of Calvinism.

Calvinism sees ordinances such as the Lord’s Supper and baptism as divine institutions. Presbyterian, Congregational, and Reformed churches embrace the theology of Calvinism.

Arminianism Defined

Arminianism is a theological system that is derived from the Dutch theologian James Harmensen (1566-1609). The Latin form of his name is what he is most remembered by today—Jacob Arminius. Arminius opposed the form of Calvinism that was prevalent at the end of the 16th century. He believed that Calvinism contained two great errors.

First, he reckoned that Calvinism made God the author of sin. Second, he believed that Calvinism rejected the idea that human beings were genuinely free to make choices.

Arminius rejected the first four points of Calvinism but left open the possibility that the fifth point—the perseverance of the saints, may be true.

The Arminian Response To The Five Points Of Calvinism

We can compare Arminius’ teachings to the five points of Calvinism in the following way.

1. Humans Beings Are Not Totally Depraved In The Calvinistic Sense

It is not possible for human beings to save themselves from sin. They are totally dependent upon God and God alone. However, this lack of ability to save oneself is not understood in the same way as Calvinists. People are able to exercise faith toward God.

2. God’s Election Is Based Upon Something Foreseen In People

God’s election of certain believers and rejection of unbelievers is based upon some foreseen faith or unbelief in these people. It is not a totally

sovereign act of God. Humans do participate in some sense in God's decision concerning whom to elect.

**3. Jesus Died For Believers And
Unbelievers Alike- Unlimited Atonement**

The death of Jesus Christ was for all humanity—believers and unbelievers. Atonement was unlimited; not definite, or limited, as taught by Calvinism.

4. Divine Grace Can Be Resisted

The divine grace can be resisted by sinful humanity. Humans can willfully reject the prompting of the Holy Spirit to respond to the call of God.

5. The Perseverance Of The Saints Is An Unsettled Matter

The perseverance of the saints was not a settled issue for Arminius. Later Arminians, however, rejected this doctrine. They taught that there was the possibility of believers falling from grace. They, like Roman Catholics, rejected the idea that anyone could be certain of their salvation in this life.

Lutheranism Defined

Lutheranism is a theological system which developed from the writings of the German reformer Martin Luther. Lutherans accept the three great ancient creeds of the church – the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

The beliefs of Lutheranism were set out in the Augsburg Confession in 1530. They also subscribe to the formula of Concord; another confession of faith.

Lutherans differ from Calvinists in that they believe water baptism is a necessary component for salvation. Lutherans also believe in the real presence of Christ's body and blood at the Lord's Supper. It is “in, with, and under” the bread and the wine.

Lutherans differ from Arminians in that they accept the doctrine of the total depravity of human beings. Lutherans also accept the unconditional predestination of believers.

Anglicanism Defined

The Anglican Church, though Protestant in name, is somewhere between the Protestants and the Roman Catholics in its beliefs. It preserves much of old English Catholicism while rejecting some of the errors and abuses that the Roman Church has practiced. The doctrinal position of Anglicanism was set out in the Thirty-Nine Articles (1571).

This brief sketch of these major Protestant theological systems can give us a basic idea as to what Protestant, or non-Roman Catholic, believers have

in common, and where they differ. In later books, we will look at the strengths and weaknesses of each system.

Summary To Question 20

What Are The Major Protestant Theological Systems: Calvinism, Arminianism, Lutheranism And Anglicanism?

It is crucial that we understand what the Bible has to say about any theological topic since it is the final Word on the subject.

However, it is important that we understand something about theological systems that have developed over time. These systems attempt to put the teaching of Scripture into some systematic order.

The four major systems: Calvinism, Arminianism, Lutheranism, and Anglicanism have each gained millions of adherents in their attempt to put the teachings of Scripture into a logical and consistent system. Therefore, it is valuable if we know certain things about them.

About The Author

Don Stewart is a graduate of Biola University and Talbot Theological Seminary (with the highest honors).

Don is a best-selling and award-winning author having authored, or co-authored, over seventy books. This includes the best-selling *Answers to Tough Questions*, with Josh McDowell, as well as the award-winning book *Family Handbook of Christian Knowledge: The Bible*. His various writings have been translated into over thirty different languages and have sold over a million copies. His available books can be found on his website www.educatingourworld.com.

Don is now a full-time missionary with GoinChrist Ministries. His website educatingourworld.com provides free resources for those wanting to know what Christians believe, as well as why we believe. Currently there are 61 books on the site in PDF form, totaling about 13,000 pages of material while answering over 1,900 questions. Eventually we hope to record all the books, as well as translating the material in other languages.