

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Revelation and Scripture, Session 4, Knowing God and Sources of Theology

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This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on Revelation and Holy Scripture. This is session 4, Knowing God and the Sources of Theology.

We continue our studies in the doctrines of Revelation, God's making himself known, and especially the doctrine of Scripture, which is the biggest part of our course.

Please join me in prayer. Father, we thank you for making yourself known to us in your creation, in human conscience, in history, and then in special revelation in the incarnation of your Son, and most especially in your word. Encourage us, correct us, and lead us in your everlasting way; we pray through Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant. Amen.

Knowing God and our sources in theology. Sometimes, the Reformation concept of sola scriptura is misunderstood.

The Reformation espoused sola scriptura, sola gratia, grace alone saves us, not grace in anything we can do. Sola fidei means faith alone, not faith plus works. All works are important, but they're the evidence and proof of faith.

They are not added to faith in order to make us acceptable to God. Sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fidei, Solus Christus, Christ alone is the Savior of the world; one must believe in him in order to be saved. Sola Deo Gloria, to God alone, belongs the glory.

Sola scriptura is sometimes misunderstood to mean that the Bible is the only source that we use for our theology. It is not true. We certainly use reason in studying the Bible, and whether we realize it or not, we are influenced by our experience, for good or for ill, and we stand in a certain tradition as we do theology, but so sola scriptura doesn't mean the Bible is our only source.

It means the Bible alone is our chief source, and it sits in judgment of the other sources. The way I like to say it is that our goal is to deliberately and consistently exalt scripture over our reason, our tradition, and our experience. The biblical story and a Christian worldview compel us to grow in our theology, as we have seen, and clarify how we understand it and go about it.

But what sources do we have that help us develop our theology? In studying theology, we learn from four sources: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. I want to work through these four and have us think about them and their place as we

study the Bible's teachings, that is theology. Scripture, as is obvious from what we outlined above from the biblical story, scripture is the chief source of all theology.

As we will see later on, scripture is uniquely inspired by God, is the Word of God, therefore, and is a supreme authority for all faith and practice. When we talk about authority in religion, we mean that which has the right to teach truth and to command our obedience. And we say that scripture is the highest authority for faith and practice, for theology and ethics.

All other sources are under scripture. That is exactly what sola scriptura means. These other sources are important but only serve in interpreting scripture and must be judged by scripture, the highest standard.

This is the doctrine of sola scriptura. Tradition. Tradition is important because it shows us what other Christians have said about perennial topics.

We do not make up theology on our own. You say, well, wait a minute. No, it's just me and the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

You got that right. You have to include yourself in that process. You can't claim it's just the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

No, you are a human subject. You are involved in studying the Bible. So your reason is involved whether you admit it or like it or not.

There's no such thing as pure theology apart from a human being studying it. How much better than to have the views of other human beings, especially those who have preceded us? We're not the first to pick up the Bible and study it.

Others have gone before and have much insight for us. Tradition conveys a historical interpretation of scripture. It relates to church's teachings, especially in creeds and confessions and so forth, corrects false teachings and offers historic perspectives on doctrinal issues.

I cannot imagine trying to invent the doctrine of the Trinity. What an invitation to end up in a cult. I cannot begin to imagine studying the Lord's Supper apart from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and symbolic viewpoints.

I cannot even understand it because those are historic viewpoints we need to understand them as we work toward our own understanding of the Lord's Supper. Reason. Reason is important because it helps us reflect on revelation.

Reason clarifies concepts, questions, relationships, and arguments. Knowing God is beyond our abilities and requires faith as well as all of our mental faculties. We need

to think hard and clearly, reject false dichotomies, see truths in relationships and analyze systems.

Reason is key to these tasks. There is no acquiring of theology apart from a human mind, apart from reason. Experience.

We're less likely to do this one and we're sort of many of us have been trained to suspect experience. Experience is also important to us. Our theology not only shapes who we are, but is shaped by who we are.

As we do theology as whole people who perceive through the lens of our particular faith experiences, church contexts, family backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, genders, and life situations, experience plays a role in helping us interpret the scripture. We cannot remove ourselves from a cultural context and be culture-less. It's impossible.

It is simply impossible. We were raised either believing in God or questioning God or not believing in God. And that's part of our experience and surely it affects how we understand God and the Bible.

Tradition, reason, and experience are good and meaningful sources. They are good guides and teachers but not infallible ones. Tradition can err.

See Galatians 1:6 to 9. Galatians 2:11 to 21. Reason can forget mystery and submission to God. See 2 Corinthians 11:3. Experience can be left unchecked.

See Jude verses 3 and 4. Each should be valued and each should be used for each helps us in interpreting scripture. But each must always be judged by scripture whose authority comes from God, not the church, reason or experience. The church stands under the word, trusting its affirmations, embracing its judgments and obeying its commands.

So, there are four sources of theology. Different traditions have looked at this in different ways. Traditionally, and Vatican II really hasn't changed this. Roman Catholicism values holy scripture and holy tradition.

They claim to hold them both in balance, but to evangelical Protestants, it looks like holy tradition, sacred tradition, sometimes trumps holy scripture. As in the teaching of, say, purgatory, which is not a biblical teaching but is a traditional teaching of the church, and that would be a place where tradition is more important in Roman Catholic theology than scripture. The traditional scriptural proof text for purgatory is not good proof text.

They're not good proof text at all, and some Roman Catholic exegetes admit that today. The Wesleyan tradition holds to the Wesleyan quadrilateral, which seeks to balance scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. I admit that we use all four, but I favor admitting that we use all four but then deliberately and consistently subordinating our thoughts, our tradition, and our experience to holy scripture.

So, it is not sufficient to say I know that is valid because I did it; I experienced it. No, it must correspond to God's word, or Calvin says it; therefore, it has to be true. No, we evaluate every human teacher, including Calvin, Luther, and Wesley, to the word of God, and again, we are rational in using Francis Schaeffer's terminology, but not rationalistic.

Rationalism, in that sense, elevates reason over the whole over the scriptures and is responsible for discarding what the thinker deems not fitting with the thinker's reason, but certainly, we're rational. We use our minds, we can't help it. God gave us minds, we read the bible, we think about it, we draw conclusions.

Tradition, therefore, has an important role in our drawing of conclusions because we compare our conclusions with those of the church fathers and the reformers, the protestant orthodox, and modern theologians who share a high view of scripture with us. Surely, we can learn from them, so tradition does have a place, and we ignore it to our peril. If we ignore tradition entirely, we're probably consigning ourselves to repeating the mistakes and errors of history.

Cannot experience play a role that is too large? Surely it can, but once again, acknowledging our experience and how our life stories, how we were raised, our church life and experience, our friends and others, how those things have influenced our lives and our thinking along with that, we must consciously and in an ongoing way subordinate our experience, our tradition and our reason to the word of God. I don't like that teaching; I don't like original sin, some will say. I mean, Adam got us all in trouble; that's not fair.

Well, there are two separate questions here. If the bible teaches that Adam's original sin influences human beings the way traditional theology has said it does, then whether you like, we like it or not, we subordinate our reason and, our feelings, our emotions to the word of God and say Genesis 3 gives the occasion, the Old Testament shows the effects, Paul in Romans 5:12 through 21 gives an exposition showing how the one sin of one man brought death and condemnation to the world of human beings. So sola scriptura doesn't mean the bible alone is our authority. It means it is our highest authority sitting in judgment on other valid authorities that we all use.

We're better off recognizing that and then deliberately crowning scripture with the rightful place, which is the first place. How about knowing God and our theological

method, our process in theology? The process of studying theology is called the theological method. As we study, we desire to follow a sound theological method.

The alternatives are an unsound method or to actually study it without realizing we're following a method at all. Invariably, we're following a method or methods. How much better is it to think about them? There's the place of reason again and to evaluate them as we do theology. Theological method or process in theology involves biblical exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, various disciplines, systematic theology, and then practical theology.

We actually start with a little introduction before we get to exegesis. Though there is a basic order to these elements, each is inevitably interwoven with the others and should not be conducted in isolation from them. The process of developing our theology includes a concern for each, and we work through each of these approaches, but not in the sequence of a math problem.

Much like the members of an orchestra, each of these areas has a part to play in forming our theology. Biblical exegesis deals with the interpretation of various passages in the Bible. Biblical theology traces through the Bible's story and its storyline as we follow creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

Historical theology doesn't follow those two the way biblical theology follows exegesis. It is concerned with the thought of the past, the way the church has understood the Bible and its teachings over the centuries. So, it doesn't stand in a straight line to exegesis and biblical theology but comes in from an angle, but surely it must be taken into account to give us perspective, to help us learn from good conclusions in the past, and to help us avoid repeating errors from the past.

Other disciplines are involved, which we'll mention as we go through here. Systematic theology, then, is a human attempt to put together the findings of exegesis, biblical theology, and historical theology in a coherent whole, putting the teachings into relationship with one another as we seek to understand the shape of the Bible's teachings altogether. So, we can say the scripture teaches that the eternal son became a human being in his incarnation and is henceforth God and man in one person.

Then, from systematics, of course, practical theology should be applied in many areas. Preaching, teaching, counseling, and missions come to mind right away. Because we all study the Bible with previously existing, even undeveloped beliefs, including theological ones, it is good to subject our method of studying the Bible's teachings to examination.

This has led some skeptics to consider all interpretations to be hopelessly circular as if our current beliefs completely control our study. We agree all interpretation and theology are done by interpreters, people who read biblical texts with, and sometimes toward, an already existing theology. None of us comes to passages with a clean slate, with a mind that is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate.

To our reading of the Bible and our theology, we all bring perspectives on God, ourselves, the Bible, Jesus, salvation, the church, history, the meaning of life, and how things work. These perspectives can offer us much insight as vantage points from which to understand theology. For example, Christians under persecution will often see more clearly and integrate more fully the biblical themes of God's presence with his people, God's ultimate victory over evil, and God's justice that prevails.

Our trials often improve our theology. As it is tested by struggles in our travels, our theology matures. The mention of persecuted people reminds me of a missions professor who was my colleague.

His name was Nelson Jennings, and he taught me many things, one of which is that to interpret the Bible correctly, we need the whole church. That is, Christians living under persecution can help those who are not living under persecution understand better the Bible's passages that address persecution. It makes a lot of sense.

It should humble us and keep us from saying just glib and simple things about persecution without respecting those who are trying to understand those passages within the midst of it. To get the teaching of the Bible, we must understand the teaching of the whole church. That means, contemporaneously to ourselves, to understand the teaching of the whole church historically is a matter of historical theology or the history of doctrine.

But if we allow our perspectives to become our interpretive keys, mistakes will follow. Some interpret scripture from perspectives other than those shaped by the biblical story and worldview. This is flawed from the start.

Such critical outsider approaches to interpretation are often imperialistic and intend to critique biblical texts from their presumed theology or conform those texts to that ideology, from their presumed ideology. Interpreting a text from their presumed ideology or making a text conform to their ideologies. This is the opposite of the approach of Psalm 119 to read scripture as humble listeners, as we saw, who receive God's instruction, as diligent seekers seeking the Lord in his commands with all our hearts, as faithful servants who accept his authority, follow his will and heed his counsel, as tested travelers who face opposition as sojourners in hostile world and desperately need wisdom from the word, as God's people in community, finding

encouragement from one another, walking in God's ways together and as joyful worshipers who declare your statutes are the theme of my song.

Psalm 119, verse 54. Allowing our perspectives to serve as interpretive keys also leads to another potential mistake. Presumptuously equating our interpretation of God's word with God's word itself.

We are still works in progress ourselves. And this means our theology is always under construction. It is grounded in what we currently know of God's word and is always being reformed.

According to God's word, we've already mentioned *sola gratia, sola fidei, solus Christus, sola gloria deo*, all glory to God. We started out with *sola scriptura*. We add a later reformation slogan, if you will.

Semper reformanda, always reforming. In that regard, our theology is never fixed in all of its particulars. Oh, the foundations are laid, and the Catholic, that is, universal and historic doctrines, are agreed upon.

But not every interpretation of every verse is agreed upon. And surely we can learn new light from God's word. Our theology is grounded in what we currently know of God's word and is always being reformed.

Semper reformanda, according to God's word, may it be so. So, we bring ourselves and our views to our biblical interpretation, but this does not lead to skepticism. Our starting point does shape our path, but it does not ultimately have to dictate our destination.

A better approach is to acknowledge and discern our already existing theological assumptions, pray for the illumination of the spirit, learn from the wisdom of the church, and trust the scriptures as the supreme authority over tradition, reason, and experience, including our initial perspectives. If we follow this approach, there's a very real sense in which every time we study the Bible, our interpretive theological lenses can be tweaked, even if ever so slightly. Given enough time, this can lead to improved theological perspectives and increased interpretive accuracy, which can lead to even better theological perspectives and increasingly developed and sound interpretations.

Thus, the assumption of a hermeneutical circle, a vicious circle with no end, no beginning, and no improvement, is unnecessary. A vicious hermeneutical circle leads one to confusion, subjectivism, and uncertainty. In a sound approach to biblical interpretation of theology, there's a hermeneutical spiral, a reference to Grant Osborne's book by that very name.

Even in a theological spiral or in our symphonic metaphor, no matter how out of tune our instruments are, we can tune them according to a standard. Such tuning may take a while, but it can happen. Similarly, as we embrace God and his self-revelation in scripture as the standard, increasingly recognize our own assumptions and biases, consistently read and carefully study God's word, and listen to the wisdom of the church, our theology matures, spiraling gradually toward the truth.

Let's consider a voice from church history, that of William Tyndale. Tyndale, we don't know his exact dates, but he was born around 1494 and was martyred around 1536. He was an English scholar and key Reformation figure who translated the Bible into English from Hebrew and Greek.

He famously said, quote, quote, I will cause a boy who drives the plow to know more of scriptures, of scripture than the Pope, close quote. In 1536, he was condemned for translating the Bible into English and executed. The Tyndale Bible played an important role in spreading Reformation ideas in England.

And significantly influenced the King James Bible of 1611. Tyndale's motive in translating the New Testament into exegesis, what is it? Quote, because I had perceived by experience how it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, so that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text. Therefore, he was moved to translate the Bible into English, even ultimately at the cost of his life, because Rome did not want people to have access to the Bible in their mother tongues.

The foundation of all good theology is understanding the meaning of biblical passages, beginning with the biblical author's intention through the text. There are many helpful tools that can assist us in understanding the meaning of such passages, including good study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries. Some of these tools include ESV, Systematic Theology Study Bible, NIV Zondervan Study Bible, a concise dictionary of theological terms, and so forth.

When studying a passage, we must note the particular literary genre, narrative, proverb, parable, gospel, letter, etc., and consider literary strategies appropriate to that genre. Literary context is also critical, as the placement of any given passage assists us in interpreting what a biblical author means. The meaning of a word often emerges through studying it in its surrounding phrases, clauses, and sentences.

The meaning of a sentence appears in its paragraphs or scenes, and the meaning of a scene surfaces in the surrounding episodes, sections, or overall book. The historical setting is also formative because knowing the text's occasion, recipients, author, and church context fosters good interpretation. Here, too, mistakes are to be avoided.

We'll mention two of them related to theological exegesis. First, sometimes readers are so focused on finding a particular theme or doctrine that they may read into a passage what is not there. The key to guarding against this temptation is to read passages first for what they intend to communicate and only then to consider how anyone's doctrine relates to those passages.

Second, readers may mistakenly give attention only to passages in which the author explicitly instructs about a theological issue. Remember that biblical authors write from theological convictions and with theological intentions, and while particular doctrines are not always the primary goal of a given passage, the writers are teaching theology so that God's people can follow God appropriately, even if the emphasis is ethical and the theology is a substructure of the ethics. So, first and foremost, good theology is grounded in biblical exegesis.

We also should avoid the concept of fallacy, which says certain words must be present in order to have a particular doctrine. So, Paul must use the word church or ecclesia to teach about the doctrine of the church. That's plainly a fallacy because he teaches about the church without using the word church sometimes.

For example, he talks about the church when he teaches that the people of God are, in fact, the church is the people of God. Passages about the people of God without using the word church are relevant to the doctrine of the church. And the Son of God loved the church and gave himself for it.

There's a use of the word church, but he also is the good shepherd who loves his sheep and has sheep, other sheep that he must bring into the sheepfold, and so forth. There is no mention of a church in John 10, to the best of my knowledge, but there is teaching relevant to the doctrine of the church without word of the church. The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Again, you don't need the word church to have that concept. Someone might say along these same lines, committing the word concept fallacy the Gospel of John does not mention election or predestination at all. It never uses the word elect, election, predestined, or predestination.

That is true. It doesn't use those words, but that doesn't mean that the concept is not present. And John uses three themes that portray to the doctrine of election or predestination.

The Father gives people to the Son. In John 17, we read that concept four times, and it certainly has to do with divine election. Uniquely in all of scripture, only John 15 verses 16 and 19 make the Son the author of election.

You did not choose me. I chose you so that you might go and bear fruit, so that your fruit may remain. The world will hate you because I have chosen you out of the world.

Couldn't this be regarded as a mere choice to discipleship, the way John 6:66 speaks of, have I not chosen you, the 12, and one of you is a devil? It is plain that Jesus's choice is to be a disciple, not a choice unto salvation. No, because in John 15, the choice is to belong to Jesus and no longer to belong to the world. The earlier John 6 reference shows that people were chosen by Jesus, but they still belong to the world.

One of you, referring to Judas, is a devil. But here in John 15, Jesus' choice is a choice unto salvation because those chosen belong to him and not to the world. The Father gives people to the Son, the Son as the author of election in John 15:16 and 19, and the prior or antecedent identity of God's people.

Usually, John says, you are not saved; you are not my sheep because you don't believe what Jesus could say. In John 10, Jesus reverses it and says, you do not believe because you are not my sheep. As we read John's gospel, my sheep hear my voice.

Jesus says in that same chapter 10, they follow me, I give them eternal life, they'll never perish. There are sheep, and I'll call them goats before they believe or don't believe. I'll say this again: that does not nullify the fact that believing is how one is saved.

However, there is also this less numerous idea that people are sheep or goats before they believe, and their believing or not believing reveals their antecedent or prior identity as sheep or goats. So thus, John's own gospel shows the fallacy of saying that one must have a particular word or words to teach a particular doctrine because John lacks election and elect, predestination and predestined. But nevertheless, with those three images, the Father giving people this to the Son, the Son being the author of the election, and the antecedent identity of the people of God, there are passages that pertain to the doctrine of election.

If you want to see more on this, D. A. Carson, it's a big book, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility, Biblical Perspectives in Tension*. So, first and foremost, good theology is grounded on biblical exegesis. In biblical theology, ultimately, the context of every biblical passage is not only its particular book but also the entire canon, which places the biblical texts into God's unfolding plan that moves from creation and the fall to redemption and new creation.

This biblical storyline frames, orders, and connects the doctrines. Furthermore, it culminates in the person and work of Christ, which distinguishes what comes before and after the gospels, Hebrews 1, 1 to 4. It is wise, therefore, for us both to locate

passages within the biblical storyline and also to relate them to other passages on the subject. We look for how the Bible story develops through the biblical covenants in the Old Testament, particularly in the law, prophets, and writings, as well as in the New Testament, in the dawning of the new covenant, particularly in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation.

Our attention should be given not only to the specific doctrines we are studying but also to the central themes of each book of the Bible and the central themes throughout the Bible: covenant, kingdom, atonement, glory, love, holiness, etc. This will enable us to see the connections of the doctrine being studied to these and other major themes, which will enable us to understand and synthesize the doctrine in its relationships in proportion and in light in the light of Christ. Thus, good theology is grounded on biblical exegesis and rooted in biblical theology.

So, if you were to ask me, do I believe in free will? My answer would be yes, but it depends on what you're talking about in the biblical story. Because there's a difference between the free will of Adam and Eve before the fall and after the fall. There's a difference between freedom of the will for unsaved persons and saved persons.

And surely there's a difference between the freedom of the will between saved persons now and saved persons in the new heavens and new earth. We will always have freedom of choice. But true freedom is more than freedom of choice.

True freedom is knowing, loving, and serving God. Adam and Eve had both before the fall. Freedom of choice and a constant companion to humanity and also true freedom.

They knew, loved, and served God. It's mysterious as to why they fell, but they did. They, of course, retained freedom of choice, which human beings always have, but they lost moral freedom and the ability to love, serve, and know God apart from his saving grace.

When people are saved, they, of course, have freedom of choice. We always have it. But they regain a real measure of moral freedom or the ability to love, serve, and honor God and obey God.

However, not perfectly in this life. Only in the eschaton, only in the new heavens and new earth after being raised from the dead, will we have the inalienable freedom of choice, but also true freedom in its fullest sense, where we will be unable to dishonor God, to disobey him, or to not believe in him. Thus, the epitome of freedom is not the ability to choose opposites, but it is knowing, loving, and serving God.

So here's an example where biblical theology, considering freedom of the will and free choice in creation, in the fall, in Christ, and in the last thing, in the new heavens and new earth, greatly influences our understanding of that concept of the freedom of the will. Historical theology. Our tendency might be to read the Bible individualistically, reading it privately to learn about God and how to follow him better personally.

While this is good, we should also consider the centrality of the church and of church history to the interpretive process. The church has been the historical interpreter of scripture. While historical church teachings and creeds are not authoritative over believers in the same way that scripture alone is, so is scriptura.

Modern and postmodern approaches to interpretation have sometimes highlighted the individual interpreter, modern or contemporary communities of readers, postmodern, at the expense of historic church teachings. We're not the first ones to read the Bible, but we stand in the stream of God's people throughout the centuries and can learn much from church history, church history's leading thinkers, that is, from the historical theology of say, Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, just to name some of the highlights. We should diverge from the church's historic stream of thought with great hesitancy and only when theologically convinced by sacred scripture and evident reason.

We should also read the scripture in the context of our present church community, realizing that scripture guides our life together with other believers. Thus, good theology is done by, with, and for the church with respect to historic church teachings and in life together. Systematic theology is based on our work in biblical exegesis, biblical theology, and historical theology, and we push forward toward a theological synthesis.

We seek to incorporate primary biblical themes, address central theological topics, and show priorities and interrelationships among the doctrines. Such theology is best organized and communicated in light of the biblical storyline: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. We also desire to express our theology in a way that is contextual, clear, and beneficial to others.

When we consider the storyline, more particularly applied to systematics, it's not just creation, fall, redemption, and new creation, but it is God, revelation, creation, humanity, fall, Israel, person of Christ, work of Christ, Holy Spirit, salvation, church, and last things. Practical theology application. What we've said is our historical, our theological method, excuse me, involves biblical exegesis, biblical theology, and historical theology, all leading toward systematic theology.

But that is not the end. Practical theology slash application is involved. Theology is incomplete until it's lived out in the church.

God uses theology to improve our beliefs and the entirety of our lives. Accordingly, we seek to apply biblical truths to the contemporary church in light of its original purpose. So our approach to love, faith, prayer, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, worship, marriage, parenting, friendship, hospitality, forgiveness, finances, preaching, teaching, missions, church planning, and so on flows from such applications.

Theology thus calls each of us and the church as a whole to apparent ways of being, loving, thinking, believing, and following. The biblical story is our story. Indeed, it is every Christian story.

As God's people, we are derived from it, defined by it, and are extensions of it as we live, love, and serve God and others for their good and for his glory. In our next lecture, we will move to begin to consider the particulars of God's revelation.

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