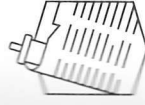




Apply the Principles

Write your story of how you were founded in the faith. Also list experiences of others whom you know. How were they founded? Reflect on the implications of being left on your own to figure things out. How important is it for believers and churches to be properly founded in the faith?

THE SERIES' STRUCTURE: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY APPROACH 2



Study the Scriptures

The following passages build on the passages and issues of the first session, lay a foundation for understanding the structure of the series, and provide a platform for discussing the idea of *biblical theology*.

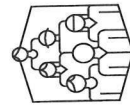
On the *first principles* idea:

Colossians 2:6–8 Hebrews 5:11–14

On the *household* as the biblical social structure of churches:

Ephesians 5:18–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1 Ephesians 3:8–10; 1 Timothy 3:14–16; Titus 2

How do these passages add to what it means to see a person established in the faith? Record your thoughts:



Consult the Scholars

The First Principles Series is based upon a biblical theology approach. What exactly do I mean by this, and how is it different from traditional approaches? Let me explain, simply, two important ways that the Bible is categorized. One is called systematic theology. *Systematic theology* has grown to be a summary of the Bible around core doctrines, for example: the Bible, God the Father, Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit, Man, Sin, the Church, and Future Events. Man sets the core categories and then fills in the categories with Scripture. Then he studies the system of categories and verses as a way of

learning the basic doctrines. *Biblical theology* is different. You study the Bible as a whole. The whole story of the Bible sets the framework. Books of the Bible and key passages are studied as a whole, and the themes of the Bible are set by the authors of the books. The natural themes and categories then build on each other as the Bible unfolds. You study the Bible as a whole and its teachings and ideas as they unfold, rather than studying the Bible as categorized by other men who are functionally controlled by entire traditions, such as Reformed or Dispensational. Though systematic theology is very useful, it should only come after one's biblical theology work is thoroughly completed. It needs to be done afresh in each culture, in each period of history, and if possible, systematic theology should be avoided in founding believers in the faith, until they can think biblically for themselves.

The First Principles Series follows the biblical theology approach. Essentially, in this series, we take major sections of Scripture from the letters of Paul to the churches and first study these major passages then progress to the whole letters. These are set in the context of the story of the New Testament Church—the book of Acts. We study how these new churches and believers were actually established in the faith. Then we study all the major passages that contain the teaching of Christ (the kerygma and didache), especially in Paul's letters that contain the plan and teaching of Christ. After that we begin summarizing the teaching—the faith—in our own words. In this process, we are actually doing what is called *biblical theology*.

The name of this series, *The First Principles*, grows out of two passages in the New Testament: Colossians 2:6–8 and Hebrews 5:11–14. The idea is simple: We cannot become stable in our faith, let alone go on to maturity, until we become founded in the first principles of the faith. These basic teachings are the basis on which we learn to reason biblically in all matters of life. They are the foundation for the Church, on which all other teachings of Scripture build. When you are in the Practicum Phase of this training, you will study these two passages in some depth in session three of Book 1, entitled “The First Principles.” But for now, it is important to realize that these first principles exist (Colossians 2:6–8) and that they are foundational to the ability to think biblically (Hebrews 5:11–14). In the Hebrews passage, he says that the first principles must be mastered before moving on to more mature biblical ideas. He defines *mastery* as knowing them, practicing them, and then developing *theological discernment* (the ability to think biblically—“senses trained to discern between good and evil”) as a result of practicing them.

The second key to understanding the structure of this series involves “the household texts” in Paul's letters. These are of two types. The first are passages addressing the family: husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, and slaves. The second are passages addressing the Church as the household of God and how it is to mature: elders, deacons, older men, older women, younger men, younger women, widows, etc. These texts provide the framework for our family and community life. Both are foundational to our faith and all sound doctrine.

These two biblical ideas, together with a biblical theology approach, form the structure of the entire series. The objective of the series is to found believers in the first principles of the faith—the teaching. The booklets of Series I and II study major passages primarily from Paul’s letters and progress in Series III to a study of an early letter (the Thessalonian epistles), a middle letter (Ephesians), and the later letters (Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) of Paul in their entirety, in the context of a complete study of the story of the Church in Acts. We then let the household texts, which give shape to our church life and family life, give additional structure to the series.

Let’s walk through the big picture of the series.

Series I focuses on the household of God—the Church. Series II focuses on individual households. As much as possible, we follow the natural structure that unfolds in the letters to the churches that contain the clear kerygma and didache—the teaching or the faith, as delivered by the Apostles, Paul being the primary steward. Here is how the series breaks down.

In Series I, the focus is on the household of God. Paul is commissioned by Christ to bring to light Christ’s administration for the Church—His household law, His overall plan (Ephesians 3:8–10). That is just what Paul is doing in 1 Timothy when he writes Timothy instructions on how households of God—local churches—ought to conduct themselves (1 Timothy 3:14–16). The household of God, the local church, sets the entire framework for establishing a believer. We begin the series by studying our need to embrace the gospel (the kerygma) and then to make a commitment to being founded in the faith—the first principles. Then we see our need to come into community (God’s household—the local church) and to begin to see the church as a family of families—a real extended household. Next we see that the Church is central to Christ’s administration (plan, purpose) and our need to commit to His Great Commission. Finally, we begin to order our life habits around the complete picture: our individual habits, our family habits, our church life habits, and our habits in the world.

Series I

1. *Becoming a Disciple*
First Principles of the Faith
2. *Belonging to a Family of Families*
First Principles of Community Life
3. *Participating in the Mission of the Church*
First Principles of Community Purpose
4. *Cultivating Habits of the Heart*
First Principles of Disciplined Living

In Series II, we turn our attention from the household of God to the individual household. Again we study the household texts on husbands, wives, and household life and social

structure. The context of our individual lives is our family, which is part of our church—a family of families.

Series II

1. *Enjoying Your Relationship*
First Principles of Marriage
2. *Passing on Your Beliefs*
First Principles of Family Life
3. *Envisioning Fruitful LifeWork*
First Principles of Ministry
4. *Building for Future Generations*
First Principles of True Success

In Series III, we move to an even purer form of biblical theology. First we work on how to accurately interpret whole books of the Bible and then study the book of Acts and an early letter, middle letter, and the later letters of Paul. Rather than majoring on key passages only, we now take on whole books, in the order they were delivered to the churches. This helps us fill in the holes and fill out our understanding of the first principles, allowing the letters to the churches to actually set the agenda rather than our predetermined categories. By studying passages (over fifty in Series I and II) and then several complete letters before we categorize them into the first principles of the teaching, or the essence of the teaching, we are far surer that Scripture is setting the agenda of the foundational teaching rather than men’s traditions.

Series III

1. *Handling the Word with Confidence*
First Principles of Bible Study
2. *Unfolding the Great Commission*
First Principles from Acts
3. *Laying Solid Foundations in the Gospel*
First Principles from 1 & 2 Thessalonians
4. *Catching God’s Vision for the Church*
First Principles from Ephesians
5. *Living in God’s Household*
First Principles from the Pastorals

A few additional observations of the overall structure will conclude our conversation. We study passages, not individual verses. This allows us to stay much closer to the agenda of the author and keeps us from compartmentalizing “the teaching” into simple categories and thus reducing the teaching to less than its whole.

It should also be added that we did not build the framework of our study around our own summary and categorization of the first principles of the faith. Clearly there are first principles of the faith—Paul states that they exist. Yet nowhere in the New Testament are they listed. They are embedded in real letters to real churches full of real people. There is something about that design that forces each of us to go through the study process for ourselves. We are trying to preserve this process in *The First Principles Series*. When we study, think, distill, and put the first principles into our own words, they become ours. We can think with them and much more completely understand them and implement them into our lives.

Record your thoughts:



Think Through the Issues

How we root believers and churches solidly in the teaching is very important. We should be careful not to reduce the process to just learning man-made traditions and theological systems based on man's categories. It is crucial that we let the Scriptures structure themselves and let each person go through the Scriptures for himself.

ISSUE: A biblical theology approach

Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. At the founding of our faith, why is it so important that we avoid merely learning a man-made systematization of doctrine?
2. Why is the biblical theology approach important in helping people really internalize the teaching?
3. Is it really that critical for us to study whole passages and books?
4. What is so important about helping people identify the first principles for themselves and put them in their own words?



Apply the Principles

Write your own summary of the importance of biblical theology and its relationship to getting people founded in the faith.

Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

Discuss the issue in your small group.

Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion: