

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

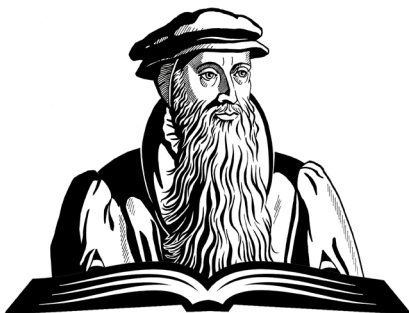
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1

INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Lecture 10

THE CONTINUITY OF SCRIPTURE



The John Knox Institute
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Module 1 ~ Lecture 10

Introduction:

1. Methodology
2. Creeds and Confessions

The Doctrine of First Principles:

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 10

THE CONTINUITY OF SCRIPTURE

Imagine going to a beautiful location, perhaps a scenic section of coastline along the seashore, or perhaps up into the mountains where you can look over a beautiful vista. What if, when you arrived at the location, you are told that you could only look at the scenery through a narrow piece of pipe. Well, you would be very disappointed. Why? Because that would restrict your view and limit your ability to see the whole scene. You wouldn't be able to take in or appreciate the whole picture and how all of the parts fit together to contribute to the beauty.

The same is true when it comes to the Holy Scriptures. We cannot restrict ourselves merely to one section or part of God's Word. We need the whole Bible to have the whole revelation of who God is. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible presents one God, one way of salvation, one people of God, all in one glorious story about the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. The whole Bible, therefore, is the Christian Scriptures. Not only must we maintain the doctrine that the Scriptures alone are God's authoritative standard, but we must also affirm that all of the Scriptures constitute that standard.

This is the final lecture in our first module on systematic theology, where we've been covering the doctrine of first principles with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. Throughout the previous lectures, we've covered an overview of what the Bible teaches about itself. In this last lecture, we will conclude our series by considering the continuity of the Scriptures—that is, that the Bible presents a consistent, unified message in one indivisible book. As in our other lectures, we'll look at the biblical teaching on continuity scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

And so first of all, we'll consider the continuity of Scripture scripturally. I would direct your attention to Luke 24 and the account given to us after Christ's resurrection from the dead. There Christ encounters two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and we read, in verse 27, these words, "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." So Christ opened the Old Testament Scriptures, described as "Moses and the prophets," and demonstrated that all the Scriptures were about Him. They all pointed to Him and spoke of Him. In other words, the Old Testament is clearly Christ-centered. Later on in that same chapter, Jesus appeared to His other disciples and He reinforced the same point. We read in verses 44 and 45, "And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." Notice again that Jesus says the Old Testament, here described

as “Moses, the prophets, and the psalms,” were written about Him, as He said, “concerning me.” Well, after Jesus had departed from the two disciples that He had met on the road to Emmaus, we read of the practical impact this had on them in verse 32. It says, “And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the Scriptures?” Similarly, the other disciples respond with great joy, as you see in verse 41. Christ had opened the Bible, and opened the eyes of their minds, to see and understand that the Old Testament Scriptures revealed Himself. And this did not just add information to their minds. This knowledge of Christ inflamed their hearts and gave them zeal to go and to tell others.

The Bible, of course, begins with the Old Testament, and some people today think that knowing the New Testament is all that we need to learn about Christ and salvation. They may know what the Old Testament says, but they may not know how it is full of Christ and the gospel. We need the whole Bible because without the Old Testament, we would have an incomplete knowledge of Christ. After all, the Old Testament makes up 3/4 of the Bible, and no one can survive without 3/4 of what God provides in the Scripture.

The Old Testament is also necessary for understanding the New Testament, since the New Testament does not, and cannot, repeat all that is already found in the Old Testament. So rightly understanding the Old Testament prevents misunderstanding the New Testament. The Old Testament was the Bible that both Christ and the early Christians read and memorized and studied, with the New Testament books being added by God subsequently, as we saw in a previous lecture. So when Paul told Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:15, “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus,” it was through the Old Testament that Timothy had come to know Christ and salvation.

There is an overarching continuity that ties the whole Bible together. Knowledge of the Old Testament is essential to understanding the New Testament, and the New Testament presupposes and builds on the Old Testament - its themes, its language, its doctrines, its principles, its historical events, and so on. Thus, in reading the New Testament we’re often reminded of and pointed to the Old Testament. And likewise, we need the New Testament to rightly interpret the Old Testament. We read the Old Testament in light of its fulfillment in the New Testament. So you can see here, scripturally, sort of an introduction to this theme of continuity, tying the whole Bible together.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctoral overview of the continuity of Scripture. Here we’ll expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that the Bible provides for us. So we begin with Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 2. You may remember these words. It says, “Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament.” And if you flip forward in the Westminster Confession, you discover that, in chapter 7, it deals with the covenant of grace that is revealed in the Scriptures. And it acknowledges that, while there was a different administration of that covenant under the Old Testament and New Testament, that nevertheless the substance of the one covenant of grace is the same in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. So chapter 7, paragraph 5 states, “This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel.” But it also makes clear, in chapter 7, paragraph 6, that “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations,” or under different periods of time.

And that brings us to considering the progressive nature of God’s revelation. It’s helpful to think about the unfolding progression of God’s revelation. So we read in Hebrews 1, in the first two verses, “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by

the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the world.” God did not provide the final product of His completed revelation all at once. He revealed it in consecutive periods throughout the history of the Bible, from Genesis to the Gospels to the book of Revelation. God chose to redeem His people through a history of redemption, not simply in one large act. His salvation history is the gradual unfolding of God’s plan to save His people in Christ, beginning in Genesis and, through a progression of historical acts, leading to the full light of Christ’s coming, and the New Testament exposition of His person and work. So God’s redemptive revelation chronologically unfolded with greater clarity and greater fullness over the period of time recorded in the Bible. Therefore, we have to relate any one passage or one single Bible story to the message of Scripture as a whole. We must see the relationship of all of the parts of the Old and New Testaments to the person and work of Christ, and thereby to the Christian.

Thirdly, under this doctrinal consideration, we have to recognize that the New Testament itself teaches us that the Old Testament Scriptures are God’s Word about Christ and the gospel. So listen to Christ’s testimony regarding the Old Testament Scriptures. He says in John 5:39, “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.” In the same passage, Jesus challenges the Pharisees and says, “For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” We see that in verses 46 and 47. Well, this corroborates, doesn’t it, what we saw earlier in the introduction of this lecture from Luke 24. If you love Christ, then you should love the Old Testament, because the Old Testament is not just a compilation of interesting stories and so on, nor can it be confined simply to a list of moral lessons. Its grand message proclaims Christ and salvation, which demonstrates the relevance of the Old Testament to Christians today. For example, we see how Paul draws the connection between the Old Testament and Christ and the New Testament Gentile believer. He says in Galatians 3:29, “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Well, examples of those connections could be multiplied throughout the New Testament. So we see continuity with regards to the teaching of Christ as well.

Fourthly, we see continuity with regards to the covenant of grace. And let me note both the points of continuity, as well as the legitimate points of discontinuity, between the Old and New Testaments. The Bible’s teaching on the covenant of grace primarily emphasizes the continuity and connection of the Old and New Testaments. You see one covenant of grace that stretches from that first gospel promise in Genesis 3:15, and then gradually unfolds and expands. So we come to Noah and Abraham and Moses and David, and then ultimately, of course, now into the New Covenant. All the way through, God proclaims the same basic promise: “I will be your God; you shall be My people.” Both the Old Testament and the New Testament reveal the same God, who is unchanging; indeed, who cannot but be unchanging. So to draw a sharp contrast between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, would be a destructive error which heretics of the past have often taught. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament reveal the same Savior; the Old Testament points forward to Christ through various types and shadows and ceremonies, and the New Testament unveils His person and work in the full glory of His coming. Both testaments set forth the same gospel of grace. Contemporary Gentile believers are saved by faith in Christ, just as Abraham was, and just as the other Old Testament believers were also redeemed. God does not have multiple plans for salvation throughout biblical history. He unfolds one single grand plan for redeeming His people after the fall. So the Old Testament is full of this gospel content in the covenant of grace.

Not surprisingly, both testaments, then, also represent one people of God, one church, under two different administrations, an old one, and a new one. In the New Testament, the church is, of course, greatly expanded through the influx of Gentile believers, as had been promised all through the Old Testament.

All of the points of continuity that we're highlighting reinforce the fact that the whole Bible is the Christian Scriptures, and we must study and understand this whole Bible revelation of God and of His redemption. But we also see that there are clearly differences between the administration of the covenant of grace in the Old and in the New Testament. And this should not surprise us, because the Old Testament is foretelling of things to come, the New Testament is telling us of what has been fulfilled, and what has already come. So there are points of discontinuity. And that would include the removal, for example, of the Old Testament ceremonial laws and institutions and regulations. The New Testament sets aside, or abrogates, the ceremonial worship of sacrifices and altars and priests and so on, along with the rituals of purification and the ceremonies of clean and unclean prohibitions. The significance of the promised land is also replaced with the realities that it symbolized. All of those things were pictures; they were signposts; they were temporary shadows that were pointing forward to the Lord Jesus Christ. But now Christ is come, and as Paul says, we must not return to the shadows when we stand now in the presence of the Person that they pictured. To do so would be an affront to Christ and would undermine His finished work. Sacrifices and all of those other things have been put away.

Another difference includes the important place of kingdom expansion. The Old Testament did not exclude the Gentiles altogether—think of Rahab, who was brought in, or Ruth, or Uriah the Hittite, and others. But proportionately fewer Gentiles were enfolded in the covenant and the Old Testament church. And here's why: the Old Testament was primarily a "come and see" model. God set Canaan generally—the promised land—and Jerusalem in particular as a light to the nations. So some outsiders would be attracted to come and to learn about Jehovah and receive His salvation. But the New Testament issues a commission that is a "go and tell" mission, not a "come and see." The gospel is taken to the nations beginning at Jerusalem, through Judea, Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth. And so the mission focuses on expanding Christ's kingdom universally, not locally in Israel. The recipients of these covenant promises will include people from every tribe and tongue throughout the whole world. The Gentile nations are to be disciplined and added to Christ's inheritance. Now this mission to the Gentile world, of course, was predicted all through the Old Testament from the early chapters of Genesis onward. But we see that the New Testament church, in all of its earliest stages of development over the last centuries, has ended up being comprised predominantly with Gentile people.

A last category of discontinuity relates to the greater degrees of blessings in the New Testament, derived from the finished work of Christ. A greater measure of the fullness of the Spirit is given at Pentecost. We have more direct and immediate communion with God, without the aid of earthly priests. We have an increased assurance, and heightened power, and sanctification, and so on—many other things could be added. So there are points of discontinuity. That does not in any way detract from the predominant emphasis on the continuity of Old and New Testaments, as we've been seeing.

Fifthly, another point would be the permanence of the law of God. So the moral law of God, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments, remains the same for all people in all ages as a revelation of the character of God and of His divine will and standard of right and wrong. Christ, after all, is the Lawgiver. He's also, in His earthly ministry, the law keeper. And He's the one who

suffers the curse of the law, the punishment for sin. In other words, the law makes Christ more precious to us. He perfectly and fully obeyed all of the law's precepts for the believer. The believer is united to Him, who did for us what we could never do for ourselves.

In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul confront distortions of the use of the moral law, but they're defending and upholding the right use of it. Paul, after refuting the use of the law as a means of justification, or a means of being made acceptable in the presence of God, says in Romans 3:31, "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law." And so there is a continuity in terms of the obligations of God's moral law. And that's reflected in the believer's love for the law of God both in the Old and New Testaments. So in the Old Testament, we sing, in Psalm 119:97, "Oh how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day." Or in Psalm 1, "But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in His law doth he meditate day and night." Joshua exemplifies this, Joshua 1:8, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then shalt thou make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou have good success." Well, you turn to the New Testament and we find identical language. In Romans 7, for example, verses 12, 14, and 22, it says "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good...For we know that the law is spiritual." He goes on to say, "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man." Well, that's the language of David. And you see him writing, in 1 Timothy 1:8, "But we know that the law is good, if a man uses it lawfully." John himself says this in 1 John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous." They're not burdensome to us. They're the delight of the Christian. And so there's continuity with regards to the ongoing obligations of God's moral law.

Another example of continuity has to do with the Psalms. The book of Psalms is the Old Testament book most often quoted in the New Testament, by far and away. It's referred to, on average, every nineteen verses in the New Testament. So it has a central place even in the New Testament. This alone would require intimate familiarity with the Psalms, but they also have a vital place in the Scriptures as a whole. God has provided the Psalms as a permanent manual of sung praise. So the Psalms are God's inspired hymnbook for the church in all ages. So you can see continuity here. The Bible teaches unequivocally that divine inspiration is a necessary qualification for writing worship songs. There's a connection between prophecy and praise. The writers understood that it was necessary to possess the gift of prophecy, and that they were writing inspired songs for worship. One example is 2 Samuel 23:1-2, which says, "Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His Word was in my tongue." Well, as you know, the office of prophet has now expired, and the production of inspired songs has ceased. We find no warrant in Scripture for the use of uninspired human compositions, or songs that are written merely by men, in the singing of God's praise in His public worship. And so you see the continuity there, as well, in the important place that the Psalms have in both Old and New Testaments.

Thirdly, we must consider and answer some of the primary arguments which undermine the continuity of Holy Scripture. This will ensure that we're equipped to refute these errors. First of all, some draw a sharp division between the Old and New Testaments, insisting that the Old Testament is no longer relevant for the New Testament, other than perhaps to provide stories that illustrate moral lessons. Well, as we've noted already in this lecture, that would dispose of the majority of the Bible—3/4 of it. And it would dispose of the very portion of the Bible that the New Testament

writers relied upon. They studied those Scriptures, and they quoted those Scriptures, and they connected those Scriptures, and applied those Scriptures, even within the pages of the New Testament itself. To dispose of the Old Testament would be to spiritually impoverish ourselves. No, God has given us a whole Bible. He didn't just give us the New Testament, He gave us the whole Bible; and therefore humility, meekness, and faith will receive all that God Himself has given.

Secondly, and related to this, some wrongly teach that the moral law, the Ten Commandments, are done away with in the New Testament. But this contradicts what Jesus Himself teaches. Christ makes clear that He did not abrogate the moral law. In Matthew 5:17–19, Jesus says, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Well, in Matthew 5, Jesus goes on to expound the Ten Commandments and to refute the Pharisees' distortion— their version—of the law; but notice that He does not lessen the demands of the law, He actually strengthens them by showing that the original and correct intention of the law is to be applied to the heart, not just the hand. It applies to our secret thoughts and motives, not just our outward actions. Well, throughout Paul's Epistles, we see him affirming the same, as we noted earlier. It is wrong to believe or teach that any of the Ten Commandments are put away in the New Testament.

Thirdly, it is also wrong to believe that there are two people of God—an Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church—or one that is earthly and one that is heavenly. If you study the Scriptures carefully, you'll note that the Old Testament believers were saved by faith in Christ, not by a different means or in a different manner, and that, even under the Old Testament, Gentiles were being added to the church, as we noted previously. The New Testament church is comprised of both Jew and Gentile. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation “to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile.” So we see this great influx in the New Testament, and Paul makes clear, for example, in Ephesians 2, that the “middle wall of partition” that separated Jew and Gentile has been “broken down,” that they are “one body” in Christ, and one by coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; that the Lord is erecting a building, which He Himself will inhabit, and that every believer, both Jew and Gentile, are added together as stones in the walls of that building that God Himself is pleased to dwell in. So it doesn't surprise us, when Stephen is speaking in Acts 7, that he refers to the Old Testament “church”—he uses the word “church”—the Old Testament “church in the wilderness.” No, there is one people of God, there is one God, there's one Christ, one Savior, one gospel; and therefore in the Old Testament, though the church was comprised predominantly of the Jews, it was one people of God, and it's that same people of God in the New Testament, now comprised primarily of Gentile people. So there's one people of God.

You'll also note, lastly and very briefly, for example, the continuity with regards to the fourth commandment in particular. The fourth commandment deals with the Sabbath day. And we note that the Sabbath was established before the fall, in Genesis 2; God set apart one day out of seven and “sanctified it”—He set it apart, He made it holy, a day that was to be devoted entirely to Him. And as you watch, again, the unfolding of Scripture, you'll see that as you come to Moses, there's a fuller revelation of all that this entails. When you come, then, to the Ten Commandments, we're given even greater clarity. And through the later part of the book of Exodus, and really, we could march all the way through the Old Testament—Isaiah 58:13–14 and others—telling us about the spiritual keeping of the Sabbath from our hearts. We come to the New Testament—that command-

ment is not disposed of. No, it's now called, under the New Testament, often, the Lord's Day, as we see in Revelation 1. It is the Christian Sabbath or the Lord's Day. There's a change from the last day of the week to the first day of the week. But that ongoing obligation to devote one day in seven to the Lord, to cease from our ordinary work and recreation, and to spend ourselves in the exercise of public and private worship, is maintained. And so that day is kept. The church is gathering on the first day, as you see in Acts, and so on. So there's continuity that is important to be affirmed in all of this.

Fourthly, we need to consider this practically. In considering the continuity of Scripture, we can highlight a few implications by way of application. The first is this: you must study Christ in the Old Testament, as an indispensable part of the whole Bible. Peter says, "Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow." See that in 1 Peter 1:10–11. Well, if the prophets themselves searched and studied diligently their own predictions to learn about the salvation provided in Christ, then how much more should we search and study the Old Testament to learn about the salvation in Christ, especially since we can now read them in light of their full New Testament fulfillment? So first, of all, we need to study Christ in the Old Testament.

Secondly, ministers, pastors, must preach Christ from the Old Testament. And this is Paul's theme when he says that he preaches "Christ and Him crucified." He would know nothing but Christ, and all through his writings, we find that same theme. First Corinthians and 2 Corinthians are good examples, in those early chapters, the need to preach the person of Christ as the eternal Son of God, who has become the incarnate Word, and has come and dwelt among us; to preach Him in all of His offices, as Prophet, Priest, and King; to preach not only His person, as One who is truly God and truly man, but also in His work as Savior and as Redeemer, as the Deliverer of His people; we have to preach the whole Christ and we have to do that from the whole Bible, preaching Christ in the New Testament, of course, but preaching Him from the Old Testament as well. Our module on the history of redemption, or biblical theology, assists us in understanding how better to do this.

Thirdly, we need to study deeply the Old Testament language, themes, doctrines, images, vocabulary, events, patterns that are found there. The Old Testament is rich with all sorts of imagery and all sorts of descriptions that God gives to us. And we need to learn to trace how, for example, the New Testament uses the Old Testament, both in terms of quoting it, as well as even in its allusions to the Old Testament. And this will open up the Scriptures as a whole to us. You'll begin to recognize, when reading a passage in the New Testament, even when not quoting the Old Testament, that there's an allusion to language, or to events that took place, to imagery, and you're able to go back and put those pieces together, to begin to tie all of that together, connecting the dots, seeing the overarching continuity. That will open up to your own heart and mind your understanding of what the Bible is teaching.

Fourthly and lastly, by way of practical consideration, you should sing the Psalms, and you should sing the Psalms until the language of the Psalms permeates your heart and your mind. That was true of the Old Testament saints. They sang them every day. It was also true of the New Testament saints and writers. They, too, sang the Psalms constantly, and you see it coming out everywhere. There's Jonah, and he's in the belly of a great fish, and you turn to Jonah and listen to his prayer. What is he doing? He's actually drawing upon the Psalms; he's using the language,

nigh quoting the Psalms in his prayer. You go to the New Testament and you listen to the words or prayer of Mary, and what do we find there? We find woven together language references to the Psalms. You come to Hebrews 1, which is one of the most important chapters in the New Testament on the divine glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a short chapter, Hebrews 1. It quotes from the Psalms seven times in that brief chapter to show us the glory of Christ. In Paul's writings, you'll find all sorts of allusions and references to the Psalms everywhere. Romans is a good example, if you want to do a study. But the point is, you yourself need to sing the Psalms. You need to memorize them. You need to meditate upon them—get them into your head and into your heart—and that will enable you to understand the Bible as a whole, because the Psalms are themselves like a little Bible. That's what Luther called them—a miniature Bible. Mastering the Psalms is a step, or means, through which we are able to better master the Bible as a whole.

Well, in this lecture we considered the continuity of the Scriptures, noting that the Bible presents a consistent unified message in one indivisible book. We need the whole Bible for the whole of our thinking and living.

This brings our first module on systematic theology to a close. We've considered it over the course of the last ten lectures. In the second module on systematic theology, we will turn our attention to a series of lectures on the doctrine of God, which answers the question, "Who is the triune God of the Bible?" Taken together, the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of God provide the foundational principles for everything else that we need in the study of systematic theology which will follow.