

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

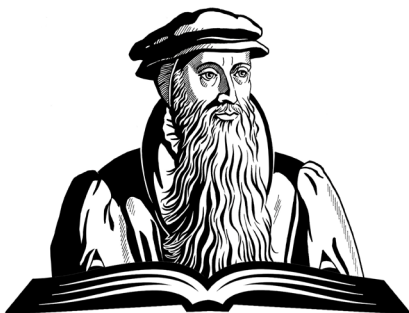
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 1:*

### INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

*Lecture 6*

### PROPERTIES OF INSPIRED SCRIPTURE



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### *Module 1 ~ Lecture 6*

#### *Introduction:*

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# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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## *Module 1 ~ Lecture 6*

# PROPERTIES OF INSPIRED SCRIPTURE

In the practical details of daily family life, disagreements and disputes among siblings can often be solved by answering the question, “Who is in charge?” Several siblings may be arguing about what they want to do on a given day; one brother insists that they should go outside and play in the rain, another brother argues that they should play a game together in their bedroom, and their sister says that they should go ahead and eat lunch. The dispute is settled when finally the youngest child reminds them that Daddy had left a note on the counter with instructions before he left the house. When they pick up the note, they discover that Daddy said that they were to stay inside out of the rain, that they were to first clean their room and then make lunch before they were free to do something else inside the house. Daddy’s note settles the dispute. Why? Because as their father, he has the authority to instruct them, and what he said was clear and provided them with exactly what they needed to know. Consequently, all of the children needed to submit to following the instructions in Daddy’s note.

God’s people find themselves in similar circumstances. The Lord has provided for them perfect instructions in His Word, the Bible. That Word answers the question, “Who is in charge?” God’s Word carries God’s authority, and those authoritative Scriptures are both clear and fully sufficient, providing all that we need to know of God’s will. Appeal to the Bible, therefore, settles all disputes and controversies within the church. In this first module on systematic theology, we are covering the doctrine of first principles, with special reference to the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture, we considered the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. We now turn to some of the other properties of Scripture that flow from its inspiration. We will look at these properties scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So first of all, let’s consider them scripturally. And we’ll cover this briefly. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 we read, “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when you received the Word of God, which he heard of us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.” So Paul tells the Thessalonians that believers receive the Word of God. The origin of that Word is not from among mere men, which is unreliable, but from the Lord Himself, with His full authority. He also says that God’s Word is fully sufficient for their salvation, that it works “effectually” in them that believe. God did not just send it—they also received it. They were not left confused or in doubt about God’s will. It came to them with clarity that they could comprehend and apply. It was this Word that provided a ground for their faith, and it was to this Word that they had to cling. Any disputes that might arise send the believer back to the authoritative, sufficient, and clear Word of God for answers. So Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 introduce to us the divine authority of Scripture and to some of the

properties of the Bible that flow from that authority.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of some of the properties of Scripture. Specifically, we'll consider four properties of the Bible: its authority, sufficiency, clarity, and its role as the supreme judge in controversies. Here we'll expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that the Bible provides for us. So let's think of these four properties of Scripture.

First of all, the authority of Scripture. And this is summarized for us in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 4, "The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God." So the Bible has divine authority because its author is the Holy Spirit, who is God Himself. Consequently, the Scriptures speak to us with the authority of God. In 1 Corinthians 2:12–13 we read, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." Now this authority in Scripture is related to the fact that the Scriptures are self-attesting and self-authenticating. So they attest to themselves; they authenticate themselves. Why is that? Well, only God is adequate to witness to Himself. Think of 1 John 5:9, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of His Son." Or as Jesus 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."

We can think of this in a variety of ways. There is an objective witness first of all. Scripture asserts that it is the Word of God. Think about how when you're reading through the Old Testament, you see the words over and over and over again, "Thus saith the Lord." So there, embedded in the Bible itself, God is affirming that it is He who is speaking through these Holy Scriptures, and through His prophets who are penning the Holy Scriptures. You see the same when you turn to the New Testament and its perspective on the Old Testament. You'll remember how in The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, Jesus insists that not one jot or tittle will in any way depart from the Word of God until the heavens and earth pass away. You'll remember how in the last lecture we saw that these Scriptures have been inspired by God. So the New Testament looks upon itself and the Old Testament as something that comes with divine authority. And you see the same with regards to how the New Testament sees itself. So for example, in Second Peter, Peter is writing, and he's referring to Paul's writings, and he refers to those writings in 3:16 as "the scriptures." So he saw Paul's writings as the Scriptures themselves. And it's those "scriptures" which, Timothy discovered, 2 Timothy 3, make us "wise unto salvation."

So we see that the Bible is attesting to its own authority, and the Scriptures demonstrate evidence of their divine origins. Here you can consider Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 5. Let me highlight just a few things from that paragraph on how the Scriptures demonstrate and evidence their divine origins. You see it, first of all, in their content and in their style; the language of the Confession is by their "majesty" and purity. Now, you'll see this in the Old Testament referred to, in Hosea 8:12, or in the Psalms—like Psalm 12:6, Psalm 119:140, and you see the same thing in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 2.

The Scriptures also demonstrate evidence of their divine origins by their agreement, so the whole Bible agreeing with itself. In the language again of that paragraph from the Confession, "By the consent of all the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God." And so you'll find that the Bible is perfectly coherent and perfectly consistent with itself, that there is no



contradiction, which of course is impossible because God himself is the author.

Another line of evidence is with regards to their power. The Confession says, “By their light and power to convince and convert sinners, and to build them up in holiness through faith to salvation.” Psalm 19 brings this out, as does Hebrews 4 and other passages. So as you open your Bibles, you see the evidence that is found in them of their divine origin.

Furthermore, with regards to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, we not only have what the Bible says about itself, and not only do we have the evidence that’s seen in the very content of Scripture, but there’s another component that’s essential, and that is the internal testimony of the Spirit. I referred to Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 5 previously. At the end of that paragraph, it says, “Yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” So in order for us to become persuaded and assured of the divine authority, we need the ministry of the Spirit. And that should be fairly obvious because regeneration—being born again—is a prerequisite, is necessary for being able to recognize the authority of Scripture. Remember Paul’s writings, in 1 Corinthians 2:12–14, where he’s saying that the natural man cannot receive the things that are of the Spirit “because they’re spiritually discerned,” right? He’s spiritually dead. This is why Jesus says to Nicodemus, “You must be born again.” And so we need the ministry of the Spirit, obviously, to regenerate our souls, and the operation of the Spirit is necessary to come to the truth. Natural man is spiritually blind. You’ll note how the Confession says that the Spirit works by and with the Word. So it’s not as if the Spirit comes to us independent of Scripture, but it’s actually while we’re reading it, while we’re hearing it preached, that the Spirit works through this internal testimony to persuade us and to show us, to demonstrate the authority of God in the Bible. The Spirit also illuminates the mind of the believer, thereby enabling our minds to see the truth and confirming the conviction of truth in us. We are brought thereby to recognize the authority of Scripture.

Now having said all of that, however, the Scripture speaks with authority over us, whether we recognize it or not. So its authority isn’t dependent on us seeing it, but rather our ability to profit is dependent on our ability to see and recognize the authority of Scripture. But it has authority in itself. So first of all, we’re thinking about the property of the authority of Scripture.

Secondly, the sufficiency of Scripture. This is summarized in Westminster Confession, chapter 1, paragraph 6, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” So the sufficiency of Scripture teaches that all that we need for life and godliness, or for faith and practice, is found in the Bible itself. So the Bible provides what’s necessary to make us “wise unto salvation” through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. You’ll remember the account of Jesus on the road to Emmaus with the two disciples, and how he opened the Scriptures to them, looking at Moses and the Psalms and the prophets, and showing Himself to them. He was turning their hearts and minds to the Scriptures themselves. The Bible is sufficient to make the believer complete and “thoroughly equipped for every good work” indeed. Anything else that directs us or seeks to direct us in knowing or serving God threatens the sufficiency of Scripture. So whether that is our own ideas, the ideas of other men, whether it’s some sort of supernatural mystical experience, or whether it’s the tradition, historical tradition of a church—anything that seeks to direct us apart from the Bible threatens the sufficiency of Scripture. This principle of the sufficiency of Scripture explains why the manner of the true

worship of God has always stood at the heart of what it means to be a biblical Christian. Only the Bible is sufficient to instruct us on how God is to be worshipped, which we'll come back to more in a moment.

So we see, first of all, the authority of Scripture; secondly, the sufficiency; and thirdly, the clarity of Scripture. The technical theological word is the perspicuity of Scripture, which just refers to the clarity of Scripture. So this is summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 7, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." So Scripture is clear, or perspicuous, in reference to everything that is necessary for us to know for our salvation. In other words, the main message of the Bible, the gospel, can be readily seen and understood by even a child. So most people can understand much of what the Bible teaches, and that is because the Scripture is clear in itself. It's referred to often as a light—it is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path. A light brightens a room and enables you to see more clearly. Where it is unclear, where Scripture is sometimes unclear, the fault is therefore with us, rather than with God. Scripture is both unclear and unprofitable, for example, to the unregenerate, as we saw earlier; they're blind, spiritually blind and unable to see. And Scripture can be more or less clear to the believer, requiring at times careful interpretation by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and we'll be considering that whole topic under a future lecture.

So we've asserted that the Scriptures are clear, but the Scriptures are not equally clear in every part or in relation to every doctrine. Think of how the Bible speaks of the fact that there are some "mysteries," and it refers to the "deep things of God," for example, 1 Corinthians 2:10 and Hebrews 5 at the end of that chapter. It also refers to the difference between "milk" and "meat." Some are able to only drink milk. The more mature, those who are more exercised and who have more knowledge of the truth, more discernment, are able to eat meat, or are able to understand more difficult things. It's interesting because even Peter found some of Paul's writings difficult to understand; consider that in 2 Peter 3:15–16. It's for this reason that God has ordained pastors and teachers to assist the Lord's people in understanding the Scriptures. Ephesians 4:11 and following make this clear; God gave some apostles and prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers for the benefit of God's people. While we ought to profit from the Lord's provision of teachers, we still must test that teaching with the Scriptures themselves. Here we have the example of the Bereans in Acts 17:11, where they "searched the Scriptures daily" to see whether the things they were hearing from Paul were in fact true. They were ensuring that they could be confirmed in the Word of God. You can recognize pretty readily that if we compromise the clarity of Scripture or deny the sufficiency of Scripture, then we are in danger, or negate the authority of Scripture. All of these pieces fit together.

Fourthly, the fourth property, is that the Scriptures are the supreme judge in controversies. Here we see this summarized in Westminster Confession, chapter 1, paragraph 10, "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men and private spirits are to be examined; and in whose sentence we are to rest; can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures." The Bible is living and powerful, as we see in Hebrews 4:12. It always has the final word on everything to which it speaks. This flows from the divine authority of the Scriptures. And so it is the supreme judge over the opinions of men and over the traditions of men. It's the supreme judge over the decrees of councils,

and over antiquity, or past traditions, and over the private judgments of individual men. So in the details of theological controversy, we should resort to the Scriptures to find answers, solutions, and to reach our conclusions. And when it's a complicated theological controversy, we especially need to resort to the original Hebrew and Greek texts that God has provided for us. Well, that provides us with a summary of the doctoral exposition of these four properties.

Thirdly, we have to consider these polemically. We need to consider and answer some of the primary arguments which attack these properties of Holy Scripture. This will ensure that we are equipped to refute these errors and to hold fast to the truth of the Bible. Let's think of each of the four properties. First of all, we spoke of the authority of Scripture. No unwritten tradition can exist alongside of Scripture. Scripture contains all of the apostolic traditions that Christ intended to give the church. Well, this is obviously opposed by the Roman Catholic Church. They view the traditions of their church to be on equal footing, or equal authority, with the Bible, which in fact results in them being over the Bible. Jesus taught us that this would be the case, when men seek to elevate tradition to the place of Scripture. He said in Mark 7:7–9, “Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things you do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.” You'll see something similar in the parallel passage in Matthew 5. We can also consider what Paul says to Timothy, in 1 Timothy 4, in the opening of that chapter. The point is, when we have anyone, whether it be the Roman Catholic church, or whether it be other church traditions, which come and seek to advance and promote, to elevate their traditions as authoritative alongside of the Word of God, Jesus says that clearly something will happen—the Bible's authority will be disregarded or diminished; it will be “set aside,” to use His words, and the traditions of men will be put in their place. So we need to beware of that threat.

Secondly, we should consider the arguments that are used against the sufficiency of Scripture. And there are several categories where it can be helpful to think about the implications. First of all, in the arena of worship. Many people come to the public worship of God with their own ideas, and they think, “Well, we can use ingenuity, and we can have creativity, and we're going to think what we would enjoy or what we think would be effective in having an impact on other people.” They, too, may look to the past and see things there that they find attractive, and so on. But in all of these instances, it's man's word and man's ideas which are being put forth. And in the arena of worship, the Bible teaches us that we are only to do and worship what God Himself has specifically prescribed or commanded or sanctioned in His own Word. And so when it comes to worship, the Bible is sufficient to teach us on how we should worship God. God says, “Come to me with these acts of worship” that He spells out: preaching, and the singing of Psalms, and prayer, and the reading of the Bible, and baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and so on. To look to anything outside of the Bible is to deny the sufficiency of Scripture. Now, this is important both in terms of worship and in terms of the government of the church.

Similarly, when it comes to the philosophy of ministry, or what the church decides to do and not do, there are many who come with various programs and agendas that they think will be helpful in reaching the lost or in edifying the Lord's people. But the Bible teaches us to stick to the Book, to stick to the Scriptures themselves and the means that God has appointed. Romans 10:17, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” We're to use the means that God has appointed in the Scriptures, and not look to entertainment, or look to the model that is used in the corporate business world, or other such things. These deny the sufficiency of Scripture.



We also need to be careful with those who come with what they say are new revelations; the Spirit is speaking to them inside of their mind or heart, or they have some vision or dream, or they receive some prophecy, and so on. The charismatic churches advance this sort of idea. But it's being put over against Scripture. The Bible tells us that God speaks to us through His Word. So in Isaiah 8:20, we read, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." We're to hold fast to the Bible.

And that's important in terms of understanding biblical godliness. How do we define godliness? We can define it by what the Bible says, what God says in His Word, or we can define it in terms of the doctrines and commandments or traditions of men. There will be people who think, Well, here are a list of rules that we've come up with that we think will be helpful in advancing godliness. Well, the question is, are those rules or directives derived from Scripture itself? Because it's the Bible that we're to listen to. This highlights the centrality of the Word and Spirit in Christian living. Isaiah 59:21 says, "My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and forever." So we learn what godliness is by what the Bible itself says, not by the traditions of men.

This is helpful in solving spiritual problems even, because it can be tempting to go to the world's ideas in pop psychology and other things, where self-help—they have all sorts of notions about how to fix your spiritual problems. Whereas the Christian says, "No, we need to apply the Scriptures to our circumstances." So that's the sufficiency of Scripture.

Thirdly, we need to think about the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture. And there are two errors that arise here, two opposite extremes, if you will. On one side, there will be those who say that the Bible is too difficult for the average person to understand. The Roman Catholic Church says this. What does that do? Well, that takes the Bible away from the people. They can't be trusted with it. They'll confuse things and come up with the wrong ideas. It takes the Bible from the people and instead, it places all of the interpretation of Scripture in the hands of priests, and they say, "We'll tell you what you should believe; listen to us, not to the Scriptures." So that's one side, one extreme is that the Bible is too difficult.

On the other side there is the error that the Bible is written for simple souls and all of Scripture can be equally understood by everyone; that the only interpreter we need is the Holy Spirit. So some would deny the need for the gospel ministry in the church, for example. But clarity does not negate the need to explain and to apply the Scripture. Christ promised to give pastors and teachers, who rest, of course, on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, in order to prevent the church from being "tossed to and fro" by every wind of doctrine, in the language of Ephesians 4.

Our fourth property is the Scripture as the supreme judge in controversies. While Roman Catholicism recognizes that the Scripture is a rule, it exalts the church, and particularly the pope, over the Word of God, rather than placing the church under the authority of the Word. Unbiblical traditions, as we saw earlier, supplant the inspired teaching of the prophets and apostles. Furthermore, while Bible-believing Protestants can learn from the teachings of godly faithful men of the past, as they expounded and help us understand the Scriptures, we cannot make our final appeal to the uninspired writings of men to settle disputed points. Arguments must rest on what God says in the Bible.

Fourthly, in considering these four properties of Scripture, we can now highlight some practical implications for ourselves. And again, we'll consider each of these four. First of all, the authority of Scripture. Clearly you can see we must bring ourselves under the full divine authority of

the Bible. James 1:21 tells us to “receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” We’re to have humility and meekness under the Word of God. And God’s authority demands submission, which leads not only to receiving it but also to obeying it. The very next verse in James 1:22 says, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” So obedience, bringing forth the fruits of faith, is a necessary application to our response to the authority of Scripture.

Secondly, we have the sufficiency of Scripture. And this is vital for knowing God’s will. You must implement the Bible in your own life, in order to point others to the Word in discerning God’s will for themselves as well. You have to learn the Father’s will, through Christ’s work as a prophet, being taught by the Spirit in your heart. That means beware of both adding to the Scripture your own ideas, as well as subtracting from the Scriptures things that God requires of us. It’s “to the law and to the testimony.”

The third property was clarity. In humble dependence upon the Lord, we need fervent prayer, and we need the development of the ability to study Scripture well, all in dependence upon the Lord, 2 Timothy 2:15, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” So that means we need to study, and to study prayerfully. It also means that we need to profit from the preaching and teaching of faithful ministers that are sent by Christ to equip His people. Again, referring to Ephesians 4:14, it says, “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” So we need to be attentive, diligent hearers of the Word when it is being preached by faithful ministers.

The fourth property was the Scripture as the supreme judge in controversies. In 1 John 4:1, we read, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” Or think of Jesus’ words in John 8:31–32, “Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, if you continue in my Word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” And so the believer and the church corporately are to hold fast the form of sound words. We’re to “buy the truth, and sell it not.” We’re to ground all of our thinking and all of our doctrine and all of our views about Christian practice in the Scriptures. And when there are controversies that arise, and when there are disputes over what we should believe or do, the final answer and appeal must be made to the Bible itself.

Well, in this lecture we considered four important properties of the Scriptures; their divine authority, the sufficiency and the clarity of Scripture, along with its role as the supreme judge in all controversies. In the next lecture we will consider the canonicity of Scripture, which addresses the question, “How did we arrive at having the 66 books that comprise the canon of Scripture? How can we be certain that these are the books that God has given to us?”