

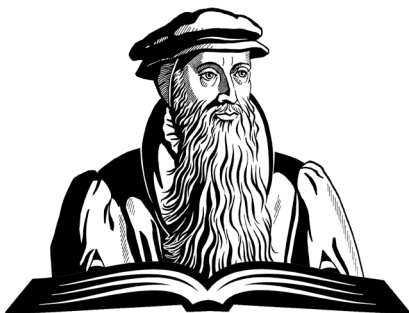
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1

PROLEGOMENA: The Doctrine of First Principles



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev. Robert D. McCurley is minister of the Gospel at Greenville Presbyterian Church, in Taylors, South Carolina, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

greenvillepresbyterian.com

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 1

METHODOLOGY

Have you ever put together a jigsaw puzzle? If so, then you know that a completed puzzle usually makes a picture of something, perhaps a beautiful landscape with mountains and pastures, forests, rivers, and with lots of details like trees and animals and blue sky and clouds above it all. But when you first open the box you discover lots of little pieces of various shapes, each one having only a tiny part of the picture printed on them. Every piece is important, but your goal, of course, is to figure out how the pieces fit together in order to form the whole picture.

The Bible provides us with all of the doctrines that we are to believe and all of the duties that God requires of us. We need the whole of Scripture to have the complete picture of what that includes. As you read each chapter of the Bible, you discover pieces of what we are to believe on a wide range of doctrines. Those pieces connect and fit together with truths that you read about elsewhere in the Bible.

The purpose of these modules or courses on systematic theology is to equip you with a deeper understanding of how the pieces—that is, the individual truths drawn from passages of Scripture—fit together to form the complete, coherent, whole body of doctrine that the Christian is to believe. So if you wish to gain a clearer grasp of biblical doctrine, these lectures aim to benefit you. The seven modules that comprise this series on systematic theology are introductory, not exhaustive, but they are intended to furnish you with a foundation that you can build upon in your further studies.

Since these modules are designed to take you through the whole of what we call “systematic theology,” defining those two terms may help clarify our pursuits. “Theology” has to do with the study of the knowledge of God and all that He has revealed for us to believe and do. One of the best definitions was provided by Petrus van Maastricht, a seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, who said that “Theology is the doctrine of living unto God through Christ.” So theology addresses both our thinking and our living.

The word “systematic” is related to the word “system.” It refers to the fact that the Bible contains a whole system of doctrine. As we will see in the remainder of this lecture, systematic theology organizes the themes of Christian doctrine by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and providing an ordered presentation of what the Bible teaches on each doctrine.

So when you put the two words together, systematic theology answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach about each individual doctrine?” Systematic theology assembles and collates the biblical material into coherent and logical categories in a manner that can be clearly taught, comprehended, and retained. So as you can see, every Christian must have an interest in the study of systematic theology.

But before we start laying out an overview of all that we hope to cover in this series of seven modules, let me begin by illustrating how these courses may be of real help to you. Consider what the Bible teaches about the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. When you open to the Gospel of John, you read in the first verse, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” You note that Christ, who is called the Word in that passage, is God. Christ is God. Reading further in John, you find that many more passages teach the same doctrinal truth, confirming that the Lord Jesus Christ is truly God. And as you widen your search to include the whole Bible, you discover many places that reinforce this truth, each text providing another piece.

But you also read in the Scriptures about Christ being born, growing in wisdom and stature, eating, drinking, even weeping, sleeping, dying on the cross, ultimately shedding human blood, and ultimately of his body being buried and raised on the third day. Again, you discover that many passages from Genesis to Revelation confirm that Jesus was truly man.

So systematic theology looks at the whole Bible, comparing Scripture with Scripture, and considers all of the pieces that God provided regarding any one single doctrine, and puts them all together into one coherent whole, so that we can see all that God has revealed about any one doctrinal truth, like, in this example, the person of Christ.

In the fourth module, you will learn more of the details about the doctrine of the person of Christ and discover that the Bible teaches that Christ is one person—not two persons, but one person with two distinct natures—both a divine nature and a human nature. And you’ll learn why this truth is so important, where we must distinguish it from false doctrine, and how it has huge practical implications for the Christian life.

The first two lectures of this course, both this one and the next one, provide an introduction to the whole of all seven modules. The remainder of this first module is devoted to the first of the seven sections of systematic theology—what we call “the doctrine of first principles,” which covers the first doctrinal truths that are necessary for studying theology. We’ll begin to take up the doctrine of first principles in our third lecture and in the remaining lectures of this course.

When you approach the study of any subject, it’s helpful to start with considering the method that you will use in your studies. So for example, the study of biology usually begins with discussing what is called the scientific method. You begin with a question, then you have an hypothesis—kind of an educated guess, then you do scientific experiments and use empirical observation to either confirm or deny that hypothesis, reaching a conclusion. So for example, to determine when water turns from a liquid state to solid ice or, on the other end, to vapor or gas, what do you do? Well, you cool it down or you heat it up to discover at what temperature it freezes or boils. That method works for science, but not for other areas of study. But you can see that method is important. So in this first lecture, we will lay out the basis for the methodology used in systematic theology generally, but especially focusing on the particular method that we will be employing throughout these courses.

So we begin in this address with the scriptural basis for the method of systematic theology. And we’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the method that we’ll be employing. Paul wrote, in 1 Timothy 6, the latter part of verse 2 through verse 4, and he said this, “These things teach and exhort. If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing.” Well, this passage provides warrant for our definition of theology as “the doctrine of living unto God through Christ.” Notice four components that are included in this passage.

First of all, when Paul says “these things,” he’s referring to the truths that he’s been teaching, not only in the preceding verses, but more generally in all of his apostolic teaching. He is pointing us, in other words, to the Scriptures. The content of the Bible furnishes us with divine truth, and we are called upon to see, know, receive, and believe what God has said. So the first component of our method includes grounding all of our doctrine in the Scriptures themselves. Our ultimate authority is God’s Word.

Secondly, and next, he tells Timothy that he is to use these truths to “teach and exhort” others. The word “doctrine” means “teaching.” Notice that he says those doctrines are both for teaching and exhorting. So teaching informs the mind, whereas exhortation addresses practice, or application of truth to the life. So the second component of our method includes a doctrinal exposition—that is, identifying and defining and clarifying the biblical components and even distinctions in each doctrine.

Thirdly, he warns that not everyone consents to the doctrine found in Scripture. Some will refuse the truth, distort the truth, and teach false doctrine. Both the Old Testament and New Testament repeatedly warn us about corrupt teachers, who Paul says in our text are “proud, knowing nothing.” God calls us to reject false doctrine. So the third component of our method should include knowing how to distinguish truth from error, and how to refute what is false. We will call this the polemical component.

Fourthly and lastly, he speaks of “doctrine which is according to godliness.” What we believe impacts and influences how we live. True doctrine aims at producing godly practice. We must not limit our interests to merely correct formulation of the truth in our thinking. The text says that we must also be diligent in the application of that truth to our living. So the fourth component in the method that we’ll be using includes practical application.

Remember these four components—the scriptural, doctrinal, polemical, and practical—because we’ll be returning to this fourfold method again in a few moments. But we’ve begun by introducing the biblical basis for them in this text from 1 Timothy 6.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview. We’re concerned in this lecture with the method employed in systematic theology. Our method concerns the path that we follow. If the method is wrong, then the path will not lead us to the right destination of sound doctrine. So we must derive the method we employ in systematic theology from Scripture, as we have already noted. God is not the God of confusion, and the Scriptures teach the unity of the truth. So systematic theology traces each of the individual threads of truth in the Bible to see how they’re woven together into one large beautiful tapestry of biblical doctrine.

So let me provide a doctrinal map of our method, so that you can see the overview of where we are going in these seven modules. We will work from the big picture down into the details, so from a brief overview of all seven modules, to the layout of each module, to the organization of each lecture.

Overview of the seven modules—consider that. Systematic theology is divided into seven large sections, each section addressing a different set of doctrinal topics. In this series on systematic theology, there are seven modules or courses, each devoted to one of those specific topics or categories of systematic theology. They include the following:

1. The doctrine of first principles; and this current module will be covering that. It includes the doctrine of Scripture and other matters.
2. We have the doctrine of God.
3. We have the doctrine of man.

4. The doctrine of Christ
5. The doctrine of salvation
6. The doctrine of the church
7. And lastly, the doctrine of last things

So if you go through all seven modules, you will have covered all of systematic theology. So that's an overview of all seven modules.

But let's also think about an overview of each module, because each module is then divided into lectures that address specific subjects within that doctrine. So an example may help to illustrate this. The module on the doctrine of salvation—well, that will include individual lectures on doctrines such as union with Christ, and effectual calling, and regeneration, and a lecture on faith, and another on repentance, and justification, adoption, sanctification, the doctrine of perseverance, and assurance, and so on. Doctrines such as these comprise the doctrine of salvation.

But then, to go even into more detail, let me describe an overview of each lecture, because in each lecture, the material will follow the fourfold structure that we highlighted earlier from 1 Timothy 6. That is, the lectures will provide a scriptural, a doctrinal, a polemical, and a practical exposition of each topic. This method was also employed by Reformed theologians of the past. But let's consider further the basis for this fourfold exposition.

So we begin with the scriptural exposition. The biblical foundation and proof for each doctrine must be a priority. If you're not grounded in the biblical basis of a doctrine, then your convictions will be easily toppled. We read in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." The Bible provides God's own inspired words to equip us with both a knowledge of the doctrine, and duties that we so desperately need. Elsewhere, in 2 Timothy 2:15, he says, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." So there is a right dividing of the Scriptures in contrast to twisting them.

As God has included doctrines throughout the whole of the Bible, so it is important to gather and arrange them according to a consistent method. First Corinthians 14:40 says, "Let all things be done decently and in order" within Christ's church. So we have the scriptural exposition.

Secondly, the doctrinal exposition. This consists of the exposition of the true doctrine. So under this section, categories and distinctions within a doctrine will be explained, drawing on the various truths provided throughout the Bible. Think of the words of Acts 20:27, where the Apostle Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders, and he says, "For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." Paul tells Timothy elsewhere, "Thou hast fully known my doctrine" (2 Tim. 3:10). In other words, Paul taught the whole of Scripture and all that is contained therein. All of that is mutually consistent and ordered, never contradictory or tangled. And so our method of studying theology must reflect these realities too.

Thirdly, we have the polemical exposition. Systematic theology not only provides us with a clear grasp of the true doctrine, it also distinguishes that truth from various errors and equips the believer with answers for combating falsehood. Errors abound, as the Bible warns, and we must separate the pure from the vile.

In 1 Timothy 6:3, Paul warned of those who do not consent to right doctrine. Well, the Old Testament had false prophets, and the New Testament speaks of false teachers. They often appear, mind you, as wolves in sheep's clothing, claiming to hold to the truth while in reality undermining that truth. Peter warns that those that "are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other

scriptures.” In other words, some men twist and distort what the Scriptures teach. They may take one verse detached from the rest of Scripture and draw false conclusions from it. It’s for this reason that Jude 3 says, “It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” We must contend for the truth and defend it against false doctrine.

We can also draw on the history of the church for help here. There’s nothing new under the sun. Most doctrinal errors are recycled old errors that appear in a new form. By studying the biblical and theological arguments marshaled against heretical teachings in history, we’re better equipped to recognize and reject them in the present day. So the third category is our polemical exposition.

Fourthly, we have the practical exposition. The study of theology should never end with merely theoretical knowledge, or what John Calvin referred to as “truths that are flitting about in the brain.” We noted earlier that in 1 Timothy 6, Paul speaks of “the doctrine which is according to godliness.” Similarly, in Titus 1:1, Paul speaks of “acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness.” So the doctrines must be practically applied or they lose their power. Christ said, “If you know these things happy are you if you do them,” in John 13:17. Or, you’ll remember, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7, that very vivid picture that Jesus gives us. He speaks of one man building his house on shifting sand and the other building his house upon a rock. And when the storms and the winds come, the one who’s built his house upon the sand will have his house collapse, whereas the house that is built upon the rock will endure. And he says that those who build their house upon the rock are those who do or apply or practice the truth that the Lord Jesus Christ delivers to us. Similarly, we read in James 1:22, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

So we have these four categories of scriptural, doctrinal, polemical, and practical, and as you may have noticed, we have been already employing this fourfold method even in this first lecture. After the introduction, we began with establishing our direction from the consideration of a passage of Scripture, 1 Timothy 6:2–4. Then, we have been laying out a summary of doctrinal truths while drawing on other supportive Bible passages. Now we will turn, thirdly and very briefly, to the polemical exposition, followed by the practical implications.

So thirdly, the polemical exposition. As we noted earlier, it is necessary to answer objections and to refute attacks on the truth. Regarding this first lecture, some may object to using the kind of method employed in systematic theology. They might insist that the logical order and presentation of doctrine detracts from or distorts doctrine. But clearly, in answer to that, clearly the organization of truth does not change the truths themselves. Rather, it brings together all of the truths concerning one doctrine into one place, comparing Scripture with Scripture, which in fact aids clarity, comprehension, and conviction regarding the truth. In fact, the Bible itself warns about the failure to use right method. In 2 Peter 3:16 and 17, Peter speaks of Paul’s writings and says “as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness.”

Fourthly, the practical implications. Even in the matter of method, we can draw practical application to ourselves. A deeper and clearer knowledge of the truth leads to spiritual maturity. Hebrews 5:13 and 14 say, “For everyone that useth milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” You see, the study of systematic

theology entails a humble act of devotion to the living God, which leads to worshipping Him and serving His glory.

So we should be convicted, if we are guilty of any sloppy and disorderly handling of God's truth, which breeds confusion and prevents holding the truth in our memory. Instead, we should strive to be workers who are "approved" and "not ashamed" in "rightly dividing the word of truth," which is a benefit, of course, to our own souls. Christ prayed, in John 17:17, "Sanctify them through thy truth: Thy word is truth." In teaching others the truth, whether they be young or old, and whether teaching them formally or informally, we should aim for clarity in our communication to needy souls. We read in Ecclesiastes 12:11, "the words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies."

In conclusion, Proverbs 23:23 says, "Buy the truth, and sell it not." And the study that we're engaged in is really an act of buying the truth, recognizing that biblical truth is a precious treasure. As the Bible says, it is to be valued more than gold and silver and precious stones, that it is sweeter to our taste than even "honey and the honeycomb," that we should esteem it more than even our "necessary food." Well, in this course of modules and lectures, we're engaged in the pursuit of buying that truth and holding fast to it.

We should also note that John Knox Institute also provides a module entitled Biblical Theology. And if you have not worked your way through those lectures, I would recommend that you consider listening to those before proceeding to go through these modules on Systematic Theology. Biblical Theology looks at the linear chronological development of theology, and the unfolding of redemptive history within the Bible, starting in Genesis, and concluding in Revelation. Systematic theology then begins with the whole of Scripture and takes up one doctrine at a time, pulling together and organizing everything the Bible says on that one doctrine. The material in Biblical Theology will equip you with a solid understanding of the Scriptures, which may increase the benefits that you will receive from these courses on Systematic Theology.

In the next lecture, we will consider the biblical role of creeds and confessions, which will complete our general introduction to these seven modules on Systematic Theology. Beginning in the third lecture and for the remainder of this first module, we will be focusing our attention on the doctrine of first principles.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 2

CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

It was the year 325 AD. The Christian emperor Constantine had invited leading ministers from throughout the world to gather for a meeting in the city of Nicaea, which was located in what is now northwest Turkey. The purpose of the meeting, which became known as the Council of Nicaea, was to settle an important theological dispute that had risen in the churches within the Empire. At the heart of the controversy were questions about the deity of the Son of God, and His relationship to the Father. On one side, you had a leader named Arius who was a very eloquent and popular preacher. He taught that the Son was created, that He had a beginning, and that He was not of the same divine nature as the Father. On the other side, stood Alexander of Alexandria and his more famous assistant, Athanasius, who asserted that the Son of God was eternally begotten of the Father, was of the same divine nature as the Father, and who therefore was not created and had no beginning. In the middle, stood a body of ministers who were unclear or undecided on what to think. Notably, all parties on both sides affirmed that the Scriptures were the inspired Word of God, and both sides claimed that the Bible taught their respective positions. But both positions obviously could not be true.

We cannot explore the fascinating details here, but the result of the debates led the overwhelming majority of ministers at the Council of Nicaea to affirm that the Bible taught the divine nature of the Son of God. As a result, they produced a creed, the Nicene Creed, which served as the church's corporate profession of true biblical doctrine, and distinguished those truths from false doctrines that must be condemned. Ever since, the Nicene Creed has served as a standard of what a true Christian and a true church must believe on these points of doctrine.

The first two lectures in this module—the previous one and this one—serve as a general introduction to the entire series of seven separate modules that take us through the study of systematic theology. In the first lecture, we considered the methodology employed in systematic theology. In this present lecture, we will investigate the important place and use of creeds and confessions of faith.

So let's begin by defining those terms. The English word "creed" derives from the Latin word "credo," which means "I believe." So a creed is simply a statement of what we believe the Bible teaches. Similarly, the word "confession" means an acknowledgement. So a confession of sin, for example, is an acknowledgement of our sin, or saying about our sin what God says about it. Likewise, a confession of faith is an acknowledgement of true doctrine, or saying the same thing about doctrine as what God says in the Scriptures. As you can see, creeds and confessions refer to the same thing—authoritative documents that affirm the true doctrines taught in the Bible, and that therefore distinguish those true doctrines that we must believe, from the false doctrines that we

should reject. The word “orthodox” means “straight thinking,” over against, you know, crooked thinking or mistaken thinking. So orthodox doctrine refers to true biblical doctrine upheld by the true church throughout the ages.

Creeds and confessions of faith are related to systematic theology and employ a similar methodology to what we considered in the first lecture. In one sense, confessions are a compressed statement of systematic theology. That is, they categorize and organize biblical teaching on select doctrines and summarize those truths with precise brevity. But they have the additional authority of being affirmed by the corporate church as definitive expressions of orthodox doctrine. It is for that reason that we will make reference to creeds and confessions in our broader study of systematic theology, especially to one confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, as we’ll note further in what follows.

As you’ll recall from the first lecture, within the general parameters of systematic theology, we are using, for the purposes of these courses, a fourfold method. That is, we are expounding and explaining what the Bible teaches about each doctrine, under four categories: a scriptural exposition, a doctrinal exposition, a polemical exposition, and a practical exposition. And we will employ those four components even in this secondary lecture.

So that brings us to our first point. We’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the importance of creeds and confessions, and their relationship to our study of systematic theology. So this is the scriptural exposition. Consider what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:13. He said, “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” With these words, the Apostle prepared his young apprentice, Timothy, to be plunged into some of the most severe upheaval the Church of Jesus Christ has endured in two millennia. Titus’s siege of Jerusalem, and with it the collapse of the world around Christ’s infant church, was looming in the near future. The martyrdom of the Apostle Paul under the bloody hands of the tyrant Nero was imminent, as you see in chapter 4, verses 6 and 7. So this second epistle to Timothy serves as a record of Paul’s last written words. They exude the tenderness of a father to his spiritual son. Where did Paul set the gaze of those left in such a desperate condition? Well, in short, he challenged Timothy to persevere in the things he had been taught. Notice that the particular emphasis in this context is placed on maintaining the apostolic truth that Timothy had received. Paul forewarned that “perilous times would come,” 2 Timothy 3:1, and one mark of those fast-approaching times was that men would “resist the truth as you see in 3:8. This included professing Christians who would “not endure sound doctrine” and “turn their ears away from the truth,” you see in 4:3–4. Even as the apostle wrote, some of his fellow co-laborers were abandoning that truth; note the reference in 1:15 and 4:14 and 16.

Timothy’s attachment to the truth was indispensable. It was indispensable for both Timothy and the church he served. Paul said to him, in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Take heed to thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee.” So Timothy was told to “hold fast,” to cling to, or to tightly grip true doctrine, just as you would hold onto a safety rope for dear life. It also includes persevering in that truth.

The “form,” or pattern, “of sound words” refers to apostolic biblical truth; note Paul’s language. He says, “which thou hast heard of me.” And the motivation for holding fast is both faith and love in Christ. After all, it is Christ’s truth, and therefore it is an expression of holding fast to Christ Himself. We must believe and love all that Christ reveals. Remember how Jesus commissioned His people to “teach the nations to observe all things whatsoever I command you,” as you read at the end of Matthew 28. And Jude 3 exhorts us to “earnestly contend for the faith that was

once delivered unto the saints.” Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 1:13 make clear that the Scriptures teach a coherent and consistent system of truth which is both identifiable and defensible. The church must discriminate between truth and false perversions of that truth in order to “hold fast the form of sound words.” Creeds and confessions express obedience to that biblical obligation.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview or exposition of the biblical necessity of creeds and confessions. The Scriptures provide several categories that reinforce their necessity and value, thus demonstrating that the very nature of biblical Christianity requires being a confessional—or we could say creedal—church. We can note several things.

One is the nature of the church itself. The early church was defined by their adherence to biblical truth. Acts 2:42 says, “and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.” We saw earlier from Jude 3 that God had given an absolute objective belief system that we are responsible to maintain. Indeed, the church is called “the pillar and ground of the truth,” in 1 Timothy 3:15. Paul writes to the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13–15, saying that just as they were chosen to salvation through “belief of the truth,” “therefore,” he says, “brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” So we have the nature of the church.

Secondly, we have the nature of God, who Himself is truth. Remember Jesus’ words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” So veracity is an attribute of God’s divine being. He Himself is truth. It’s not just that He has truth, it’s not just that He speaks truth, but that He Himself in His divine being is truth. And this reinforces for us the sanctity of truth. Truth is not something that is incidental, not something that can be handled casually, not something that you can take or leave, or trade, like you would some small object. There’s a sanctity in the truth because of the nature of God.

Thirdly, we have the nature of the Bible, which is also truth. Jesus prayed in John 17:17, “Sanctify them by Thy truth: Thy word is truth.” So the Holy Scriptures are a communication of God’s mind, and providing for us eternal truth. And so the nature of the Bible reinforces the necessity of these affirmations of true doctrine.

A fourth category is the constant danger of what the Bible calls “grievous wolves” that are “speaking perverse things” and imposing falsehood. That’s the language that Paul used when he addressed the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 and 29. You remember how Paul reinforces this with the Galatians and tells them, Listen, it doesn’t matter who comes and tells you another gospel than the one that you’ve received, even if it’s an angel from heaven, even in that circumstance, you’re to reject it and hold fast to the truth. The Old Testament is full of descriptions of false prophets who came in God’s name and who claimed to be telling the truth, but who in fact were teaching falsehood. In the New Testament, likewise, we have references to false teachers. Paul warns of those who teach even “doctrines of devils” in 1 Timothy 4:1. He says, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth,” (2 Timothy 4:3).

Another set of Scripture’s doctrines that reinforce this, teach that ministers are held accountable for faithful doctrine. Now, this can be seen in many places. But in Titus 1:9, we read that an elder must be “holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” So Paul tells Timothy, in 1 Timothy 1:3, to charge these men “that they teach no other doctrine.”

But it’s not just true for ministers. Individual Christians are also held responsible for faithful doctrine. Think of the words found in Ephesians 4:14, “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.” And so the individual Christian also has a very special interest in maintaining true doctrine.

Lastly under this point, we see that God’s people have always been a confessional people. In the Old Testament, the saints maintained a faithful testimony of God’s redemption. Go back and read, for example, Deuteronomy 26. And this included a discriminating commitment to biblical faith. Joshua stands before the people of Israel and says, you know, “Choose you this day whom you’re going to serve. If Jehovah is God, serve him, if Baal, serve him; but as for me and my house, we’re going to serve the Lord.” And you have that sort of language that is woven throughout the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus Himself, we’re told, made “a good confession.” And we have various examples of personal confessions that were made. You’ll remember how we’re told that if we do not confess Christ before men, that He will not confess us before His Father in Heaven. We also read about church councils that passed authoritative declarations over controverted matters. You see this at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, and you see the byproduct of that in the opening verses of chapter 16, especially verse 4.

And so in all of this, we see a doctrinal exposition, how these various parts, truths, components, doctrines fit together to reinforce this main point about the necessity and use of creeds and confessions.

But thirdly, we have the polemical category. Many modern Christians will object to the necessity and value of creeds and confessions. So we need to consider some of the primary arguments against the use of creeds.

First of all, some assert that “We have no creed but Christ, and no book but the Bible.” What do you think of that statement? Well, the fact is that that statement is self-contradictory. You may ask, “Well, why is that?” Remember that the word creed means “I believe.” So a creed is a statement of what you believe the Bible teaches. So as soon as someone stops directly quoting the Scriptures and makes any comment about what it teaches, they are in essence stating their creed. In other words creeds and confessions are logically inescapable. The real question is whether you have a good creed or a bad one; whether you have one that is clear and cogent and careful, one that is accurate, one that unites your belief with what faithful churches as a whole affirm. If a church says they have no creed but the Bible, then they’re left to the fluctuations of whatever their pastor happens to say from the pulpit each week. That, in fact, becomes their creed, however incoherent it may be.

Secondly, others assert that creeds and confessions somehow undermine the ultimate authority of Scripture because having a formal creed places it above the Bible. Well, is this true? We affirm that the Scriptures are the inspired infallible and inerrant word of God. Creeds and confessions, of course, are not. They are uninspired documents. In fact, the best confessions affirm this very point, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith. But a good creed or confession, however, is a fallible expression, true—a fallible expression of infallible truths.

Unalterable doctrines are timeless truths that can be expressed in a multitudinous number of ways. Some doctrines are so clearly taught in the Bible that they must be seen as unalterable; that they cannot be abandoned without even damning error, and that they are required to maintain biblical orthodoxy. That would include, for example, the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Now, we can express that doctrine in various uninspired words. We can say God’s word is inspired; we can say what the Bible says, God says; we can say the Scriptures are ultimately authored by the Holy Spirit, and so on. All of these are uninspired words that are describing a biblical and certain doctrinal truth. And so it is incomprehensible, therefore, for allegiance to the primacy of the Bible

to require a willingness to view, for example, the doctrines of inspiration and infallibility and inerrancy and sufficiency and primacy of Scripture, as creedal doctrines which undermine the Bible. And that doesn't make any sense, much less to do it under the guise that the affirmation of these truths are cast in uninspired language. If that were true, which it is not, then alleged fidelity to Scripture would give way to infidelity. You see, creeds in fact preserve the churches against such errors that undermine the ultimate authority of Scripture.

Thirdly, others object that creeds create controversy. But the truth is that sin and error breed controversy, and that, rather, creeds and confessions resolve controversy, by holding fast to the form of sound words. In other words, it is false doctrine that divides, and it is true doctrine that unites. A historical example would be the formulations of the doctrine of the divine nature of God the Son, which we referenced earlier in this lecture. Those formulations came out of the heated controversies of the early church. But those formulations, though uninspired, like the Nicene Creed, have become a standard of orthodoxy that have been repeatedly put to the test by challenge after challenge throughout the centuries, but have nevertheless continued to be maintained to the present. To this day, if someone rejects the classical, though uninspired, expressions of the doctrine of Christ's deity, then they are considered, rightly, a heretic. It is possible, of course, that time and greater light will prove the orthodox doctrine of the divine nature of God to be true. Is it possible that time will prove it to be wrong? Clearly not. It is divine truth, and time will not change that. What is true today will be true one thousand years from now. The wording of the formulations is uninspired, but the doctrines remain fixed. New light may break forth and give new depths of insight and clarity to the doctrine, but time will not disprove what we already know of the doctrine of Christ's deity. These doctrines of God's Word must be unalterably maintained by every generation until Christ's second coming. Martin Luther wrote, "If I confess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ." A twentieth-century theologian, J. Gresham Machen, wrote that "the type of religion which shrinks from controversial matters will never stand amid the shocks of life. In the sphere of religion," he said, "as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight." You see, the cause of controversy is bad, because the cause is sinful error, or corrupt doctrine. But in God's gracious disposal of things, the fruit of controversy is often good, because it brings greater clarity to the details of biblical doctrine.

Before we pass from this point, let me also provide an abbreviated summary of some of the creeds in church history. We began by telling the story of Athanasius at the Council of Nicaea, and I mentioned that they produced the Nicene Creed. There was an earlier creed which we sometimes call the Apostles Creed, or the Apostolic Creed, or the Twelve Articles. That's one of the earliest creeds in the church, and you have twelve doctrines in a very brief concise compressed form, articulated about what the true Christian is to believe.

The Council of Nicaea was only one of several ecumenical councils where ministers from around the world gathered together in order to hash out and clarify what the Bible taught on various points, and you have other creedal statements that came out of that. The Council of Constantinople was another important one for the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. We have what we call the Athanasian Creed, and there are others. But fast-forwarding, you come to the period of the Reformation, in the sixteenth century, and the post-Reformation, or Second Reformation, in the seventeenth century. And there were dozens of Reformed creeds and

confessions that were produced at that time, which were mostly relatively in agreement with one another. The Lutherans in Germany produced the Augsburg Confession in the Formula of Concord. In England, they produced the 39 Articles. The Swiss on the continent produced the Helvetic Confessions. The Dutch in the Netherlands produced what we call the Three Forms of Unity—the Canons of Dordt, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Belgic Confession.

In Britain, later on, they produced what we call the Westminster Standards—the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism, along with some other documents that were produced by the Westminster Assembly. This was in the middle of the seventeenth century; the Westminster Assembly met from January 1643 through February 1652, though most of the work was completed by 1648. At that assembly, the Westminster Assembly, you had over 120 of the most godly and learned English Puritans, along with a delegation of Scottish Presbyterians. And the documents that they produced, including the Westminster Confession, became the confessional standards of Presbyterian and Reformed churches around the world ever since. One of the benefits of the Westminster Confession of Faith is that it came later, in the Second Reformation, and therefore perhaps brought even greater clarity of the collected mature thought of the churches at the time. And it is the Westminster Confession of Faith that will serve as the primary creed or confession that will be referred to throughout these modules or courses.

Lastly, we have a practical exposition. In the consideration of creeds and confessions, we can draw practical application to ourselves. There is indeed a practical necessity of creeds. Let me mention just a handful of things. First of all, creeds provide a foundation for church unity—church unity that is built upon uniformity of true doctrine. The prophet Amos, in Amos 3:3, says, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” We must be unified in the truth of God’s Word. First Corinthians 1:10 says, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” This language of having the same mind and speaking the same truths occurs repeatedly throughout the New Testament. In Romans 15:6, it says, “That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And so one practical application with regards to creeds and confessions is the way in which they foster and build unity within the church, providing a shared testimony, professing the same thing about what the Scriptures teach.

A second application is that creeds provide a standard for testing a person’s faithfulness to Scripture. Now you see this within the church itself; in 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul says, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” So there were standards that ministers were held to. We noted that earlier under the doctoral exposition within this lecture. This is also true in our message outside the church. So Jesus in his Great Commission, in Matthew 28:19 and following, tells them to go and to teach the nations everything that Jesus Himself had commanded them. And so there’s a united voice or testimony to the world at large—“This is what God says, and this is who God is.”

It’s also helpful in this regard, in terms of examining new ideas and doctrines that arise. People come speaking new things. Think of the words of 1 Thessalonians 5:21, which says, “Prove,” or test, “all things; hold fast that which is good.” “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

Thirdly and lastly, in terms of practical application, creeds and confessions strengthen our clarity and our conviction and our commitment to biblical truth. We can end where we began, with 2 Timothy 1:13, “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” The desire for clarity, conviction, and commitment to biblical truth is

borne out in our appreciation for the use of creeds and confessions.

Well in conclusion, these first two lectures have provided a general introduction to the entire series of seven modules that will be going through on systematic theology. We considered both the biblical methodology employed in systematic theology, and the necessity and use of creeds and confessions. In the next lecture, we will now turn to the specific topic of this first module or course—the truths regarding what we call first principles. This will take us through a consideration of various biblical doctrines that are fundamental and primary to everything else that follows in systematic theology. As you'll come to see, the bulk of this module pertains to the doctrine of Scripture, or what God teaches about His own Word, the Bible. But before we turn our full attention to Scripture, we will prepare the way with other important considerations.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 3 SCRIPTURE

Most countries today have a system for producing paper money that they use as a medium of exchange for the payment of goods and services. But as I am sure you know, wherever you find paper money, you will also find individuals who attempt to produce their own counterfeit currencies, that is, fake money made to look like the official currency. The counterfeits, of course, hope to fool people into thinking that they are receiving real money. In order to prevent counterfeiting, some specialists are trained to spot it when they see it. Well, how do they do this? It may surprise you, but they do not study all the endless types of counterfeits in circulation. Rather, they study deeply the details of the real money to such a degree of perfection that as soon as you put any kind of counterfeit in front of them, they immediately recognize it. Nowadays they also use other means, like a special pen that people use to write on money, which does not make a mark on official currency, but does on counterfeits.

When it comes to religion, there is true religion and false, or counterfeit, religion. The believer's aim is to study deeply all of the details of what is true to such a degree that as soon as you come across what is false, you recognize it immediately. It would be a waste of time and not at all spiritually edifying to use your time and energy in studying falsehood. We need to know, see, and cling to the perfect truth God has revealed to us. As we saw in the first lecture, true theology is the doctrine of living unto God through Christ. In this present lecture, we now turn to the theme that we'll be covering throughout the rest of this first module on systematic theology. That theme is the doctrine of first principles. Since the most complete and perfect source of true theology is found in the Bible, much of this module will be devoted to understanding the doctrine of Scripture, which is the indispensable groundwork, or first principles, for everything we will cover in Systematic Theology.

But in this lecture, we will begin by considering the nature of theological knowledge within true religion. In venturing into the study of systematic theology, we must see our great need for true theological knowledge, and understand what it is, and where it is found, and how we can have it, and what effect it must have on us. As in all of our lectures, we will be expounding the topic of this lecture on the nature of theological knowledge under four points. We'll look at it scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

And so first of all, let's consider this scripturally. We'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the nature of theological knowledge and its place within true religion. Consider what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:12–14. It says, "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. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” So Paul says that the unbeliever does not receive the things of God. Why? Well, because he considers them foolish and, the text says, he cannot know them. They are “spiritually discerned.” In other words, the unbeliever is ignorant and without knowledge. Elsewhere, we discover that the unbeliever is spiritually blind and dead to the things of God. In fact in the previous chapter, 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says specifically that the unbeliever considers the preaching of the Cross as “foolishness” in verse 18, and that by their so-called wisdom they “knew not God,” as you see in verse 21. So the world is devoid of the knowledge of true theology.

In contrast, going back to 1 Corinthians 2:12–14, we are told that the Christian has not received the spirit of the world nor the words which man’s wisdom teaches. Instead, by the Spirit of God, the Christian has true knowledge of the things that are freely given of God, which the Holy Spirit reveals and teaches in the Scriptures. Again, in the previous chapter, 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that God destroys the so-called wisdom of the world (verse 19), and what the world considers the foolishness of God is actually wiser than men, and indeed God’s wisdom confounds those who are wise in their own eyes. Consider verses 25 and 27. God uses the preaching of Christ to save those who believe (verse 21), because in Christ alone are hid “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” as we read elsewhere in Colossians 2:3. So the believer should have confidence in their knowledge of the truth. As 1 Corinthians 2:9–10 says, “But as it is written, eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit, for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.” Only Christians have true theological knowledge, with minds that are illuminated by the Spirit to see and understand what is revealed by God supremely in the Scriptures. This is true wisdom that leads to knowing and worshipping and living unto God through Christ and in the pursuit of His glory. Unbelieving theology is vain, foolish, false, and unworthy of the name theology. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 2:12–14, therefore, introduce the nature of theological knowledge and distinguish true religion from false religion.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the nature of theological knowledge, and we’ll do so under several points. First of all, natural man begins with knowledge, but they twist and distort and suppress that knowledge in their sin. We learn of this in Romans 1, where it says, “Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God,” they did not acknowledge Him as such; that’s verses 19–21. So the unbelievers’ sinful depraved hearts “hold the truth in unrighteousness,” as verse 18 says. Verses 21–23 tell us more of why this is the case. It says, “they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.” Therefore the unbelievers’ wicked hearts lead to gross ignorance, so that in their spiritual blindness, neither can they truly know the truth, because the truth is spiritually discerned. This spiritual ignorance leads to “vain imaginations,” as the passage says, and it ends up leading them to concoct various forms of idolatry.

If you stop and think about this here, we find an explanation for all of the false religions

throughout the world and throughout history. Natural men are aware of God's existence deep in their hearts. They have a sense of religious obligation and they even crave to worship. But without the knowledge of God in Christ, and without belief in the gospel, their depraved hearts lead them to fabricate expressions of false religion out of their own vain imaginations. This emphasizes the need for true theological knowledge. You think of the Thessalonians, who received the Gospel, and who followed the Lord Jesus Christ. We're told that they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God," as we see in 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

Secondly, theological knowledge is built on two principles: the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Scripture. Now, we will consider the first of those, the doctrine of God, at length in the second module, and we'll be considering the second, the doctrine of Scripture, throughout the remainder of this module. But we should understand from the start that the sufficiency of Scripture and the supremacy of the triune God provide the foundation for theological knowledge.

Thirdly, Jesus said in John 17:3, "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent." So eternal life is rooted in the knowledge of God and Christ. Christ, of course, is "the image of the invisible God," as we see in Colossians 1:15; "the brightness of God's glory," "the express image of His person," as we see in Hebrews 1:3. Christ is "the only mediator between God and men," as we see in 1 Timothy 2:5. Christ is the Wisdom of God. And therefore theological knowledge imparts divine wisdom and prudence, which always leads to godly piety. God's truth sanctifies the soul and the life of the believer, as Jesus tells us in John 17:17.

Fourthly, we can distinguish between God's knowledge of Himself, that is, His self-knowledge, from the knowledge that He has revealed to us. Why is this important? Well, while we as finite creatures cannot exhaust or know fully God as He knows Himself, we can know truly and certainly what He has revealed to us. The believer's theological knowledge grows in this life of pilgrimage that we're on, and will continue to expand forever throughout even all of eternity. We will never be able to plumb the depths of all that there is to see and know of the all-glorious God. That increase of knowledge, of course, results both now and especially in heaven, that increase of knowledge results in an endless increase of joy that leads us to worship Him.

Fifthly, theological knowledge reinforces the need of regeneration through the work of the Spirit. We see this in John 3, as well as in 1 Corinthians 2. In John 3, Christ rebuked Nicodemus for being a teacher in Israel. He was a theologian, if you will, but he was a teacher in Israel without understanding that he must be born again. Being born again, or the "new birth," removes the blindness from our spiritual eyes—we see that in John 9. The new birth is necessary to receive God's words—we see that in John 7. Because after all, even Satan possesses theological content, but he has a false heart. And so there is a "form of godliness that denies the power thereof." Paul warns us of this in 2 Timothy 3:5. As we saw in the first lecture, theology is the doctrine that accords with godliness. Knowledge that does not produce godliness is not true theological knowledge. You must be affected by the power of that truth.

Sixthly, theological knowledge also shows the necessity of faith. Hebrews 11:6 makes this clear. Faith is necessary. We have to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and we have to behold Him by faith to have true knowledge of God. Second Corinthians 4:6 says, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." And so there has to be faith in Christ, seeing the face of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, to have the knowledge of the glory of God. Faith is necessary in order to receive whatever God says to be true in principle. Romans 4 reminds us of that.

Seventhly, theological knowledge teaches the necessity of union and communion with Christ both in grace and in glory. If we do not have Christ as our Teacher and God, as the Source and Object of our knowledge, and the Spirit Illuminating our path, then we know nothing as we ought to know it. Increasing in the knowledge of Christ is designed to increase our love for Christ and our practice of godliness. Theological knowledge is provided for the purpose of not only bringing us into union with Christ, but in fueling and feeding a sustained communion with Him. We have communion with the Father and with the Son and with the Spirit.

Well, thirdly, we need to consider this polemically. Our third main category for considering theological knowledge is to look at it polemically. Now many modern men will object to the doctrine that we are considering. We must consider and answer some of the primary arguments against theological knowledge, so that we are well equipped to refute those errors and to hold fast to the truth of Scripture. Let's think about a few of them.

First of all, some assert that there is no distinction between true and false religion, or true and false theological knowledge. They maintain that all religions are really different expressions of the one and the same religion. They'll appeal, for example, to the illustration of Mount Fuji and insist that there are many paths, many religions, but that they all lead to the same destination at the top of the mountain. The Bible refutes this by constantly distinguishing the one true religion from all of the false religions of Egypt and the Canaanites and Assyria and Babylon and Persia, the Greeks, the Romans, and all others. Indeed, we sing in Psalm 115:4–8, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: they have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: they have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them." So the Bible makes clear that there is one true religion and there are many, many, many false religions, just as there is one real currency and many counterfeits of that currency.

But furthermore, this objection is irrational. Well, why? Because all of these religions flagrantly contradict each other at the most fundamental points and therefore cannot all be true. The Bible teaches the triune personal God. Islam denies the Trinity, and Hinduism teaches an impersonal God. The Bible teaches that salvation is found through faith in Christ and His atoning work alone. Other religions ground any and all hope of forgiveness in the merit of man's own good works. Well, we could list many, many, many other points and examples. But at every fundamental point, false religions contradict both each other and, more importantly, contradict the true religion.

Well, secondly, others object that no one can know absolute truth about anything. So there really isn't theological knowledge because no one can know absolute truth about anything. Now the Bible teaches that God Himself is truth—that He is revealed in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life; that the Word of God is truth, and that believers come to knowledge of that truth through the gospel. Besides, the statement that no one can know absolute truth is self-contradictory. Ask yourself, "Is it an absolute truth that no one can know absolute truth?" You see the point. It's contradictory. And if you cannot know the truth, then you cannot distinguish it from falsehood, so how would you know that the statement I made is not false anyway? Well, this leads us to the conclusion, as God says, that the so-called wisdom of man truly is foolishness.

A third objection—others make a mistake in approaching theological knowledge as merely intellectual notions, or to use the words of John Calvin, "as truths that are flitting about in the brain." But true theological knowledge is living unto God through Christ. That includes, yes, a clear grasp of the truth with our mind, but it cannot be confined to that. It impacts the whole person. It shapes

the will and it enlivens the affections and it informs the conscience, employs the body in God's service, and so on. As we'll see further in a few moments, theological knowledge must be accompanied by faith and love for God and complete devotion to the pursuit of His glory. It cannot be confined to merely intellectual or notional ideas.

Well, fourthly, we'll consider this practically. So in considering the doctrine of theological knowledge, we can now highlight some practical implications for ourselves. The first thing that we see is that every Christian is responsible to pursue and obtain theological knowledge. This includes the need to exemplify the knowledge of God in the practice of holiness. We should also enjoy our theological studies to the glory of God. After all, what is more delightful to the Christian than knowing God and His Word? But this is an enterprise—it is a duty, a responsibility, and much more; it is a privilege that falls to every Christian. Every Christian has a keen interest in true theological knowledge.

Secondly, it is true that theological knowledge is exhilarating. After, all, we're dealing with holy and high and eternal matters. So these are things which are captivating to the mind and to the heart. But it should always produce genuine humility and teachableness, and an increased intimacy with the Lord. The idea of a proud student of theological knowledge is contradictory. True theological knowledge requires humility. And this is important for us, especially in these early stages, as we are venturing out to perhaps learn greater depths, and have a more expansive grasp of the truth that God has delivered to us in His Word. We can begin to think, "Well, we know more than we used to know," and perhaps think, "We know more than many other people know," and we can be taken up with the exhilarating nature of thinking about these profound and deep truths that God has given to us. And so it is essential for us to remember the place of humility. When we see God, what is the result? The result should be to be brought low before Him. Every instance that's given to us in Scripture of a person encountering God exhibits that very thing. You think of Isaiah, and he has this vision, and he sees the Lord and His train filling the temple in Isaiah 6, and he cries out, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips," from a people of unclean lips, right? There's humility that is seen there. Daniel, who was a very godly man and a prophet, he too has an experience where the angel appears before him and he faints; he collapses; he loses his strength. Even the Apostle John, who during the earthly ministry of Christ had laid his head upon the bosom of Christ, when he sees the revelation of Christ exalted in glory—in Revelation 1, he falls as dead before His feet. And so humility, teachableness, and the desire for intimacy with the Lord is necessary.

Thirdly, we need to remember the necessity of prayer in the pursuit of theological knowledge, which, after all, demonstrates, in a degree, our humility. Prayer expresses our dependence upon God and our need for the Spirit's help in the study of Scripture. It is the Spirit who illuminates our understanding and who applies the truth to our souls. And so not only do we come as students to an open Bible—that certainly is essential, but we also come before that open Bible and the God of the Bible in prayer, seeking His help in dependence upon Him.

Fourthly, theological knowledge must include the whole person. True theology always leads to communion with God, as we saw earlier. This produces a deeper, closer, sweeter walk with God. And so we're not just employing our minds, we're employing all of the faculties of our souls, and we're even going to employ our bodies in the service of the living God, as a result of the theological knowledge that we obtain through the revelation that God has given to us. And so we should not compartmentalize our understanding of theological knowledge. It has a breadth, and it is something that impacts every part of our being. So as we study, as we think, as you listen to

these lectures, as you continue to prayerfully dig and seek to understand the things that we'll be looking at, you should have a view and an eye that is looking to trace out the implications of this throughout your whole person.

Well, in this lecture we set a foundation and some parameters for our studies. We learned about the nature of the theological knowledge that we are seeking to study and learn and believe in the course of this module. In the next lecture we will begin to turn our full attention to the doctrine of Scripture. Understanding the doctrine of Scripture provides indispensable first principles for the study of systematic theology. Why? Because God provided the supreme revelation of divine truth in the Bible—His holy Word.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 4

REVELATION

Imagine walking into a large room with bright lights. In the middle of the otherwise empty room, you see in front of you a very large white sheet that has been draped over something, forming what looks like a large mound in the middle of the room. The sheet functions like a veil, covering what is hidden. Then two men walk into the room, and, grasping opposite ends of the sheet, they lift it off, thereby unveiling what is underneath. When they do so, you discover that hidden underneath the sheet are large tables full of gold, silver, and precious gems. You say to yourself, “Wow, who would have ever imagined?”

This illustrates the biblical idea of “revelation.” In English, the words “conceal” and “reveal” are opposites. The former means to hide something, whereas the latter, the word “reveal,” means to expose or to make something known. In the Bible, revelation refers to God unveiling and making known His truth to creatures such as ourselves. He takes what would otherwise be hidden from us and graciously condescends to show it to us. He is not silent. He opens up and discloses to us the knowledge of Himself and the way of salvation. If we wish to know Him, we must rely on what He tells us of Himself. Relying on any other speculation would only lead to greater ignorance.

In this first module on systematic theology we’re covering the doctrine of first principles. And turning our attention to the Scriptures, we must first begin with what the Bible teaches about the general idea of revelation. As in all our lectures, we will be expounding the topic of this lecture, the biblical doctrine of revelation, under four points. We will look at it scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and then practically.

And so first of all, let’s consider this scripturally. We’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of revelation. If you have your Bible with you, you can turn to Psalm 19. You’ll note that the Psalm can be divided into three parts. First, verses 1–6 teach us that God reveals Himself to us through the created universe. Second, in verses 7–9, it speaks of God’s revelation to us through His written Word. We learn, therefore, that God reveals Himself in two primary ways—in creation and in the Scriptures. The third section of Psalm 19, verses 10–14 address the practical implications in our response to God’s Word. Look more carefully at the two types of revelation that are described there. God reveals Himself first of all in creation. The Psalm opens, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” We see in verse 2 that this revelation is constant—never ending, and without interruption. We also learn, in verses 3 and 4, that it extends to all men throughout the whole world. Everyone is exposed to this knowledge and has access to it. But God also reveals Himself more fully and more accurately through His Word. You’ll note that in verses 7, 8, and 9, we find six parallel statements, each comprised of three parts. In the first part, you have a description of God’s Word;

so, you'll note the language "law," "testimony," "statutes," and so on. In the second part of each of those parallel statements, you'll see a characteristic of His Word. So it's described as "perfect" or as "sure" or as "right," and so on. And then thirdly, you'll note the personal impact of God's Word. It speaks about how it "converts the soul," "makes wise the simple," "rejoices the heart," and so on. David's words in Psalm 19, therefore, introduce the basic components of God's divine revelation, the unveiling of the knowledge of God to His creatures. It comes to us both through creation and, more fully and accurately, through His Word.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the doctrine of divine revelation. Here we'll expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that Scripture provides for us. First of all, this doctrine is summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, in Chapter 1. If you look at that, you'll note that the first paragraph reads like this: "Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God as to leave men inexcusable, yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary unto salvation." That first paragraph then goes on to speak of the necessity of the special revelation of God's Word, and really the remainder of Chapter 1, which is comprised of ten paragraphs, expounds then the whole doctrine of Scripture.

And so we begin by considering what we call general or sometimes natural revelation. It's called general revelation because, first of all, it provides general knowledge of God, though not about God as Redeemer. Secondly, God conveys that knowledge to a general audience, that is, to all mankind. It is sometimes called natural revelation—natural, because He reveals Himself through the natural world or the created order. We need to consider four components of this general revelation or natural revelation, and this will help elucidate or clarify our understanding of the doctrine.

First of all, I want us to consider the ways in which God reveals Himself in general revelation. As we've noted, He reveals himself through His works of creation and providence. Now this shouldn't surprise us, because both creating the world out of nothing, and His providential care where He is governing all of the affairs of the world, are the works of God, and so we should be able to see something of Him in them. We already saw this in Psalm 19; the created order bears witness to the Creator, and thereby serves as a medium of divine revelation. In addition to creation outside of us, God has also placed a witness inside of us as those made in the image of God. This is what John Calvin called the "sense of divinity" or the "sense of the divine" which God plants in our conscience. So if you look in your Bible at Romans 2:14–15, we read, "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law," - they don't have special revelation - "which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another." You'll see something similar when Paul is in Athens in Acts 17 and he addresses the Athenians at that time, Acts 17:22–31. So, first of all, the ways in which God reveals Himself in terms of general revelation are primarily through creation and through providence.

The second distinction that we need to make is what it is that God reveals. What exactly does He disclose or show to us? Well, as we learn in Romans 1:15–32, creation reveals specific, though limited, things about God. It manifests, for example, His wisdom and His goodness, His power and His wrath, and it shows Him to be the Creator, Governor, and Judge of the world. All of this is revealed to all men. So as you look at the created order, you can see the wisdom of God in how all of the pieces fit together, His goodness in providing for His creatures, the power of it as seen in

things like a tsunami or an earthquake or other things. We also see His wrath, so that all men have a cognizance, a recognition, that there is a Creator and a Governor, and what's more, that there is a Judge to whom they're accountable. So the second thing is what exactly is revealed.

The third thing is to whom this is revealed. To whom does this general revelation come? And the answer is that it comes to all men equally, and it comes to all men inescapably. Again, note Psalm 19, or look at Romans 1 and Romans 2. We discover that everyone—doesn't matter what part of the world you live in, what time of history you live in, what your language is, or anything else—men can look upon the works of creation and providence and see clearly these things.

The fourth distinction pertains to the limits of general revelation, and this is an important point, as we'll see more in a moment—the limits of general revelation. General revelation reveals enough to condemn men but not to save them. So in seeing the goodness, the wisdom, the power of God, knowing that He is the Creator, knowing that He is the Judge, all of that is sufficient to condemn men because of their sin, but in all of that, no matter how far you look or how deep you look, you'll never find the knowledge necessary unto salvation. There's no salvation found in general revelation. So that's the first general category, general revelation or natural revelation.

But then we need to turn, by way of contrast, to considering special revelation. And we're going to note these same four distinctions; they run parallel to what we've just said with regards to natural revelation. So special revelation comes to us—first of all, the ways in which it comes to us. How is it or through what means does God reveal things to us pertaining to salvation? Well, chiefly, it is in the Scriptures. Now we can say that there were many means culminating in Scripture. So in times past, He revealed Himself through visions and through dreams and through other miracles, through the voice of prophets that came, and so on. But all of that culminated in Scripture itself, and all that we have after the days of the apostles is our Bible. So special revelation is referring to the Holy Scriptures.

The second distinction answers the question, What exactly is revealed in special revelation? And while it is true that it also reveals things that we find in creation about God's wisdom and power and glory and so on, more specifically, the gospel is revealed in special revelation. God as a Savior and as a Redeemer is revealed to us in the Bible—Romans 1:16, “For the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.” And so the thing that sets it apart is God coming and disclosing to us Himself as a Redeemer, along with the way in which He has secured salvation for His people.

Again, the third distinction answers the question, to whom does this revelation come? And we know that the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His apostles, and the ministers of the Gospel that would follow them, to go and to “preach the gospel to every creature.” And so this special revelation of the Scriptures is to be proclaimed freely to all men. Now it is only made effectual—it's only made savingly fruitful—in the elect. But all who sit under the proclamation of the gospel are given access to this special revelation.

And then fourthly, the fourth distinction relates to the limits. Whereas general revelation had specific limits—it was enough to condemn men but not to save them, we discover that with special revelation, it is fully sufficient, or to use the words of 2 Peter 1:3, “according as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.” And so the Bible is fully sufficient for all that we need for life and godliness. We'll consider this more fully in a future lecture.

Before we pass on from this point of looking doctrinally at this particular point of theology, we can make a further clarification, and ask how it is that general and special revelation relate to one another. Well, we noted that general revelation is inadequate and incomplete, and that it necessi-

tates special revelation. This is very important within the life of the Christian, and it's very important within the life of the church, because this is the driving Biblical impetus for evangelism and for missions. If men were left only to general revelation, they will perish. They will perish without a knowledge of God in Christ, as He is revealed in the gospel. But special revelation builds on general revelation; it builds on the innate knowledge that a sinner has of their need for salvation. They can see that this Creator has wrath against them, but they need the gospel. And so general flows to the special revelation, or reinforces the need for the special revelation of God. The natural man's problem is not a lack of information. All of creation, including every blade of grass, reveals God. The unbeliever suppresses—pushes down—that truth, in an effort to maintain his own alleged autonomy. We'll consider this more in a moment. So only Jesus Christ is the Savior of sinners, and only the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures tells us of Christ and the way of salvation. It alone, as we saw in Romans 1, is the “power of God” to that end.

Thirdly in this lecture, we need to consider the doctrine polemically. Many people will object to the doctrine that we are considering, and so we need to know how to answer some of the primary arguments against the biblical doctrine of divine revelation so that we're well-equipped to refute those errors and to hold fast to the truth of the Scriptures.

One has to consider two primary objections. First of all, some object that general revelation either does not exist, or that it is not inescapably clear, because otherwise there would be no atheists, or so people say. This objection fails to take into consideration what theologians call the noetic effects of sin, which refers to the influence of sin on the mind. A person can be shown something and yet refuse to see it. In that case the problem does not lie with what is outside the person but rather what is inside them—their character, their heart, and their belligerent attitude. Romans 1:19–21 teaches that the knowledge of God is manifested and shown to all men through the created order, but that natural men “hold the truth in unrighteousness” and “become vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” In other words, they suppress the truth due to their depravity and their rebellion against God. And so this is a moral problem; it's a heart problem. It's not a problem of intelligence, which is why Romans 1 says that they remain “without excuse.” Despite all of their denials and despite all of their pontification, they remain without excuse. That's also why we sing in Psalm 14:1 that “the fool has said in his heart, There is no God.” That is not name-calling and it's not asserting that a person lacks intelligence or intellectual faculties. Psalm 14:1 is describing the sinful character of the atheist. They are acting in a way that is rebellious and foolish to say that there is no God.

But there's a second objection that we should consider. Others maintain that a person can rely entirely on natural revelation alone, without special revelation. This approach to a merely natural religion disposes of the necessity of the gospel in the Scriptures for understanding the way of salvation. But as we saw earlier in the Westminster Confession of Faith, general revelation is not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary unto salvation. You cannot find the name of Jesus, a revelation of Him as Mediator, or the knowledge of His atoning work, anywhere in creation. No, as Romans 1:16 says, the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation, and that gospel is provided in the Scriptures alone. We learn in Romans 10 that “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” And so not only is the knowledge of Christ found in the Scriptures not in creation, but also, when those Scriptures are proclaimed to us, it is necessary for us to hear them in order to believe them. So for example, we learn that young Timothy was made wise unto salvation through being taught the Scriptures by his mother and grandmother. We read that in 2 Timothy 3:15.

Fourthly and lastly, we need to consider this doctrine practically. We can highlight some practical implications for ourselves that are derived from the doctrine of divine revelation. Let me provide a few. First of all, the place of the believer's study of creation and providence. What the believer discovers is that the whole world comes alive to the Christian because we find that it is God's world, that it's created and owned by Him for showing forth His glory. Revelation 4:11 says, "For thou Hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." In other words, the universe is a theater for displaying God's glory, and the Christian has a keen interest in that. The Christian wants to see and wants to know more of who God is, and so it's a delight to discover that when we open our eyes, whether we're looking up into the outer reaches of the heavens through a telescope, or whether we're looking down into the unseen details of a human cell with a microscope, we are there studying the "handiwork of God," as the Psalmist says. You'll notice how often Jesus draws on illustrations from the created world in order to convey spiritual truths. This isn't by accident, and it's not just that Jesus looks at the created world and thinks, "Well, how can I teach some spiritual truth with this?" No, it's quite the opposite. God has Himself buried in the created world spiritual truth which Jesus is merely drawing out, so when He says, "Consider the lilies of the field," or when He's pointing to a sparrow, or speaking about the hairs upon our head, looking into the heavens, the stars, and so on, Jesus is actually bringing out for us to see truths with regards to God that He had placed there from the beginning. And so the Christian takes a keen interest in all of this, whether it be the study of botany and plants, or whether it be the study of animals, or the stars of the heavens, or many, many, many other things. Or it could be the study of history, the unfolding of God's providential dealings with men, the hand and finger of God is traced through all of these things, which brings tremendous blessing to the Christian.

A second practical area—while God's works of creation and providence lead us to worship the triune Creator, the believer recognizes that his or her chief priority is to study the Holy Scriptures above all else. It is in the Bible that we hear the voice of the Shepherd and follow Him. Jesus says in Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." So consider Job; Job says that he esteems the Word of God "more than his necessary food." Jeremiah speaks about how God's Word is the "joy and rejoicing of his heart." David refers to God's Word as something that is more valuable than gold and silver and precious stones; that it is sweeter to his taste than "honey and the honeycomb," and those examples could be multiplied throughout the Bible. The Lord has revealed the full, complete, perfect, and saving knowledge of Himself in the Scriptures, and since believers long to see and to know Him, they dig deep in the revelation of His Word. We realize how indispensable our Bible is to our spiritual well-being and to all that we consider important and precious. And so practically, this doctrine reinforces our attachment to the Bible.

A third practical area—we see the indispensable need for evangelism and missions. We've noted the gospel is the "power of God unto salvation." There is no other name given among men, "no other name under Heaven" by which men may be saved other than the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is that Name that is published, and it is Christ's person and work that has to be taken to the ends of the world, in order for sinners to be saved. Think of how Paul describes this in Romans 10:13–16, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" People all around the world are born and spend their whole life and

then die without any knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore they perish eternally in their sins. Knowing this fuels the church's drive to take the gospel to every Creature. The reason that believers engage in evangelism in their own community, and the reason that the church commissions and sends men as missionaries and preachers of the gospel to other parts of the world, is so that those who now dwell in darkness may be brought under the light of the knowledge of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, as it is revealed in His Word.

That brings us, fourthly, by way of practical application to the fact that the pinnacle of God's revelation is seen in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. Hebrews 1 opens with these words, "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." Saving knowledge of God revealed in the Bible leads the believer to worship and communion with God in Christ, and it thereby produces a deeper and closer and more intimate and sweeter walk with God. So you can see clearly the practical importance of the doctrine of divine revelation.

In conclusion, we have been noting that God has, in His condescension, chosen to reveal Himself and His truth to His creatures. That's a mystery in itself. And understanding the biblical doctrine of divine revelation prepares us to then more fully appreciate the priority and place of the Holy Scriptures. In the next lecture, we will turn our full consideration to understanding what the Bible says about itself as the inspired word of God. Understanding the doctrine of scripture provides indispensable first principles for the study of systematic theology. Why? Because the Bible serves as the primary source for our whole study of theology.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 5

INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

The devil constantly seeks to undermine and attack the Word of God. This was true from the very beginning. Remember what happened in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. After God had spoken His Word to Adam and Eve—Satan immediately brought his “pseudo” word, or false word, to our first parents, tempting them to turn from what God had said to them. He questioned God’s Word by saying to Eve, “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” No, that is not what God had said. Satan twisted and distorted God’s words and then he flatly contradicted them. He said, “Ye shall not surely die.” If that was not enough, he went on to sow doubts in Eve’s mind by speaking lies to her about the character of God. He said, “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

Satan has maintained the same tactics ever since. He employed the identical attack on Christ 4,000 years later when he tempted Him in the wilderness. And Paul writes to the Corinthians, “But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ,” 2 Corinthians 11:3. Generation after generation, the devil continues his relentless assault on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. This is the reason that it is essential that we understand the doctrine of Scripture and that we defend and maintain it with all our hearts.

We rightly speak of the Bible as the voice of God and the Word of God. That is because every word is inspired by God. The word “inspired” or “inspiration” means God-breathed. Just as we expel breath from our mouths, so, ultimately, God Himself is speaking in the Scriptures. God is the ultimate source of every word in the Bible. Since God is the author, the Scriptures are also inerrant, which means without errors, and infallible, which means it is never wrong, never able to fail.

In this first module on systematic theology, we are covering the doctrine of first principles, with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture we considered the doctrine of general and special revelation. We now turn to the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. As in all of our lectures, we’ll be expounding this doctrine under four points. We’ll look at it scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So first of all, scripturally. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17 we read, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” Paul speaks of “all Scripture”—not some of it, or even most of it, but every bit of it—and he says that this Scripture is given to us by God Himself. We’ll consider the role of the human authors in a moment, but we see here that behind everything else, God provides His own word to men, and He gives it by inspi-

ration. It is God-breathed. God is the original author of all the words of Scripture. Consequently, the Bible has divine authority.

But you'll also notice in 2 Timothy 3 that this high doctrine comes with very practical implications. Since it is God's Word, it is highly "profitable," Paul says, for men. Indeed, there is no book that is more profitable in all the world and all of history. He says it is applicable to what we think and what we do. It is for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and instruction in righteousness. The believer is fully equipped by the Bible for all good works, or, as 2 Peter 1:3 says, "God has given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness." Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3, therefore, introduce to us the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture.

But secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal exposition or overview of inspiration. Here we will expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that Scripture provides for us. So first of all, this doctrine is summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith in chapter 1, both in paragraph 2 and in paragraph 4. In paragraph 2, the Westminster Confession lists the 66 books that comprise the Bible, thereby identifying and limiting what we mean by the content of Scripture, excluding other things. And it says this: "All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life." Further, in paragraph 4, we read, "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."

We must begin by defining some important terms. We can speak of the plenary, verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, and each of these words carries weight of importance. So think about each of those words. First of all, we refer to plenary verbal inspiration. So the word plenary means that it is extending to all parts equally; that this inspiration extends to every part of the Bible; it is full, complete, absolute. For example, Jesus said in Matthew 5:18—this is the Sermon on the Mount—He says, "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." Now those two words—a "jot" is a reference to the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It looks like just a small stroke. And a "tittle" is actually a little piece of a Hebrew letter. You might think of it as a little tail on the end of a letter. So the Lord is saying, right down into the very letters of the Bible, that all of them are upheld as the Word of God. So we have "plenary," which means that this inspiration extends to all the parts of the Bible.

The second word is "verbal"—plenary, verbal inspiration; and by "verbal," we mean that it was given in written words. So it is propositional. Proverbs 22:20–21 says, "Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, that I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth." Among other things, God provided Scripture in written words for their permanent preservation, which we'll consider in more detail in a future lecture.

The third word is "inspiration"—plenary, verbal inspiration. As we've already seen, that means "God-breathed." So we read in our Bibles over and over again the words, "Thus saith the Lord." God is obviously speaking to us and He's speaking to us through the Scripture. The ultimate origin of the Bible is God Himself.

And we can add two more words that we referred to earlier. As you probably know, the Old Testament was primarily written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. And the inspiration of the Bible applies to these original autographs, the original Hebrew and Greek texts that the Lord has given to us. So when we speak of these additional two words, of "inerrancy" and "infallibility," along with inspiration, we have in mind, of course, the original Scriptures that God has given to us.

So the next word is the word "inerrancy," which means that there are no errors in the Bible.

Notice how Paul demonstrates this in Galatians 3:16, where he builds his whole doctrinal point on the fact that an Old Testament word was given in the singular form rather than in the plural. He says, “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds,” that’s plural, “as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ.” So inerrancy extends to every detail; there are no errors whatsoever. Not in the tense of a verb, not in whether a word is singular or plural, or anything else.

Our last word is the word “infallibility,” which means that the Bible is reliable, it is sure; it is unchangeable; it is never wrong. The Scriptures cannot fail. And this must be so, because God is the Author, and God is Truth itself. His veracity is one of His attributes. So He is incapable of inspiring falsehood or speaking anything that is untrustworthy. So the Bible is both inerrant and infallible.

But we must also consider the role of the human authors that God employed in writing the Holy Scriptures, the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament prophets and apostles. In 2 Peter 1:19–21 we read this, “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” So let’s think about that a little. We see that “holy men” spoke, and that’s a reference to those prophets and apostles who were set apart by God. That’s what’s meant by “holy men,” men that were set apart by God for this purpose. So this is speaking to man’s agency, man’s involvement. Men, with their full personality, mind, heart, imagination, and will, were the agents or instruments that God employed. That is why each writer’s personal characteristics are reflected in the text. So when you read, for example, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, both of which were written by Luke, there’s a certain character—the vocabulary that he uses, the sentence structure that he follows, and so on—and it’s obviously different from the Apostle John, who wrote the Gospel of John, and who wrote three Epistles and the book of Revelation. Or the Apostle Paul, he has a very distinctive style in the way that he writes, laying out arguments, and so on. And so each of these writers—and the same is true for the Old Testament prophets—had their own personal characteristics, and that’s reflected—we can see it in our Bibles.

But looking at 2 Peter 1, it also says that they spoke “as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” So this speaks to the divine origin of their words. God is the ultimate source of the special revelation that they’re writing. The Holy Spirit so fully influenced the writings of the apostles that, in whole and in every detail, the Scriptures are God’s perfectly accurate, infallible Word. You might also look up in your Bibles 1 Corinthians 2:13 and 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

So if you put these things together, we see that men were 100% engaged in writing, and God 100% superintended the production of those writings, guiding the human authors so that their words would be nothing but the words of God. Now that is not to say that God mechanically dictated his message to human authors. That is not true, because it would be a denial of the human author’s agency. The Bible does not teach that God so overruled the mental activity of the human authors that they were rendered passive, if you will. Rather, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit communicated through the writers the very words of God Himself. So the origin of all that is written comes from the mind of God, which is communicated by the Holy Spirit in superintending the writings of these human authors, so that what we have in our Bibles are the very words of God Himself. So that’s a summary of the doctrine of inspiration.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically. As we noted in the introduction of this lecture, Satan constantly seeks to attack the doctrine of Scripture in every generation through a wide number of subtle ways. So we must consider and answer some of the primary arguments,

noting specifically in this lecture those attacks against the doctrine of inspiration. This will ensure that we are equipped to refute these errors and to hold fast to the truth of Scripture.

We will first survey the modern attacks, and then summarize their common errors. So the first group would be those that we call the theological liberals, so theological liberalism. In some cases, the theological liberals would say flat out that the Bible is not the Word of God. Some of them would be a little more nuanced, and they would say that the Bible contains the Word of God, but along with many other errors. So notice that word “contains.” The Bible “contains” the Word of God, but along with many errors. So when it comes to the history that’s given, well, that may be inaccurate, they say; the science that is reflected in the text, well, that may be inaccurate; or there may be grammatical inaccuracies, and so on. What’s happening here? Well, this false teaching is basically saying that Scripture is the product of men, but a book that God uses, and He may use it for, you know, encouraging people or for their moral improvement or something else. They don’t say that the Bible is the Word of God—it contains the word of God. You might even think of a husk with the kernel in the middle. They would say that the Bible that you have in your hands is the husk, and that the Word of God is the kernel inside. And so there might be something little here, and something little there, when you’re reading through your Bibles, that are true, that come from God. So that’s the first set of errors.

The second set is the neo-orthodox view. This would be reflected in writers in the 20th century like the theologian Karl Barth and others: the neoorthodox view. And they teach that the Bible becomes the Word of God. So the Scripture is the instrument that God uses to existentially communicate this word, though the Bible itself is a fallible human record. And so the emphasis is that it is personal, not propositional, not verbal, not the words, but it is a personal experience. So the emphasis is on experience when you’re reading. That would work its way out, for example, by telling people that, Well, you’re reading your Bible, and as you’re reading along, all of a sudden something jumps out from the passage, and it is especially meaningful to you, and it affects you and impacts you, and so on. Well, there is the Word of God. So the Bible itself and the words that you find on the page aren’t the Word of God, but it is the means that God uses to somehow bring this experience home to your hearts. Similarly, some would contend that God speaks through the words, but not in the words. So it’s a similar problem. You can see that readily.

Another related view is that the intent is inspired, and the purpose is infallible, though the content or words are not inspired. So this error emphasizes that the Bible is fully human and thus errant in matters pertaining, again, to science and history, and so on.

So those are some of the common views, some of the common errors or attacks against the biblical doctrine of inspiration. And we can summarize some of the root problems that they all share. All of them stem from unbiblical notions about the roles of God and man in inspiration. And if you think about what we’ve described, they conclude, in essence, that man replaces God. God is responding to man perhaps and using his efforts, but God is not the source or origin of His own Word. God is replaced by man, and we end up with what they would consider a merely human book. Behind all of these errors also lies an anti-supernaturalism. So you think in terms of what is natural—you understand that; supernatural—they’re against what is supernatural; they want to keep everything earthy and human and man-centered. And so the same group of people—the theological liberals, who would reject the virgin birth, and would reject miracles that the Lord Jesus Christ did in His earthly ministry, those who would reject as well the idea of an eternal heaven and hell, and of the existence of angels, and all sorts of other things, also reject the hand of God in giving to us an inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word. And so there’s an anti-supernaturalism that

lies behind this.

These falsehoods also deny that revelation is propositional. You'll note how they don't want to say that the words are inspired, that the letters are inspired. They want to get away from what is propositional revelation. And so that's why we began where we did. It's helpful to go back and think in terms of plenary—it extends to all of the parts; verbal—dealing with the very words that we find in our Bible. That's what gives us the boundaries for understanding inspiration. So really, the fundamental question is, does the final authority rest in God or man? Because rejecting God as the Author of Scripture means rejecting the divine authority of God's Word. And this too demonstrates part of the problem with these errors, these falsehoods. Behind them is a desire to be able to break loose from the authority of God that is exercised in His Word over men. In contrast to all these errors, the biblical orthodox view can be summarized this way: the Bible is the Word of God. Not that it contains the Word of God, or becomes the Word of God, the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is propositional revelation, provided by the Holy Spirit, through the means of human authors. And so for the believer, we say: What the Bible says, God says. What the Bible says, God says. Or, in the words of the Westminster Larger Catechism, answer 4, "The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience."

Fourthly, we need to consider this doctrine practically. Considering the doctrine of inspiration, we can now highlight some of the practical implications for ourselves, as we saw in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. Let's consider a few. First of all, the authority of the Bible is a fundamental article of the faith. So we must not allow any toleration for undermining that authority. Why? Because without the Scriptures, you and others can have no knowledge of God in Christ, and would be without hope, and "without God in the world," as Paul says in Ephesians 2:12. We must worship God as He is revealed in the Bible alone. We must cultivate believing confidence that we can read the infallible Word of God, and that it could be the "power of God" for salvation to us and others, as we see in Romans 1:16.

Secondly, love for God means that we should love our Bibles, since it is the very Word of God, and the means of hearing God's voice and knowing God's mind and will. David says in Psalm 119:97, "Oh, how I love thy law. It is my meditation all the day." We think about what we love. We need to read the Bible deeply and fully, meditating upon it, thinking long and hard about it. We should memorize it, and in memorizing it we need to give special care to accuracy with every inspired word. Psalm 119:11 says, "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee."

Thirdly, the believer must rely on the inspired Scriptures for growing in spiritual maturity. Matthew 4:4 says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." The Spirit who inspired the Bible uses the Bible as the means for the believer increasing in gospel holiness, as Jesus says in John 17:17, "Sanctify them through thy truth: Thy word is truth."

Fourthly and lastly, in 2 Timothy 4:2, God calls ministers of the gospel, pastors, to "preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine." So ministers are to preach God's Word, not their own ideas or those of other men. Expounding the text of Scripture itself is necessary, pointing men back to God's inspired Word. Two chapters earlier in 2 Timothy 2:15 we read, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." It is a sober thing for fallible men to preach the infallible Word of God. If you're a pastor, you need to humbly plead for the Spirit's help in preparing and preaching the Word. Pray that you would be an instrument of Christ,

who is the true Minister of the Word, through the Spirit, who is the true author of the Word.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture we have considered the plenary verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. This lays the foundation for the divine authority of the inerrant and infallible Word of God. In the next lecture, we will consider some further characteristics of the Holy Scriptures which flow from its divine inspiration. As you can see, understanding the doctrine of Scripture provides indispensable first principles for the study of systematic theology, because the Bible serves as the primary source for our whole study of theology.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

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?”

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 7

THE CANON OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Many of you will have visited a library at some point, whether big or small. Some of you may even have a small selection of books that you have collected in your home. Libraries serve as a depository of written literature. We find them all over the world, in universities and schools, local communities, and private homes. Ordinarily, the books in larger libraries are organized according to subjects, and then arranged in order after the names of the authors. A visitor can explore the stacks, scanning the shelves for volumes that would prove useful for what they desire to research or investigate.

When we think about the Bible, we usually think of it as one large book, and that is obviously true. But in another sense, it is also a small library comprised of 66 different books written by various human authors with diverse backgrounds over the course of many centuries, all of which are inspired by God Himself, the ultimate author of every word.

In this lecture, we will consider the canon of Holy Scripture. Now the word “canon” comes from a Greek word that referred to a straight rod used for measuring. This rod served as a standard or norm. The word was then applied to the Holy Scriptures, which are the inspired standard or authoritative rule for faith and practice in all ages. So when we say canon, we mean the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament. These 66 books of the Bible, no more and no fewer, comprise what we call the canon of Holy Scripture.

At the time of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, the people of God possessed a complete collection of the Old Testament Scriptures. Both Christ and the apostles recognized their divine authority and read them, studied them, memorized them, and frequently cited them accordingly. During the time of the apostles, the process of collecting the New Testament Scriptures began immediately. Paul, of course, knew that his writings were inspired, which is why he writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:27, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read until all the holy brethren.” And he also says in Colossians 4:16, “And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans.” Likewise, Peter refers to the writings of Paul as holy “scripture” in 2 Peter 3:15–16. As the God-given books of the New Testament were being widely distributed, problems arose, and this was due to heretics rejecting some of the New Testament books, and other false teachers promoting uninspired books of merely human composition. To combat these errors, the Church found it necessary to meet by council to declare what is recognized as the exact content of the New Testament for the edification of God’s people.

We continue in this first module on systematic theology covering the doctrine of first principles with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture, we considered some of the properties of Scripture that flow from its inspiration. Those properties serve as a foun-

dation now for our consideration of the canonicity of Scripture. As in our other lectures, we will look at the doctrine of canonicity—scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So first of all, we'll consider it scripturally. In Romans 3:1, Paul asks the question, "What advantage then hath the Jew?" "What advantage then hath the Jew?" Now, if you were asked that question, how would you answer it? What privileges did the people of God have under the Old Testament? More specifically, if you had to limit yourself to one, what chief advantage would you highlight? Well, Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, supplies the answer in verse 2. He says, "Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God." Oracles are divine sayings, utterances, originating from God. These oracles of God, as he calls them, refer to the Old Testament Scriptures. The source or origin of them is God, as we saw in the lecture on inspiration. But God, having supplied the Scriptures, also committed this divine revelation unto people. Well, what people? Specifically, the Lord committed them unto the church, the people of God, who were to recognize the divine authority of the Scriptures and to receive them, believe them, and hold fast to them. It was their chief advantage, or privilege, to have the Word of God. It would, of course, be no advantage if God supplied the Scriptures and His people failed to recognize or receive them. God's intention is for the Church to have His complete revelation and to have complete confidence in those Scriptures as the very word of God, their only rule for faith and practice. So Paul's words in Romans 3:1–2, therefore, establish our expectations for recognizing and receiving God's written Word that is committed unto us, and it thereby introduces to us the concept of the canonicity of Holy Scripture.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the canonicity of Scripture, and here we will expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that the Bible provides for us. But first of all, let's hear how the Westminster Confession speaks of this. In chapter 1, paragraph 2, we read, "Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all of the books of the Old Testament and New Testament, which are these," and then it goes on in that first chapter to list off all 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament. So this recognizes the parameters of the Bible as consisting of 66 books, no more or less. So there's a summary statement in the Westminster Confession.

Now, we explored in the previous lecture the divine authority of Scripture. Let me remind you how the Confession speaks of this in chapter 1, paragraph 4. It says, "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." The nature of the canon must be distinguished from the recognition of the canon. In other words, the canon is inherently authoritative. The recognition of the canon by men or the church does not make it authoritative. Now that is true because only God is adequate to witness to Himself, as we see in John 5:38–39, for example.

That leads us to the most fundamental and important point regarding canonicity, which is this: the canon is self-authenticating. So the canon is proved authentic, genuine, and authoritative from itself. This point is reinforced by the material that we covered in a previous lecture on the self-testing nature of Scripture. The believer is brought to recognize the divine authority of the books of the Bible with the aid of the witness of the Spirit, but those books are authoritative whether men recognize it or not.

Furthermore, the self-authenticating nature of the New Testament canon is reinforced by further criteria, and that includes apostolicity; that is, each book had to be written by or under an apostle. Well, why do we believe this? Well, because Christ promised to use the apostles to supply

Scripture. You think toward the end of his ministry, for example, in John 14 and in John 16, we see Him speaking about this. And that is manifest, for example, in John 21:24; John is writing, and he says, “This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true.” Paul confirms this in places like Ephesians 3:5 when he says, “Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit.” The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, as we see in Ephesians 2:20, because those divinely-appointed offices, apostle and prophet, were given by God to provide us with the completion of the canon, with the remaining New Testament books. That gives us the foundation upon which the church is built. And this is why it was so important that there was a confirmation that the New Testament books were actually written by apostles, the ones claiming to be writing. Which is why Paul says, for example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, “The salutation of Paul with mine own hand,” which is the token in every epistle—“so I write.” What is he doing? He’s confirming to the church in Thessalonica that this is indeed an epistle that had been written by him, because they understood, just as he understood, and the church generally, that it was the apostles that God would use to inspire them in writing Holy Scripture for the provision of the church.

But there’s more. The self-authenticating nature of the New Testament canon is also reinforced by its contents, its internal contents. The New Testament books are, of course, self-consistent, and agree with the teaching of other portions of the Bible, and are of the same high spiritual character as we see in the Bible as a whole. We have numerous examples throughout the New Testament of the confirmation of this within the books themselves. So you think, for example, of the last book of the New Testament and its first verse. Revelation 1:1 says, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his Angel unto his servant John.” Well, that has all the characteristics of what we’ve been describing within the contents of the book itself. And that same book, the book of Revelation, ends with these words, in Revelation 22:18–19, “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” The Lord is saying we are not to add to or take away from anything that He has provided through His apostles. So you see these indicators within the content of Scripture itself. Now, there are many examples that could be given. A few others include 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:14, 1 Corinthians 2:12–13 as well as 14:37, we could list many, many, many others.

Furthermore, the self-authenticating nature of the New Testament canon further explains its universal reception by the church. So, think back to what we said at the beginning of this lecture. As we saw in Romans 3:2, God committed the Scriptures to a community designed to receive them, namely, the church, and so they must be accepted by the church as a whole. This was true of the New Testament saints and their view of the Old Testament. Paul refers to the Old Testament as Holy “Scripture.” Our Lord does the same in the Gospels. He speaks of Timothy being raised and taught the Holy “Scriptures” from the time of his youth, referring to the Old Testament. This is the testimony, of course, of the New Testament with regards to the rest of the New Testament as well. And there are many, many examples of some portions of the New Testament referring to other portions of the New Testament as Scripture. In 2 Peter 3:3, you have a passage of Scripture given to us, and then that passage is actually quoted later on by Jude. You can look at 2 Peter 3:16 as well;

turn to Jude verses 17 and 18 for comparison here. Many examples of this can be given. Indeed, it would be a helpful and edifying study for you to compile a list of these. But this explains why the canon was historically settled in God's providence, with the church as a whole recognizing the inspired New Testament Scriptures. It had to be so. God gave those 27 books in the New Testament to His church. They had to receive them and recognize them, universally, as the people of God. And that, of course, is exactly what has unfolded, as I say, in God's providence.

So we have some of the components of the biblical principles that contribute to our understanding of the doctrine of the canon. We recognize, first of all, that it is self-authenticating; that it is deemed authentic, or genuine, and authoritative from itself. And that's borne out in the apostolic witness and it's borne out in the contents of the New Testament books, and in the fact that they're received by the people of God.

But that doesn't mean that everyone agrees with this. And so thirdly, we need to consider and answer some of the primary arguments which attack the canonicity of Holy Scripture. This is the polemical consideration of the doctrine, and this will ensure that we are equipped to refute these errors and to hold fast to the truth of Scripture.

Well, the first thing that we need to consider is the difference between the Roman Catholic doctrine and the biblical and Protestant doctrine. So within Roman Catholicism, they maintain a dual authority: the church has authority with all of its traditions, and Scripture has authority and they are co-equal. Indeed, even worse than that, their making them or alleging that they're co-equal, ends up exalting the church and the traditions of the church above the Bible. The Protestants, on the other hand, hold to the doctrine of Scripture alone, that the Bible alone is the standard for faith and practice; that it alone has divine authority; that everything is to be subjected to Scripture and tested by the Word of God.

So how does this affect the doctrine of canonicity? Well, the Roman Catholics will come and say that they are the Church that gave you the Bible. You can understand the idea here—they see the church as being in a position of authority, and they're the ones giving you the Bible. Well, Protestants, on the other hand, say, no, the church recognized the self-authenticated canon, but the church did not create that canon. In other words, the Bible comes first, then the church, which is actually born out of the Bible. Similarly, the Roman Catholics will say that the church is the mother of Scripture—you know, the picture is of the mother giving birth to the Scripture, again exalting the church above the Bible. Whereas Protestants and the Bible itself teach us that the church is the servant of the Bible, not over it but under it; that we are the servants of Holy Scripture.

The Roman Catholics teach that the church has infallible interpretation. So the church is to tell you what the Bible says and what the Bible means, and they therefore exercise that authority. And so there have been times in history when they've said, "We can't even give the people in the pew, the people of God, the Bible because they'll make a mess of things, right? We need to tell them what they're to think about what the Bible says." You can see how this flows out of exalting the authority of the church over the Bible. Well, the biblical doctrine that Protestants hold is that there is no private interpretation. So 2 Peter 1:20–21, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man"—see there, it's not the church that's originated it in their own self, "but," it says, "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." And so the first area in considering this polemically is being able to recognize the errors of the Roman Catholic Church in exalting the church over the authority of the Bible.

But there's a second one that we can consider and that is the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha pro-

vides a helpful test case of the marks of canonicity. Now when I say “Apocrypha,” or the “Apocryphal books,” we’re referring to the collection of books that is found in between the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament Scriptures, within Roman Catholic Bibles. So where did these come from? The Apocryphal books were written after the Old Testament was completed, so after the prophecy of Malachi. And during that four hundred years intervening, these books came about—they were produced, and then we come of course to the Gospels, and then we have the New Testament Scripture. So this middle collection of books which Roman Catholics have in their Bible is referred to as the Apocrypha. Now what does the Westminster Confession say about this? In chapter 1, paragraph 3, it says, “The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, or to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, then other human writings.” So that’s the summary of what Protestants believe regarding the Apocrypha.

Now, let’s think back through the doctrines that we were reflecting on under the second point and test the Apocrypha by that biblical standard. Well, first of all, we have to conclude that the Apocrypha is not self-authenticating, and that’s going to be born out in what follows; nor is it confirmed by the witness of the Spirit. Notice some of the details. So for example, the Apocrypha was not authored by prophets or apostles. Now we saw that was one of the criteria—the Old Testament Scriptures given by prophets, the New Testament given by apostles and prophets as well. Well, those books are not authored by prophets and apostles, which means they fail to meet the criteria that the Bible itself provides for us.

Secondly, in reading through the Apocryphal books, you notice how contradictory they are. They’re contradictory to themselves, but more importantly, contradictory at points to doctrines and truths taught elsewhere in the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, there are parts of the Apocrypha that are pure fiction—that are fictional. So the contents, the standard that the Bible gives us regarding the contents, also cause the Apocrypha to fail the test.

And then lastly, the Apocrypha was not universally received by the church. Indeed, the Jews did not accept them as Scriptures, the apostles did not quote them, and the early church did not receive them in those first few centuries. So the Apocrypha fails to meet the standards of canonicity. Here we have another example of the use of the doctrine of canonicity polemically.

But fourthly and lastly, we need to consider this practically. Considering the canon of Scripture, we can highlight some practical implications for ourselves, just a few. So this doctrine of canonicity leads to a high and holy esteem of the Scriptures. The Bible, and only the Bible, provides the authoritative standard for even itself. That’s what we mean by the self-authenticating nature of the canon. God alone can speak for Himself. Think of the words of Daniel 4:35, “And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou?” And so this doctrine of canonicity gives us a high and holy esteem for the Scriptures.

Secondly, we have a Holy Bible, one that is set apart from all other books and of perfect purity. We must take care, then, to resist adding to it or taking away from these 66 books of the Bible. We read in Deuteronomy 12:32, “What things soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.” This is very similar to what we saw earlier in that quotation from the end of Revelation chapter 22. In other words, we must fear God. Isaiah 66:2 says, “But to this man will I look even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word.” This is descriptive of the fear of God, of handling the Bible as a holy word that He has given to us. And we should be jealous about preserving it, not allowing people to tinker with it by adding

or subtracting from it.

Thirdly, understanding the doctrine of canonicity cultivates confidence in the Word of God. The believer can be certain—absolutely certain—that their Bibles provide the divine revelation that God has committed to His church for their spiritual edification. Now there will be many unbelievers who will come and question this, and will say, “Well, there were lots of books that were written in the first century, and how do we know? Maybe we’ve got the books wrong; maybe there are ones that should be included that aren’t, and others that shouldn’t be included.” And there’s all sorts of confusion, and this can have a tendency in some believers in taking away, as it were, their confidence, or shaking their confidence in the Scripture. So our study of the doctrine of canonicity addresses that, right? It sends our roots down into the Scriptures themselves, solidifying in our own hearts and minds the fact that this Holy Bible with its 66 books is indeed the complete and perfect canon of Holy Scripture.

Well, in this lecture, we considered the canonicity of the Scriptures—that the Bible is comprised exclusively of 66 inspired books, 39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New Testament. In the next lecture, we will consider the preservation of the canon, as well as the biblical principles which control the translation of the Scriptures into various languages.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 8

PRESERVATION AND TRANSLATION OF SCRIPTURE

Imagine owning something that you consider very special, though it may or may not have much monetary value. It could be something simple, perhaps something that belonged in your family for a couple of generations. What would you do with such a special object? How would you treat it? Well, you certainly would not handle it like other common objects that you own. You would not leave it where it could be lost or stolen, nor would you put it in a place where it could be torn or broken. You would protect it. Why? Because you would wish to preserve it, to keep it, perhaps even to pass it on to someone else when you die.

Well, there is nothing more valuable in the entire world than the Bible. And no one considers it more precious than God Himself. After all, it is His own Word. He graciously gave the Scriptures to instruct and to spiritually enrich men, leading His people to salvation and edification. But it was not only intended for those who first received the Scriptures. Remember what Jesus said in John 17:20. God intended for His Word to be passed down from generation to generation, century after century, and He also intended for it to be taken to every tribe and country all around the world. In Matthew 28:19, He told His disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations.” Well, that required two things. First, the Scriptures had to be preserved in order to be passed down through the generations. God not only initially gave His inspired Word, but He Himself also determined, by His providence, to ensure that it would be preserved and kept pure in all ages. Secondly, the Scriptures would need to be translated from their original languages into the language of people all over the world.

In this lecture, we will consider these two related matters—the preservation of Scripture throughout time, and the translation of Scripture into other languages. As you know, in this first module on systematic theology, we are covering the doctrine of first principles with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture, we considered the canonicity of Scripture. God provided in the canon a complete and perfect collection of 66 divinely inspired books, which comprise our Bibles. In this lecture, we will study what we are to believe about the preservation of that Bible, and its translation into various languages. As in our other lectures, we will look at this scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So first of all, we’ll introduce this scripturally. In Psalm 12:6–7, we sing, “The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, Thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever.” Well, this text teaches us that God’s words are perfectly pure words. Well, we saw that in an earlier lecture on the inspiration

of Scripture. But we are also told that God will certainly keep and preserve these words in their purity. Notice that God Himself assumes the responsibility to protect His own Word. He alone, of course, has the power and ability to guarantee the preservation of the Scriptures in His providence. If it were merely left to the feeble and fragile hands of men, the Bible could be corrupted or lost. But the Christian has no such worries. The preservation of the Bible throughout the ages lies in the hands of their almighty Lord.

Since every word in the Bible is pure, careful attention must be given to its translation. Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:13, “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.” Notice that God does not just provide inspired ideas or thoughts, but Spirit-given words. This is so important that in Galatians 3:16, Paul quotes from the Old Testament and builds his whole argument on the difference between a word being in the singular rather than in the plural. So it is important that regarding the original Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament that we give attention to safeguarding the details of the inspired text when translating them into other languages. Psalm 12:6–7 serves as one example of the Bible itself setting our expectations for what we are to think about the preservation of the Bible, and how we are to approach its translation. The important point is that the Scriptures themselves instruct us on these matters and not the world’s ideas. We must prove from the Bible the basis for our confidence in our translations of Scripture.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the preservation and translation of Scripture. And as in the other lectures, here we will expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that the Bible provides for us. And we’ll begin by turning our attention to the Westminster Confession of Faith once again, and this time to chapter 1, paragraph 8, which covers both of the matters that we’re discussing. Here’s what Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 8 says: “The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic”—authentic, authoritative—“so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.”

Well, that’s a long paragraph, but it summarizes the biblical teaching on both preservation and translation. And let me highlight just a couple of the phrases that we have in that paragraph. Note especially, first of all, with regards to preservation, the doctrine of preservation, that it says, “and by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages.” God has providentially preserved the purity of the Scriptures throughout time. And secondly, with regards to translation, it says, “they are to be translated into the vulgar language”—which means the common language, or the common native vernacular—“of every nation unto which they come.” So there’s a helpful summary for us from the Westminster Confession.

Well, these two issues, both preservation and translation, reflect the two fundamental issues in assessing every version of the Bible. First of all, we must ensure that the underlying manuscripts, especially the Greek New Testament manuscripts that are being used, are the correct ones, or are

the authentic texts that God gave us. And secondly, we must ensure that the philosophy of translation being employed is correct and accurate. So with regards to preservation, we want to ensure that we have the authentic texts that God gave us, and with regards to translation, we are concerned with accuracy.

Let's think for a moment a little more about the preservation of Holy Scripture. Now, you'll remember, in Colossians 4:16, Paul says, "And when this epistle"—the epistle to the Colossians—"is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans." So he understood, and the church understood, that what he was writing was Scripture, and therefore it shouldn't be restricted to just one place and a few people. It needed to be taken elsewhere; it needed, indeed, to be taken everywhere. And so the Scriptures were given to the church of Christ to be received, and then widely distributed through faithful transmission. After all, the house of God, which is the church of the living God, is the pillar and ground of the truth, as 1 Timothy 3:15 tells us.

We also know that the Bible had warned of heretics who would seek to corrupt the Scriptures. So godly scribes were vigilant to make faithful copies, careful not to change anything in the text, not even a letter, and in fact to dispose of anything that was mistaken or errant. And those copies, of course, were then copied as they went to different regions of the world—into Asia and the outer reaches of Europe, into Africa, and so on—those copies of copies were multiplied into vast numbers as they spread. And so you had, for example, the original letter that Paul wrote to the Colossians, inspired by the word of God, and that letter was then copied in, perhaps, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, and elsewhere, in Antioch, in various places; and then within that local place, copies of the copy would be made, and eventually copies of copies of copies were made, and there was a multiplication of vast numbers of the Scriptures, as they were taken to the church and the people of God throughout the ages. Well, the question that we're dealing with is, how can we be sure that pure copies have been maintained and spread down through the ages to ourselves? Well, the providential preservation of the Scriptures can be seen in a host of passages. We've already considered a couple, but think, for example, of Deuteronomy 29:29 which says, "But those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that they may do all the words of this law." We read in Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever." Again, we sing in Psalm 119:160, "Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth forever." Well, we turn to the New Testament and find the same thing. Jesus is speaking at the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:18, and He says, "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." And, of course, this must be the case, because how could the believer be called to believe and obey all the words of Scripture if not all the words of Scripture were preserved? And so we are confident that it was kept pure in every age by the Lord, and not lost to His beloved church.

Now, turning our attention to the translation of Scripture. Given our doctrine of Scripture, all that we've learned in these lectures, accuracy becomes absolutely essential in translating the Bible. We learned about the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture—that every word and all of the words come to us from the Holy Spirit, and that therefore they're inerrant—without error, and that they're infallible. And so for us the question is, when we take those Scriptures—Old Testament Hebrew, New Testament Greek—and we translate them into Spanish or Chinese or English or German, whatever the language may be, the question is, what is equivalent to what the author wrote? But notice, the question is not, How would our readers understand it? The focus is on the text, not the reader. What does the text say? And this is important, because the Scriptures may be taken, for example, to a country where there are no lambs, where there aren't any sheep, and yet you know that

the word “lamb” is in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Well, you can imagine a translator might say, “Well, there’s no lambs, no sheep in this country, but they have pigs and they’re familiar with pigs and they understand what a pig is, so we’ll translate the word, not ‘sheep’ or ‘lamb,’ but we’ll translate it ‘pig’.” What are they doing? They’re thinking in terms of the reader, not the text. Well, you know that in this case, that would be disastrous; it would be disastrous theologically, because the lamb has significance, as the Old Testament sacrifice, and Christ is “the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.” And you know that in the Old Testament, under the ceremonial laws of Old Testament Israel, the pig was actually an unclean animal; it was one that was to be set aside, that they were prohibited from having contact with. And so if you translated it “pig,” you would end up with all sorts of confusion. No, what should be done is translate it according to what the text says, and then explain to people what the text means. First, we’re given an accurate translation, and then we need faithful teaching of what that text—what the Bible—actually means. So you can see the importance of accuracy of translation followed by faithful teaching, not taking teaching and then putting it into, as it were, the translation itself. That would be altering the Word of God, which is a problem.

Well, thirdly, we must consider and answer some of the primary arguments which attack the providential preservation and the accurate translation of Holy Scripture. This is considering the doctrine polemically, and this will ensure that we are equipped to refute those errors that come up, and to hold fast to the truth of Scripture.

The very first recorded words of Satan in the Bible are these, “Yea, hath God said.” Four words, “Yea, hath God said.” The devil has continued to use the same foolish tactics throughout the ages to attack and undermine the Scriptures. Now, he can do so by either seeking to take away the Bible, or by undermining the believer’s confidence in the Bible, which is the Word of God. Well, attacks against the providential preservation of Scripture arose in the nineteenth century, and persist to the present day. These attacks aim at undermining the confidence of God’s people. What happened? Well, in the nineteenth century, especially in the West, there were a number of spiritual departures from Scripture, and it was during that era that someone discovered some Greek New Testament manuscripts in a burn barrel. And they looked at these and determined that they were, allegedly, older than the manuscripts that were commonly used in making translations. Not only were they older, they were viewed as manuscripts that had been lost for fourteen centuries and had then just been rediscovered. And so there was a great deal of excitement about this—a great deal of excitement—and two schools of thought arose. One was that the supposedly oldest manuscripts were the ones that were the most authentic, even though there were just a tiny few of them, like the ones I’ve just mentioned. On the other side, you had the position that had been maintained for a long time that where there were the most manuscripts, we should have greater confidence. Well, the modern movement that emerged from that nineteenth-century incident, has led to publishing translations, at least in the English language, that are based on Greek manuscripts that follow the idea of using these very few, allegedly old, manuscripts. But think about what we’ve just learned in this lecture. If portions of the Scripture were missing for fourteen centuries, then the church didn’t have the authentic text during that period, which would be contrary to what the Bible teaches us about the preservation of Scripture. God has determined that He will keep it pure in all ages, and He’ll preserve it for His church throughout the ages. So it is impossible that those texts would be authentic if they were missing for fourteen centuries. You might also ask yourself the question, “Why would something so old not be worn out?” And the reason is because it was not used. The reliable texts would be the ones that were used over and over and over again, for translation and

for copying. And those that were known to be less reliable would be set aside and not used, and thus not worn out. You might also ask yourself the question, “Why were there so few?” You would expect that if these were the most reliable manuscripts, that there would be tons of them—that there would be many, many, many of them. Well, that’s a good point. In fact, we should believe, we should conclude, that the more reliable texts are found in multitudinous proportions, found in many, many, many, many copies.

You’ll also note that, with regards to this, the issue of the region from which these manuscripts came—these questionable manuscripts that are being pawned off or being promoted as the best. They came from North Africa. And in the ancient church, North Africa was an area where there was a lot of difficulty with heresy, like the Arians who taught that Jesus was only a man, and that He was not God. And so take for an interesting example, 1 Timothy 3:16. That text says, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” “God was manifest in the flesh.” Now, in 97% of the manuscripts, we have the word “God,” but in a tiny few of these Egyptian manuscripts, that is missing. Instead it just says “He is manifest;” they supply the pronoun. And that’s the text that’s being used by many modern scholars. Well, no surprise there, is it? It came from a region that was denying that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh. And so the point here is that these, some of these modern notions are a way in which the devil can come in and begin to disturb and unsettle the Lord’s people, and their confidence of whether the Bible that we’ve had and has been had through the ages is actually His true Word. But what authority guides us in this question? The answer is Scripture alone guides us. And the Bible teaches us the doctrine of providential preservation.

Now secondly, there is the other matter we’ve been considering, regarding translation. And there are two schools regarding translation. One focuses on accuracy, the other focuses on readability—how readable it is. And, in contrast to the emphasis on the content of the original Scriptures, saying, in other words, what the text says by how the author wrote it, there are others that have begun to say that we should insist on translating the Scripture thought by thought, not word by word. Well, this is false, and this incorrect view is focusing on the response of the reader, not focusing on the text of Scripture. So they emphasize things like, “How would we say it? How would we say this?” Well, this contradicts the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture, which we know from the Bible, as we saw in 1 Corinthians 2:13, that this inspiration applies to the words of Scripture, not just to the thoughts or intentions. And so the translator must follow the inspired words of the text, and then leave the interpretation of those words to others, to the reader, or to a pastor who’s preaching, and so on. To do otherwise, to view interpretation as Scripture, would be another of the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. And so we need to be careful that this notion that some modern translators are employing, of not sticking with accuracy to the words of Scripture and translating them accordingly, but rather being a little more fluid, a little more loose, and translating the idea of what the passage is saying—that is something that needs to be resisted because of what the Bible teaches us about itself. So there are problems both with regards to preservation and translation that we should be alert to.

But fourthly, we need to consider this practically. And in considering the preservation and translation of Scripture, we can highlight some implications for ourselves. First of all, the believer should know that he has good grounds for complete confidence that he has the very Word of God in faithful translations of the Scriptures. We can take up our Bibles, faithful translations of our Bible, and say, “This is indeed the very Word of God.” What does that do? That deepens faith, and it deepens love, and it even deepens our delight in the Scriptures. We should be thankful to God

that He has been pleased to bring us His word in our own languages, recognizing that without it, we would be walking in darkness and ignorance of God's special revelation and the good news of Christ the Savior.

Secondly, these doctrines provide biblical conviction about how men handle the Bible. These doctrines control how we translate the Scriptures into various languages, and provide us with discernment for assessing those translations, whether they're especially good, or perhaps not. But it also fuels the prayers of God's people. It fuels our prayers and our support and our desire to see faithful translations of the Scripture produced and taken to every people in every language throughout the whole world.

Thirdly, we think about what we love, even the details that delight us. That's true in normal life. How much more when it comes to the Bible? We should give careful attention to every word and detail of the Scriptures, and we can do so by way of meditation. Again, we sing in Psalm 119:97, "Oh, how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day." Notice the words of Joshua, in 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." And so we're to be meditating with love upon this inspired Word that God has given to us.

In addition to meditation, something else that goes hand in hand with that is our memorization of Scripture. We are to lay up the Scriptures in our heart and our mind with careful accuracy. Remember the words of David again, in Psalm 119:11, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee." So in your memorization of the Scriptures, which is very important, you need to be careful that you're memorizing it accurately. One of the things that I've done with my own children is, when I'm reviewing with them passages of Scripture that they have memorized, verses or perhaps a chapter or more at times, I ensure that every letter is right. And they appreciate that. But if they make a mistake, then I explain to them that, "You've said it wrong, and now we need to practice it even more the right way." And so I'll have them repeat it the correct way, maybe three or four, sometimes more times than that, in order to ingrain in their head each and every letter, each and every word, so that the word that they're hiding in their heart is, in fact, the inspired word that God has given to us. And you may find that helpful yourself.

Well in this lecture, we considered the preservation and translation of the Scriptures, demonstrating the importance of both having the authentic text that God has given, and an accurate translation of that text. In the next lecture, we will turn our attention to the interpretation of the Scriptures. How do we rightly understand the meaning of what is written in the Bible?

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1 ~ Lecture 9

INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

You have no doubt had the experience of holding a conversation with someone, perhaps a friend or family member, and in the course of that conversation realizing that they misunderstood something that you were saying to them. They may have mixed up your words, or they may have even heard them correctly. But in either case, they misinterpreted what you were seeking to communicate. These instances of miscommunication cause many problems in daily life, but the same is true of written material. A written document must be interpreted properly in order to be understood correctly. As we've seen in previous lectures, the Bible is far more important than any other book in the world, so interpreting it is a far more solemn task—one that requires careful diligence in rightly dividing the Word of truth, as we see in 2 Timothy 2:15. One of the first questions that we ask, when reading a passage of Scripture, is, "What does this passage mean?" It is essential that believers understand accurately what the Bible teaches. Well, where do we learn how to approach the interpretation of Scripture? The answer is from the Bible itself. The sacred Scripture is its own interpreter. In order to avoid erroneous misinterpretations, we must interpret Scripture with Scripture. We continue in this first module on systematic theology covering the doctrine of first principles, with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture, we considered the preservation and translation of the Scriptures. In this lecture, we turn our attention to the fundamental principles of how to interpret Scripture. This will serve as an introduction, since a fuller treatment of this large subject would require us to devote a whole module or course to its consideration. As in other lectures, we will look at the biblical teaching on interpretation of Scripture scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So let's begin by opening our Bibles and considering it scripturally. In 2 Peter 1:20, we read, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." In the preceding verses, Peter makes reference to his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration—see that in verses 17 and 18. And you'll remember from what you read in the Gospels of what that entailed. Peter, James, and John were taken up into the mount, and the Lord Jesus Christ was transfigured in front of them. Moses and Elijah were there, they heard a voice from heaven, and so on. Well, everyone would consider that event remarkable, perhaps one of the highest privileges that you could possibly have, to have seen these things and heard these things. But Peter says something different. He compares that experience to having the Scriptures and concludes that, "We have a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed," in verse 19. In other words, he's saying, Though I had experiences and saw wonderful things on the Mount of Transfiguration, we can have even greater confidence in the Scriptures than those sorts of remarkable experiences.

But men are not given liberty to interpret those Scriptures as they see fit, according to their own

notions. As the following verse, verse 20, says, the Bible was given by the Holy Spirit. So it must be interpreted according to what the Spirit Himself reveals throughout the whole Bible, not according to our own personal ideas. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 2:13, “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.” We learn, therefore, that the Bible itself tells us how we are to interpret the Bible. Now this flows from everything we have already learned about the Scriptures—it is inspired and therefore must be consistent and coherent within itself, because God cannot contradict Himself. The Lord has provided a beautiful, harmonious, perfectly-connected revelation within the pages of Holy Scripture. And so in this passage in 2 Peter, we see that the Bible itself provides us with the ability to interpret itself.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the interpretation of Scripture. And as we have done in previous lectures, we will expound some of the detailed categories that the Bible provides for us. So we begin, as we have in most of our lectures, with the Westminster Confession of Faith, because here we have a nice summary of what the Scripture teaches. Westminster Confession, chapter 1, paragraph 9, says, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” This is a very helpful summary. We have an infallible rule, that is, an infallible standard of judgment in interpreting Scripture. Since the Bible alone is infallible, it alone can be the infallible rule. Every passage of Scripture is to be seen in light of Scripture as a whole. And where one part is less clear, we use other parts that are more clear to help us understand those more difficult passages. So our standard is not tradition, it’s not new revelations of the Spirit, nor is it our own minds. It is the Word itself, comparing Scripture with Scripture. No text in the word of God, therefore, can be interpreted in any way that would conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture. So there’s kind of a summary of the basic point or emphasis in interpretation.

Secondly, in interpreting Scripture with Scripture, we’re faced with a question—the question of which texts or passages are given priority. What do I mean? Well, in other words, what is the method for deciding which passages shed light on other passages, instead of the reverse? The answer simply is this: we interpret the more obscure texts in light of the more clear ones. If this one principle is followed, it would prevent many of the errors that exist in the modern church.

But we need to spell this out in greater detail. How is this principle applied, interpreting the more obscure texts in light of the more clear ones? Let me give you several examples. The first instance would be to interpret the historical narratives in light of the didactic, or teaching-oriented, passages of Scripture. So the narratives include the Old Testament historical books; you think of 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, many others as well, Nehemiah and Joshua, Judges, we could go on and on. And we also have in the New Testament the same thing, in parts of the four Gospels, as well as the book of Acts. The didactic books would include, for example, the Old Testament Law, parts of the prophets as well, and in the New Testament, the epistles would be an example. Well, the purpose of the didactic passages is to teach, to instruct, and to explain doctrine. This is not to mean that we put these two categories against each other, the narratives and the didactic. Rather, most of the time the doctrinal sections of Scripture clarify the stories, the historical narratives, and often the historical passages illustrate and flesh out the doctrinal sections, and so they work hand in glove, if you will—they work closely together. So for example, the Gospels report what Christ did and what Christ said, and then as you read the New Testament epistles—they help interpret the significance of what was done and said, supplying us with doctrine and

exhortation and application. And so the first example is interpreting historical narratives in light of the sometimes more clear, teaching-oriented passages, or didactic passages, of Scripture. The reason this is important is because someone might, in reading the historical narratives, see or hear or read of an event that takes place, and they could draw false conclusions from that. There may be an instance where it appears as if the Lord doesn't know something. So for example, Abraham on Mount Moriah—the Lord was going to see what Abraham would do. Well, we know from other passages of Scripture that the Lord is omniscient—that He knows everything infinitely, perfectly. He knows it before things take place. And so it's not as if the Lord had to learn something in that passage, in Genesis 22, but rather the Lord is stooping to speak to us in terms of the way that we think and see things, and in dealing with Abraham, to draw out his faith. Well, we could multiply examples, but hopefully you see the importance of this.

The next example would be to interpret the implicit passages in light of the explicit. So there's a difference between what is said, and what is left unsaid, but implied. So does John 3:16 imply that fallen men have a natural ability to believe the gospel in their own strength? Well, you look at that passage—the text explicitly states that believers will have eternal life. It does not explicitly say who will or will not believe, or what is needed to believe. But if you turn three chapters later, to John 6—look, for example, at verse 44 and verse 65—the Lord Jesus explains the limits of sinful man's ability to believe on his own. He needs a new heart, he needs the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and so on. So we have to interpret the implicit in light of the explicit.

Another instance would be to interpret earlier texts in light of later texts. The Bible opens with Genesis, all the way through the Old and New Testaments, ends with the Book of Revelation. As the Scriptures unfolded, God provided a fuller picture of all that He intended to do in the history of redemption, beginning in Genesis and progressing through the Scriptures. And so as He gave us more Scripture, He provided more revelation, and therefore more light, on what we need to know. And that later revelation often clarified what was stated earlier. So if you turn to Genesis 3:15, here you have this gospel promise, but it's like a little seed. You see something, you see it truly, but it's hard to understand, with just that verse, all that is intended. But that seed grew, and our understanding of what was intended increased as the Lord told us more, and we learn more and more about the seed of the woman, and who this Messiah would be, and all that He would accomplish and do; and then we, of course, see it all fulfilled in the New Testament in the Gospels, and we learn about the way in which God has brought salvation through His Son. Well, that message of salvation was there in the beginning, but we're able to understand it more clearly with what revelation followed it. So the New Testament helps us to understand more of the Old Testament, just as you cannot understand the New Testament without a solid grasp of the Old Testament. Both of these things are true. The New Testament draws on language, vocabulary, concepts, history that are in the Old Testament. And it wouldn't make much sense to you at times, it would be difficult, if you didn't have that Old Testament. But here in this point, I'm especially emphasizing that those Old Testament Scriptures can be seen and interpreted through the light of the New Testament.

This relationship of the Old and New Testament is so important that we will consider this in a separate lecture. We'll talk about how that relationship of Old and New Testament work as the complete revelation of God.

Next, we must interpret figurative texts in light of more literal texts. When Christ says that He is "the door," we're not to conclude that He is a wooden door that hangs on hinges. We know that He is the incarnate Son of God and that His human nature consists of a true body and a reasonable soul. So we understand that Christ as "the door," teaches us that it is by Him and through Him

alone that we have access and acceptance before God. Many other passages teach us that, and so we're interpreting the figurative in light of more literal passages elsewhere.

Lastly under this section, the Westminster Confession, in chapter 1, paragraph 6, also teaches that "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." Now think about that for a second. Good and necessary consequences are just as binding as statements that are expressly taught in Scripture. Now true consequences only bring out the full meaning of the words of Scripture, as long as the conclusions that we are deducing are good and necessary. So in Matthew 22:31–32, Jesus illustrates this when He proves the doctrine of the resurrection to the Sadducees by an argument from good and necessary consequences derived from Scripture. Paul also illustrates this in another place, in Acts 17:2–3. And so we're interested in what the Bible explicitly states—that's important. But we also recognize an important place for good and necessary consequences that flow out of what is stated, so, things that we necessarily conclude from what is stated. And so that's an important element or tool in our toolbox of knowing how to interpret Scripture.

Thirdly, we must turn to a polemical consideration of this matter of interpretation. We need to consider some of the arguments which undermine the proper interpretation of the Holy Scripture. First of all, there is an important difference between getting the true meaning out of the text, and reading our meaning into the text. These are two very different things: getting the true meaning out, versus reading our meaning into the text. The former, of course, is right, and the latter is wrong. We are not to bring our own subjective ideas to the Bible and then look for ways to make Scripture teach what we think. That would be putting our meaning into the Bible. James 1:19 says, "Let every man be swift to hear," and then in verse 21, it says, "and receive"—"receive" the engrafted word "with meekness." The believer comes to the Bible with a desire to hear what God says, to receive and believe what the Bible itself teaches. We are the ones that need to be instructed and taught. Hebrews 4:2 teaches that we must mix our hearing with faith. What we're hearing we have to be receiving and believing. We must avoid interpreting the Bible according to our own desires, our own prejudices, perhaps our own history or tradition. We are to interpret the Bible as it is written, understanding what it actually says, and guarding against forcing our own views upon it. So that's one error that we are to be alert to.

The second thing that we should consider is that every heresy, every false doctrine, seeks to support its position from Scripture. And this is no surprise, really, because Satan himself quoted Scripture in a false way in his temptation of Christ in the wilderness. You can read about that in Matthew 4:1–11. Likewise, false teachers will do the same. Paul makes this point in 2 Corinthians 11:13–14, where he says, "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light." So the tendency of false teachers is going to be to appeal to Scripture. The devil himself did it. Even those heretics who deny the deity and divine glory of the Lord Jesus Christ seek to prove their case wrongly from the Bible. And so the believer must be on guard. It is not enough that a teacher or preacher quote Scripture. The question is, are they rightly dividing the truth and interpreting the Bible accurately in their teaching? So we must be on guard on that front as well.

Fourthly, we'll consider this practically. In thinking about the interpretation of Scripture, we can highlight a few implications. First of all, ministers of the gospel must give careful attention to the accurate interpretation of Scripture in their preaching and teaching. In Nehemiah 8, we have an account of the Levites—the Old Testament ministers, if you will; we have an account of them

reading the Scriptures to the people. In the end of verse 7 and verse 8, it says that they caused them to “understand the law....So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” You see what’s happening there. This is a good description of what it means to be a pastor. The Word of God is being read to the people, but then there’s this obligation to give the sense, in order to give the meaning, to help them understand what that Scripture means. You think, for example, in the book of Acts, you have Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The Ethiopian eunuch is traveling along, he’s reading from the prophecy of Isaiah out loud. And Philip approaches him and begins to ask him whether he understands, and he says, “How can I understand, if I don’t have a preacher? I’m not sure what this means.” And so Philip comes up and begins to explain to him how that prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, and in giving him the sense, and helping him to understand, accompanied by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, he’s brought to believe that word. He’s converted and be baptized. Or you think of Acts 18:24–28, we’re told that Apollos, who had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and who was very fervent in spirit, still had to have the way of God expounded to him “more perfectly,” so that he would understand it more clearly, more fully, more accurately. And so this is essential for pastors, that they give themselves to careful study and interpreting the Scripture, in their instruction of the people of God.

Secondly, we also learn that it is essential to engage in a systematic habitual reading of the whole Bible. And this is true for every Christian. We need to be reading the whole Bible, which results in a more comprehensive knowledge of what it teaches. You think of Paul in Acts 20:27. He’s speaking to the Ephesian elders, and he says, Listen, I’ve been faithful to teach you the whole counsel, all of what the Bible says. And so if you only read your favorite parts of the Bible while neglecting other parts, it will cause spiritual malnutrition and inhibit your ability to properly interpret Scripture. Now this could lead to the foolish mistake of thinking that you’ve arrived at a new, innovative meaning of a passage, which, as I said, is foolish. Now, you need to be reading fully in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and in reading, to think and reflect and meditate upon what God is saying. And as you do so, you’ll discover that in reading one place of Scripture, other places—maybe several other places—in Scripture will come to mind that you’ve read elsewhere. And you’ll begin to put those pieces together to have a fuller understanding of the will of God that has been revealed to us.

Thirdly, the accurate interpretation of Scripture is essential for the believer’s growth in Christian maturity, by strengthening our spiritual discernment. This is spoken of in Hebrews 5:13–14, and the Bereans were notable for this. In Acts 17:11 we read, “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” We need to be good Bereans. And parents are to assist their children in this; Deuteronomy 6:6–7 teaches us that. Even husbands are to assist their wives, as 1 Corinthians 14:35 says. We sing in Psalm 119:18, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.” This is the cry of the Christian: “Lord, give us the help of the Holy Spirit, that we might understand the Bible rightly and grow thereby in spiritual maturity.”

Fourthly, we must begin by asking, what does this passage mean? Not, what does this passage mean to me, or how does it apply to me? It is only after we understand the accurate meaning that we then go on to apply that passage and its application to our own life and circumstances. Faithful interpretation of Scripture will protect God’s people from the countless errors of those who twist the Scriptures, 2 Peter 3:15–16 says. The believer is not to be “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine,” as we read in Ephesians 4:14. Rather, they are to “prove all things”

and “hold fast that which is good,” 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

In this lecture, we considered the interpretation of Scripture, noting that the only infallible rule of interpretation is Scripture itself. We must compare Scripture with Scripture. We mentioned in passing the importance of understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and in the next lecture we’ll consider that relationship, which affects our doctrine of Scripture. God gave us both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and believers desperately need the whole of the Bible to live as truly biblical Christians.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

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 con-

nected 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 commandment 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.