

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

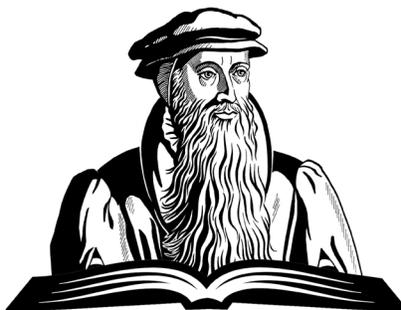
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1:

INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Lecture 3

SCRIPTURE



The John Knox Institute
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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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Module 1 ~ Lecture 3

Introduction:

1. Methodology
2. Creeds and Confessions

The Doctrine of First Principles:

- 3. Scripture**
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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.