

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
ONE

## INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Terminology.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Biblical Hermeneutics	2
B. Hermeneutical Processes	3
1. Preparation	3
2. Investigation	4
3. Application	4
<b>III. Scientific Hermeneutics .....</b>	<b>5</b>
A. Biblical Roots	5
B. Examples	6
C. Priorities	8
1. Preparation	8
2. Investigation	9
3. Application	9
<b>IV. Devotional Hermeneutics .....</b>	<b>10</b>
A. Biblical Roots	11
B. Examples	12
C. Priorities	14
1. Preparation	15
2. Investigation	16
3. Application	17
<b>V. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>18</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson One

### Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics

#### INTRODUCTION

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We all know that young children often think they know a lot more than they really do. They watch their mothers cook, help a little bit, and assume that they know enough to do it on their own. They watch their fathers do their work, they play at it once or twice, and they think they know everything their fathers know. But at some point, children usually find out that they have much more to learn than they ever imagined.

Unfortunately, adults often make the same mistake, even when it comes to something as important as interpreting the Bible. Most of us read our Bibles regularly; some of us have done so for many years. So, we often assume that we know enough about interpreting the Scriptures to just go ahead and do it. But biblical interpretation is one of those things that can seem much simpler than it really is. And when we take time to reflect carefully on what interpreting the Bible entails, we often find that we have much more to learn than we ever imagined.

This is the first lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*. In this series, we'll explore several crucial outlooks on biblical interpretation and investigate ways to improve our ability to understand the Bible. We've entitled this lesson "Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics." This lesson will introduce a basic framework for sound and scholarly biblical interpretation.

Our introduction to biblical hermeneutics will divide into three main parts. First, we'll gain an orientation to our subject by introducing some important terminology. Second, we'll explore "scientific" approaches to hermeneutics that characterize scholarly interpretation of the Bible. And third, we'll look at the value of employing devotional hermeneutics in conjunction with traditional academic approaches. Let's begin with some important terminology.

#### TERMINOLOGY

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Misunderstanding key terminology can be a big source of confusion in any discussion. So we'll introduce several terms for our study. First, we'll touch on what we mean by biblical hermeneutics. And second, we'll look at three hermeneutical processes. Let's look first at the concept of biblical hermeneutics.

## BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

“Hermeneutics” is a common word in theological and biblical studies, but we don’t use it often in our daily lives. Many of us will notice that the word “hermeneutics” derives from the family of Greek terms that includes the name “Hermes,” the mythological messenger of the gods. The word itself derives from a family of Greek words related to the verb *hermeneuo*, which means “interpret” or “explain.” So, broadly speaking when we refer to hermeneutics, we have in mind the interpretation or explanation of some kind of message or communication.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, who lived from 1768 to 1834, is often called the father of modern hermeneutics. In 1819 he spoke of the need for “general hermeneutics,” a unified theory for understanding all literature. He acknowledged that we should approach different subjects with their own special hermeneutics, but he argued that all hermeneutics should share a common method of interpretation.

By the end of the twentieth century, leading scholars saw the need for general hermeneutics because the processes of interpretation had become an important facet of many fields of study. Today, hermeneutical discussions appear in philosophy, literature and the arts. Hermeneutics is also useful in psychology, sociology, and even fields like physics and biology. This expansion has occurred because many leading figures in these fields have become more aware of how much their disciplines involve interpreting the meaning of the objects that they study.

As the title of this lesson suggests, we’re primarily interested in biblical hermeneutics, the study of interpreting the meaning and significance of Scripture. If you’ve ever read the Scriptures, then you’ve involved yourself in biblical hermeneutics, at least informally. Informal approaches to the Bible are of great value, and these lessons will build on what most of us already understand. But we’ll also move beyond informal hermeneutics and explore the kinds of issues that move to the foreground in academic, scholarly interpretation of the Bible.

**It’s helpful to make a distinction and a comparison between general hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics. The Bible has in common with general hermeneutics the ideas of what does a verb do? What are parts of speech? What is grammar, syntax, and so forth? How do we determine what an author meant when he or she wrote those words? But there are particular rules that pertain to biblical hermeneutics principally because the Bible claims to be the Word of God, and as such, it is authoritative, and it reveals God to us. And since God is one and God is truth, the Bible never contradicts itself. And so, one particular aspect of biblical hermeneutics that’s unique is that we try to seek to relate all the data of Scripture together under the assumption that they don’t contradict one another, but rather they speak — while of the variety of God’s revelation — they also speak one in agreement with itself.**

— Rev. Mike Glodo

Keeping in mind what we mean by biblical hermeneutics, we should turn to a second important term, hermeneutical processes — the main procedures we follow as we interpret the Bible.

## HERMENEUTICAL PROCESSES

Throughout this series, we'll speak of three main hermeneutical processes: preparation, investigation, and application. These processes are so essential to biblical interpretation that each lesson in this series will fall into one of these three categories. Let's look first at preparation.

### Preparation

The hermeneutical process of preparation takes place before we begin to interpret a portion of Scripture. And of course, this means that we prepare repeatedly because we read and study the Bible over and over. In a very important sense, preparation is inescapable because no one ever comes to the Bible as a *tabula rasa* — a blank slate. We all approach the Scriptures influenced by an assortment of concepts, behaviors and emotions. Whether we realize it or not, every time we begin to read the Bible, many influences have already prepared us for handling the Scriptures well, but other influences have created obstacles to sound biblical interpretation. For this reason, these lessons will give deliberate attention to preparing ourselves as well as we can for interpreting the Bible.

**I think there's a lot of things we do to prepare ourselves, or should do to prepare ourselves, to study Scripture... Studying Scripture can be hard work. There are details that we need to examine, and there are many, many details that we need to remember as we're going through the study of Scripture, as well as listening to the Spirit of God. And so we need to prepare by having good tools. We need to prepare by having good material written by others. We need to prepare by praying and allowing the Holy Spirit, giving him freedom to work in our lives... You're going to be listening for God's voice, and listening for God's voice for your own life, and then to pass that voice on to others as well.**

**— Dr. Stephen J. Bramer**

In addition to the hermeneutical process of preparation, we'll also explore the process of investigation. When we speak of investigation we have in mind concentrating on the original meaning of a biblical passage.

## Investigation

Essentially, when we investigate the Scriptures, we do our best to leave our modern world behind and grasp the meaning of portions of the Bible when they were first written. In the process of investigation, we focus on the original meaning intended by God and the Bible's human authors, on the biblical documents themselves, and on Scriptures' first audiences. In many respects, whenever we read Scripture, we can't avoid dealing, to some extent, with original meaning.

For instance, if we explore the Bible in its original languages, we have to take into account the linguistic conventions of ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Even if we rely on a modern translation of the Bible, that translation is based on assessments of the ancient meanings of terms and grammatical expressions. In these and many other ways, the original meaning of a biblical passage is always crucial to its interpretation. So, we must also give a great deal of attention to the process of investigation.

Hermeneutical processes not only include preparation and investigation, but they also entail the process of application.

## Application

In simple terms, application amounts to appropriately connecting original meaning to contemporary audiences. Once we've understood the original meaning, we travel, as it were, through the millennia to our modern situation. In application, we reflect on the ways the Scriptures should apply to us as the people of God.

As with the other hermeneutical processes, it's impossible to avoid application completely. Even when we merely gain superficial understanding of a biblical passage, we still apply it, to some degree, to our thinking. Of course, the Scriptures warn against the hypocrisy of understanding the Bible and not obeying it. So, in this series we'll give a lot of attention to applying the Scriptures deliberately and thoroughly.

As we go through these lessons, we'll see that preparation, investigation and application are highly interdependent processes. We can only do well in one process when we're also doing well in the others. Of course, everyone has different inclinations and abilities, and as a result we tend to stress only one or two of these processes. But the interdependence of preparation, investigation and application reminds us to develop our skills in all three areas.

Now that we've explained some important terminology in our Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics, we should turn to our second main topic: scientific hermeneutics — how biblical scholars over the centuries have approached the interpretation of Scripture more and more like a scientific exercise.

## SCIENTIFIC HERMENEUTICS

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To one degree or another, biblical hermeneutics has always had something of a scientific flavor, and this tendency has grown over the millennia, much like it has in many other disciplines. The reason for these developments is plain enough. The Bible was written by people living thousands of years ago. So, in many ways, we rightly treat the Scriptures like other writings of the ancient world. As scholars have handled the Bible with its historical context in view, they've often drawn from scientific disciplines like archeology, history, anthropology, sociology and linguistics. As in these and other scientific endeavors, academic interpreters of Scriptures have applied factual, or rational, scientific methods to the Bible.

To see what we mean, we'll touch on three issues related to scientific hermeneutics. First, we'll point out the legitimacy of this approach by noting its biblical roots. Second, we'll mention some historical examples that illustrate developments in this type of hermeneutics. And third, we'll see how this approach to Scripture establishes certain priorities for the processes of interpretation. Let's turn first to the biblical roots of scientific hermeneutics.

### BIBLICAL ROOTS

People living in biblical times weren't modern scientists. But this doesn't mean that they were unintelligent or irrational. On the contrary, their sophisticated architectural accomplishments, extensive maritime travel, innovative agricultural programs, and countless other cultural achievements demonstrate that people in biblical days dealt with facts and thought rationally about the world, much like modern scientists do.

For this reason, it shouldn't surprise us that biblical authors themselves often interpreted other Scriptures with an orientation toward factual and logical analysis. For the sake of time, let's illustrate what we mean with just one passage. In Romans 4:3-5 the apostle Paul wrote:

**What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4:3-5).**

In these verses, Paul quoted from Genesis 15:6 where God “credited” righteousness to Abraham when he believed God's promise. But notice how methodically Paul treated this Old Testament passage. In verses 4 and 5, Paul carefully analyzed the meaning of the word “credited,” or “reckoned” as the Greek term *logizomai* may be translated. From his knowledge of Greek, he argued that, “wages are not credited ... as a gift, but as an obligation.” But then he noted that for anyone who trusts God their “faith,” — not works — “is credited as righteousness.” So, he concluded on the basis of this reasoning that Genesis 15:6 indicates that Abraham was granted righteousness as a free



gift through faith. It isn't difficult to see here that the apostle Paul handled Genesis 15 with meticulously factual and logical analysis.

As this one example illustrates, time and again biblical authors presented this kind of careful interpretation of Scripture. And their approach to Scripture indicates that scientific biblical hermeneutics is firmly rooted in the Scriptures themselves.

With the biblical roots of scientific hermeneutics in mind, let's look briefly at some historical examples of this kind of biblical interpretation.

## EXAMPLES

During the Patristic period, one of the most influential figures in biblical interpretation was Origen of Alexandria who lived from A.D. 185 to 254. As we'll see later in this lesson, Origen went far beyond scientific interpretation, but he nonetheless devoted himself to careful factual and rational analyses of the Bible. For instance, one of Origen's greatest accomplishments was the creation of the *Hexapla*, reportedly a 6,000 page work of more than 50 volumes in which Origen made a word-by-word comparison of various Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament. Although this work was lost centuries later, it still represents a remarkable example of scientific biblical interpretation in early church history.

Other prominent examples of developing scientific approaches to Scripture appear after the days of Origen. For instance, Augustine of Hippo, who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, continued to focus on careful, often painstaking, factual and rational analysis of the Bible. And by the time of Thomas Aquinas, who lived from around 1225 to 1274, the mainstream of biblical interpretation in Western Christianity reflected the influence of the rational, scientific philosophy of Aristotle. Aquinas and his followers applied rigorous empirical and logical analysis to the Bible.

Unfortunately, up to this time in church history literacy rates were low, and the Bible and other books weren't widely available. So, only a privileged few could actually study the Scriptures. As a result, church authorities controlled how the general population understood the Bible. But in this context, many scholars began to interpret Scripture through even more sophisticated scientific analysis, apart from the dominance of the church.

One of the earliest steps in this direction took place during the Renaissance. After the capture of Constantinople in the fourth Crusade in 1204, many of the classical and biblical manuscripts stored there were brought to the West. But instead of interpreting the significance of these ancient texts through the lenses of church dogma, Renaissance scholars devoted themselves to understanding these texts by meticulously analyzing their grammar and ancient historical contexts. With the aid of Gutenberg's movable type printing press, which came into use around 1450, it wasn't long before Renaissance research became widely available. And as a result, influential figures like Erasmus, who lived from 1466 to 1536, led many in their day toward increasingly scientific approaches to biblical interpretation.

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century took scientific biblical hermeneutics even further. Following the path of the Renaissance, early protestant

leaders like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin strongly rejected the dominance of church dogma over biblical interpretation. Instead, they emphasized that the meaning of Scripture should be determined through analysis of the Bible's grammar and historical contexts.

It's important to keep in mind that early Protestants coupled this emphasis with the well-known doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, "Scripture alone." Protestants understood that the Bible was the only unquestionable authority, the highest authority by which all others were to be judged. This commitment to the supremacy of biblical authority meant that the only infallible interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. So, nothing was more important to early Protestants than understanding the Bible through meticulous, rational analysis of its grammar within its ancient historical context.

The Enlightenment in Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took scientific biblical hermeneutics even further by emphasizing modern, factual and rational scientific standards for judging all truth claims, including those of Scripture. Similar to geologists, archeologists, and other modern scientists, biblical scholars carefully applied scientific standards to the study of Scripture.

This approach to the Bible has developed in a number of ways over the centuries. But to one degree or another, modern biblical scholars have followed two main paths. On the one side, the majority of interpreters in leading academic institutions have followed a direction that is often called critical biblical studies. Broadly speaking, critical biblical scholars are those who have rejected the traditional Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* and consider only reason and scientific analysis as the supreme standard for discerning truth. By and large, critical interpreters have concluded that the Scriptures represent ancient, primitive, and unreliable views of God, humanity, and the world. In this view, modern people may benefit from the Scriptures in some ways, but any judgments about the Scriptures must rely on scientific investigation rather than on the teachings of the Bible.

On the other side, other experts have followed a path that we may call modern evangelical biblical studies. Evangelical scholars affirm that the Bible is the only unquestionable rule of faith and life. They don't reject factual and rational scientific reflection on Scripture; they fully endorse the rigorous application of scientific analysis to the Bible. Yet, when such analysis clearly contradicts the teachings of the Bible itself, evangelical scholars wholeheartedly submit to the Scriptures as their authority. As we'll see throughout these lessons, this series follows the evangelical path.

**It is a very important matter for a Christian, especially Protestant Christian, to submit to the authority of Scripture... True authority is the right and power to compel assent, and Scripture is uniquely qualified to function as authority in the Christian's life. One of the reasons for this is that the Scriptures contain wisdom and insight that would be otherwise unobtainable for us. That's why it's called revelation... The other reason is that while there's truth in many places, the truth that is embedded in Scripture has been supernaturally superintended in its composition and final form so that it has a degree of trustworthiness and infallibility that is unique among all the sources of truth that we have access to in this world.**

**Now we know that the reason why it obtained that unique reliability, that infallibility, that inability to fail, is because it was God-breathed. It is the Word of God, so that when we speak of the authority of Scripture we're really speaking of the authority of God. And so to submit to it is an acknowledgment that we are creatures, we are derivative and dependent beings. And here's the paradox: rather than having this act of submission demean us or make us less powerful, so to speak, it's actually the most empowering thing we could possibly do, for it sets us in the direction of truth, puts us firmly on the path to life and to flourishing.**

**— Dr. Glen Scorgie**

Having mentioned the biblical roots of scientific hermeneutics and looked at some historical examples, we should now turn to a third issue: the priorities of this approach to the Scriptures.

## **PRIORITIES**

By and large, modern evangelical biblical scholars around the world have been strongly committed to scientific hermeneutics. This commitment has led to certain priorities for the processes of preparation, investigation and application. Let's see how this is true, starting with their typical priorities for preparation.

### **Preparation**

As we said earlier, preparation is inescapable whenever we begin to interpret Scripture. But academic biblical interpreters have developed priorities for preparation that are more or less in line with the intellectual priorities found in many other academic disciplines.

Imagine you're about to study biology at a university and you want to prepare yourself as well as you can. So you ask several biology professors, "How should I get ready for my studies?" They'd probably tell you things like these: "Memorize as many biological facts as you can." And, "Learn all you can about the scientific procedures we use in biology."

Well, in much the same way, if you were to ask most professors in most evangelical theological institutions today how you should prepare to study the Bible at their schools, most of them would give similar advice. They might say, "Learn Hebrew and Greek." "Learn as many facts as possible about the Bible." "Learn sound methods of interpretation." After all, most biblical scholars today emphasize rational and scientific approaches to the Bible in their own careers. And they believe that the success of their students depends on them doing the same.

Of course, preparing ourselves with factual and methodological understanding is important. There's no substitute for learning facts about the Bible. And we should do our best to learn the principles needed for biblical interpretation. But as we'll see in a moment, focusing exclusively on intellectual preparation overlooks some of the most important ways we should get ourselves ready for interpreting the Bible.

Having seen a few priorities for preparation, let's look at the priorities for investigation in scientific hermeneutics.

## Investigation

In general, biblical interpreters distinguish two ways of investigating Scripture: exegesis and eisegesis. Exegesis comes from a Greek term meaning "led out of" or "derived from" and means to pull out or derive meaning from a text. By contrast, eisegesis has the connotations of "led into" or "put into." It means to read meaning into a passage. Scientifically-oriented biblical interpreters work very hard to avoid eisegesis. Instead, they employ principles of interpretation that they believe will ensure them of exegetical, not eisegetical, understandings of Scripture.

In this view then, investigation largely amounts to putting our intellectual preparations into action to discover the facts of Scripture. We investigate the original meaning of biblical texts by meticulously implementing carefully conceived methods or principles of interpretation to discern the actual original meaning — not just someone's opinion or agenda.

As we'll see throughout this series, implementing scientific methods in this way is a very important dimension of biblical interpretation. But we'll also see that it hardly covers everything necessary for sound investigation of the original meaning of Scripture.

We've looked at certain priorities for scholarly, scientific hermeneutics in the processes of preparation and investigation. Now we're ready to ask about the process of application. How do the majority of evangelical scholars apply the Bible today?

## Application

When I was a theological student, a particular classmate would frequently interrupt professors while they were lecturing. His questions were always the same. "Professor, what are the implications of your exegesis for us today?" "How should I apply what you're saying about this biblical passage to my life?" With rare exception, the response was always the same. The professor would smile and say, "That's a great question. Not for me, but for the practical theology professors."

As this experience illustrates, all too often, scientific, scholarly interpretation of the Bible has little room for the practical application of Scripture. At best, it leads to factually-oriented modern application. In other words, application primarily amounts to establishing the kinds of facts that the Bible teaches modern followers of Christ to believe. We call for the faithful to believe that the theological and moral factual claims of

the Bible are true. To be sure, this type of application is of great value. But it neglects a number of crucial ways that Scripture should be applied to our lives today.

**Bible study methods are crucial, but we can overemphasize them at times because we can make it too mechanical, as if it's automatic, so that it's just a matter of, "Well, I've used these methods; here is my logical conclusion," and it becomes a purely intellectual exercise rather than something that our whole person embraces and gets into. I found over the years as I... For example, one of the places where I've emphasized a lot of my own research has been in cultural background, the world, the ancient world, because that was a need. A lot of people don't have access to that, so as a scholar I could bring that to bear. And I found that, as I did that, as it would come back to the biblical texts, it would open whole new worlds to me of understanding those texts. At the same time, there was no spiritual life in the background by itself. I took intellectual pleasure in it, but the real spiritual life was in the biblical text, and coming back to it and hearing what God is actually saying to us, submitting our lives to it, that's something that can't be just a mechanical procedure. That's something that comes only by devoting our hearts to the one who loved us and gave himself for us.**

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Now that we've looked at some important terminology used in biblical hermeneutics, and the longstanding tradition of scientific hermeneutics, we should turn to our third main topic in this lesson, how scientific interpretation should be coupled with devotional hermeneutics, the Christian tradition of emphasizing our need to draw near to God as we interpret the Scriptures.

## **DEVOTIONAL HERMENEUTICS**

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Followers of Christ adopted scientific hermeneutics that resemble many facets of general hermeneutics because human beings wrote the Scriptures. But devotional hermeneutics focuses primarily on the divine authorship of Scripture.

Christians have always acknowledged that the human words of Scripture are also the Word of God. As 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us, the Scriptures were inspired by God, or more literally were "God-breathed." This fact makes biblical hermeneutics distinct from other facets of general hermeneutics because we must interpret the Scriptures devotionally, as the living word of God himself.

**As we interpret Scripture it's so important that we remember that we're not just handling the words of human authors, that the Holy**

**Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity, has breathed out these words through the distinctive personalities, styles, experiences of those human authors. As we go to Scripture, that means because the Spirit who breathed these words out is also resident and at work within us as believers, in a sense we have access to the author of Scripture. And we need that desperately; we need as we approach Scripture to come prayerfully, dependent upon the Spirit to open our minds as well as to open the Scriptures to our minds.**

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

To see what we mean, we'll look at devotional hermeneutics in ways that parallel our earlier discussion. First, we'll see that this kind of scriptural interpretation has biblical roots. Second, we'll sketch some historical examples of biblical scholars who practiced devotional hermeneutics. And third, we'll see how following this approach to Scripture shapes our priorities for the processes of interpretation. Let's turn first to the biblical roots of devotional hermeneutics.

## **BIBLICAL ROOTS**

Even though biblical authors often examined the Scriptures in more or less scientific ways, it's just as important to see that they also approached the Scriptures devotionally. Time and again, they indicated that followers of Christ are to read the Scriptures as the word of God, in the presence of God, in ways that bring about extraordinary, even supernatural experiences of God.

Biblical authors pointed to this dimension of interpretation many times, but for now we'll mention just one passage as an example. In Hebrews 4:12 we read:

**For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).**

In this passage, the author of Hebrews referred to a portion of Psalm 95 that he had quoted in the preceding verses, calling it "the word of God." Earlier in Hebrews 4:7 he quoted the same Psalm saying that God himself "spoke through David." And prior to this, in Hebrews 3:7, he introduced Psalm 95 with the words, "as the Holy Spirit says."

Now, notice how after acknowledging the divine authorship of the Psalm, the writer of Hebrews described the experience of reading Scripture. He said that Scripture itself is "living and active." It "penetrates" the depths of our inmost being and "judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" with a blade that is "sharper than any double-edged sword." In scientific hermeneutics we view the Bible as an object that we dissect and analyze. But in this passage, the writer of Hebrews indicated that Scripture actually dissects and analyzes us.

This passage is particularly important for our discussion because the author of Hebrews was a very sophisticated biblical scholar. Time and again, he treated Old Testament Scriptures with a depth of insight that exceeds many other New Testament authors. Still, his highly intellectual analyses of Scripture didn't turn him away from devotional hermeneutics. On the contrary, his intellectual interpretations enhanced his ability to approach the Scriptures in ways that brought him into highly emotive, compelling, and deeply transformative encounters with God. And as such, he shows us that scientific and devotional hermeneutics must work together.

Having seen the biblical roots of devotional hermeneutics, we should mention a few historical examples to illustrate the way followers of Christ have combined scientific and devotional approaches to interpretation.

### EXAMPLES

Devotional interpretation of the Bible was particularly important in the Patristic period of church history. We mentioned earlier that Origen of Alexandria was a meticulous, scientific biblical scholar. Yet, listen to the way Origen encouraged Gregory of Neocaesarea in the *Letter of Origen to Gregory*:

**When you devote yourself to the divine reading, uprightly and with a faith fixed firmly on God, seek the meaning of the divine words which is hidden from most people. Do not stop at knocking and seeking, for the most necessary element is praying to understand the divine words.**

Here, Origen told Gregory to “devote [himself] to the divine reading.” The terminology “divine reading” was later expressed in the Latin phrase *Lectio Divina*, a tradition of devotional hermeneutics that continues in various forms even today.

Now, Origen's approach to Scripture was deeply influenced by Neo-Platonism, especially as it had been expressed earlier in the works of the Jewish Old Testament interpreter Philo of Alexandria. From this point of view, beneath the surface of the Bible were heavenly, spiritual truths that were “hidden from most people.” Believers needed a “faith fixed firmly on God” if they wanted to discover the Bible's hidden truths. That is to say, they must “seek the meaning of the [Bible as] divine words.” So, biblical interpreters must “not stop at knocking and seeking” for personal enlightenment from God. In fact, according to Origen, “the most necessary element” for comprehending Scripture is “praying to understand the divine words.” Although we should reject Origen's Neo-Platonic orientation toward these matters, he recognized something that is certainly true about Scripture. When the faithful seek God through prayerful contemplation as they read Scripture, God grants them insights that otherwise often remain hidden.

**People like Origen emphasized the fact that when you read the Bible, it's really important that you gain the spiritual meaning of the text. Now I would want to say that is a really healthy thing, because the**



**Bible is not just a history book, it's not just an academic textbook to titillate our theological imagination. There is spiritual significance ... In fact, we believe that the two belong together, that as we improve our ability to understand the meaning of the biblical words, the context in which they're set in the passage, the historical details, etc., etc., that also helps us gain spiritual insight into what the text meant, both for the first readers of the text, but also for us subsequently.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Throughout the medieval period, nearly every leading interpreter of Scripture practiced some form of divine reading, or *Lectio Divina*, including important scientific interpreters like Augustine and Aquinas.

By and large, *Lectio Divina* came to be practiced in four well-known steps or movements: *lectio*, reading of Scripture; *meditatio*, silent pondering of the content of what is read; *oratio*, earnest prayer for God to grant enlightenment; and *contemplatio*, quietly waiting for the Spirit of God to grant highly intuitive, deeply emotional and transforming convictions of a passage's significance.

By the time of the Reformation, the Church of Rome used the practice of *Lectio Divina* to justify all kinds of false teachings. Church authorities claimed that their teachings derived from supernatural insights from God, but these “insights” actually contradicted the teachings of Scripture in some very important ways. In response, most Protestant scholars rightly placed a high premium on scientific hermeneutics. But they didn't forsake reading the Bible devotionally. On the contrary, they insisted that devotional hermeneutics be tied to sound exegetical analysis of Scripture.

This feature of Protestant biblical scholarship isn't widely acknowledged, so it will help to mention just two well-known examples: John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards.

John Calvin has rightly been called the most rational and logical biblical interpreter of the early Reformation. His training as a lawyer and Renaissance humanist equipped him well for this role. But throughout his commentaries, we find that he vigorously pursued not only scientific but also devotional hermeneutics.

As just one example, in his *Commentary on Haggai*, part 2, he wrote:

**The glory of God so shines in his word, that we ought to be so affected by it ... as though he were near to us, face to face.**

Far from treating the interpretation of Scripture as a detached, impersonal scientific activity, Calvin insisted that “the glory of God so shines in his word” that when we read the Scriptures “we ought to be so affected,” as though God himself were “face to face” with us. As this passage indicates, Calvin called his followers to read Scripture as an all-consuming, intensely emotional and humbling experience of God's presence.

In much the same way, the early American theologian Jonathan Edwards, who lived from 1703 to 1758, frequently displayed his meticulously rational and logical analyses of Scripture. But listen to these words from his essay, *Personal Narrative*:



**As I read the words [of 1 Timothy], there came into my soul ... a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God ... for ever!**

Here we see that Edwards delighted in a “sense of the glory of the Divine Being” as he read Scripture. And this experience of the Spirit of God was so powerful that Edwards desired to “enjoy that God ... for ever!” Edwards is well-known for being strongly influenced by Enlightenment rationalism, and he rightly believed that biblical interpretation had to be deeply scientific. But even Edwards wasn’t satisfied with mere rational reflection on the Bible. He knew that Scripture must also be read with a deeply intuitive sense of the wondrous presence of God.

In our day, devotional approaches to hermeneutics have nearly disappeared from scholarly biblical interpretation. While early Protestants moved toward scientific hermeneutics in response to the machinations of Roman Catholic interpreters, today many biblical scholars consider devotional hermeneutics beneath their intellectual prowess. They give nearly all of their scholarly attention to careful, rational exegesis, as if this approach will provide all that we need from the Bible. Seeking illumination from God through intense prayer, fasting, and contemplation has all but vanished from evangelical scholarship. But it’s crucial that we pursue both scientific and devotional hermeneutics when we approach formal, academic interpretation. We need to be careful not to go to extremes, but many Protestant interpreters have done this well in the past, and we would be wise to follow their example.

Keeping in mind the biblical roots of devotional hermeneutics and some historical examples of theologians who combined scientific and devotional approaches to biblical interpretation, let’s look briefly at the priorities of this kind of hermeneutics.

## **PRIORITIES**

Most followers of Christ begin to read the Scriptures with a devotional spirit. But when they become more adept at scholarly biblical interpretation, they often lose sight of the importance of devotional hermeneutics. But scientific interpretation of the Bible is often so highly intellectual and analytical that we actually forget something that was once crucial to our walk with Christ — the personal and powerfully transformative experience of God through his Word. For this reason, we should see how a devotional approach to the Scriptures should adjust the priorities that we have as we pursue all three hermeneutical processes.

We’ll examine the priorities of devotional hermeneutics in the same way that we looked at scientific hermeneutical priorities. First, we’ll determine the priorities for preparation. Next, we’ll focus on the process of investigation in devotional hermeneutics. And finally, we’ll give some thought to the modern application of this type of interpretation. Let’s start with the priorities for preparation.

## Preparation

Unfortunately, many sincere followers of Christ believe that when we read Scripture we have absolutely no control over the experience of God's special presence. It either does or does not happen. And there's no way we can prepare ourselves for it. But listen to the way James addressed this misconception in James 4:8:

**Draw near to God and he will draw near to you (James 4:8, ESV).**

The expression "draw near to God" comes from the Old Testament. Faithful worshippers would "draw near" to God's special presence in the tabernacle and temple. Of course, God is everywhere and he can make himself known in dramatic ways anytime he wishes. But James' words reflect the biblical emphasis on human responsibility. If we want to experience the special presence of God, then we must draw near to him. And God will reciprocate by drawing near to us.

In general terms, preparation for devotional hermeneutics involves sanctification or holy consecration to God. As the Scriptures teach, we have to rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way of communion with God and pursue everything that enhances it. Needless to say, this kind of preparation entails far too many things for us to mention them all, but it helps to gain a sense of their breadth by speaking of three general categories: conceptual, behavioral and emotional preparations.

First, we get ready for God's presence in Scripture through conceptual preparation. By this we mean that we do our best to conform our beliefs to God's true word. Believing false concepts about God, the human race, and the world erects obstacles to communion with God. As we've seen, biblical scholars have tended to focus on a relatively narrow set of concepts that fit with their academic emphases. But sanctification by God's Spirit brings a longing to have all of our thoughts conform to the mind of God, and this desire prepares us for entering his presence as we interpret the Scriptures.

Second, we also draw near to God as we read the Scriptures through behavioral preparation. In the Scriptures, doing things that are contrary to God's will is one of the greatest barriers to experiencing the favorable presence of God. Preparation for devotional hermeneutics must entail repentance over our failures and a sincere desire to behave in ways that please God.

Third, we must get ready for seeking God's nearness through emotional preparation. Emotional preparation involves all of our attitudes — from passing passions to our enduring feelings about God, human beings and the rest of creation. The Scriptures frequently warn against pride, hatred and hardness of heart. These and similar emotions are obstacles to entering God's special presence. But humility, love, tenderness of heart and the like open the way for communion with God. For this reason, preparation for devotional hermeneutics must address not only our concepts and behaviors, but also the full range of our emotions.

**Interpreting the Bible wisely and faithfully isn't just a matter of the mind. It's really a matter of the heart, of the whole person. And that means — and this is, I think, a challenge for anyone who has a responsibility to interpret and then teach God's Word — that means that the condition of our heart, our relationship with Christ, really has an influence on the effectiveness of our understanding of the Bible. And so that's why it's very important to be faithful in confessing our sins, holding onto the gospel every day. And when we start to wander spiritually, and particularly if we wander into sin in various areas of life, that can have a very negative effect. I think it does have a negative effect on our ability truly to understand God's Word. And one thing it particularly does is it causes us to back away from the really strong commands that we have in Scripture and we don't hold them in their full integrity because we're trying to wiggle out of those commands. It's very important — the condition of the heart is essential to faithful biblical interpretation.**

**— Dr. Philip Ryken**

With these priorities for preparation in mind, we should turn to the second hermeneutical process, the investigation of original meaning in devotional hermeneutics.

## **Investigation**

Devotional hermeneutics entails shaping our investigation of Scripture's original meaning in ways that bring us near to God. In devotional investigation we look at original meaning in terms of biblical authors' experience of God's nearness and how they intended to bring their original audiences near to God as well. There are many ways to do this, but for the sake of simplicity, we'll speak, once again, in terms of the conceptual, behavioral and emotional dimensions of investigation.

In the first place, devotional hermeneutics requires conceptual investigation — paying attention to the concepts that God and his inspired authors intended to communicate to their original audiences. As we've seen, devotional hermeneutics must be closely tied to the facts of Scripture so that it doesn't venture into speculation or error. We've already noted that scientific hermeneutics is well designed for this task. But in devotional hermeneutics we ask certain conceptual questions that aren't commonly addressed in scientific hermeneutics. How does this text reveal the author's experience of God? How does it indicate how the author intended for his audience to experience the nearness of God?

In the second place, devotional investigation should also focus on the behavioral dimensions of Scripture's original meaning. We said earlier that human behavior either furthers or hinders our ability to come into the special presence of God. For this reason, as biblical authors wrote they also revealed how their own actions and the actions of their audiences affected their experience of God's nearness.

In the third place, devotional investigation should also draw out the emotional dimensions of original meaning as they relate to the nearness of God. Although scientific interpretation often overlooks this, biblical authors expressed their own emotions and sought to impact the emotions of their original audiences. The joys, doubts, sorrows, and fears of biblical authors and their audiences appear at every turn. And as we've already suggested, intense experiences of God's nearness involve heightened emotions. So, we always need to pay attention to what biblical texts reveal about the emotions of the authors and their audiences and how they related to their experiences of the presence of God.

Having touched on the priorities of preparation and investigation, we should also mention the priorities of application in devotional hermeneutics.

## Application

When we read the Scriptures in the presence of God, we're particularly devoted to applying the Word of God as God intended. We don't treat the Bible as a lifeless object that mere mortals wrote thousands of years ago. On the contrary, we handle the Scriptures as God's Word living for us today. To help us gain a better sense of how we accomplish this, we'll speak once more of the conceptual, behavioral, and emotional dimensions of application.

On a conceptual level, devotional application focuses on how God is impacting our concepts of himself, humanity and the rest of creation through the Scriptures. As we seek the illumination of God's Spirit through intense prayer and contemplation of his Word, we'll find that the Spirit of God confirms, enhances and corrects our concepts of him, humanity and the rest of creation. And when we embrace these corrections with our whole hearts we'll find ourselves drawn ever further into the blessing of God's presence. On a behavioral level, devotional application focuses on how our behaviors are affected by the presence of God as we contemplate the Scriptures.

When we come to Scripture, we must humbly lay bare everything we've done. And as we prayerfully draw near to God, his Spirit confirms and enhances our actions for future service to God. And beyond this, as we reflect on Scripture in conscious dependence on the Spirit, we find that he corrects and empowers us to turn to actions that are pleasing to God.

Finally, on an emotional level, devotional application of Scripture entails how our attitudes and feelings are affected by reading the Scriptures in the special presence of God. In his wisdom, God's Spirit brings regret, grief and sorrow when they are appropriate. God's Spirit also fills our hearts with joy, peace, and love. When we approach the Scriptures as the living Word of God, our emotions toward him, other people and the rest of creation can come upon us quietly. Or, as the Spirit wills, they can also fill our hearts so that we're overwhelmed by God's presence. Whatever the case, as we learn how to interpret the Scriptures in the light of God's nearness, we'll find that the Scriptures come alive and transform us, not only in our concepts and behaviors, but also in the depths of our emotions.

We have to recognize that when we study the Bible that the Bible is not asking us just simply to change our thinking. It's asking us to change our lives. And so one of the things I like to use when I encourage people to study the Bible is to think of the application of Scripture in three parts: think, feel, do. Intellectualism is when we only apply the Bible to one of those places — how we think. But God does want us to love him with all our minds, so thinking matters to God. But also how we feel matters to God — our emotional life, our disposition throughout the day. It matters to God what our feelings are. And feelings can be faithful to God, and feelings can *not* be faithful to God. There's no such thing as neutral feelings. But there's also the "do" aspect. When we apply the Scripture, God doesn't only want us to think about how it affects our emotions or affects our mind, but also how it affects our actions. And so if we use that grid — think, feel, do — it really provides a balance for how we think about the Bible.

— Dr. Michael J. Kruger

## CONCLUSION

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In this introduction to biblical hermeneutics, we've focused on three main concepts. First, we explored some of the basic terminology we need to orient ourselves to this subject. Second, we saw that scientific hermeneutics are important for their rigor and their logical consistency. And third, we saw that devotional hermeneutics — reading Scripture in God's presence — is a critical counterbalance to scientific hermeneutics.

Learning more about interpreting the Scriptures opens the way for all kinds of new insights and blessings from God. The Old and New Testaments set the standards for everything we believe, everything we do and everything we feel as God's faithful people. And as we look into many more details in lessons to come, we'll come to see how essential it is to give ourselves both to scientific and devotional hermeneutics. As we do, we'll discover new paths of faithful service to God in every dimension of our lives.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
ONE

Introduction to Biblical  
Hermeneutics  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	Why is it so important to submit to the authority of Scripture? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	What are the most important hermeneutical principles we should follow? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b>	Why aren't our interpretations of Scripture equal in authority to Scripture itself? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b>	Why is it so important to search for the original meaning of biblical passages? .....	5
<b>Question 5:</b>	How does our faith in Christ affect our interpretations of the Bible? .....	6
<b>Question 6:</b>	How does the spiritual conditions of an interpreter affect his or her ability to interpret the Bible? .....	8
<b>Question 7:</b>	How can we remain emotionally engaged with the text of Scripture when we make it an object of academic study? .....	9
<b>Question 8:</b>	How important is it for us to love and cherish the Scripture? .....	10
<b>Question 9:</b>	What part does prayer play in biblical interpretation? .....	11
<b>Question 10:</b>	How important is it for us to put our knowledge of the Bible into practice? .....	13

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson One: Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Jimmy Agan  
Dr. Bruce Baugus  
Dr. Steve Blakemore  
Dr. Darrell L. Bock  
Dr. P. J. Buys  
Dr. Gary Cockerill  
Dr. Andrew Davis  
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Dr. Matt Friedeman  
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Dr. John Oswalt  
Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

Dr. Robert L. Plummer  
Dr. Vern S. Poythress  
Dr. Philip Ryken  
Dr. Miles Van Pelt  
Dr. Peter Walker  
Dr. Sanders L. Willson

### Question 1:

#### Why is it so important to submit to the authority of Scripture?

**The Bible is a book that speaks to us on many levels. It speaks to us today just as it spoke to the early Christians. And because it's God's Word, it speaks with authority as the only unquestionable rule of faith and life. Why is it so important to submit to the authority of Scripture?**

#### **Dr. Peter Walker**

One of the key reasons why we should submit to the authority of Scripture is simply this: because Jesus himself did. That is amazing. In Jesus' own ministry you see him saying time and time again, "It is written..."; "It is written..." That's how he answered Satan in the temptation narrative. He's still quoting Scripture on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So out of the depth of Jesus' being, on that occasion, comes Scripture. His was a mind which was saturated with Scripture. He prayed to God using the words of Scripture. He allowed Scripture to dictate, if you like, the path of his own ministry. Now if that was true for Jesus, how much more it should be true for us? And when you think of who Jesus is, Jesus is, if you like, the subject matter of Scripture. He is that about which the Scripture is written. These things point to him. More than that, he's actually the subject of Scripture. He's the one who creates it, who writes it, who inspires it. I believe that Christ stands behind all of Scripture. And if that's the case, he himself submitted to Scripture, how much more should we? Think about it. Jesus also described as himself the "Word of God," John 1. The Word of God? He himself submitted to the written word of God. Well, this is amazing. We can't understand it in a sense. But it just shows how important Scripture is. And I'm really impressed by the fact that in Luke 24 when the risen Christ is there with those Emmaus disciples on the road, what does he do? He gives them a glorious Bible study, and he takes them back and says, "It was written..." — It is written that

this is would happen, and now I have fulfilled it — And I think there's a very important lesson there. Jesus is, if you like, saying, don't make the mistake of saying, "hey, we've got the risen Christ, we've got the Holy Spirit, who needs a dusty old book like that?" Instead, he's saying, even though I'm arisen from the dead, even though you can have a personal relationship with me, you need a book to guide you. And I'm giving you this book. You've got the Old Testament already. I'm going to give out my Spirit and enable the New Testament writers to write about me, to write an authorized biography of Jesus. They're going to do that. You need the book. And if Jesus says that, then we do indeed need it.

**Dr. Vern S. Poythress**

In Psalm 119:105 it says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." That's saying God specifically designed the Bible precisely to give us definitive guidance in our whole life. If we're not going to listen to it, if we're not going to obey it, if we're not going to take it to heart, we're going to foul our lives up. I mean, this is really important ... Scripture is designed to overcome sin, and that means submitting even when you don't like it, when it cuts against the grain of your own sinfulness. That's one of the most important areas where we should be submitting.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

If God talks, we should listen, and we should be responsive. So, the authority is not a response to words in a book, which is sometimes what people are accused of when they respect the Bible. Rather, the response is a personal response in the context of your personal relationship with God, recognizing that God has every right to direct your life, and to lead you, and to give you instruction and wisdom, and to encourage you, all those kinds of things. And that's what the Bible is seeking to do. So I would be foolish not to be responsive to the authority that is inherent in the inspired Word.

**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

Well, accepting and acknowledging the authority of the Scripture as the foundational starting point for all theological reflection and doctrinal claims is important because of what the Scriptures purport to be telling us, and that is this: that God has acted in history. We have to remember that the Scriptures aren't comprised of a set of great religious insights or moral claims. Take like the Quran or the writings of much of the Hindu scriptures or Buddhist writings, those are basically moral proclamations or religious insights produced in the mind of what we might call a religious genius, the Buddha or Mohammad. But the Scriptures say God has acted in history, and in these acts — the act of calling Abraham, the act of delivering Israel, the act of sending judgment upon Israel through the Babylonians, the act of bringing Israel back to Jerusalem, ultimately the act of becoming incarnate in the virgin Mary, of being born, of Jesus dying on the cross literally, physically, historically, rising from the dead literally, physically, historically — those are historical events that the Scriptures say they are reporting on. Now it's important to submit to the teaching of Scripture if the teaching of Scripture is telling us about what God has done. The Scriptures then are our only access, our only access in written form to the account of what God has done

to reveal himself... That's the only access we have to God's mighty acts of self-revelation. Therefore, the Scriptures themselves become the revelation of God to us.

### **Question 2:**

#### **What are the most important hermeneutical principles we should follow?**

**When we come to any text, whether it's a novel, personal letter, or a newspaper, we instinctively want to know the message and how it might relate to our lives. The same is true when we come to interpret the Bible. We want to understand the meaning and possible application of what we're reading. Given the uniqueness of Scripture, what are the most important hermeneutical principles we should follow?**

#### **Dr. P. J. Buys**

The most important principle for evangelical interpreters is to be serious with the text, that you really want to understand the text in its original meaning as how the first recipients heard it. And that you really faithfully convey it to people living in a totally "other" context, in such a way that it impacts their lives and enrich their lives. And the most important issue is to bring them in a closer relationship with the real author of the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### **Dr. Jimmy Agan**

When I have opportunity to teach in the classroom, or in church settings, or even with my own family, the sort of the basic principles for interpreting Scripture, I always go back to five fundamentals. The first is "clarity," understand that God wants us to understand his Word. He wants us to know him. He has communicated in languages that we can understand. The second is "unity," that we lean into the Bible expecting it all to be one consistent story, not expecting to find contradiction. Complementarity and different emphases, yes, but it's all going to fit together. Clarity and unity. Third is "grace," to understand that the pattern of Scripture is to show us our need of God, how he has met that need, how he has provided for us ultimately in Christ, and how we are to respond to his provision. And then after that we'd move to "context," the sense that, while all of Scripture is one coherent whole, when we look at any part we can better understand it if we see how it connects to other parts. So, context, how does it connect to history, culture? How does it connect to other passages around it? And then finally, a principle that I'm stealing from Augustine way back when in church history, the principle of "charity." He emphasized that all of Scripture is designed to help us to love God and love neighbor. And if we're not using the Bible in ways that helps us grow in love for God and neighbor, then we're misusing Scripture. So, there are lots of things we could say about important principles for interpreting the Bible. But I think if we get those five down, they'll never mislead us or take us astray.

**Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

One of the questions I get asked all the time is, "What principles do Christians need to use to interpret the Bible?" And I usually sum it up by saying, "Context is key." You've got to have the right context if you're going to understand the Bible. But context is multilayered, and one of the things I tell people is, there's really three different contexts that you use to interpret Scripture. First is the "immediate context." You want to make sure that you understand that passage and the surrounding texts right around it. What argument is the author making? What book does it fall in? Things like this. The second layer of context is what I call a "canonical context," or maybe a redemptive-historical context. Where does that passage fall in the larger Scriptures? And so, when you're interpreting one passage, you use other passages of Scripture outside of that immediate locale to interpret it. And the third layer of context is what I call an "ecclesiological context." We don't interpret Scripture in isolation from the church. We interpret Scripture in conjunction with the church, both in the present and also throughout the ages. What have the church fathers said about this passage? What have theologians said about this passage? What's the collective wisdom of God's people about this passage? Now, when you look at all three of those levels of context together, they really work in a harmonious way to help people understand what the Scripture says. And a mistake can be made in any of those three areas. But if they're all checked, usually that can lead us to a good understanding of what that passage says.

**Question 3:****Why aren't our interpretations of Scripture equal in authority to Scripture itself?**

We all come to the Bible with personal experiences and ideas that shape the way we read it. And many of our interpretations may seem good and right to us initially. But, they must always be checked against what the Bible actually says. Why aren't our interpretations of Scripture equal in authority to Scripture itself?

**Dr. Robert G. Lister**

Our interpretations of Scripture are accountable to the authority of Scripture in a way that Scripture is not accountable to the authority of our interpretation. Now, we want to be careful how we understand that. We don't want to indicate that we cannot understand Scripture accurately where we do understand Scripture accurately and repeat it back in terms that might be different than the terms Scripture uses. For example, the word "Trinity" as a summary of what the Scriptures do teach about God. Even when the Scriptures don't use the word Trinity, we would understand our interpretation to be an accurate interpretation. But we always have to allow our interpretation to be accountable to the Scriptures themselves. It is possible to misinterpret. It's possible to not consider all of the relevant data. It's possible that there is some piece of information that we're missing about the historical situation of the original text itself. And so we always want to understand that our interpretations

are revisable in light of what Scripture teaches, and we come back to that authority again and again and again to correct possible misinterpretations, nuances. And in this, the teaching of church history is very helpful because it points out ways in which people throughout the history of the church have both gotten major doctrinal issues right and major doctrinal issues wrong. And so we stand in a stream of witnesses, a stream of inheritance, so to speak, of handling the Scriptures. So we're not interpreting the Scriptures in a brand new way absent of context of, say 2,000 years, of church history. So we can correct our interpretation by looking at what other good Bible interpreters have had to say over the years and use them as conversation partners, but always appealing to Scripture itself as the final authority.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

In the Wesleyan world, we have talked about the Wesleyan quadrilateral, which means "Scripture, reason, experience and tradition." And some people got that out of whack to think those are four equal things, that Scripture is the same kind of authority as reason, same kind of authority as experience, and the same kind of authority as tradition. But it wasn't so with John Wesley, and it wasn't so for evangelicals since John Wesley. We have always said Scripture is number one. And then underneath that Roman numeral, so to speak, is: A, B and C, which would be reason, experience and tradition. So we look at Scripture to say, alright, that is our authority. Is there something in our brain that can help us understand that? Some kind of reasonable dynamic that we can understand Scripture? Yeah, sure. Can tradition help us to understand Scripture? You bet. Can our experience help us to understand Scripture? Yes it can. But, Scripture is always the final word, not reason, not experience, not tradition. Always the Bible.

**Question 4:****Why is it so important to search for the original meaning of biblical passages?**

**In many ways, interpreting the Bible is unlike interpreting any other book. We need to consider many factors when we come to interpret a passage of Scripture. And perhaps none of these factors is as important as a passage's meaning in its original context. With everything else to consider, why is it so important to search for the original meaning of biblical passages?**

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

Searching for the original meaning in biblical passages is critical because that's where our basis of divine authority is. If we don't know what God intended in a passage of the Bible, then we can't say what its meaning is for us today. So, original meaning is a critical starting point for making modern application. And, in fact, saying the Bible means things that are contradictory to, or even outside of original meaning can be one of the most unhelpful and even self-serving things that people do in the church.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

God in his wisdom chose to reveal his Word in specific historical contexts over hundreds of years. God gave his Word to prophets. God gave his Word to his apostles, and this Word was communicated to the living audience of that day. For example, the apostle Paul. When he writes to the Ephesians, God's Word comes through that thinking, feeling person, Paul, such that Paul is instructing them, and he's warning them, and he's passionately pleading with them. And yet the very words that he's using in his letter are the exact words that God wants chosen. Now as we look at this, we seek first to understand what the original writer, the inspired writer of Scripture, was intending to convey to that original audience. What was Paul seeking to teach the Ephesians? What error was he correcting? What truth was he impressing upon them? And then that sort of makes a channel, a channel in which all legitimate implications that we have flow today. A wrong approach to Scripture is just to kind of jump down into it and, "Oh, this makes me think of this," or "Suddenly I feel this," as opposed to, say, "Well, you know, God gave his Word in history and to particular persons, particular times, for a reason." And we respect that channel even as we see there are many implications, countless implications which flow out of that channel and meaning for our lives today.

**Dr. John Oswalt**

One of the things that has been stressed in seminary education for many years is the original meaning of the text. And if we know the meaning of the original text, it often helps us to avoid wrong applications and does help us to find the right applications. I teach Hebrew, and one of the things that I often say to my students is, "The value of your knowing Hebrew is that you'll be able to help your congregations realize what's going on in many of these cases." For instance, I think about the book of Ruth. Well, we don't thresh wheat on the top of a hill anymore. We don't have foreign girls coming into a setting in another culture in the same way. But we do see what God is saying about human behavior ... Well, if we understand what was going on with Ruth — how she in her situation nevertheless cared for her mother, how she in her situation was willing to risk, really, her life on that threshing floor at night with a rich, elderly, landed, male citizen who could have raped her and left her helpless — we can see something of her courage. We can see something of her love for God and understanding what's going on in that setting, in the language. And the Hebrew word *hesed* is the word that means "passionate devotion" to someone to whom you don't necessarily owe that. And Ruth demonstrates that as a person who is really helpless.

**Question 5:****How does our faith in Christ affect our interpretations of the Bible?**

It's clear that we aren't able to come to the Scriptures, or any text, apart from our own beliefs and experiences in life. And one of the key factors that shapes how we see any passage is our relationship with Christ. So, how does our faith in Christ affect our interpretation of the Bible?

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

Our faith in Christ is fundamental to how we interpret the Bible. The psalmist in Psalm 119 prays, "Lord, open my eyes that I can see." Or in Isaiah there is this kind of curse, in Isaiah 6. "Seeing they will not see, and hearing they will not hear," meaning they can read the information or hear the words but not really understand what's going on. And the point of both of those passages is that the work of the Spirit to give us faith — eyes that see and ears that hear — is fundamental to interpreting Scripture. Without a renewed heart the Bible is in some sense a condemning word against us. But once God has renewed our heart and gives us eyes that see and ears that hear, once we have that faith... we perceive for the first time that the Bible is God's message to his people about salvation through his Son. And so, when it comes to faith and when it comes to grasping the gospel and grasping the message of Scripture, faith is the necessary first prerequisite for adequately understanding and apprehending the significance of the gospel through the Scriptures to us.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

If we think we can come to the Scriptures and understand them apart from the assistance of Christ and his Spirit and apart from finding Christ in the Scriptures, then we're mistaken. In the Gospel of John 5:39, Jesus said — he said this to his contemporaries. He said:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness about me (John 5:39, ESV).

It's very possible to be someone who can even memorize large sections of the Bible, but unless we find ourselves treasuring Christ, unless we find ourselves repenting of our sin and trusting in him for our salvation as a result of our study of the Scripture, then we are not studying the Scriptures as God would have us to do. In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul writes about how the Holy Spirit enables us to understand, how the Holy Spirit enlivens and illumines our minds to understand what is written in God's Word. Martin Luther, the famous reformer... says that in Psalm 119 we find a model for studying the Scriptures. And a third of the Psalm is calling out to God for supernatural assistance: "Open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your word. Turn my heart and mind away from vain and worthless things." And so, apart from the work of God in our spirits, in our lives, in our minds to understand his Word and to treasure it and to see Christ as providing the righteousness we desire, then we're not studying the Scriptures aright.

**Dr. Andrew Davis**

Our faith in Christ affects our interpretation of the Bible in profound ways. First and foremost, we have to be regenerate, born again and indwelt with the Spirit properly to interpret Scripture and to see Christ at the center of Scripture. And then a sense of a living, walking relationship with Christ, so that we are filled with him as we come to every text of Scripture. And then to try to understand the proper way that perhaps the Old Testament or the New Testament teaches things about Christ. The Spirit of



Christ, the testimony of Christ is a spirit of prophecy we're told. And so, how does the book of Deuteronomy point to Christ? How does Isaiah point to Christ? How do other prophetic passages or Psalms point to Christ? And so, as we're filled with the Spirit and we have good fellowship with Jesus, we can pray through the Spirit and say, "Lord, show me yourself." We think about what he did on the road to Emmaus, how with those two disciples he opened their eyes to see everything that was in Scripture concerning himself. And he did the same thing with the apostles in the upper room. I want that experience as a teacher of the Word of God. So, I want to go to Christ by the Spirit and say, "Lord, show me yourself in Scripture."

### **Question 6:**

**How does the spiritual conditions of an interpreter affect his or her ability to interpret the Bible?**

Since the Bible is living and active, it is clear that it speaks to us in our current situations. It is also clear that our personal, spiritual conditions influence our understanding of a text. How does the spiritual condition of an interpreter affect his or her ability to interpret the Bible?

#### **Dr. Bruce Baugus**

When we read the Bible, we are engaged in a text that goes beyond all other texts. However profound other texts might impact us and challenge us, nothing engages us in the complete and the whole man like Scripture does. I mean, this is God speaking to us ... This is the most important relationship that there is. This is the thing that defines everything else, that sets the categories for everything else. And that's the level that Scripture is working in us and on us as we read it. What this means is that the whole man, the whole person is involved in the reading of Scripture. And you cannot check any part of yourself and pretend or ignore it as though that doesn't matter, that this doesn't count. No, it's quite the contrary. We must bring the whole of who we are in to the reading process. And this puts our sin front and center so that, to the degree that we're sinful, we're going to have a kind of a natural impulse to defend ourselves against the force of Scripture, against what God is saying to us, against the challenge, the correction, the rebuke, to justify ourselves, to explain these things away. And that, as Kierkegaard has pointed out one time, the problem is not that we do not understand the Bible. The problem is that so often that we understand it all too well and are unwilling to obey it and to believe it, and to entrust ourselves to the promises and so on. That's really the fundamental problem many, many times when we claim not to be able to understand the Word of God.

#### **Dr. Gary Cockerill**

Well, the spiritual condition of a person certainly is important in interpreting Scripture. Not that somebody who is walking closely with the Lord can just interpret Scripture without study, without putting effort into it, but... something that is essential for understanding Scripture, for letting it come into my life, is humility and

submission to Scripture, to listen to what God is saying. And so, a person who is walking with the Lord closely — their spiritual condition then you'd say was good, is "walking with the Lord closely" — is much more likely to be submissive to Scripture, to really listen to what it has to say. Not to try to twist it to... what he wants it, or she wants it to say, but to really submit to the text of Scripture and let it speak to them ... And that is so important. If the Scripture is the Word of God, and if it is God's message of salvation, then I want to know what God is saying. I don't want to know what I am saying. I don't want to make it mean what I want it to mean. I want to know what God is saying. And so, a submission to the Scripture is very crucial. And that, I think, is one of the main things that walking closely with the Lord does, walking and having a good spiritual condition and relationship with him does. It enables us to be humble before Scripture and see what God has to say to us.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf (translation)**

A biblical interpreter should be in good spiritual condition and mature in the Christian faith if he is to understand the deep spiritual truths in the Bible. If the interpreter is in a poor spiritual state, he will poorly express the Bible's concepts and ethical principles. But if he is spiritually mature and lives in spiritual maturity, he can deeply understand what is in the Bible because its principles, whether doctrinal or ethical, really talk about the depth of the human conscience. This requires the person to be mature in faith and spirit ... That's why the apostle Paul emphasized that elders should be prepared and mature for teaching... because the interpreter's spiritual state significantly affects what he says in relation to his understanding and explanation of what's in the Bible.

**Question 7:**

**How can we remain emotionally engaged with the text of Scripture when we make it an object of academic study?**

Approaching the Bible in a scientific, academic manner has many benefits. One of these is seeing the original meaning of the text more clearly. But when we pursue the original meaning of a passage, we often focus solely on our intellectual study of the passage and ignore more devotional aspects. How can we remain emotionally engaged with the text of Scripture when we make it an object of academic study?

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

Academic study often does push "the mind" to the forefront and the emotions backward. But let's say it this way: we're whole beings — body, soul, mind, strength, emotions, will and mind — and therefore we should engage the whole person. You know, how do you get engaged when you've been academically studying Greek or Hebrew and the structure of a passage? One answer is, pretend you're there. If you're reading a historical narrative, imagine what it would have been like to be there when Jesus wept over Lazarus, when Lazarus came forth. So as you picture yourself being there, you will reengage the whole person as well ... Another way to keep our

emotions engaged is to picture the people to whom you're speaking. If you know someone in your church has just experienced a death, has just become married, has just gotten a job after a long search, feel that when you talk about work. Picture the people to whom you're ministering in your mind, the joy or perhaps sorrow they're feeling at the time. And as you remember that it's not just you and the Scripture — it's you and the Scripture for the sake of your people — your emotions will stay engaged in a godly way.

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

Apart from the Spirit, we can't understand the mind of God in his Word. So the Holy Spirit is the gift of Jesus to understand the testimony about Jesus that's given to us in the Scriptures. And so, practically what that means is when we study the Bible, and we seek to know Christ through the Scriptures, that we have to seek that understanding of who Jesus is through the Spirit's guidance. So one of the principal reasons we do that when we study the Bible is we pray, and we remember that it's not just an academic activity, but it's a spiritual activity. And that even as we grow in grace and as the Spirit makes us more and more like Jesus, we're better able to understand that Word, too, the Spirit working in our sanctification.

**Question 8:**

**How important is it for us to love and cherish the Scripture?**

**Many times people who are unfamiliar with the Bible assume that it's merely a boring list of rules and doctrines. But rather than finding the Scriptures dull, the Bible's human authors treasured them. So what about us? How important is it for us to love and cherish the Scriptures?**

**Dr. Andrew Davis**

It is vital for us to love the Scripture as having come from the mind, from the heart of God. God is our heavenly Father in Christ and he's speaking to us. And when Scripture speaks to us, we need to love what he's saying. And probably there's no part of Scripture that displays this love for Scripture as much as Psalm 119. And the psalmist over and over says, "Oh how I love your law and meditate on it day and night. I eat your words, I ponder them; they are my food." And he just delights, verse after verse — 176 verses of delighting in the law of God. And I think to myself how more should I as a New Testament believer delight in the whole counsel of God. We have better promises, the book of Hebrews tells us. We have the fulfillment of the life of Christ. And so I can love whatever the writer of Psalm 119 loved plus a whole lot more. And so, for me, to love the Scripture means that I love the God who gave it. And then it means that I really delight to obey what he said. And more than anything, we are to love Scripture and its testimony to our Savior Jesus Christ. It says in John 1, "In the beginning was the Word." There's such a close link to the written Word of God in our experience of Christ. I don't know anything about Jesus except from Scripture. I can't learn about Jesus from clouds or mountains or rivers. I learn about

Jesus from special revelation, from God communicating through Scripture who his Son is. And so, I love Scripture because it points me to Christ and gives me Christ. And I can feed on Christ as living bread by reading Scripture. So it's really important for us to love Scripture.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf (translation)**

We love many things in life. We love our country, parents, our sons and daughters and many hobbies. And this makes us move forward to get to know them more. So, if you love the Bible, you will love to study the Word, study the Bible and dig deeper to know its facts. Usually, if you study something you love, you advance in its field. And if we love the Bible, we work on studying and understanding it, and put in time and effort, and look for references to understand it more... In my experience, the more I study the Word — the more time I spend in understanding and verifying its meanings and looking in dictionaries and reference books — the more I love this Word. Many verses in the Bible say that studying the Word is like eating honey. It is extremely sweet because it gives spiritual and mental satisfaction. In fact, studying the Bible fills us on every level. How many times do we get more knowledge, and then our minds are open to understand more? And how many times while we read and study the Word, God speaks to us and we start to pray and talk to him. This produces fellowship with him. As a result we love God and his Word. And his word lives in us, and we apply it to our life and we live for him. And all that happens through practice. There is a common Arabic proverb that says, "With distance the heart grows stale." So, if the person lives by the word and studies it, he will love it more and more and he will grow in this love till he starts bragging about it, that he and the Word are one. The more he is into the Word, the more the Word is in him and works in his life to show its virtues and wonderful meanings, especially the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

We ought to love, cherish, delight in Scripture. I read at least one paragraph every day out of Psalm 119, and over and over again the psalmist is saying, "How I delight in your law, how I love your precepts." And to kind of catch that fire for Scripture, I think it's an exceedingly important thing. You know, the Jews were known as "the people of the book." Oh, that we could become the people of the book. But we march beyond the book to what the book is trying to tell us to do and the things the book is trying to tell us to love: Love God with all you heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Very important things, but we need a passion for this book.

**Question 9:**

**What part does prayer play in biblical interpretation?**

**Devotional hermeneutics focuses on our need to draw near to God as we interpret the Scriptures. This means that we always have the author of the passage we are**

**studying right there with us. Since we always have access to God as we study the Bible, what part does prayer play in biblical interpretation?**

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

I do think prayer is a very essential part of our interpretation of the Bible. And that's because when we are studying the Bible, we're not only studying an historical document or a literary document, but we're actually seeking to meet with God himself. Jesus teaches very clearly what the rest of the Bible also teaches that spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Of course, that's the language of Paul. Jesus says something similar in John 7. "If you desire to know the truth, you will understand that I am from God," Jesus says. Those are just a couple of hints of the reality that interpreting the Bible is more than an intellectual exercise. It is a spiritual experience, a spiritual exercise itself. And so it stands to reason that we should be praying and seeking the Lord before, during and after sermon preparation, personal Bible study, devotional reading of all sorts, because that is part of what it means to read the Bible well.

**Dr. Philip Ryken**

Biblical interpretation really begins with prayer, because when we come to the Bible to understand the Bible and then perhaps also to teach the Bible to others, we're not standing over God's Word trying to use it to do things that we want to do with it. We're sitting under God's Word. And the way we bring ourselves into submission to God's Word is to pray for the guidance and help and direction of the Holy Spirit. And the same Spirit that inspired God's Word also guides us into an understanding of God's Word. We invite that work of the Holy Spirit through prayer.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Prayer is a vital part of the discipline of reading the Bible rightly and reading it well. If we think about the fact that we have access to the divine author whose meaning we are really after when we read the Bible, then why would we not be in conversation with the author if we could possibly be? And, of course, we can, and that is prayer. There's another aspect to this, too. Prayer has been given to us by God as a kind of discipline to practice in our life that is helping us greatly to come into ever greater conformity with his Word and with the likeness of Christ. And so, that also is a critical aspect for becoming a better reader of Scripture. Sin blinds us. Sin twists us. Sin defends itself against the Word of God. Sin does not want to feel the weight of the Word of God. Prayer is able to attack sin in certain ways and to overcome this and to bring us to repentance and confession of sin and so on. And this is a vital part of becoming an ever better reader of God's Word.

**Question 10:****How important is it for us to put our knowledge of the Bible into practice?**

There are at least two ways to approach any subject. We can simply develop an intellectual understanding of it, or we can use our knowledge for action. This is true for the Bible as well. Those who simply read what it says will have a different understanding of it than those who do what it says. How important is it for us to put our knowledge of the Bible into practice?

**Dr. Miguel Nunez (translation)**

Regarding the knowledge and practice of the Word of God, we have to remember that if we know the Word, and we do not put it into practice, we are disobeying the Word and it is actually useless to us. In the book of James we have a very well-known text in 1:22 that says:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says (James 1:22).

James is inviting us to know the Word and then put it in practice, "Do what it says." If we don't, we're deceiving ourselves. And he uses the illustration of the man who looks at himself in a mirror, and when he leaves he forgets how he looks in front of the mirror. There is a particular calling to not only study the Word, not only listen to the Word, but put it into practice too. When this doesn't happen — and frequently it doesn't happen — we are in disobedience. The only reason to study the Word is to obey it. If we aren't going to obey it, then don't study it. In fact, we'll be in a worse place if we study it and we don't obey it than when we only have the knowledge. We have to study it and then put into practice what we've learned. And then the Word will literally rule over us. It's not an option that we have. It's a mandate to be "doers," or someone who practices the Word. If we don't, we'll live in disobedience.

Unfortunately, there are many Christians, many believers, and sometimes even leaders that live in disobedience because they are listeners but not doers of the Word.

**Dr. Sanders L. Willson**

Jesus said that you should be very careful how you hear. And he said, "To the one who has even more will be given. The one who does not have, even what he has" — go figure — "will be taken away." And I think what he's saying to us is there are ways in which we have to be careful how we hear intellectually. But then practically, there are ways in which we have to be very careful how we hear. In other words, he's saying that if you don't put it into practice, you're going to lose it. If you put it into practice, you'll be given more. So, I don't think that we can expect to grow in our understanding of the Bible unless we're putting into practice what we're hearing as we hear it. Also, if we don't put it into practice, we don't become very effective teachers for other people because we're only talking about something that we have no experience of. But if we have experience of it, we'll talk about it very differently. For

example, if I'm trying to put into practice loving my wife, I'm not going to be too hard on you because I know how hard this is — or really, I should say it's hard for her to love me. But I know how hard it is. We need the grace of God. And so there'll be a graciousness in my presentation because I've been trying to put this into practice, and I know how difficult it is. On the other hand, positively, as I put it into practice, I know how important it is, and therefore there will be a sense of urgency as I teach this to other people. So there's a spiritual context as well as an intellectual one that is only enhanced as I put into practice what I'm interpreting from the Bible.

**Dr. Andrew Davis**

It is absolutely vital for us to put what we learn from Scripture into practice in our everyday lives. The Lord means to transform the way we live by the renewing of our minds, Romans 12. Jesus said if you know these things, you'll be blessed if you do them. Jesus said make a tree good and its fruit will be good. He wants it lived out. For us to not seek to put into practice the things we're learning means we're just gaining head knowledge... Knowledge puffs up, Paul said, but love builds up. And so our desire is to be transformed in the way we live. But we can't do the opposite thing which is just look good on the outside and have a shiny, you know, pleasing life on the outside. Then we're hypocrites at that point. We're being actors. We're like those white-washed tombs. So there has to be a complete integration of a transformation of the heart that leads to a whole new way of living. In Romans 6 Paul said, don't you know that when you present yourself to someone to obey them as a master, you're a slave or a servant to the one whom you obey. And so we show that we are Christ's servants by obeying him in everyday life. So many verses teach us that Christ the King wants to be, demands to be, obeyed day after day. And Scripture is given to help us do that. It tells us what we're to obey. It gives us commands, many of them, and those commands really do chart the course of a godly life. So after we've come to faith in Christ, we then are brought back by the power of the Spirit to the laws of God so that we can live them out in everyday life, not for our justification but for our godly living and fruitfulness. So, it's absolutely vital for us to put into practice the things we learn from Scripture.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

I think it's extremely important that when you read something you do put it into practice. I had a hermeneutics professor that said one time, "You do what you believe and you believe what you do." So, all knowledge eventually comes out in terms of: I am applying this to my life. Now having said that, the Old Testament word in the Bible for "know" was "*yada*," which meant not just intellectual capacity, but it was "to encounter" or "to experience." So, to know God meant that you were encountering him, you were experiencing him, which goes far beyond just what's going on in your brain but goes to entire lifestyle.

**As we interpret Scripture, both scientific hermeneutics and devotional hermeneutics become important. In a very real sense, they provide a healthy balance between an overly intellectual approach to interpretation and an overly emotional approach. And as this balanced approach becomes more natural, so does our fruitful**

**interpretation. As a result, we can apply the Scriptures to our own lives in ways that help us live out God's Word and glorify him in our world today.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
TWO

## PREPARATION FOR INTERPRETATION



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Dependence on Holy Spirit.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Inspiration	2
1. Divine Source	5
2. Human Means	8
B. Illumination	9
<b>III. Need for Human Effort .....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. Importance	11
B. Influences	12
1. Exegesis	13
2. Interaction	13
3. Experience	14
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>15</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson One

### Preparation for Interpretation

#### INTRODUCTION

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Whenever we begin a project, it's wise to make the right kinds of preparations. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself illustrated this idea when he described a man who wanted to build a tower, but failed to complete the project because he had not prepared. Well, something similar is true when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures. Making sense of the Bible is a complex project that requires all kinds of activities and extends throughout our entire lives. So, we have to make sure that we prepare to interpret the Bible in the right ways.

This is the second lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, a series devoted to exploring how followers of Christ should interpret the Bible. And we've entitled this lesson "Preparation for Interpretation" because we'll be focusing on some things it's helpful to do before we read and interpret the Scriptures.

In this lesson, we'll look at two crucial elements of our personal preparation for interpretation. First, we'll consider our dependence on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And second, we'll address the need for our own human effort. Let's look first at our dependence on the Holy Spirit.

#### DEPENDENCE ON HOLY SPIRIT

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When we mention the Holy Spirit, we all know that different Christians react in different ways. Perhaps you're from a branch of the church that stresses the gifts of the Spirit — his presence and empowerment in everyday life. Or maybe you're from a branch of the church that minimizes the Spirit's activity in the daily life of believers. Well, what we're about to say about the Holy Spirit's work in the interpretation of Scripture will both reassure and challenge each one of us. As we interpret the Bible, we must consciously give ourselves to the ministry of the Spirit, but the Bible itself teaches us to do this in particular ways. To ignore the Holy Spirit is the height of foolishness; but we must pay attention to him in the ways that the Bible instructs. What then does it mean to depend on the Holy Spirit as we interpret the Scriptures?

Most evangelicals theoretically acknowledge that the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in our interpretation of Scripture. But modern academic books and lectures on biblical hermeneutics often pay almost no attention to the Holy Spirit's role. Instead, we commonly treat biblical interpretation as if it were an impersonal event, a process in which we simply implement a list of principles or methods to understand a text. But from

a biblical point of view hermeneutics, or the interpretation of Scripture, is very personal because it involves interaction between human interpreters and the person of the Holy Spirit.

Conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit in interpretation is crucial for at least two reasons. First, the Spirit was the source of the inspiration of Scripture. And second, the Holy Spirit grants illumination to human interpreters. Let's turn first to the matter of inspiration.

## INSPIRATION

I remember once having the opportunity to meet a well-known author whose books had helped me at a critical time in my Christian life. I was so excited to sit down with him and to tell him how much his books meant to me. At one point in the conversation, I told him about a particularly beneficial insight that I derived from one of his books. But much to my surprise, he looked up at me and said, "You've got that all wrong! That's not what I wrote at all!" Well, to say the least, I was embarrassed. But I remember taking a deep breath and admitting to him, "Well, I guess the man who wrote the book knows what it means better than I do."

Well, in many ways, the same is true with the Bible. The Holy Spirit of God inspired every word of Scripture. And in this sense, he's the author of Scripture. So, it only stands to reason that we should seek insight into his book from him. In a very basic sense, the doctrine of inspiration says that:

**The Holy Spirit moved human beings to write God's revelation as Scripture and superintended their work in a way that made their writings infallible**

Listen to the way Peter expressed this idea in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

**No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).**

In this passage, Peter said that all biblical prophecy originated with the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit moved human beings to write down God's revelation. This process ensured that what they wrote was absolutely true, and that the words of the human authors were also the words of God. And in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul indicated that all of Scripture was similarly inspired.

**The Bible is organic truth, interconnected from beginning to end, a wonderful book that is the Word of life, grounded in life, that provides for all the needs of life. It is truth because it has the Holy Spirit as the author, and it's impossible for the Holy Spirit to go**

**against himself or contradict himself... It doesn't matter if you read Jeremiah or Paul or Obadiah or Jonah; they all use different words, but the spirit behind those words is the same, because one Spirit inspired the words that were chosen.**

**— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation**

Christ and his disciples were committed to the idea that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture. And those who have attempted to follow Christ have almost always affirmed some sense in which the Scriptures were inspired. Even so, those who profess the Christian faith have tended to understand the nature of inspiration in different ways.

For our purposes, we'll focus on three views of inspiration that are prominent in the modern church. First, some people believe in what we'll call a "romantic" view of inspiration. According to this view, the Holy Spirit inspired biblical writers in the same way that secular poets or musicians might be moved to write their own works. In their view, Scripture isn't God's infallible truth, but only the personal reflections and opinions of the human authors.

Second, other Christians believe in what we might call "mechanical" inspiration. According to this outlook, biblical writers were relatively passive as they wrote Scripture. The Spirit of God essentially dictated the Bible and human writers recorded what he said.

Third, most evangelical Christians affirm that the Spirit's work of inspiration was "organic." According to this view, the Holy Spirit moved human authors to write and supervised and directed their words. As a result, the words of Scripture are the words of God. At the same time, the Holy Spirit used the personalities, experiences, outlooks, and intentions of human authors as he supervised their writing. So, the words of Scripture are also very much the words of its human authors. This third view best reflects the Scriptures' own testimony about the nature of inspiration.

**Reading the Scriptures is a very fascinating process, because it was created over hundreds of years by multiple authors, and so you see those personalities flowing out in the way they write, in the way they relate to the people around them, and in the language they use. And so, their personalities are important to the Word of God because God uses them in a lot of different ways. For example, you have priests that write, you have a farmer that writes, a herdsman that writes, you have a king that writes, you have a medical doctor that writes, and you have a man who, in our culture, would have a Ph.D. from "Hebrew University," the apostle Paul, who has a phenomenal grasp of the Old Testament as well as Greek culture and Greek language and is able to take the Greek language and pull out of it its appropriateness for the expression of theological thinking probably better than any language that's ever existed.**

**— Dr. Howard Eyrich**

For instance, listen to the way Peter described the organic nature of inspiration in 2 Peter 3:15:

**Our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him (2 Peter 3:15).**

In this passage Peter revealed how Paul's letters should be received. On the one hand, he said that, "Paul wrote." So, Peter affirmed Paul's involvement in his epistles. But on the other hand, Peter didn't just attribute these epistles to Paul. Instead, he noted that Paul wrote, "with the wisdom that God gave him." Paul's letters represented God's wisdom because of the guidance of Holy Spirit.

**This is true about the Word of God: every word in Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit. This is also true about the Word of God: every one of those words was written by a real human being, and in an amazing way, God sovereignly superintended the gifts and experiences of each of those biblical writers so that their personality, their literary style comes through, and at the same time the Bible is the very Word of God. So when you're reading Jeremiah, for example, you get a sense of his grief and passion for the people of God; when you read the Gospel of Luke, you get a sense of his careful eye for medical details and his love for history and accurate history. I mean, the personalities of these biblical writers and their experiences shine through in Scripture, but that happens without losing any of God's own authority and inspiration and power in the Word of God.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

**Well anyone who reads the Scriptures can see that the styles differ and that the writers are using their own gifts because of the different ways in which different writers express themselves, and the different kinds of choices these writers make to present the material. For example, in the Gospels we have Mark who doesn't do much with action scenes ... or does much, rather, with action scenes, but keeps his discourses to a minimum, whereas the Gospel of John is full of discourses, which reflects a different interest. So these writers are writing out of their own style, their own background, their own expression, and that's very clear from the differences we see between various books in those areas. God is inspiring them in the sense of directing what they say and standing behind what they say, but he is letting them express it in their own way.**

— Dr. Darrell L. Bock



We'll touch on two important aspects of organic inspiration that help us orient ourselves to the task of interpretation: first, the fact that the Holy Spirit was the divine source of Scripture; and second, the fact that he worked through human means to produce Scripture. Let's look first at the idea that the Spirit is the ultimate divine source of the Bible.

## Divine Source

As the one who inspired all Scripture, the Holy Spirit has intimate knowledge of the Bible's meaning and of the way it communicates that meaning. So, preparing to interpret the Scriptures involves dealing personally with the Holy Spirit as their ultimate author. We have to approach the Scriptures humbly, in full submission to him.

**It is, I think, essential to rely upon the Holy Spirit for a profound, in depth understanding of the Bible. It is clear, I think, that one does not have to rely upon the Holy Spirit to understand the message of the Bible as such. If that were the case, the Bible would have no evangelistic function. But to understand it in depth, there is good reason to think that it's absolutely critical to rely upon the Holy Spirit. Of course, the reason for that is that the church believes, and I certainly agree with its claim, that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture. And so in order to understand fully what the Holy Spirit intended to say through these writers, we need to be in touch, as it were, with that spiritual source.**

— Dr. David R. Bauer

On a number of occasions, biblical authors openly and directly acknowledged the Holy Spirit's inspiration as they dealt with the Scriptures. Without denying the role of human writers, they recognized that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of Scripture. For instance, in Acts 4:25, Peter and John led the church in an affirmation of Psalm 2, saying:

**You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David (Acts 4:25).**

In much the same way, Hebrews 3:7-8 speaks about Psalm 95:7-8 in this way:

**So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:7-8).**

In these and many other passages, biblical writers identified the Holy Spirit as the inspirer, and therefore, the ultimate author of Scripture. And they relied on this understanding of inspiration as they prepared themselves to read, interpret, and apply the Scriptures.

One of the most important implications of the divine origin of Scripture is the Bible's unquestionable veracity. Unfortunately, from time to time, well-meaning people say that they believe in the Spirit's involvement in the inspiration of Scripture, but they don't affirm that the Holy Spirit protected the Scriptures from error. But listen to what Jesus said about the Holy Spirit in John 14:16-17:

**The Father ... will give you another Counselor to be with you forever  
— the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17).**

When Jesus called the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of truth,” he indicated that the Holy Spirit is utterly truthful. So, we can be sure that the Scriptures the Spirit inspired are also utterly truthful. They don't lie; they don't contradict themselves. And therefore, part of our preparation for interpretation should be to affirm the absolute trustworthiness of the Holy Spirit and of the Scriptures he inspired.

**Paul tells Timothy that the Word of God was inspired — *theopneustos* — it was breathed out by God. And if it was breathed out by God, then we know that the source is perfect, the source is inerrant, and whatever comes out of him has to be equally perfect and inerrant. That, then, is the inspiration. If the Spirit inspired it, and if the Spirit now dwells in me, when I study the Word, I need to rest, to trust in the Spirit to give me illumination and understanding, because he inspired it in such a way that my study is based on the understanding of the one who inspired the Word in the first place. There can't be a better teacher than the author of a book, and the author of the book is the Spirit. And so, when the teacher who illumines our minds is the Spirit, there can't be anybody who can give me a better understanding of what was said, of what was inspired, than the teacher himself, who wrote it in the first place.**

**— Dr. Miguel Nunez, translation**

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, expressed this conviction in his Letter 82, chapter 1, paragraph 3, where he wrote these words:

**I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.**

Augustine's words illustrate the prevailing view of the truthfulness of Scripture in the early church and reflect the view taught in the Bible itself.

Now, everyone familiar with the Bible knows that there are many portions of Scripture that challenge even the best interpreters. From time to time, the Scriptures appear to contradict science, our personal experiences, and even other passages of Scripture. How should we deal with these apparent problems? Well, interpreters have a variety of ways to handle these types of issues. And for the most part, their solutions differ not because of the character of Scripture, but because of the interpreters' attitudes toward God himself.

On the one hand, those who deny that the Holy Spirit authoritatively inspired the Bible interpret the Scriptures critically, elevating their own understanding over the Spirit's authority. On the other hand, those who acknowledge the Spirit's authoritative inspiration read the Bible submissively, expecting and assuming it to be true and harmonious, even when they can't demonstrate or prove its truthfulness.

**When we come to the Bible we do not come to just another human book. We come to a book, which has been miraculously inspired by God. That means that we cannot read the Bible simply as we read another book. Now it has to be said, God has communicated himself in our language, in our styles, and so we do start at that point of simple literary interpretation of what's there. But if we stop there, then we forget that this is a sacred book which God not only inspired in the beginning, but is continuing to inspire to our hearts, so that in order for my human fallibility, my human sinfulness not to overcome the truth of the Scripture, the Holy Spirit has to be constantly at work in me as the reader and the interpreter to understand what it is God wants to say to me through this passage.**

— Dr. John Oswalt

**What's the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation? A very significant question. For one thing, the Holy Spirit inspired the Scripture, so obviously we want to take into account, who is the principal author of Scripture and what we can know about him. It's the Holy Spirit who teaches us through the Word about who God is. The second thing is that the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for a proper understanding of the Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 2 it talks about this very thing. In verse 14 it says that:**

**The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14, ESV).**

**That's the person who has the Holy Spirit. So we need to ask God to send the Holy Spirit and to fill us with his Spirit in order that we may receive faithfully what he is teaching in his Word.**

**— Dr. Vern Poythress**

Having looked at the fact that the Holy Spirit is the divine source of Scripture, the second aspect of the doctrine of organic inspiration we'll mention is that the Holy Spirit used human means to produce the Scriptures.

## **Human Means**

Sometimes Christians act as if they would prefer that God had given us the Bible directly, like Mormons and Muslims claim to have received their holy books. Mormons believe that God delivered the Book of Mormon in complete form to Joseph Smith, and Islam makes a similar claim about the Koran descending from heaven. But this isn't how God gave us the Bible.

Instead, God had the Scriptures composed by means of human authors; he revealed himself through the gifts and abilities of different human beings. Without a doubt, the Holy Spirit could have eliminated any influence or presence of human writers in Scripture. He could have revealed every passage so that we could never tell that one portion was written by one man and another portion by another. But he didn't. In his infinite wisdom, he chose to involve and work through the ideas, motives and personalities of human authors. So, part of depending on the Holy Spirit in our interpretation of Scripture is honoring the way he organically inspired Scripture, and trusting the human authors he inspired. So, if we're going to interpret the Bible in the way he intends us to, we have to understand that the Scriptures were written by different people, and that they reflect the diversity of that human authorship.

For example, the gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John covered basically the same events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But their books aren't identical. Matthew is different from Mark. Mark is different from Luke. Luke is different from John. And this isn't a shortcoming of Scripture. It's a product of the way the Holy Spirit chose to inspire the Scriptures.

Because the Scriptures were organically inspired, we always have to acknowledge both their divine authorship and their human authorship. When we prepare ourselves to interpret the Bible, it's important to keep in mind that we're seeking what the Holy Spirit meant. But if we stop there, our preparation isn't complete. We also have to take into account how the Spirit works through human beings, through their personalities, their experiences, perspectives and emphases. Every word of Scripture is the word of God. But God's word comes to us through human beings that were inspired by the Spirit, and they wrote in different ways at different times. So, we must always prepare ourselves with the understanding that the Spirit of God spoke in a variety of ways through the Bible's various human authors.

Having seen how the inspiration of Scripture requires our dependence on the Holy Spirit, let's turn our attention to the way we also depend on his ongoing work of illumination.

## ILLUMINATION

In the context of biblical hermeneutics, illumination may be defined as:

**The Holy Spirit's work of conveying a proper understanding of Scripture to a human being**

**We can distinguish two works. One is the work of inspiration where the Holy Spirit comes to the original human authors of Scripture and empowers them so that what they write is the word of God, is what God says and not simply what the human being says. Illumination is where the Holy Spirit stands with us. He indwells Christian believers and opens our minds to understand and to receive what he has inspired in the Bible.**

— Dr. Vern Poythress

Through his illumination, the Holy Spirit grants us knowledge of his Word. And this knowledge isn't purely cognitive. It also impacts our imagination, intuition, emotion, will, motivation, desire, moral conscience — any part of us that contributes to our understanding of Scripture can be illumined by the Spirit.

Sometimes Christians assume that if we just think carefully, then we'll be able to understand what the Scriptures teach. But in reality, human beings are so deeply affected by sin that we can't understand the things of God on our own. We desperately need God himself — the Holy Spirit — to illumine us. Listen to how Paul talked about the Spirit's illumination in 1 Corinthians 2:11-13:

**No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words (1 Corinthians 2:11-13).**

Here, Paul explained that without the work of the Spirit, we have no hope of grasping the thoughts of God as we should. This is why the Spirit's personal illumination is so important to our interpretation of the Scriptures.

The illumination of the Spirit is a subject that has seldom been addressed at length. But one of the most important treatments appears in the well-known work of John Owen, who lived from 1616 to 1683. In Owen's work, *Spiritual Illumination Proved From Scripture*, he summarized the Holy Spirit's illumination this way:

**All divine truths necessary to be known, and to be believed, that we may live unto God in faith and obedience, or come unto, and abide in Christ; as also, be preserved from seducers, are contained in the Scripture, or proposed unto us in divine revelations. These of ourselves we cannot understand, unto the ends mentioned; for if we could, there would be no need that we should be taught them by the Holy Spirit. But this is so, he teacheth us all these things, enabling us to discern, comprehend, and acknowledge them.**

Owen wisely pointed out that the Scriptures give us all we need to “live unto God in faith and obedience,” to “come unto and abide in Christ,” and to “be preserved from seducers.” But as much as even unbelievers may be able to grasp from the Bible on their own, “we cannot understand” the Scripture “unto these ends” unless the Holy Spirit enables us “to discern, comprehend and acknowledge them.”

**When 2 Timothy 3:16 talks about all Scripture as being God-breathed, it alludes to the idea that the Bible is inspired, or perhaps more accurately “expired” — breathed out — from the heart of God, and therefore Scripture itself comes from the very being of God. When we speak about being inspired with something, we talk about being enthusiastic or apprehending something, and the word “illumination” sort of gets at what that concept's all about, that we need the Holy Spirit who inspired infallibly God's Word to give us apprehension and understanding so that our minds might be illumined by God's truth, that we may grasp God's truth clearly.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

**Inspiration is what God did when he inspired the writer, so, we are no longer being inspired. But we are being illuminated, which means that God is, through the Holy Spirit, shedding light, giving us spiritual discernment and giving us the ability to help to understand what these words are saying.**

— Rev. Thad James, Jr.

Now that we've seen how important our dependence on the Holy Spirit is, let's explore the need for human effort as part of our preparation to interpret Scripture.

## NEED FOR HUMAN EFFORT

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We'll consider our need for human effort in two parts. First, we'll look at the importance of human effort. And second, we'll survey some of the influences that inform our human effort. Let's turn first to the importance of human effort.

### IMPORTANCE

All too often, well-meaning Christians think of the work of God's Spirit in biblical interpretation as the opposite of human effort. It's true that sometimes the Spirit works beyond our efforts, without them, even against them as we study the Bible. But this doesn't eliminate the need for human effort as we interpret the Scriptures. The most ordinary way that the Spirit illumines us is through, or in conjunction with, our hard work. For this reason, while we mustn't reduce biblical interpretation to a human endeavor, there's a very important place for working very hard to understand the Scriptures properly.

Unfortunately, in some circles, well-meaning followers of Christ minimize anything that looks like human effort when they prepare to read the Bible. Instead, they often prefer a "spiritual" approach, where the message of a biblical text comes to passive readers directly from God. These believers rightly acknowledge the importance of our dependence on the Holy Spirit. And we can admire them for that. But their avoidance of human effort is unbiblical. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:15:

**Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).**

In this verse, Paul encouraged Timothy to be a man who correctly handles the word of truth. But notice the metaphor Paul used to convey his perspective. Timothy was to be "a workman." Here the apostle used the Greek word *ergates*, a term that often referred to field laborers. And Timothy was to do his best, or as some translations put it, he was to "be diligent."

By comparing an interpreter of the Bible to a diligent, hard-working field laborer, Paul encouraged Timothy to exert strong effort in his study of Scripture. But what exactly does that mean? And how does our dependence on the Holy Spirit interact with our human effort?

**If understanding the Bible is something that the Holy Spirit does and not something that we do, why do we bother with working at biblical interpretation? And the answer to that is very simple. God does not reward laziness. God does not anoint the minister who doesn't prepare to preach. To be involved in God's work requires diligence**

**because God is not just working through us, he is also working on us... In the process of biblical interpretation, what is happening is not just a cognitive thing where we're coming to understand what the Bible is saying, there's also a sanctifying process that God is doing in us so that we become not just people who understand what this particular passage says, but we become people who think more the way God wants us to think, the way he designed us to think, to see things his way.**

**— Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Dependence on the Holy Spirit doesn't imply that we should be passive when we interpret Scripture. In fact, responsible interpretation involves hard work. We might even say that dependence on the Spirit includes dependence on the tools and opportunities he's provided. After all, the Holy Spirit designed Scripture to communicate through human means, including human effort on the part of the reader.

In fact, the Holy Spirit ordinarily illumines us by means of the efforts we put into preparation. Just as our bodies normally receive nourishment through the process of eating food, the Spirit typically works through the process of our reading and study to give us a fuller understanding of his Word.

Now, it should be clear to most readers of Scripture that some portions of the Bible require more human effort than others. On one end of the scale, some passages are so clear that they require very little effort to understand. Throughout the centuries, Protestants have rightly held that what is necessary to be believed and obeyed for salvation is so clear in one place or another in Scripture that nearly everyone can understand it. On the other end of the scale, many portions of Scripture are very difficult, and some may even be impossible to understand fully.

But practically speaking, most passages of Scripture fall along a spectrum between these two extremes. The clearer portions of Scripture normally require relatively little human effort in preparation. But when we deal with more difficult passages in Scripture, adequate preparation usually requires increased levels of human effort.

In addition to recognizing the importance of human effort in preparing for interpreting Scripture, it also helps to become aware of some of the major influences that God normally brings to bear on our human effort.

## **INFLUENCES**

If there's one thing that hinders well-meaning biblical interpreters today, it's that they think they can study the Scriptures in ways that don't reflect external influences on their lives. We think that somehow we can rid ourselves of our life experiences and simply go to the Scriptures without preconceived notions. But one of the most important things to remember about our human effort in biblical interpretation is that no matter how hard we try to do otherwise, we always approach the Scriptures affected by countless



influences. And the more we're aware of these influences, the better we'll be able to discern whether they're positive or negative, whether they help us or they hinder us as we interpret the Bible.

We'll consider three main influences on the efforts we exert when we prepare to interpret Scripture. These influences are interrelated, but we'll treat them separately for the sake of simplicity. The first we'll mention is our prior exegesis of Scripture.

## Exegesis

For the purposes of this series, we'll define exegesis as:

### Drawing meaning out of biblical texts

— especially by looking at things like the historical context, literary forms, use of grammar and vocabulary, theological setting, and so on. Although there are many things we might say about exegesis, for now, we just want to point out that the exegesis we've done in the past helps prepare us for the task of interpretation.

Every involvement we have with the exegesis of Scripture prepares us for further interpretation of the Bible. The knowledge, skills and attitudes we develop from one encounter with the Bible influence us the next time we go to Scripture. For instance, every time we study biblical vocabulary and grammar, we increase our ability to handle these aspects of Scripture more responsibly. When we work to understand the literary types of Scripture, such as narratives, laws, poetry, prophecies, proverbs and the like, we're better equipped to understand them at a later time. And as we learn about the ancient history of the Bible, we're prepared to come back to the Scriptures for further understanding. Every effort we put into the exegesis of Scripture helps prepare us for further study.

A second type of influence that affects our human efforts in hermeneutics is our interaction in community.

## Interaction

Interaction with other people is one of the most influential, but frequently underestimated, influences on our efforts to understand the Scriptures. We all want to engage in direct exegesis of the Bible. But whether we realize it or not, it's nearly impossible to interpret the Bible without being influenced by our interactions with other people. And this is a good thing.

Other people, both from the present world and from the past, have received great gifts and insights from the Holy Spirit that can help us as we interpret Scripture. They've produced valuable reference works. They give us godly counsel. They teach us about biblical languages and literature and history and all sorts of other things that help us

understand and apply God's Word. Even the very Bibles we hold in our hands have come to us from other people. They've come to us through the work of scholars, translators, editors and publishers.

Beyond this, most of us have specific Christian communities where we feel at home, including our churches and our denominations. These communities share common traditions that influence the way we read and understand Scripture. And the input we receive from pastors, teachers and other individual believers helps us in many ways too.

We learn many valuable things through the successes, failures and insights of others. We learn from those who are like us and those who are different, from those in the past and those in the present, from those we know personally and those that we've never met. Whether we recognize it or not, all of our interpretations of Scripture are and should be deeply influenced by other people.

A third major influence on our efforts in preparation is our personal Christian experience.

## Experience

It's fair to say that anything we encounter in our lives as Christians is part of our Christian experience, including things we've already addressed like exegesis and interaction with others. So at this point in our lesson we want to focus on the kinds of things we normally think of when we talk about our personal Christian experience or our walk with God. These personal aspects of Christian living contribute to our interpretations of Scripture in a variety of ways.

For instance, our Christian growth and sanctification increase our ability to interpret the Bible; the ways we live deeply affect our ability to grasp the Scriptures. When followers of Christ are faithful — trying to think, act and feel in ways that please God — they usually find that they're better prepared for learning more from the Scriptures. But if we haven't brought our lives into conformity to the Word of God, studying the Bible often leads to misinterpretation and misapplication.

Our past experiences can also affect our ability to interpret responsibly. All believers have had experiences that shape the way we think, feel and behave. And these experiences influence our efforts to interpret Scripture. For example, someone who grew up in a wealthy environment may find it difficult to understand the concern for the poor expressed in Luke's gospel. Someone who was raised in a culture that stressed honor might be more likely to understand passages concerning shame.

Beyond this, each individual has different personal strengths and weaknesses, different abilities and blind spots, different gifts from the Holy Spirit, and, of course, different sins. In one way or another, all of these things influence our competence when it comes to interpreting and applying Scripture.

**Our sins inhibit our ability to understand truth in general, including in the Bible. The Bible says that we suppress the truth in unrighteousness in our sinful nature. And so there's a distorting effect**

that our sin has in our ability to understand truth. And so when we come to the Bible, understanding it without that twisting effect of sin is one of the things the Holy Spirit enables us to do that we are very grateful for.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Sin can hinder our interpretation of Scripture because people tend to find in Scripture what they want to find. For example, a few centuries ago slaveholders came up with a way to interpret Scripture that justified slavery. It was in their own economic interests to do so, so they would — if they allowed the slaves to be preached to at all — they would preach from Ephesians 6:5 where slaves are supposed to obey their masters. They wouldn't pay any attention to 6:9, however, which says, "And masters, you do the same things to them." I mean, if you actually take that seriously — if masters actually have to serve their slaves — slavery probably wouldn't last very long. It kind of destroys the economic incentives. But when people have an agenda that they approach Scripture with and they're trying to justify the way they live, they're going to end up reading Scripture in that way. Now, sometimes people have the opposite problem. They may come from a setting where they're always expecting condemnation or they're always expecting guilt, and they read Scripture that way too. Instead of reading Scripture in light of our presuppositions, we need to, as best as possible, try to hear what the message of the text really is to us.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on our preparation for interpretation, we've looked at two critical aspects of the preparations we should make before we interpret Scripture. We've considered our dependence on the Holy Spirit in terms of the doctrines of organic inspiration and the Spirit's illumination. And we've emphasized the need for human effort by looking at the importance of human effort and by surveying some of the influences that God normally brings to bear on our interpretive efforts.

Preparation for interpreting the Bible requires us both to depend on the Holy Spirit and to put forth a great deal of human effort. We have to approach Scripture in conscious, prayerful submission to the Holy Spirit because he inspired the Scriptures and

because the Father sent him to us to illumine our minds and hearts to understand the Scriptures. But at the same time, God has ordained that we should put forth our own efforts as well, by reading, studying, interacting with others and by applying the Scriptures to our own lives every step along the way. Interpreting the Scriptures is a complex project that we must pursue throughout our entire lives, so we must be careful to prepare ourselves as thoroughly as possible. The more we pay attention both to God's Spirit and to our human efforts, the better prepared we'll be for interpreting the Bible.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
TWO

Preparation for  
Interpretation  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	In what ways did the writers of Scripture use their own gifts, abilities, and writing stylers as they composed the Scriptures?.....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	In what ways are unbelievers unable to understand the Scriptures fully? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b>	What do theologians mean when they say that the Holy Spirit grants people "illumination" to help them understand Scripture? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b>	Why can't we just reply on the Holy Spirit to tell us what the Scriptures mean? .....	6
<b>Question 5:</b>	What types of training and education are most beneficial to us when we interpret the Bible? .....	8
<b>Question 6:</b>	How do our past experiences help or hinder the way we apply Scripture to our personal lives?.....	9
<b>Question 7:</b>	Do our sins hinder our ability to interpret the Bible? .....	10
<b>Question 8:</b>	What role should our current beliefs play in our interpretation of the Bible? .....	12
<b>Question 9:</b>	How should we prepare to read the Scriptures, and why is deliberate preparation so important? .....	13
<b>Question 10:</b>	In what ways should we rely on the Holy Spirit as we study Scripture? .....	14
<b>Question 11:</b>	What kind of impact should inspiration have on the way we interpret Scripture? .....	16

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Two: Preparation for Interpretation

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. David R. Bauer

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

Dr. Gary Cockerill

Dr. Dan Doriani

Dr. Matt Friedeman

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Dr. David T. Lamb

Dr. Robert G. Lister

Dr. Thomas J. Nettles

Dr. Miguel Nunez

Dr. John Oswalt

Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

Dr. Greg Perry

Dr. Vern S. Poythress

Dr. Philip Ryken

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

Dr. Simon Vibert

Dr. Brian J. Vickers

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace

Dr. Guy Waters

### Question 1:

**In what ways did the writers of Scripture use their own gifts, abilities, and writing styles as they composed the Scriptures?**

We affirm wholeheartedly that the Bible was authored by God himself. In this way, it's God's own message to humanity. At the same time, we know that the Bible also had its human authors. In what ways did the writers of Scripture use their own gifts, abilities, and writing styles as they composed the Scriptures?

#### **Dr. Greg Perry**

We believe that God, in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used the gifts and abilities of each of the human authors of Scripture. He didn't take them over and sort of possess them, but he came alongside and carried them along using the ways in which God had sovereignly prepared them for a particular role. And we see that in the life of Moses. Luke tells us in Acts how he was raised in Pharaoh's court and how he was educated in all of the literature of the ancient Near East. And so, it really shouldn't surprise us that Moses is fully aware of the literary form of covenant, of these treaties between nations. And he chooses that to really utilize, to communicate in ways that the people of God could understand about how God was making promises to them. Or in the life of David, someone who was a musician, who uses the different aspects of Hebrew poetry to really cultivate the worship of the people of God. And so, we should understand how parallelism works, because David is taking those aspects of Hebrew poetry and touching the heart of the people of God to bring them into the worship of God. Or in terms of Paul, trained at the feet of Gamaliel, trained in different ways of using text. And so, it shouldn't surprise us in his use of the Old Testament, then, that he understands different forms of Midrash, of how to link different words and themes together like we see in the first part of 1 Corinthians when

he's linking text about wisdom. Or how he talks about fulfillment language and what that means with regard to *peshet*, that the final age has come, that the time has come for the age of fulfillment. So these different aspects of Midrash make sense as we understand Paul's training with Gamaliel in the use of text. So, the Holy Spirit uses the different backgrounds, the educational backgrounds, even the personal relationships that human authors have and how they choose different genre forms, and even the words they choose to communicate God's word to God's people.

**Dr. Daniel B. Wallace**

These authors used their own personalities fully in the writing of Scripture. They used their own skills in writing, and those skills included making what we might call "grammatical mistakes." John spells the verb "open" in Greek three different ways in the space of eight verses — a very creative speller. They didn't have any dictionaries back then that said, "Here's how you have to spell these words." But that's what he does in the space of eight verses, three different ways. And you don't get Luke to do those kinds of things. Paul doesn't do that kind of thing. The author of Hebrews writes in a remarkably elegant style with some complex sentences. The author is involved in the learning that God has taken him through for years, and you don't have these authors writing down what God is dictating, except on very few occasions like when Moses wrote down the Ten Commandments. But they're using their personalities, their gifts, their talents, their backgrounds, their language skills, their research skills. When they write the Gospels, they're not sitting down in a room saying, "Okay, Spirit of God, tell me what Jesus did and I'll just copy down what you tell me." That's not at all what happened.

**Dr. David T. Lamb**

I think as we look at a biblical text, it's important to think how might the biblical authors — the individuals who were behind the text — how might their own individual characteristics, personalities, temperaments, how might have those things shaped how they wrote the text, how they wrote Scripture? ... When it comes to New Testament books, I think we can do some comparisons amongst the Gospel authors. Luke was a physician, and he was perhaps a little bit more academic. He wrote a more orderly account addressed to Theophilus, as we know, but Luke composed things in a different way than Mark. Mark, again, may have been shaped largely by Peter. Peter was more of a blue-collar guy, concerned about action, miracles, everything happened quickly. A lot of "immediately" shows up in the Gospel of Mark. So it's very different from Luke's gospel. Matthew seems to have been... he came from a Jewish background, also perhaps called Levi, his other name. Matthew starts out with the Old Testament and is always jumping back to, "How does Jesus fulfill the Old Testament? How do these things go back to the Old Testament?" Even in the Sermon on the Mount, when Matthew is quoting Jesus, he is concerned to show how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. He completed it. He fulfilled it. He is not in contrast to it. John has a very different approach. So John's temperament, we don't know a lot about it, but he seems to be more theological. So in each of these cases, David, Solomon, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I think we see various aspects about their temperament, their personality that shapes how they write. And I think it's

wonderful to see those, because some of us are going to relate... Some of us may resonate more deeply with Solomon. Others of us will relate more deeply with David or Luke. Personally, I love Mark. I'm a practical person; I like action; I like excitement. I love Mark's gospel. My wife is a little bit more philosophical, theological, intuitive, and she loves John. So I think it's wonderful to see the different personalities of the various authors of Scripture affect how they write.

**Dr. David R. Bauer**

Well, one of the first things that we notice as we read the Scriptures is that there is a significant difference in writing styles, in vocabulary, in tone among the various biblical writers. So any notion of the Scriptures that moves in the direction of something like a dictation theory seems to run counter to the evidence that we have manifestly in the text itself. Matter of fact, there's even a variety in terms of quality of writing and rhetoric that we have within the Bible. So it's very clear that any understanding of the inspiration of Scripture must, if it's true to the nature of Scripture itself, take that profoundly human aspect into account.

**Question 2:**

**In what ways are unbelievers unable to understand the Scriptures fully?**

**The Bible is a book that makes significant claims about itself. This means that those who read it must either accept those claims or deny them. But in order to accept these claims, we must first understand them, and sometimes that can be challenging. In what ways are unbelievers unable to understand the Scriptures fully?**

**Dr. Robert G. Lister**

It's an interesting concept to ponder how unbelievers are able to understand the Scriptures in some sense and not in other senses. We recognize on the one hand that unbelievers can regurgitate the message of Scripture. They can repeat back to you the basic propositions of the gospel, and yet they see those in a different way than believers do. 1 Corinthians 2 talks about the natural person being unable to understand the things of the Spirit. And 2 Corinthians 4, I think, is helpful in elaborating on that in indicating that the god of this world has it as a task of his to blind the minds of unbelievers so that they might not see the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, the very fact that we're talking about the unbeliever's inability to understand something about Scripture assumes that they can comprehend something of the message of Scripture to begin with. That is, when they respond in 1 Corinthians 1, for example, that the revelation of Christ on the cross is foolishness, they have to have understood something about it first to judge that as foolish. So what is it that they are not understanding? It seems to me that what they are not understanding primarily is the beauty of the truth of Scripture, the glory of the truth of Scripture. They can understand the message "Christ died for sinners," and they look at that as foolishness because they don't see it as beautiful. They look at it as foolish because they don't see it as glorious. They despise what they conceptually understand because

their heart is not prepared to receive that truth. There's a moral antipathy to the truths of Scripture that is based, in part, on the fact that there is a conceptual ability to understand some of the things that Scripture says. So it seems to me that the piece that unbelievers are primarily missing is not necessarily a conceptual capacity to understand the words of John 3:16, or something along those lines, but a loathing of that because they have a different direction of their lives. They have a different worship orientation that loathes the place of God on the throne and would rather see something else there in its place, or his place.

### **Question 3:**

**What do theologians mean when they say that the Holy Spirit grants people "illumination" to help them understand Scripture?**

The inspiration of Scripture is one of the more frequently discussed topics in theology. The doctrine of inspiration deals with the initial writing of the text. But no less important is the doctrine of illumination, which deals with the subsequent reading of the text. What do theologians mean when they say that the Holy Spirit grants people "illumination" to help them understand Scripture?

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

The Holy Spirit gives us illumination because by ourselves we simply wouldn't understand what God is saying because we wouldn't want to. The Bible says in one place it's something like a veil over our eyes. We don't want to give up lordship of our own life. We don't want to yield to another master in ourselves unless, unless the Spirit moves us to be open to the idea that we aren't our own saviors and kings. That's the most basic. And then, for a believer, you know, we often read the Bible, and for a little while we say, "I simply don't know what that means," or "I know what it means, but I don't know how to apply it." Now this is the Holy Spirit working alongside us if we're believers. Sometimes you simply have to read a passage two or three or four times. And sometimes you have to read it the third or fourth time and then go away and think about it. And as we do our work, the Holy Spirit will suddenly... "Oh!" — give us an "Ah, now..." because the Spirit opens us to its meaning. We grasp what it means and we grasp the implications for how I'm living today.

#### **Dr. Glen G. Scorgie**

Among the many ministries of the Holy Spirit related to Scripture is a very special ministry that we call "illumination." The Holy Spirit has multiple roles in relationship to Scripture. Among them, of course, and very importantly, is the inspiration of the authors and the text. But then once the text has been received by the church as a gift, the Holy Spirit does not stop his engagement and involvement with the Scriptures but then participates in this ministry of illumination. Illumination is about something becoming luminous or lighted-up. And the idea is that without illumination, perhaps there's insufficient light for the reader to truly grasp the meaning and application of the Scripture's message to their own hearts. Again, I think it was Calvin — I know it

was Calvin — who says that illumination is like a light that is shone over your shoulder onto the page of a book and then reflects back into your eyes so that you can see... what is on, the otherwise darkened page. So, this light shining from your shoulder forward to the Scriptures and back into your eyes is not a bad image of this ministry of illumination. There are a number of texts in Scripture that attest to this vital role of the Holy Spirit. And I just mention that one that I learned as a little boy in the old King James Version from Psalm 119 — the longest in the Bible — "Open Thou mine eyes, that I might behold wondrous truths out of your word." That's the spirit of every Christian who goes to the Word of God. You see, to grasp the meaning of Scripture, we need the Spirit all along the way. And the ministry of illumination is absolutely essential and means that we come on our knees, not with a sense of arrogance that we can mine this thing, we can troll for truth, we can in a sense claw everything we need from the Bible on our own in a self-sufficient, even arrogant spirit. Now, I know one of the questions that often comes up is, "Are you saying that an unbeliever with a Ph.D. in Old Testament or New Testament studies can't understand the Bible because they have not been blessed with the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit?" Well, of course they can understand many things that are accessible to anyone who understands the languages, understands the historical context, perhaps exercises the historical-grammatical method with some competency. Of course they can understand the intent of Scripture at some level. But when it comes to the connections between that message and the condition of their own hearts and lives, and the implications for action and response, at that point, the ministry of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the word becomes absolutely indispensable. And we also find that the darkened understanding can be brilliant in its intellectual comprehension of the message of Scripture and at the same time be basically in denial, willfully refusing to acknowledge what this calls for in real life. The ministry of illumination breaks down that barrier of denial and exposes the truth and its implications for the reader in a way that is a God-work.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

The Holy Spirit inspires Scripture, but then, thankfully, he illumines the believer in his enlightening our understanding of Scripture. So it doesn't mean an unbeliever who doesn't have the illumination of the Spirit isn't able to understand the historical background, the intent of the author, but there is an understanding at a much deeper level that brings a changed life and obedience that the Spirit brings from within.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Divine illumination is a theme that you find running through Christian theology. Augustine talked about illumination a lot. Reformed theologians continued to affirm the doctrine of divine illumination. In fact, Westminster talks about the necessity of divine illumination for the saving understanding of Scripture. So it's important that we pay attention to this. One of the things that I find that is a common misunderstanding when it comes to divine illumination is that when we talk about divine illumination, we're not talking about illumination of the text. We affirm the perspicuity or the clarity of Scripture, that Scripture... not all things in Scripture are equally clear, but those things that are most necessary to know and to understand for

salvation are most clearly taught. And all things that are necessary to believe are clearly taught in one place or another in Scripture. However, we also believe that we're sinful; we're fallen. As sinners we have an invested interest in defending ourselves against the Word of God, against the authority of God, and that sin blinds us to the truth. This is why we need divine illumination, not because of any deficiency in Scripture itself. It's we who need to be illuminated. It's our minds that need to be illuminated, not the text of Scripture. And the illumination helps us to understand what it is that God is saying to us. It helps us to understand the gospel and how the gospel presses home upon our own life, how it comes to bear upon us and what we must do to be saved.

#### **Question 4:**

**Why can't we just rely on the Holy Spirit to tell us what the Scriptures mean?**

**One of the more common notions in biblical interpretation centers on the role of the Holy Spirit. This idea simply states that we're dependent on the Holy Spirit's guidance when we read the Bible. But, if this is the case, why is it important for us to study the Scriptures diligently? Why can't we just rely on the Holy Spirit to tell us what the Scriptures mean?**

#### **Dr. Craig S. Keener**

There are some people who say, "Well, let's just listen to the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is our teacher." And I don't want anybody to misinterpret me. I believe in all the gifts of the Spirit. I practice some of the gifts of the Spirit. I believe that the Holy Spirit leads us as we pray and in our daily life. I believe in all of that. At the same time, one of the spiritual gifts is teaching. So it's not just that the Spirit teaches us only directly. And also, it's very important, Proverbs says to seek wisdom diligently, to seek knowledge diligently. And sometimes we take shortcuts. It's like we have instant mashed potatoes, or instant this or instant that. We take shortcuts, and we take shortcuts that God doesn't really honor. That is, the way God communicated to us through the text, he inspired these prophets and apostles and others to speak his message, and if we really want to make sure that we're hearing the Spirit, we want to make sure that what we're hearing is in conjunction with what God has already spoken ... If I can just give an illustration of this: When I was a fairly young Christian, I had a friend who was having visions and... she was hearing all sorts of things from God. And that was wonderful, but one day she told me that she had had a new revelation, that there were not just three members in the Trinity, there were four, that we would all become God. And I said, "That's not in the Bible." She said, "That's understandable. This was only revealed last week." I said, "But it contradicts the Bible." And so we went back and forth and back and forth. Ultimately, she was able to be persuaded, but initially her response was, "Well, you know, why should I listen to them? You know, God spoke to them, God speaks to me." But if God is really

speaking to us, what God speaks to us will be consistent with what God has already spoken.

**Dr. Philip Ryken**

One of my favorite Bible teachers from Scripture is Ezra the priest. And the Scripture says that Ezra had set his heart to study the Word of God and to do it and then to teach its statutes in Israel. And Ezra is a great example of a very hardworking man who labored to understand the Word of God, and then, because of the work that he had done in preparation, was able to put the Word of God into practice in his own life, and then to teach it to an entire nation. And I believe if you look at the life and ministry of Ezra, you see that the Holy Spirit was involved in every aspect of that. The Holy Spirit was with Ezra when he was studying and working hard privately to understand God's Word. The Holy Spirit was enabling him to put that Word into practice, and then the Holy Spirit blessed his teaching of the Word of God. We should not think that the Holy Spirit is only active when we are teaching God's Word. The Holy Spirit loves to work in and through a hardworking, diligent student of the Word of God, and that's what is really blessed as a fruitful ministry, a ministry that invites the Holy Spirit into the work of preparation and also the work of teaching.

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

Since we know that the Scriptures are breathed out by the Holy Spirit, we might be tempted to think that we don't need to study it very much. If we just keep praying long enough, the Holy Spirit will whisper into our ears or into our minds exactly what every text means. As a matter of fact, though, we need to respect the fact that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use means to reveal what the Scripture means. He uses the means of our study of the Word, because we respect the fact that God gave his Scriptures at a particular time and place in history. He spoke Scriptures over a period of many hundreds of years to ancient Israel. And he spoke into their experience, into their history, in ways that they could understand. He spoke the New Testament in a much briefer period of time, after the coming of Christ, all within the generation of the apostles, but again, to them in their particular time and place. And there are many things that are so distinctive to them, so vivid to them in their time and place that are a little foreign to us now. And so we need to do the work, recognizing that as God gave his Word, we need to do the work of trying to put ourselves as much as we can in their frame of reference to grasp what the text said to them then for the sake of then understanding how it speaks to us today. It's a matter of respecting the way God has given his Word interwoven with his plan of redemption and his outworking of that plan in history, leading to the climax of redemption with the coming and the work of Christ, and therefore the completion of the Scriptures in that first century so that now we want to get at what the Spirit said to them. And we do that through the means that God has provided for us.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

I think we ought to study the Scriptures diligently, and I think we ought to rely upon the Holy Spirit to help us understand what it means. I think these things go together. Some people want to make it an either/or — "I walk by the Spirit" — and people



want to say, "I study the Scriptures, don't really need the Spirit so much." They do need to go together. And when we put them together, we have a powerful resource to live the kind of holy life that he wants us to live.

### **Question 5:**

#### **What types of training and education are most beneficial to us when we interpret the Bible?**

**We know that the Holy Spirit plays an active part when believers come to study a passage from the Bible. But he doesn't do so apart from the readers' experiences, which include their formal academic training. So, what types of training and education are most beneficial to us when we interpret the Bible?**

#### **Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

When we sit down to study the Bible, either for personal devotion or maybe to lead a Bible study or preach a sermon, there are a whole host of things that can help us do that well. Many people in the world have had the opportunity to have a formal education, but that's not required to be a good student of the Bible. The most important thing you could do is learn to be an active, observant reader. Just to read the text over and over again and with a posture of heart, of receptivity to God, asking the Holy Spirit to in fact illumine us, to help us understand. In terms of a specific set of skills that we can develop? Well, knowledge of how languages work, grammar, and if possible the Hebrew and Greek originals. A knowledge of historical background of the information of the text can be helpful. Knowledge of literature and how it works, how authors often structure ideas and words and paragraphs together, that can all be very helpful in our study of Scripture. But I would suggest in addition to those things, one of the most important skills to have, or tools in interpreting the Bible, is a life of service including even a life of suffering for the sake of Christ. It is when we are in active service to God and his people, in obedience to him, that when we go to the Scriptures we find we understand what God is saying the most. So in addition to those skill sets, I'd like to encourage us to remember that our posture of heart and our willingness as manifested in our lives are some of the most important skills that we can have as we read Scripture.

#### **Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

When it comes to reading the Bible in its original context, that task requires a number of fundamental skills. And the better you get at these skills, the better you'll be able to interpret the Bible faithfully and, therefore, to apply it more rigorously and truthfully to the people you preach and teach to. And there are lots of different skills required. And I probably can't comment on all of them, so I'll just talk about some of the really fundamental skills. And one would be, some knowledge of the biblical languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Because the Bible has come to us from an ancient world in ancient languages, the best way to have first and primary access to those manuscripts and documents are through the languages. And so, one of the skills

necessary would be studying at least some level, having some familiarity with the Hebrew language and the Aramaic language. Those are the two languages the Old Testament was written in. But then also Greek because that's the language of the New Testament. And so you want to have some skills, some facility with all three of those languages. There are other skills necessary. For example, understanding historical backgrounds and historical contexts. So learning something about the culture that the Bible grew up in — to know a little bit about Egypt, and Babylon, and Assyria, and Edom, and Moab — and as they relate to Israel or to Rome, and how that affected the New Testament history and politics and where Jesus grew up and how he lived. Things like that. So, biblical languages, biblical backgrounds. But you also need skills in literary analysis. So you have to be sensitive to the type of literature that you're reading. From historical narrative, but also Old Testament law, or apocalyptic literature, or epistles, or gospels... or praise, wisdom and lament in the poetry, all of these different types of literature require slightly different skills when interpreting. So some languages, some historical background, some literary sensitivity. All of these things take time, to develop these skills. Many of these skills can be gotten on your own through textbooks that are written or produced, but that's often very hard to do ... It's important that pastors and teachers have some type of training, that they begin to swim in a stream where others have gone before them. And they can take up that mantle and learn in that tradition and continue in those skills. And so, studying with another pastor is another way to get those skills. Or studying online, or studying at a seminary, or at a college, something like that. Those are the ways you can get them. But the skills that you need, I would say at the fundamental level, would be: the biblical languages, historical backgrounds, and then literary studies as well. So, a liberal arts education for the Bible.

### **Question 6:**

#### **How do our past experiences help or hinder the way we apply Scripture to our personal lives?**

**It's important to realize that we don't lay aside our past experiences when we interpret the Bible. Everything an individual goes through affects how he or she relates to the teachings in Scripture. And this has a real impact on application. So, how do our past experiences help or hinder the way we apply Scripture to our personal lives?**

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

First of all, our past experiences influence our interpretation, both for good or for ill. We may, for example, have heard a beloved teacher say something. And since we believe that's true, we see a Bible verse — because we love our teacher and then we see a Bible verse — and we might read that thing that we've been taught into that Bible verse. And it's not very helpful. Sometimes, also, our past makes us say things like, "I will never do this" or "I will never say that." Well, in fact, you're just reacting in some way in which somebody mistreated you, and you may need to do that thing

that you said you would never do. For example, if someone was spanked or even beaten by their parents, they may say, "Well, I'll never lay a hand on my child." Well, be careful about that. I mean, you know, there is a place — gentle, mild — for corporal punishment. And sometimes you may need to lay a hand on your child to pull them away from something that can hurt them. So don't let a vow — "I'll never do 'such and such'" — keep you from following God's Word wherever it leads. A positive way, of course — experiences can sensitize us to things. So for example, if you're young and your life has been beautiful and you grew up in a wonderful home and you have good friends, and the people you worked for were kind, you may have a very limited ability to grasp what the Bible has to say about suffering and lamentation and trouble in this world. And then maybe as years go by, you start to pick up experiences and then you come to understand why there are so many psalms of lamentation, why the Bible does say so much about persecution. When you're young, you may never be persecuted. When you're older, you may boldly step out in faith, and then those verses about paying a price for following Christ are very much alive. ... And so if we have suffered hardship, then we're suddenly sensitized to what the Bible has to say about hardship or persecution. In this way our minds are opened through our experiences.

**Dr. Stephen J. Bramer**

I think our past experiences of seeing the Word of God applied or misapplied affect us greatly. When it's been applied in a legitimate way, we are open to seeing that application in our own lives, when we've seen it in other people's lives and seen the wonderful results. I think sometimes we've seen Scripture misapplied, perhaps taken out of context, perhaps applied in a very legalistic way, and this affects us. And if we're not careful, we can actually kind of walk away from the Scripture, or any application of it, lest we have those bad experiences come back to us. So I think that our past experiences can help and can hinder us in the application of Scripture. And we need to be mature enough to really begin to question ourselves and say, why am I having difficulty applying this Scripture or accepting a certain application? Is it really because it's demanding something of me that I don't want to give? Or is it because it has been misapplied? And we would recognize that all of us in our churches and in our Christian experience have had both good and bad experiences, and we want to learn from both of them.

**Question 7:**

**Do our sins hinder our ability to interpret the Bible?**

**We know that our ability to understand a text is influenced by a number of factors. These include our education, theological beliefs, personal experiences, prior interpretation of Scripture and others. But we're also influenced by the sin in our lives. Do our sins hinder our ability to interpret the Bible?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

The Bible itself argues that our sinfulness does hinder our ability to understand God's message, and therefore, we do need God's help in order to apprehend what he's saying to us. A generation of Bible theologians made a distinction between the utter depravity of the human being and total depravity. By total depravity they meant that every part of the human being is affected by sin, which includes our thinking and our understanding. But that doesn't mean we're as sinful as we could possibly ever be. And so, consequently, we do believe that sin has affected our ability to understand God's Word, and that reading the Bible is also a deeply spiritual task in which we ask God to help us understand what we're doing and to grasp God's truth, as well as wanting to welcome it in our hearts too.

**Dr. Vern S. Poythress**

Our sins definitely hinder our ability to interpret the Bible. One way in which that happens is simply laziness. Laziness is a sin with respect to studying the Bible. We don't read it or we don't apply ourselves to the reading of it. So that's one area where sin has an effect. A second area is people can read the Bible and go away and not act on it; they don't apply to their lives. That's the problem that James addresses in chapter 1 of the book of James. Still another area is that people come to the Bible already with the baggage of ideas and distorted conceptions from a life perhaps before they became a believer. One of the most devastating effects of sin, I believe, is simply we impose our own ideas on the Bible. That's rebellious. It's in effect saying, "I want the Bible to say what I want it to say rather than what God says." And that attitude, I think, can creep in subtly even among Christian believers. We've fundamentally been healed from sin by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and yet there are remnants left. So we must beware of that kind of attitude. We must listen to the Bible submissively and saying, "Lord, you teach me, you tell me what you're saying here, and I'm not going to impose my own ideas. "

**Dr. Gary Cockerill**

It's a very interesting and important question whether and, well really, how our sins hinder our ability to interpret Scripture, because they certainly do. First of all, we have to understand what sin is. Sin, as it begins in the Garden of Eden, is a distrust of God. Eve begins by distrusting God's goodness. It is then deliberate disobedience. And finally then displacing God in my life so that I put myself in the place of God as the one who determines what is good for me, the way my life should go. Therefore, of course, the Bible is given to us in order to bring us back into fellowship with God, which means an obedience, which means giving God his rightful place in our lives. So our sinfulness obviously keeps us from hearing the Bible, because we want to go our own way and the Bible wants to bring us back to God. So in a general and fundamental sense, that's how sin hinders. Of course, sin in a sense then is pride because it is putting me in the place where God should be. Specific sins then of course come under that and also hinder. I mean, if I have been committing specific sins, if there are specific things I want to do, be they sexual sins or other kinds of sins that I'm habitually doing, obviously then I'll try to justify those, twist Scripture to

justify my lifestyle. And so... repentance of sin and humility before God is absolutely essential to truly understand the Bible, to truly allow the Bible to impact my own life.

**Dr. Miguel Nunez (translation)**

The sinner who has never received the Lord and has never given his life to Christ, still has his mind in darkness, and it's his sin that has his mind in darkness. But for the believer who is born again, who has the Spirit in his life, our relationship with the Spirit, our holy life, has plenty to do with our ability to understand the Scriptures. Sin turns me away from God, so that when I'm far from God I can't understand God's revelation as well as when I'm near to him. Maybe the best way to illustrate this is by thinking about the light from a lamp when I'm reading a book. The closer I get to the light, the better I see. And if I get far from it, I begin to see a shadow that darkens the pages of the book I'm reading. So now it will be more difficult to read because the light is far away. But it's my sin that keeps me away from the light, keeps me away from God. Once again, the illumination that God's Spirit gives us has to do with the filling of the Spirit. When I'm living a life of sin, I'm less full. And when I'm less full, I have less understanding. So, I believe that the preacher, the ordinary believer, all need to understand that there is a direct relationship between our life of holiness and our ability to understand God's Word. That's why, in the past, great men of God with great understanding of the Word — great teachers of the Word — also had great lives of holiness. One thing is impossible without the other. I cannot have a great holy life if I don't understand the Scriptures well. But understanding the Scriptures well requires a life of holiness and a close walk with God.

**Question 8:**

**What role should our current beliefs play in our interpretation of the Bible?**

**What we believe about the inspiration of the Scriptures and the authority of the Bible affects how we interpret any given passage of the Bible. And this is true for any theological category. We'll never be able to separate ourselves from our current beliefs when we read the text. So, what role should our current beliefs play in our interpretation of the Bible?**

**Dr. David R. Bauer**

In terms of what role our beliefs play in the interpretation of Scripture, the first thing we need to acknowledge is they will play a role. There's no way of leaving them aside entirely. And I, for one, don't think we should leave them entirely aside, or try to. They often inform in very positive ways our understanding of the Scriptures. And they certainly help us to make connections between what the Scripture is saying and our experience, our own Christian or religious experience. I do believe firmly in an inductive approach though, to the study of the Bible, which seeks intentionally to allow the biblical text to speak on its own terms to us. And I am very concerned that we not co-opt the message of the Bible or any passage within the Bible to our own

prior belief systems. The authority of the Bible means, among other things, allowing the Bible to speak to us its own different message. Not simply conforming to our to the presuppositions, including our doctrinal presuppositions, with which we come to the text, but challenging them. Luther has a wonderful expression; it's Latin. He refers to the Bible as *adversarius noster*, as our adversary. Certainly, he meant a beneficent, gentle sort of adversary, but an adversary nonetheless, by which he really meant that the Bible always challenges our beliefs, our presuppositions, and really that of the church. And that both the church as a whole, and we as individual Christians, are constantly in need of reformation, of hearing the different challenging confrontational word of Scripture. And really, the only way to do that is to be intentional in not allowing our presuppositions, including our doctrinal presuppositions, to determine ahead of time what the Scriptures, or a passage of Scripture means.

**Dr. John Oswalt**

When we come to the Bible, necessarily we bring with us all of our own understandings, all of our own context, if you will. And I think there are two important issues that have to be addressed there. On the one hand, I need to be as aware as I can of my current beliefs. What am I bringing to the text? Then I need to be saying, alright, given that this is the way I think and the way I believe, what does the text say about that? How does the text... how should the text alter those? How should the text correct those? At the same time, we recognize that the way we appropriate the text is going to be based upon who we are and where we are. So, as I say, we need to be, on the one hand, honest about what our beliefs are. At the same time, we need to allow the text to address those in any way that it needs to.

**Question 9:****How should we prepare to read the Scriptures, and why is deliberate preparation so important?**

As anyone who's read the Bible would affirm, it's a complex book. We have to consider many different questions as we read through its pages. So, it's essential that we spend time preparing to read and study the Scriptures. But how should we prepare to read the Scriptures, and why is deliberate preparation so important?

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

We should prepare ourselves to read the Scriptures and be deliberate about it when we do for several reasons. One is its precious. The Bible says that the law of God is more precious than precious metals; it's life giving. So, when we pick up the Bible to study it, we should do so realizing we have something very precious, very meaningful, very desirable in our hands. Secondly, we should deliberately prepare ourselves by asking that God would reveal himself to us. That's the entire purpose of Scripture summed up, that it's God's self-revelation, his personal act to make himself known to us, and we should never study the Bible without that in mind. And then thirdly I would say we should be deliberate by acquiring skills, by acquiring



competencies, how to read text, how to understand the author's role and meaning, how to understand how words are put together to shape meaning so that we develop actual skills. But the first two must precede that third one.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think it's important when we study the Scripture that we do have a rigorous and sort of well-thought-out method for doing so according to and depending on what we're reading, the parts of Scripture we're reading, the kind of thing we're reading in Scripture. And the great strength about having a rigorous methodology when we're studying Scripture is we're applying sort of careful investigation to the study of Scripture rather than just, say, opening it up and waiting for something to pop out at us, whatever sort of strikes me that day as being important. And to me, the greatest strength about following a methodology for studying the Scriptures is that it makes it less likely that I'm just going to make the Bible say what I want it to say, which, we all have a tendency to do that anyway. But we have sort of a methodology that we're following. Whether it's steps or what have you — however we do it — or asking particular questions of a text, hopefully that helps us see what the text has to say for itself... Because we all bring our own ideas to it and our own backgrounds. And so maybe rather than just that one verse that just happens to speak to me that day for some reason... I mean, that's great and that's important and we need to hear those kinds of things from the Bible. But if I'm going to preach or teach a text, people don't need to hear just how this text is striking me. Not just that. What they need to hear is what is God saying in this text and how's it being said? And having a methodology that we follow can help. It doesn't ensure that we do it but it can help us sort of reach that goal.

**Question 10:**

**In what ways should we rely on the Holy Spirit as we study Scripture?**

**With any given text, we tend to rely on our own abilities to understand what it means. And yet, this approach won't bring us to a full understanding of a biblical passage because we aren't the only active participants when we read and interpret Scripture. The Holy Spirit, the source of the Scriptures, provides illumination. But why is this important? In what ways should we rely on the Holy Spirit as we study Scripture?**

**Dr. Thomas J. Nettles**

One of the issues that every Christian has to deal with when he comes to the Bible, and he reads the Bible, and wants to interpret the Bible properly, is related to the necessary conviction that the Bible is the result of at least three actions of the work of the Spirit. Perhaps more if we would extend that. But one, there is the revelation of a truth which is given by the Holy Spirit in particular ways. And then there is inspiration in which how this truth is to be communicated when a particular situation is given. And then there is the work of the Spirit in the believer illuminating his mind

to understand this ... So we need to approach the Bible with the full conviction that it is the Word of God. It is a message; it is a coherent message. And that all the different pericopes of Scripture do not stand alone, but they are building a case that God is setting forth for us. He's setting forth an argument for us so that we can see clearly... what his purpose is in governing the world and purpose is in redeeming us. So, in that general sense, we recognize that God's superintending of this process means that all of it is true and it all ties together. But we also recognize that he has spoken to us in language and words. And just as it arises — as I think as we've talked about it before — it arises out of particular human situations and historical situations, so the interpretation of it is dependent upon our understanding of grammar and syntax and language and historical situations. We study these things. We cannot simply say, "Because it's inspired, therefore I have no obligation to understand it." We understand it in a very human way. There's one sense in which we could say, we must try to understand the Bible as if the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with our understanding of it — as if he has written it, he has left it, and now he says, "Understand it." Now, that is not the case, but I think that we receive the illuminating work of the Spirit only as we work very hard to understand the language. There are some texts that I have studied, and I thought that I have understood them, and I have preached them in a certain way. And I discovered later I was not preaching falsely, but there were certain things in there I was missing simply because I didn't understand a broader context or how a word was used in a different place the Scripture. Or how another theological idea was sort of hidden under the assumptions of this passage. So as I study it and expand my knowledge of Scripture, I find that there is a greater spiritual delight, and there is a greater illumination that comes into my mind to be able to preach that text better the next time I do it.

**Dr. Guy Waters**

It is important to remember that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, that is, God has breathed out the Scriptures. We speak of plenary inspiration, that is, from beginning to end. We speak of verbal inspiration, that is, down to the very words. And according to Jesus's promises in places like John 14, John 16, this is the work particularly of God the Holy Spirit. That gives us the confidence that when we open up the Bible, we know that it is true, and we know that every word has proceeded from the mouth of the Lord. And so it has the authority of God himself. And that's going to shape and affect the way we read and handle the Scripture. At the same time, it doesn't mean that we don't pick up the Bible and read it, and apply ourselves, and work hard to understand its meaning. But even in saying that, we need to appreciate that there is an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, not inspiration, as though he were speaking words into our ears or our minds, but we call this work illumination. That is, that he enables us to understand fully, savingly, what God has said in his Word. He shines, as it were, upon our minds so that we can understand fully what God has said in the Scripture. And that's a wonderful promise, because it means for all the difficulties that we face when we pick up the Scripture to read it, that God's people always come away learning and knowing what God intended for them to know from the Scripture, namely, what must be believed and what must be done for salvation. And for all the questions we may bring to any text of Scripture or that we may take



away from the text of Scripture, that's a wonderful, comforting assurance that we will never rise in doubt as to the answer of that question: what does the Scripture say about what I must believe and what I must do in order to be saved?

**Dr. Greg Perry**

We should rely on the Holy Spirit as we read the Bible for several reasons. First of all, Paul in writing to Timothy tell us that the Scriptures are God-breathed, that the Spirit of God is the one who has given the Scriptures to the people of God. And so they come to us with God's authority, with a sense of the veracity and the truthfulness that is befitting God's character. And so as the source it's really important. But also in terms of the destination of the Scriptures, the Scriptures are given primarily to the people of God. And the Spirit has given gifts to the entire community of God. And so as we read the Scriptures, we understand not only that the Spirit has given the Scriptures through the author's inspiration, but also in terms of the gifts of receiving the Scriptures within the community of God, the different gifts that the Spirit has given to the church. And then thirdly, we're told that the Spirit is given to each one of us. And so inside my life or your life, as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus, we've been given the Spirit of God. And so the Spirit's own work in our individual walk with Christ is an important aspect of influencing how we read the Scriptures as well. So, from the author, to the community, to you and I as individuals, the Spirit is at work in all three of those arenas. And it's really beneficial to remember the Spirit's work in those ways as we read the Bible.

**Question 11:**

**What kind of impact should inspiration have on the way we interpret Scripture?**

**The doctrine of inspiration affirms God's role in the writing of the Bible. This doctrine should then have significant implications for how we read the text. What kind of impact should inspiration have on the way we interpret Scripture?**

**Dr. Robert G. Lister**

The inspiration of Scripture should have a profound effect on our interpretation of Scripture, because while we do come to the Scriptures as the words written by David and Moses and Paul, we also understand that these are the breathed-out words of God. And so we come to the Scriptures unlike we come to any other document. The inspiration of Scripture is not like Shakespeare's being inspired. Shakespeare, we might think of being inspired in the sense of being great, great literature, classic literature. And the Scriptures, while having spectacular literary qualities, are more than just great literature. They are the words of God, the authoritative words of God to mankind. And so with that understanding of inspiration, we come to the Scriptures and we understand that unlike any other text, we have a place to acknowledge the authority of the Word of God ... So when we read the Scriptures, we come under its authority and not as the authority. We come not to criticize Scripture but, when

necessary, to be criticized by Scripture. We recognize that it, as the Word of God, has a unique authority for all of our lives. And so we come to it with that kind of recognition in a way that we wouldn't come to any other text.

**It's always important to prepare ourselves before we come to interpret any passage of Scripture. Our current beliefs, our interpretive tools, and our past experiences all play a part in how we read the text. When we keep these kinds of factors in mind, we can better prepare ourselves to interpret what the Bible is saying. And in turn, we can be better prepared to share that message with others.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
THREE

INVESTIGATING  
SCRIPTURE



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Original Meaning.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>III. Theological Basis.....</b>	<b>3</b>
A. Writer	3
B. Audience	5
C. Document	8
1. Organic Inspiration	8
2. Divine Accommodation	10
<b>IV. Importance.....</b>	<b>12</b>
A. Church History	12
B. Modern Church	14
<b>V. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>16</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Three Investigating Scripture

### INTRODUCTION

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In many ways, understanding Scripture is like going on an archeological dig. We all know that archaeologists devote themselves to studying things that come from the past. They dig up artifacts at an ancient site and do their best to reconstruct the artifacts' significance when they were first created and used. Well, in much the same way, investigating Scripture involves digging into something that comes from the past — the Bible. We explore biblical passages that come from thousands of years ago and reconstruct their significance in their original ancient historical settings. Investigating Scriptures in their ancient contexts is a crucial dimension of biblical interpretation because it enables us to discover the fully reliable, infallible and authoritative meaning that the Holy Spirit and his inspired human authors intended when the Scriptures were first written.

This is the third lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Investigating Scripture." In this lesson, we'll focus on several concepts that are important to exploring and discovering the meaning of Scripture.

Our discussion of the process of investigating Scripture will divide into three parts. First, we'll define original meaning, which is the object of our investigation. Second, we'll explain the theological basis for focusing on the original meaning of Scripture. And third, we'll look at the importance of paying proper attention to original meaning. Let's begin with a definition of original meaning.

### ORIGINAL MEANING

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We've all had experiences when someone has misunderstood something we've said or written, and we usually say something like this, "You know, that's not what I meant." We don't like it when people take our words and use them in ways that go against what we first intended. And usually a few words of explanation settle things. But when it comes to figuring out the original meaning of something that was said or written thousands of years ago, like the Scriptures, things are not so easy. We have to slow down and ask a few questions: What do we mean by the "original meaning" of a biblical passage? Why should we be interested in it? Why is it important for us today?

Countless scholarly debates have raged over how to define original meaning. But for the purposes of this series, we'll define the original meaning of a text as:

**The concepts, behaviors and emotions that the divine and human writers jointly intended the document to communicate to its first audience.**

To be sure, there are a number of complexities that this definition raises, and we'll deal with some of them as we go along.

Let's start with the word "communicate," which we'll take in the broadest sense possible. Both the Holy Spirit and the human authors of Scripture wanted their biblical books to communicate on many levels. Unfortunately, we tend to think of Scripture's communication primarily in terms of the thoughts or concepts biblical authors wanted to communicate to their audiences. But the Bible's meaning is much richer than this. As one traditional illustration puts it, Scripture communicates in terms of the head, the hands and the heart. Or to put it in the terms we've used in this lesson, it communicates in terms of concepts, behaviors and emotions. Biblical authors designed the Scriptures to draw attention to their own concepts, behaviors and emotions as well as to those of others mentioned in their books. But more than this, biblical texts were also intended to impact and to change their audiences' concepts, behaviors and emotions. As we read in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

**All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).**

The Holy Spirit designed Scripture to accomplish all these things and more in the lives of believers. So, when we say that our investigations are intended to discover the original meaning, we're not simply trying to find out what the words and sentences might have meant in a narrow intellectual sense of the word. Rather, we're looking for the full range of impact authors intended to have on the lives of their first audiences.

As we consider the concept of original meaning, it's helpful to think in terms of three main concerns: the biblical document we're investigating, the human writer that the Holy Spirit inspired to write the document, and the audience that the human writer intended to be the first recipients of the document.

The document is important because it's the actual word of God that was sent to the first audience. The human writer is important because, through the process of organic inspiration, the document reflects the author's thoughts, intentions, feelings, literary skills, and so on. And the audience is important because both the Holy Spirit and the human author crafted the document in a way that spoke particularly to them in their own context and circumstances. This means that every biblical text was historically conditioned for, or accommodated to, a time in history and a life-situation experienced by the original audience of the text.

It's true that human writers create documents that affect their audiences in ways they never intend. But in the process of investigation, we're especially interested in how biblical writers intended to impact their original audiences through their documents. So, investigating the original meaning of a biblical passage involves exploring the text as if it were still within the historical circumstances of its writer and first audience. This kind of



exploration requires a lot of research, careful thinking and imagination. In other words, it requires a lot of human effort because biblical documents no longer exist in their original settings.

With this understanding of original meaning in mind, let's address the theological basis for emphasizing it when we're investigating Scripture.

## THEOLOGICAL BASIS

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There is a sound theological basis for emphasizing three aspects of original meaning in our investigation of Scripture. First, we'll speak of the theological basis for giving attention to the writer. Second, we'll consider the original audience. And third, we'll look at the function of the document itself. Let's begin with the theological basis for considering the human writer.

### WRITER

In a previous lesson, we mentioned that the Bible is organically inspired by God. The Holy Spirit chose to communicate his word through the personalities, experiences, emotions, and patterns of thought of human biblical writers. And there are several places in the Bible where the importance of the human writers is mentioned explicitly. For instance, listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 22:41-45:

**Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."' If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (Matthew 22:41-45).**

In this passage, Jesus referred to David's authorship of Psalm 110. And he specifically tied his interpretation of the psalm to the fact that its human author was David.

Jesus pointed out that since David called the Christ "Lord," the Christ could not merely have been David's son. The Christ had to be even greater than David. In fact, Jesus' argument only makes sense if we consider the fact that David wrote this psalm. And just like Jesus did here, all responsible interpretation acknowledges the significance of the human writers of biblical books.

**One of the joys of reading and studying the Bible is coming to a deeper knowledge of the men who wrote the Bible. And often this has a way of illuminating the Scriptures, giving us a deeper understanding. There are all kinds of examples of this. I think, for example, of the ministry of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, and**

**understanding what he went through as he prophesied judgment against the people of God in Jerusalem and then actually experienced God's judgment falling on that city and then lamented the disaster that had befallen the city. All of that gives a deeper, richer understanding of the whole book of Jeremiah. Or think of just all we know about the apostle Paul and how helpful it is to read his epistles in the context of the stories that are told about his ministry in the book of Acts. The Bible reinforces its meaning by helping us understand the life and experience of the biblical authors, and that sets their teaching into its proper context.**

**— Dr. Philip Ryken**

Focusing on the human writer helps us understand many features of Scripture. As another example, consider the different ways that 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles tell the story of the kingship of David. 2 Samuel devoted nine chapters to the sin of David with Bathsheba and Absalom's rebellion that followed David's sin. But 1 Chronicles doesn't tell any part of these stories. It doesn't even mention the names of Bathsheba and Absalom, except in David's genealogy. Why would the Chronicler omit such major events in David's life? The answer has to do with the historical circumstances and intentions of the human writers of Samuel and Chronicles. The author of the books of Samuel was concerned with showing that the Davidic line was God's choice for Israel despite David's shortcomings, so telling the story of how David responded to his sin was crucial to the author's narrative purpose. But the author of Chronicles was writing a very condensed history of Israel for an audience returning from exile. He didn't contradict Samuel, but he only recorded the parts of David's life that suited his own narrative purposes, which were to teach the returning leadership how Davidic kings should reign in Israel.

**Today especially we have available to us a lot of information both about the original setting of when the biblical books were written both in terms of their author and also in terms of their audience. And that information can be very, very helpful, especially to help us get at a wise and even safe reading and application of a text so that we're not saying something that in no way was related to what the original author meant or what the original audience heard. Yet at the same time, I think that kind of information, that background information about the biblical author and the biblical audience is what I like to describe as "a good servant but a bad master." It can really help us as we're interpreting the Bible, but if we make that the main way and the main avenue through which we understand what the Bible is saying, I think it will often limit our understanding and even misconstrue it at points. So it's helpful, but don't make it your main focus at the beginning or the end of your study of Scripture.**

**— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

**There's incredible value in knowing about the writer's original context to understand a particular part of Scripture. But first just to say a bit of a warning: Actually the authority of the Scripture is in what is written, not in our imagining or reconstructing the author's background. So, so long as we remember that their words are true even if we don't fully understand the background of the writer, that's important. But if we can understand something more of the writer's context and their personality, that's going to help us. And I think it's going to help us just to be able to make imaginative connections with them. And so we can imagine Paul in prison and can begin to see what it was like, and we can kind of make intuitive and imaginative connections with them. And that's going to make Scripture become three-dimensional to us, not just wooden and two-dimensional.**

**— Dr. Peter Walker**

In passages like the ones we've mentioned, Scripture demonstrates how important it is for us to focus not just on God as the ultimate author of Scripture, but also on the human writers he inspired. And that means that we have to learn as much as we can about the situations, personalities, experiences, skills and intentions of these writers. Having seen the theological basis for emphasizing the human writer of a biblical document, let's turn to a second important aspect of our investigation of original meaning: the first audience or recipients of that document.

## **AUDIENCE**

Have you ever noticed that throughout biblical history God gave his Word to his people in ways that suited their historical circumstances? Imagine if God had given ancient Israel a computerized version of the Ten Commandments. Or what if God had given the New Testament Scriptures to the early church in modern French or Mandarin? These scenarios don't make sense because the original audiences of Scripture would not have understood what God was saying to them. And, of course, this isn't what God did at all. He wrote the Ten Commandments on stones. He led Christ's apostles and prophets to write in Greek. In fact, throughout biblical history, to one degree or another, God always accommodated his revelation to his original audiences so that they could understand.

Divine Accommodation is the idea that:

**God designed his revelation to be understood by its first audience.**

He adapted the words and ideas of Scripture to the culture, technology, social structures and even religious experiences of its first audiences, so that they would understand what he was saying.

It helps to think of divine accommodation in terms of a spectrum ranging from general to specific accommodations. On one end of the spectrum, every portion of Scripture was written to suit the universal human condition. By this we mean that every time God revealed himself to human beings, he did it in ways that were applicable, in one way or another, to every human being throughout history.

Listen to the way John Calvin described the general aspects of accommodation in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, chapter 13, section 1:

**Who ... does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to “lisp” in speaking to us? ... [S]uch forms of speaking ... accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.**

As Calvin pointed out, God’s mind is so far beyond our minds that he has to speak to us as a nursemaid speaks to an infant. Because God is so immeasurably greater than we are, he has to stoop very low in order for us to understand him.

We see this kind of universal accommodation throughout the Scriptures. It appears most dramatically in anthropomorphisms — the times in Scripture when God speaks, behaves, or appears in ways that seem almost human. God speaks human language; he’s grieved; he changes his intentions; he asks questions. These and countless other features of divine revelation were designed to meet our general human limitations.

Toward the middle of the spectrum of divine accommodation, God also fit his revelation to cultural expectations. For example, he revealed himself in the ancient Near East. And in this cultural context, he established covenants that resembled ancient Near Eastern international treaties. With regard to language, God revealed himself through the specific languages of his first audiences, such as Hebrew and Aramaic in the Old Testament for the nation of Israel, and Greek for the international New Testament church. Divine revelation in the Bible took into account these kinds of broad cultural circumstances of the original audiences of Scripture. Listen to Matthew 19:8 as an example of accommodation to cultural expectations:

**Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”**

In the preceding verses, Jesus had said that God ordained marriage at creation, and that divorce was not part of the marriage ideal. Then he went on to explain that Moses had permitted divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 only because of Israel’s sinful hardness of heart.

In Deuteronomy 24, Moses gave legislation requiring that a certificate of divorce be given to a divorced woman. Some Pharisees in Jesus’ day had used this passage to justify divorce for any reason, so long as a certificate was given. But notice how Jesus factored in God’s accommodation to the original audience. He said that God gave this law “because your hearts were hard.” On this basis, Jesus argued that Moses merely “permitted” divorce as an accommodation to his first audience, the nation of Israel. Divorce wasn’t ideal, and it wasn’t even really acceptable. But in light of Israel’s

stubborn and unforgiving spirit, God had commanded divorce certificates as a way to minimize the damage done by their sin.

This example indicates just how important it can be to investigate the original audience of a biblical passage. Jesus' correction of this pharisaical practice rested on the divine accommodation of Moses' law to the original audience of Scripture.

On the other end of the spectrum, God also accommodated his revelation to individuals, such as the specific people to whom he spoke. He took into account the strengths and weaknesses, and the accomplishments and failures, of particular groups of people, and sometimes even of specific individuals.

For example, in the New Testament we have many letters that are addressed to one specific church or another. And within those letters, in places like Colossians 3, we find teachings that are given to smaller groups within those churches, such as fathers, children, slaves and masters. And some of Paul's letters, like Philemon, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus, were actually written to one specific person. In various ways, the Holy Spirit shaped these scriptural revelations to meet the specific needs of their original audiences. So, in order to understand the revelations properly, we have to learn as much as we can about those original audiences.

**Well, it's important for us to understand the context of the initial readership when the biblical writers were writing to a particular audience. That's very, very important. For example, when you take the book of Hebrews ... the writer there, whom we do not know, that writer was writing to an audience of a dispersed group of Jewish Christians, and they were being persecuted. And they would have had every temptation to go back into Judaism because they would have had some level of protection under Judaism. And so when the people who were coming to persecute them, they would have had every temptation to just abandon their Christian faith. So what the writer is doing is understanding that historical context, understanding the readership, trying to encourage them about the supremacy of the person of Jesus Christ over all of the other individuals and systems in the Old Testament.**

**— Dr. Stephen Um**

**God revealed himself to an original audience, people in a particular place, in a particular time. This is one of the remarkable things about the Bible. It is not merely a collection of prescriptions from on high. God was speaking to particular people in a particular setting, and so when we know how they understood what they were hearing from God, what they were receiving from God, that helps us to know what the limits are for our own understanding. If I'm understanding the Bible in some way very different from what the original hearers understood it, there's something wrong. Surely, my own context will make a difference, but my own context has to be understood in the**

**light of their context, and then I'll know what the probable limits of interpretation can be.**

**— Dr. John Oswalt**

So far in our discussion of the theological basis for focusing our investigations on the original meaning of Scripture, we've considered the significance of the writer and the original audience. So at this point, we're ready to focus on the biblical document itself.

## **DOCUMENT**

It should be obvious that if we want to know the original meaning of a biblical passage, we have to look at the passage itself. Now for many of us, this means that we simply read our modern translations of the Bible. Modern translations are not infallible, but they do represent one of the most important teaching ministries of the church. And as long as we're careful not to depend too much on a particular word or phrase that may be different in one translation or another, we can learn a lot from the translations we use. But as this lesson stresses, we must do all we can to grasp the original meaning of biblical passages — what the Spirit of God and the writers he inspired intended. So, when God gives us the opportunity, we should also become familiar as much as possible with the original languages of Scripture: Hebrew and Aramaic in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament. Now few of us will become experts in these languages, but the more we know about them, the better we'll be able to understand the original meaning of Scripture.

The theological basis for emphasizing the biblical documents in our investigation can be found mainly in two important doctrines: the doctrine of organic inspiration, and the doctrine of divine accommodation. Let's look at how each of these doctrines points to the importance of the biblical documents, beginning with the doctrine of organic inspiration.

### **Organic Inspiration**

The doctrine of organic inspiration teaches that the Holy Spirit inspired human authors to write Scripture. But it does not say that every copy made of that document will be perfect, or that every translation made from that document will be perfect. In fact, in places like Jeremiah 8:8, Scripture itself says that copies of biblical documents can contain mistakes. And we have all seen that different translations of the biblical documents can vary greatly.

Because the doctrine of organic inspiration extends only to the original texts of Scripture, only those documents have the full authority of God himself. The changes that have taken place in these texts as they have been copied over the centuries are not inspired by God, and neither are the translations of those texts. So, in order to increase

our confidence that we have rightly understood the original meaning of Scripture, we have to do all we can to find and study the writings that God actually inspired.

Of course, in our day we're somewhat removed from the original documents of Scripture because they're no longer available. They don't exist in some holy shrine or in a museum. We only have copied texts and translations. And the authority of these copies and translations always depends on how well they represent the actual documents that the biblical writers produced under the inspiration of the Spirit.

This fact is often raised by opponents of the Christian faith as a reason for rejecting the authority of Scripture altogether. Secularists argue that we can't know what the original texts of Scripture said, much less follow them. Muslims frequently argue that the Quran has been perfectly preserved by Allah, and therefore they trust the Quran over the Bible. These issues come up so often that we should pause to offer some explanation.

First, one of the most important things for followers of Christ to remember is that the original documents of the Old Testament didn't exist in Jesus' day either. Slightly different Hebrew versions of Old Testament books existed at that time. And there were also Aramaic versions, as well as multiple versions of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. But Jesus and his apostles still believed that the Scriptures they had were trustworthy and adequate to lead the people of God. Similarly, the early church used multiple copies of the original New Testament documents because they also believed reliable copies to be fully sufficient for directing God's people.

Second, modern Christians have the advantage of many decades of scholarly research devoted to studying and comparing ancient copies of the Scriptures. These explorations have confirmed over and over that the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible are far more reliable than the texts we have of most other ancient writings. In his providence, God has preserved the Scriptures in remarkable ways. For this reason, the Bibles we have today are still adequate to lead the church of Christ, if we interpret them carefully.

**If you're going to transmit books in ancient history, it has to be hand copied by a scribe and copied letter by letter and word for word. When that happens there are natural scribal variations that slip in: misspellings, words left out, word order changes, and so on. Those are inevitable if the Bible is going to be transmitted in normal time and space throughout history. But the question is are those changes so significant, and so meaningful, and so severe to call into question whether we have the original words of Scripture. Well, in order to determine whether we have the original words of Scripture, we can look at the collective remaining manuscripts we have and compare them with one another, and we can see how much change has taken place over time. And the good news when it comes to the Bible is we have so many manuscripts of the Bible that we can compare them, we can see how they have developed over time, and we can look and see what the original text actually was. And this gives us a lot of confidence that the words that we have today are the words that were originally written back then. So, yes, scribes did alter the text from**

**time to time but not in such a way that we can't recover the text in a very faithful way.**

**— Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

**The Bible has been copied by hand century after century after century. In fact, all copies of the Bible until the year 1454 were done by hand... So the short answer to whether the Bible has been corrupted over time is: of course it has. But the long answer says, but how has it been corrupted and how much has it been corrupted? When it comes to those kinds of issues, it almost depends on book by book, but one of the most amazing things about the copying of Scripture is that there's not a single essential doctrine that has ever been jeopardized by any of these textual variants. It's an amazing fact... we might almost say that, gee, someone behind the scenes is preserving the text for us... But once again, there's no essential belief that has been considered a cardinal belief of the Christian faith that is impacted by any of these variants.**

**— Dr. Daniel B. Wallace**

Even so, since modern translations are imperfect, we should be open to improving them as research warrants. Moreover, we must never allow our interpretations of Scripture to depend too heavily on the turn of a phrase, the choice of a particular word, or some other small item that appears in only a few ancient manuscripts or in particular translations of Scripture. We need to work hard to confirm our interpretations of particular portions of texts with many other portions of Scripture.

With this understanding of organic inspiration in mind, let's turn to the second theological basis for emphasizing the biblical documents in our investigation of Scripture, namely, the doctrine of divine accommodation.

## **Divine Accommodation**

The doctrine of accommodation implies that everything in Scripture — including things like its words, grammar and literary style — rose out of the cultural and linguistic conventions of its day. So, if we pay careful attention to the ways Scripture reflects these conventions, we'll be more likely to interpret it correctly.

As just one example, listen to this account from John 20:16:

**Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher) (John 20:16).**



Pay special attention to the words in parentheses. This text was written in Greek, but when John quoted Mary, he didn't use the Greek word for "teacher"; he used the Aramaic word, and then offered a translation.

John first referred to Mary's words with the Aramaic term *rabboni*, which was the original word that Mary spoke to Jesus. But John apparently believed that a significant number of his first readers didn't know Aramaic. So, he accommodated the text to them by offering a translation that they would understand: the Greek word *didaskalos*. By first using *rabboni*, John created a moment of hesitation that heightened the drama of Mary's response. John's text led his readers to imagine the actual sound of Mary's joyous cry, to help them appreciate her joy in the risen Savior.

Literary devices and conventions like this demonstrate the importance of accommodations in the original documents of Scripture, and encourage us to focus on similar issues in our investigation of original meaning.

**As you read the Bible, it becomes very evident that the writers did what they can to help their original readers understand what was being said in the text. So, for example, the gospel writers might translate Aramaic or Hebrew words for the benefit of their first readers. Or sometimes locations will be pointed out in relationship to other localities so that they can orientate themselves within the geography in which it was written. And there are all sorts of ways in which it is quite evident that the writers thought that the original readers needed help in understanding the text so that they would put into their hands, as it were, the tools they needed to read the Bible properly.**

**— Dr. Simon Vibert**

**Everything has a cultural context if it's human. There's no way you can address humans without human language and human culture. And so, when God gives us his message, he gives us his message in ways that we can understand. When it's in words, as Scripture is, it'll be in a specific language. And also, it comes to us in the concrete forms of the cultures in which it was given. Now, some things are very clearly transcultural. I mean, "You shall not commit adultery" is the same in all cultures... But then, there are also things in Scripture like building a parapet around a roof, or a fence around the roof, so your neighbor won't fall off the roof and you incur blood-guilt. Well, in my neighborhood, we don't have flat roofs. Normally our neighbors don't go up on the roof, so the fence around the roof isn't the issue. But the principle there can be applied in all cultures, and the principle there is that you should care about your neighbor's safety. You are your brother or sister's keeper. Not all Scripture is for all circumstances. It's for all time, but it's not for all circumstances. We need to find out what the circumstances are, and we need to find out how to apply it**

**concretely in those different situations, because that's the way God gave it to us.**

**— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

As we've seen, the Scriptures themselves provide a strong theological basis for giving attention to the writer, the document and the audience of every biblical passage. Now of course, paying attention to all three of these guides to the original meaning requires a lot of hard work. But the more we know about the writer, and the document and the original audience of a biblical passage, the better we'll be able to explore its original meaning. And the more we understand the original meaning, the better we'll be able to apply the Scriptures to our lives today.

Now that we've seen what original meaning is and explored its theological basis, let's look at the importance of focusing on original meaning in our investigation of Scripture.

## **IMPORTANCE**

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We'll consider the importance of proper investigation in two ways. First, we'll look at the significance of this process throughout church history, especially during the Protestant Reformation. And second, we'll address some challenges in the modern church that have discounted the importance of the investigation of original meaning. Let's begin with a brief look at church history.

## **CHURCH HISTORY**

Pursuing original meaning isn't a new, modern emphasis of biblical interpretation. It's true that at certain times the Christian church advocated rather elaborate hermeneutical systems that were far less concerned with original meaning than we are today. Even so, throughout the history of Christianity, leading theologians have urged that pursuing the original meaning of Scripture is an essential part of biblical interpretation.

One of the concerns of the early church was to preserve the original meaning of Scripture against the rising challenges from heretical groups that twisted its meaning to suit their own purposes. Many early writers in church history worked hard to preserve the original message of biblical books because only the original message was authoritative.

For instance, the early church father Irenaeus, who lived around A.D. 130 to 202, condemned false interpretations of Paul's writings in his work *Against Heresies*, Book 3, chapter 7, section 1. Listen to what Irenaeus said there:

**As to their affirming that Paul said plainly in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds**

**of them that believe not,” and maintaining that there is indeed one god of this world, but another who is beyond all principality, and beginning, and power ... they ... know not how to read Paul.**

Irenaeus was refuting Gnostic teachers who believed that Jesus came from a higher god than the creator God of the Old Testament. These false teachers believed that 2 Corinthians 4:4 taught that the Old Testament “god of this world” blinded people to the existence of this higher New Testament god, who is “beyond all principality, beginning and power.” Irenaeus devoted this chapter of his book to demonstrating that these Gnostic interpreters didn’t know how to read Paul because they were missing Paul’s original meaning.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, there were some extreme cases in which the Scriptures were viewed primarily within the context of church tradition. But there was also a strong belief in the value of original meaning or *sensus literalis*, as it was often called.

For example, the famous theologian Thomas Aquinas argued in his work *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, question 1, article 10 that the *sensus literalis* was the foundation for all other meanings a text might be said to have.

**Thus in Holy Writ no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one — the literal — from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory.**

As this passage clearly indicates, Aquinas believed that there are many senses for Scripture, but he insisted that “all the senses are founded on ... the literal.” And that this literal sense is that “from which alone can any argument” — or interpretation in the church — “be drawn.”

Later, during the European Renaissance of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, the church’s control over the interpretation of literature began to wane. As a result, the emphasis on conforming interpretation to existing church tradition began to weaken, and the emphasis on the original meaning of the Scriptures began to increase. During this period, a number of important ancient Greek and Latin classical texts began to circulate around Europe in their original languages. And scholars that studied these texts focused on their original languages and historical settings. Moreover, they based their interpretations of these texts on the original meaning rather than on the authority and tradition of the church.

This shift laid the groundwork for much of what took place in hermeneutics during the Protestant Reformation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Scholars like Martin Luther and John Calvin devoted themselves to investigating the Scriptures in their original languages and historical contexts. They believed that knowing the original meaning of Scripture enabled them to maintain the Bible as their only absolute authority, even over the theology of Rome.

Among evangelical scholars, this view of the interpretation of Scripture came to be called the “Grammatico-Historical Method.” This method is attested to in Scripture, was important all throughout church history, and has been the dominant approach to the study of Scripture since the time of the Reformation.

**In the Middle Ages, the Scriptures were the book of all of society. All the learned people spent most of their time studying the Scriptures, and it played a great role in society as well as in the church, of course. And in that studying of Scripture, they developed, during the Middle Ages, a very somewhat elaborate way of reading Scripture that focused on many different layers of the text. The original meaning of the Scriptures, if we mean by that the historical authorial intent, was certainly a very important part of the interpretive method of the Middle Ages. It was seen, however, as a means to a greater end. Unlike much of later interpretation, the authorial intent or the original meaning was seen as the basis for good reading, but there was something that was seen to be more important than just the original meaning. It was the Christological, the focus on Christ, and often the eschatological or the focus on a final end times or final Christological reading of the Bible. And so the authorial intent mattered but it wasn't seen as the end game. It was seen as a means to an end.**

**— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

**Asking the question about the relationship between original meaning and church tradition in the Middle Ages is something that probably would have made a medieval interpreter look at you oddly, because in the medieval period they were deeply concerned about the meaning of Scripture... They were coming at the Bible with a basic conviction that church tradition was the teaching of the Bible. Now, it's kind of easy for us as twenty-first century Protestants to snicker at that, but we're not immune to that. There are plenty of our people who are running around who will say, you know the teaching of John Calvin is the teaching of Scripture, or John Wesley, or Martin Luther, or whoever. So, what is happening in the Middle Ages is they are doing an approach to interpreting Scripture that is grounded in the dynamic of the rule of faith. The question that medieval interpreters are asking is, "How is the faith handed down by the apostles emerging for us through the particulars of this passage?"**

**— Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Now that we've seen that investigating the original meaning of biblical texts was important throughout church history, let's consider some of the challenges to this idea that have arisen in the modern church.

## MODERN CHURCH

We live in a day when the importance of original meaning of any text, not just the Bible, has been questioned in a variety of ways. As we've already seen, in the past, many interpreters spoke of many meanings for every biblical passage because they believed that the Bible came from God whose mind is far beyond our comprehension. But in the modern world, the value of the Bible's original meaning or the original meaning of any literature has been questioned not because of God but because of the nature of human communication.

In the early twentieth century, modern schools of literary criticism began to disregard original meaning. The earliest of these schools generally argued that the authors and original audiences of Scripture were largely unknowable. Historians said that the writers and audiences couldn't be identified with certainty. Anthropologists emphasized that we can't apply inferences from modern cultures to ancient cultures. Psychologists suggested that modern readers can't reliably discern the intentions of ancient writers. And philosophers argued that all human knowledge is so subjective that we can never really know what writers were thinking.

By the middle of the twentieth century, frustration with identifying ancient writers and audiences led many interpreters to ignore them altogether and to focus entirely on the text. New critics tried to read texts without any historical context. Structuralists found meaning in the choices of words in a document in relation to all the other potential choices in the linguistic system. And reader-response critics looked for meaning in the responses contemporary readers had to the text.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, literary critics went so far as to say that the meaning of the text itself was unknowable — or worse, evil. Some post-structuralists refused to allow ancient writers to impose their ideas on modern readers. They encouraged readers to “deconstruct” ancient texts by focusing on apparent contradictions and ambiguities in order to make the texts appear incomprehensible. And many critical scholars dismissed ancient authors, and encouraged modern readers to twist the words of Scripture to fit their own purposes.

As strange as it may sound, it's actually possible to gain a lot of useful insights from critical scholars who challenge the value of discovering the original meaning of Scripture. But on the whole, we're wise to remember the lessons of the Reformation. The only way to avoid hermeneutical tyranny, the tyranny of human interpreters, is to view biblical passages in the historical context within which the Holy Spirit first inspired them. This is the only way to secure the authority of the Bible against individuals, cultural movements, churches and others who frequently use the Scriptures for their own purposes and claim to have the support of the Scriptures simply to exert their own authority over the lives of others.

The Reformers saw that the only way to avoid the hermeneutical tyranny of church authorities was to view the Bible in the historical context in which the Holy Spirit inspired it. In much the same way, the only way to secure the authority of the Bible against the hermeneutical tyranny of contemporary individuals, political movements, churches and other powers is to pursue the Bible's original meaning.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on the investigation of Scripture, we've defined the original meaning of Scripture as the object of our investigation. We've explained the theological basis for focusing on original meaning. And we've looked at the importance of paying proper attention to original meaning.

As we've seen throughout this lesson, many aspects of biblical interpretation are like going on an archeological dig. We investigate the Scriptures in their ancient historical contexts to discern their original meaning — the ways the Holy Spirit and his inspired authors intended to impact the concepts, behaviors and emotions of their original audiences. Doing our best to grasp the original meaning of each biblical text is crucial to interpretation because the original meaning bears the authority of God himself for all of his people throughout history. And for this reason, we should always stand ready to improve our understanding of the original meaning of every biblical passage, so that we can insure that every modern application we make accords with its authoritative original meaning.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
THREE

## Investigating Scripture Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	What factors can help us discern the original meaning of Scripture? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	What do we mean by grammatico-historical exegesis? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b>	How does information about the writer of a biblical book help us understand the book's original meaning? .....	5
<b>Question 4:</b>	How can information about a biblical book's original audience help us understand it's meaning? .....	7
<b>Question 5:</b>	How did biblical writers deliberately accommodate their material to make it more meaningful to their original audiences? .....	9
<b>Question 6:</b>	During the Middle Ages, was the emphasis placed on the original meaning of Scripture more or less important than church tradition? .....	10
<b>Question 7:</b>	Has the text of the Bible been corrupted over time? .....	11
<b>Question 8:</b>	What are the consequences of ignoring the historical situation of biblical passages? .....	13

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Three: Investigating Scripture

### Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Guy Waters

### Question 1:

#### **What factors can help us discern the original meaning of Scripture?**

When we come to a passage of Scripture, it's important to understand its original meaning — that is, what it meant in its original context. This gives us a solid foundation as we ask other hermeneutical questions. There are many different tools to help us discover what a passage meant for its original audience. So, what factors can help us discern the original meaning of Scripture?

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

Well, a great number of factors help us discern the original meaning of Scripture, and a very quick summary of them would go like this: We have to attend to the context first. And then we have to analyze the passage. If we have a narrative, we see: How is it set up? Who are the characters? How do we move to the climax, and what comments are made in the narrative that show us what the main point is? With things like poems or letters, prophetic utterances, you have to follow the logical thrust of the passage. That's analysis. It's good to pause and consider. An ordinary reader should always make sure they're not skipping over things that they don't really know. You know, when it says, "They were fasting," are you sure you know what fasting is? When it says, "the Lord spoke," are you sure you know what that means? So, check out those sorts of things. Of course, we should always look for themes in the Bible. So, for example, we might look at prophets in the Bible — at the first prophets and subsequent prophets; and prophets that only speak; and prophets that speak and lead; and prophets that speak, lead and act, perform miracles. Or look to the great prophet, Jesus. We look at the way in which he was understood and misunderstood as a prophet. And of course we look at the ways in which the apostles would fulfill prophetic roles, and then ask, does that continue in any way today at all, even in a derivative way? That's a thematic study. Of course, we're going to always look for the main point as well and reflect on what do we learn about God? What do we learn

about his redemption in this passage? So, you know, very quickly, that's context and analysis. And then identifying any problems we have, any themes that run through all Scripture and then reflecting on the main point. And we could leave application off to the side for the moment. So those are the big ideas.

**Dr. David R. Bauer**

A very important question has to do with the factors that can help us to interpret the original meaning of Scriptures. The most important factor is literary context. That includes not only the verses that immediately precede or follow a given passage that we're studying, but actually the entire biblical book of which the passage is a part. The basic literary unit in the Bible for the most part — you might find certain exceptions like the book of Psalms or the Psalter — but for the most part, the basic literary unit of the Bible is the biblical book. Writers basically plan and write books. And that means then that context is not confined just to the passages that immediately precede and follow, which of course it is, and that's very important, very important indeed. But really, it's important to note how a passage functions, what role it plays within the whole book of which it is a part. So, I encourage my students as they work with individual passages to begin by looking at the entire book and get some sense, at least, as to what's in the book and how the book is laid out, and these kinds of things. Of course another consideration in terms of discerning the original meaning of passages has to do with probing the meaning of key terms that are used in the passage itself. And again, context is important here. I would begin by noting where else within the book the writer has employed the term. And this, of course, involves the use of concordances, which, of course, are lists of passages where various words are used within the Bible. So, already as you work with context, you begin to work with concordances. But also, how that word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament or in the New Testament depending on what testament you are working with. If possible — and if people have the ability to make use of resources that will aid them in this regard — it's well to note where the same Greek or Hebrew term is used ... And then, looking at one or two commentaries, at least, and interacting critically with the commentary. Not simply accepting what the commentary says, but having read and worked closely with the passage itself and the use of the words, at least, of that passage, to make use of commentaries and to engage in a conversation with the commentator. And it's out of that conversation with a commentator — not simply accepting what the commentator says, but *noting* what the commentator says in terms of interpretation and the reasons the commentator gives for that — the way in which the commentator makes use of the passage in its context will help greatly. Another value in use of commentaries is that good exegetical commentaries — that is to say, commentaries whose purpose is actually the interpretation of the text — will make accessible certain types of evidence or certain considerations with regard to interpretation that it might be difficult for readers of the Bible to find otherwise, especially historical background sorts of considerations.

**Rev. Thad James, Jr.**

To develop the skills, again, one, we need to go back to 2 Timothy and to study "to show [ourselves] approved." The passages, again, will go back to the interpretation

that there can only be one truth in that interpretation ... But again, I always go back to the humility and the reverence of God's Word. One of the acronyms that I use as I teach Bible interpretation is called: "T.H.E. R.O.A.D." And THE ROAD is used in the historical-critical method of interpretation. The "T" is the "type." So, Scripture is going to be... whether it's literal or figurative. Is it didactical? Is it poetical? We have to understand when we read that that the Bible is made up of all genres of Scripture which can affect the interpretation. The "H," the "historical," then, we look at the geography. We look at plant life and animal life, and all those things, again, will have an effect on how we interpret Scripture. And then we have the "Event." The event is whether is it a wedding. Is it a funeral? What is going on here? And then the "R" is the "recipients." Who was being spoken to? What are their lives? How did they live? And then the "O" is going to be the "occasion." Why is this going on? Are these the Jews in the diaspora that are getting ready to face persecution under Nero? And then the "A" is the "author" and what are the circumstances of the author? Is he in a Roman jail as he writes his epistle? And then the "D" is the "date." When did this take place? What is going on in history at this point in time? So, we're blessed today to have a lot of tools available to us. But again, I can't emphasize enough the humility and the reverence and the respect of God's Word and using those tools in line with my love of God.

## **Question 2:**

### **What do we mean by grammatico-historical exegesis?**

**We can ensure a responsible interpretation of a biblical text by seeking to discover its original meaning and by examining the text itself. To do this, biblical interpreters have relied on what is called "grammatico-historical exegesis." What do we mean by grammatico-historical exegesis?**

#### **Dr. John Oswalt**

One of the wonderful things about the Bible is that God is able to speak through it to people who have little understanding, who have little background, and yet love God and want to know his Word. However, the Reformers, as they looked at some of the excesses of biblical interpretation — where people were simply making the Bible say whatever they wanted it to say — they determined that we need to ask two questions about the Bible. Number one, what does it say? And that's the "grammatical" question. What is the language saying? God chose to say it this way. That's important, and we need to understand. Is it past tense? Is it future tense? Is it feminine? Is it masculine? We need to answer those grammatical questions to understand what the text is saying. They then said there's a second question that we need to ask, again because of the nature of the Bible, and that's the question: What did it say? What was the initial point that was made in that historical context? They said if we know the answer to those questions — "What does it say," the grammatical; "What did it say," the historical — we're now in a position to answer the third question: And what does it say to us?

**Dr. Guy Waters**

Grammatico-historical exegesis is a way of summarizing in short form an answer to the question, "How is meaning to be found in a text?" We insist that there is meaning to be found, and we insist that meaning is going to be derived from the text itself. Well, how does that happen? Well, the word "exegesis" is simply a word meaning "to explain," "to draw out," and we're drawing out meaning from the text. It's not from the author independently of the text. It's not from the reader independently or even in conjunction with the text, but we say the text says something. How is that meaning to be drawn out? Well, "grammatico," that captures grammar. We attend very carefully the words. What do those words mean? Those words in relationship to one another, at the very simplest level, word-to-word; we call those "syntactical relationships." And then we expand; we look at clauses and sentences and paragraphs and much larger units of discourse. "Historico" means that a text is written at a particular place, at a particular point in time, by a particular author. And meaning has to be understood in the context, in that historical context that I've just outlined ... We do insist that the Scripture has something to say to readers in all times and all ages, but it had to have meant something to the original audience. And its words, its meanings, its reference, of course, have to be understood in that historical context. And once we come to terms with the grammar and with the historical context, then we're in a position to say, "This is what the text means," and then we can make application to contemporary audiences.

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

Grammatico-historical exegesis is the norm for exegesis through the years. It means that we believe that an author has an intent in a passage and that we should discover it by using the means that would get us closest to the mind of that author. So how do authors express ideas? Well, they do it through writing, through sentences, through words that carefully chosen, through sentences put together to make paragraphs and then clusters of paragraphs. And we simply try to follow that, and we do that by looking at things sentence by sentence... So we look for words like "therefore," "so," "thus," "if," "then," "when," "whenever," "although." Words of that kind which clue us into the meaning and the flow of thought in the author. We also assume that an author chooses words carefully. There may be a small difference, but there is a difference between, say, "perseverance" and "endurance," or "heart" and "bosom," and "body" and "hands." So we ask, how does an author use these words? What connotation is behind these? And so we're operating with the lexicon and we believe that the word "endure" has a certain meaning, and "abide" has a certain meaning. And they're close but not quite identical. And we give the author credit and try to ask what they were up to with their word choices, not assuming that every word choice is vital. Sometimes we alter words just for the fun of it. Historical exegesis means you don't put someone in the wrong era. And so if somebody refers to kings, we try to remember that in those days kings were leaders. We may live in a country where there's a president or prime minister, but a king was the leader. And we simply try to remember that's the way it was. Or if it refers to slaves in the Bible, we have to remember that most cultures for millennia were slave cultures, or at least had large

numbers of slaves. The Bible isn't necessarily approving that or endorsing it, but it's describing the way reality was. And so we don't ask the Bible to be something that it isn't, and that is, something that's detached from its cultural, historical moorings.

### **Question 3:**

#### **How does information about the writer of a biblical book help us understand the book's original meaning?**

**When we consider the Bible's original meaning, we're actually looking at it from several vantage points. One of those vantage points involves the original author of the passage we're looking at. How does information about the writer of a biblical book help us understand the book's original meaning?**

#### **Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

The information about the author of a biblical book is of great help to us as we try to understand its meaning. And this is because the Holy Spirit — in the way that only the sovereign God could — used human individuals in their personalities, in their background of experience, to deliver his inerrant Word. And often when we can get some sense of how he formed the human author to be the one through whom he would speak the word, it enriches our understanding of the text. I think of Psalm 42 and 43. I call it "Psalm" because although we number them in two, they really go together. That motif — "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so [disquieted] within me?" — ties them together ... We're told that this is a psalm of the Sons of Korah, and we know that the Sons of Korah were among the temple singers. When you hear it as a psalm, first of all, spoken, sung in a kind of lament, by one associated with the singing of the temple, then it gives special meaning to the longing, the poignancy of his not being able to be in the sanctuary now. He remembers when he led the procession. The fact that, as he refers to it, he seems to be up on Mount Herman, the headwaters of the Jordon, far from Jerusalem. And you begin to feel a little bit more how this psalm refers to that longing of one who is accustomed to the presence of God and being in the praises of God's people, feeling that kind of longing. Or Psalm 51, a classic, the song of David's repentance and of his recognizing his terrible sin against his faithful soldier Uriah with the taking of Bathsheba, and that confession. That whole psalm just comes alive as we see it as a confession of a king who is a man after God's own heart and yet who has sinned grievously but finds forgiveness in God. Or think of the New Testament. Think of the apostle Paul. We think of him obviously as the champion of the gospel to the Gentiles. But when we think about his earlier history, the fact that he was a zealous Jewish leader of the Pharisees, that he persecuted the church, as he mentions in his letters, that's to him the sign that he's the chief of sinners, the least of the saints. He persecuted the church. He will bring that experience right in and say, "I am the great exhibit of how gracious God can be to one who was his sworn enemy. I didn't know I was his sworn enemy, but I was. I'm also the sign that the attempt to win and keep God's favor by keeping the Law given through Moses is an absolute dead end" ... "What I thought was gain,"

he says to the Philippians, "I realize now is loss and rubbish." So his experience is woven right into his letters, and that enriches our understanding of those texts.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

Well, to appreciate the meaning of a book, it's important to understand the background of the author, because the author gives us a certain angle from which the story is being told. For example, Matthew is Jewish, very Jewish. And he is engaged in his gospel in dealing with disputes between Judaism and Jesus, because Jesus is presenting himself as the completion of Judaism. He's not trying to break away from it. The breakaway happened because of Jewish pressure against Jesus and the movement that he founded. So knowing that Matthew is Jewish helps us to understand why, for example, he speaks about the Law so much and issues related to the Law. Contrast that with Luke, who we're pretty confident is a Gentile. In fact, he may be the only Gentile writer in the New Testament. When he comes to the Sermon on the Plain — which is his version of the Sermon on the Mount — all the legal stuff is gone, and the only thing that he's teaching are the moral emphases that come out of that sermon — to love your neighbor and to pray for them and the description of the blessings and woes of the character of the person who's in the kingdom of God, that kind of thing. But the six antitheses, which Matthew has — "You've heard it said unto you... but I say unto you..." — where there's a contrast between what was taught and what Jesus is teaching in driving the Law deeper, those are all gone except for one, and the one that remains is the exhortation to love your enemy. That, in part, has to do, I think, with both the background of the writer and the audience to which they are writing, because... in one case the writer is Jewish, and Matthew is writing primarily to a community that cares about Jewish issues, and the other writer is Gentile, and he's writing primarily to an audience that cares about Gentile issues. And so that background helps to explain why we have some of the things we have in the books that they write and why we don't have other things.

**Dr. Luis Orteza**

I think one of the things that's necessary in interpretation is to understand the historical background of the book. And I think in some circles there is this idea somehow that the Bible just fell in our laps, as it were, so that it speaks directly to us and so that, therefore, we can apply it directly to our lives. But I think, when we do that, we often miss the intended meaning of the Bible by failing to understand the background and the uniqueness of a particular author ... The point being is that we need to understand the context, for example, of the situation in Corinth before it can be properly applied in our present situation. He cited the example of how the "love chapter", chapter 13, often when people read it in weddings, it has this connotation that it's quite romantic, ideal. But if you study the book of Corinthians and know the context of that church, they had all kinds of problems that happened in that church, so that if you read chapter 13, it comes out like a rebuke to the people, you see. And that's what I mean. You know, if you understand the context, it has a forceful application, better application for our time than if we just ignore the context.



**Question 4:****How can information about a biblical book's original audience help us understand its meaning?**

As we look for the original meaning of a text of Scripture, we should always keep the writer in mind. At the same time, we can learn a lot about a passage by considering that writer's earliest audience. How can information about a biblical book's original audience help us understand its meaning?

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think when we read the Bible we have to be aware that it was written to specific people, in specific places, in specific times, with specific questions and issues. And so, knowing something about that context can be extraordinarily helpful. Now we have to be honest, sometimes we don't know exactly the context that, say, James or Paul is writing to. Now, we can put a lot together. For instance, we can see that it's pretty clear that James is writing to a Jewish audience, a Jewish Christian audience. And they're experiencing certain things that James is addressing. We know the places, generally, that Paul's writing to. And sometimes we know more about what was going on there. What we know is what the biblical authors tell us, and I think that's the important thing to remember. It can be really helpful to have general historical information about a place or a time. That can be very helpful. But nothing is more helpful or more important than what we know from the biblical writers themselves. So we need to be aware. We need to be aware of the situation they're writing to as they tell us about it and... we don't want to build a historical situation that *might* have existed. And so the best thing to do, and the thing we should do, is stick with what we know, like, say, about Galatians and who Paul's writing to and what they're experiencing and how that affects what he has to say to them.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

You know, the question "what is the gospel?" is an important, crucial question for Christians, but it's not an easy question to answer unless we really know who we're talking to. We can think about how important it is to communicate that the gospel is about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the sins of God's people, and that's a critical aspect of what the gospel is. But what's really interesting as we think about the importance of the original audience is that Paul writes not *one* tract about the gospel that he uses in every place, but he actually writes *thirteen* different letters. And in those letters, it's really interesting how he summarizes the gospel in different ways depending on who he's speaking to. So, to the Galatian church and to the challenges and the opportunities for the gospel in the region of Galatia, Paul focuses in on different metaphors like, Christ is the seed of Abraham, or that the gospel is about our justification. As the Gentiles are coming into the church, it's important to understand that they don't have to become culturally Jewish, but they're justified by faith in Christ. But it's really interesting that Paul doesn't say anything really about justification to the Thessalonians or to the Corinthians. The challenges of Christian identity, the opportunities for the mission of the church on the stage of Corinth, are

really quite different than the region of Galatia. And so, when Paul summarizes the gospel to the Corinthian Christians, he talks about how Christ is our "Passover," and so, in dealing with sexual immorality in the church, they are to get the leaven out of the church. Or Christ is our wisdom. As they deal with factions within the church, and following the rhetorical prowess of different leaders, they have a false view of wisdom ... And so it's very helpful for us as we read the Bible to understand the original context as much as we can, to understand why the gospel is being summarized in different ways.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

There are real benefits in knowing the original audience. For example, the book of Revelation, they are experiencing real persecution. The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians working out whether they're going to go back into the synagogue or embrace the Gentile church. So this is always going to really add value. Or the Corinthians. They're living in a culture where there's lots of new money around, people are "on the make," people are in law courts against each other, and it's a difficult culture. And so when we read a letter like 1 Corinthians, we can begin to see which the points where Paul's words would really resonate, or touch deeply, or connect with the original audience. And there may be places which don't really connect with us, but it's useful to actually realize where the hot spots are, if you like, in the latter. So that's really valuable.

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

Our knowledge of audiences is, of course, speculative. We don't always know who was getting something or what they were thinking. Nonetheless, it can be very helpful if we do know ... A book like Genesis describes very early events. But Moses was writing it for the Israelites as they were about to enter the Promised Land and reminding them, God's the Creator of all things and he's the forefather of our nation. He established our nation so long ago. Our identity does not come from being enslaved in Egypt. It comes from being called by God. And then you can also ask the question, "What did people know?" Some books might have been written for people who were pretty ignorant ... The book of Luke is written consciously for a man named Theophilus, so he could have certain knowledge of what he'd already heard about. So here's a man who knew some things and Luke is trying to take him deeper. And then, of course, we have the knowledge that some books were written for those who were struggling with all kinds of questions. The Corinthians' correspondence is a clear example of that as the book marches through the difficulties that they themselves had asked Paul about in the letter, and the difficulties he had heard about. And he answers them one by one. Of course, a book like Galatians is written for a very hot controversy, where Paul had preached the gospel, and then some other people — the "Judaizers," we call them — perverted the gospel, and so Paul has to reestablish it. And so, what we have to do is be aware of the separation between the time when an event occurred, and when it was written about, who read it, on the one hand. On the other hand, we have to know that some people were just ignorant, and we want to fill them in. And others were not ignorant but deceived and had had their faith perverted and it had to be corrected.

**Question 5:****How did biblical writers deliberately accommodate their material to make it more meaningful to their original audiences?**

We know that biblical authors wrote to specific audiences with specific needs at specific times. And these audiences impacted the way the authors wrote or structured their texts. But how did biblical writers deliberately accommodate their material to make it more meaningful to their original audiences?

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

When we come to the Bible, we find what we have there is inspired Scripture. So, we can say this is the Word of God but we can also say these are words written by inspired human authors. It's sometimes called "dual authorship" or "concurrent authorship." And because of that, the human authors are writing in a particular historical context, to particular people, and they apply the timeless truths that God is inspiring them to write to those particular situations. Now, in so doing, for example, let's say in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is instructing the people about the issues of the way women are to respect their husbands, the proper male and female gender roles in the church. And within that particular culture, one of the ways that a woman showed respect to her husband and submission to her husband was to cover her head. And so Paul gives instructions on head-coverings there for the purpose of applying that timeless principle of submission in marriage and male and female gender roles in the home and the church. I don't know that I would call that accommodation more than a cultural application. And we realize that there's a cultural veneer to that timeless principle. So in other words, if my wife were to wear a veil here in Kentucky and people saw her, they wouldn't say, "Well, now there's a woman who respects her husband." They would say... "Why is she wearing that on her head?" But by my wife taking my last name, by my wife wearing a wedding ring, by the way my wife interacts with me, she communicates an acceptance of biblical teaching on gender roles in the home and the church.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

Growing up in the church, I remember how my pastor, when I was a young boy, would get down on one knee and would look me right in the eye and would speak to me on my level and how much that meant to me that he would take the time to stop and to talk to me, and to talk to me in a way that I could understand. And in doing that, he was really following the example of the biblical writers and how they have accommodated what they want to communicate to God's people in ways that they can really understand. And so, Moses, when he's trying to communicate about the covenant that God has made with his people, he chooses treaty forms that they would understand, land-grant treaties of the day, when he's talking about how God's given a land to the people of God. Or we think about the pain of the exile and how excruciating and horrifying it is to be torn away from your home and then to have the

prophets and the Psalmist choose the form of lament and how the people of God can cry out to God with their tears. And they ask the question, "why?" They can ask the question, "how long?" And the biblical writer is meeting the people of God right where they are emotionally ... So the biblical authors really chose forms of literature that meet the audience of the people of God right where they are.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

It's a great question to try and determine how a biblical author accommodates their writings to the audience that they're writing to. Again, it's very important to think of the audience as a constituent purpose of what the author is trying to do. The author is always writing to a specified audience. It may be general, or it may be highly specific to a particular locale. I was just the other day lecturing on the book of Revelation, and we often think of it as an acontextual book that talks about strange and various future things. And yet, very carefully, the author in chapters 2 and 3, John, tells us who his audience is. He records who the seven churches are, and these are all churches in Asia Minor. We can learn a lot about their own historical circumstances, even the archeological realities of their locales. And what we can see is that he's addressing each of those seven churches, especially in chapters 2 and 3, Jesus is giving a vision through John that concerns the specific situation of those churches. Whether they're going through persecution, he encourages them through persecution. If they are enamored with wealth, he challenges that. If they've lost their first love, he mentions the need for them to reclaim that. And so, again and again the author is conforming his message to the particular audience.

**Question 6:**

**During the Middle Ages, was the emphasis placed on the original meaning of Scripture more or less important than church tradition?**

**Biblical interpreters have varied in the amount of emphasis they placed on original meaning. And some of the views that were held during the Middle Ages still affect us today. During the Middle Ages, was the emphasis placed on the original meaning of Scripture more or less important than church tradition?**

**Dr. Miguel Nunez (translation)**

Regarding the study of the Scriptures during the middle ages, we have to remember first that the Bible was forbidden for ordinary members of the church. There was not much emphasis on the study of the Word. But also, we need to keep in mind that during this time there was not an emphasis on original language studies. The Vulgate was translated by Jerome around the years 400 and 405 in Latin. And that was basically the official translation used by the church in Rome during this time. But there was not any emphasis on studying the Greek, the Hebrew, or the Scriptures in their original language ... But Erasmus was a humanist. So he, at the same time, had an interest in studying the Word in Greek, and he produced a translation from the original language. Erasmus made the first translation of the New Testament in his day

from the original Greek language ... But from Rome, the emphasis was on the tradition of the church which could tell you what you should do or not do ... God's Word is the ultimate authority. Everything else is under the umbrella of the word. The Word determines the right from the wrong. Tradition can be followed if it agrees with the Word. Otherwise, it has to be rejected.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

During the Middle Ages, I don't think most Christian interpreters completely lost sight of the author's meaning of Scripture, but it was certainly much less important in their exposition. And so, during the Middle Ages, what was called the "fourfold interpretation of Scripture" became popular. It was understood there was an original authorial historical meaning. Then there was a spiritualized or allegorized meaning. Then there was a moral level of interpretation. And then there was an eschatological or heavenly level of interpretation. And interpreters saw it as more skilled for them to develop those other levels of interpretation. They had certain safeguards. They had to be within the bounds of orthodoxy according to their understanding. But what resulted was, often — from our perspective — you would read it and you'd say, well, some of your conclusions there on the nature of Christ are right on, but that text doesn't really say anything about that. I can think about one in particular. In Genesis 18, the three visitors that come to Abraham. You know, just reading the text as it is, it appears that one of them is a Christophany — represents the presence of the Lord — and there are two angels. But throughout the Middle Ages, this was widely used as a proof text for the Trinity. And Luther, in discussing this, he says, now doctrinally that's wrong but rhetorically that's a nice embellishment. So, even with the Reformation and return to the author's original meaning, they were struggling with these long histories of these texts being used in other ways.

**Question 7:**

**Has the text of the Bible been corrupted over time?**

**Every book of the Bible has been copied many times since it was written. Until the invention of the printing press, the only way the church could make the Scriptures available to more people was by copying the texts by hand. But sometimes the people who copied these texts made mistakes. So, what does this mean for us today? Has the text of the Bible been corrupted over time?**

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

When it comes to the text of Scripture and its preservation and purity over time, there are two different ways to think about it. The first way to answer this question is, no, the text of Scripture has not been corrupted over time. We have textual witnesses for both the Old Testament and the New Testament in abundance that record and testify to the truthfulness of Scripture, the purity of the manuscripts that we have received throughout the ages... Now, on a second level we could answer that question, "Yes," in terms of the transmission of the text, the copying of the text, the hand-copying of

the text, over thousands of years. Have small textual corruptions, misspellings, word inversions, words dropping out, occurred over the hand-copying of texts for over a thousand years? And the answer to that question is, yes. There textual omissions, textual changes that appear in our Old and New Testaments that are slight. None of them have to do with any significant points of doctrine. Usually they relate to the spelling of a word, the absence or presence of the word "the" or "and" in a particular sentence. But the nice thing is, because we have such a wide body of witnesses both for the Old and New Testament, we're able to compare manuscripts and identify to a very good measure what the original reading was and, therefore, what reading to maintain. And so, we have scholars who are dedicated and devoted to that. And over my 20 years of studying the Old Testament text, every instance of what I considered originally to be a slight error or change in spelling has always proven to me — in terms of my discovery of the answer to the problem — the truthfulness and the veracity of the text. Not once have I ever encountered anything that would say, "this is a major problem," "this violates what I've been taught to believe." In every instance, it's always confirmed that the tradition of the text is stable and that the testimony of church history is valid in their attesting or holding to that text.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill**

People like to talk a lot today about whether the text of Scripture has been corrupted over time because, obviously, the Bible comes — well, even the New Testament — from the first century, and we live in the twenty-first century. And for fifteen hundred years, fourteen hundred years anyway, it was, as were all ancient books, it was copied by hand before the development of printing. And so, people want to suggest that, in that copying, it has been corrupted. And the plain answer to that is, absolutely no. And all the evidence points in the direction of "no." We have manuscripts — of course, some of them are fragmentary — that go all the way back into the second century and even into the early part of the second century ... But in all of the history, all of those from the second century, from the early second century until the Bible was printed in the fifteenth century — the whole history we have — there's not a corruption in the text of the New Testament. Yes, scribes sometimes made *faux pas*, true, but there's nothing that has corrupted the basic message and text of the New Testament. If you took the manuscripts that have the most scribal errors in them, we still have essentially the same thing as we have at the beginning. And it's important, particularly with the New Testament, to compare this with other ancient books. Nobody says that we don't really know what Aristotle wrote, or that we don't know what Plato wrote. And we have thousands of New Testament manuscripts. Granted, all of them are not complete New Testaments. For summary ancient writings of Plato and Aristotle, we have six or eight, or ten, or twelve. And so, if we know what was written in any ancient book at all, we know what was written in the New Testament because the evidence for it, the manuscript evidence for it, is absolutely overwhelming.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

Well, the issue of whether the text of the Bible has been corrupted over time or not depends on, actually, how you ask the question. If the question is, "are there a variety

of readings at certain points in the text that we have from all the manuscripts we've collected?" the answer to that question is definitely, yes ... And anyone who picks up a Bible and looks at their margin and sees the word "or" at certain points in certain verses sees some evidence of that. But it's not really a corruption of the Bible in terms of not having what it originally says, because we have a way of sifting through what those differences are. And most of them, in fact, are very, very irrelevant to the meaning. They are misspellings — that we, if we were typing, would call them "typos" — that kind of thing. They're easily spotted for what they are. And where there are significant differences, these are noted for people who have their Bibles, so they know the original text read either this or that. Inspiration, as we define it theologically, applies to what was originally written and not necessarily to the copies we have in our hands. That's an important distinction as well. The problem, I like to say, for students is that we have 105 percent of the Bible as opposed to 100 percent. And we've got to figure out what that 5 percent is to get back to the 100 percent. And there are ways scholars do this in making the choices between readings where there really is a choice and we're uncertain exactly what the text reads. When we get those places, we just need to pay attention to the fact that this text could be saying A or B and then read the text accordingly.

### **Question 8:**

**What are the consequences of ignoring the historical situation of biblical passages?**

**In any situation in life, actions have consequences. And the neglect of certain actions has consequences as well. The same is true for interpreting passages of Scripture in light of their original meaning. So, what are the consequences of ignoring the historical situation of biblical passages?**

#### **Dr. Robert G. Lister**

The most obvious consequences of ignoring the historical situation of any given biblical passage is the possibility and likelihood of misinterpretation and, therefore, misapplication. And the effects of that misinterpretation and misapplication can range from relatively innocuous to very dangerous. So you might, on the one hand, in sort of an extreme example, find yourself reading about Solomon's concubines and many wives and — if you're not careful to keep that in context with God's broader perspective on marriage and monogamy — read that and conclude, "well, evidently I should pursue relationships with multiple wives and concubines, as well." That's not going to make for a happy home. But you could think of other examples, as well, where you take the passage sort of lifted out of context, sort of treated in an ahistorical context as if there is no context. And so principles don't need to be developed or applied relative to some of God's commands for Israel and her purity relative to the nations. For example, should we still not be wearing cloth made out of two materials? Is that the one-for-one correspondence for us today? Or was that something indicating a way that Israel was supposed to be different from the nations?



And then, might there be other ways in our context — not living in a theocracy — where Christians would want to make sure that we are distinct from the world in our pursuit of Christ and our value of God's claim on our lives, while also leaning into the world and reaching out with God's love? So we want to be careful. And it can be innocuous on the one hand. It can be very severe and detrimental on the other hand. But we always want to take care to give proper consideration to the original context in which a passage is written before we rush to make application of that to our lives.

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

If we ignore the original cultural situation of a biblical passage, we can basically read into a passage anything that we want or anything in light of our own presuppositions. For example, the Hindu could read Jesus talking about being born again and think it's talking about reincarnation, whereas, in a first century Jewish setting, it meant something clearly different. Sometimes people have done this with ignoring hyperbole. Rhetorical overstatement was a common Jewish teaching technique. Sometimes people have ignored that in Jesus' teachings. Usually where it talks about, if you're in danger of lusting, the solution to that is pluck out your eyeball, most people I know have not taken that literally. But then the next paragraph goes on to say that whoever divorces their wife and marries another except for the cause of immorality — this is Matthew 5 — has committed adultery. And so there are churches that actually want to take people who are remarried and break up the second marriage, or break up the third marriage. And I think that's missing the point of the hyperbole in light of Jesus's other teaching on the subject elsewhere. It's not that you are to break up the other marriages; it's that you are to invite people, to summon people, to be faithful to their marriages.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Part of what it means that God has organically inspired Scripture is that it arises out of particular occasions, of particular times in history. It speaks to issues that concern particular people who lived at a particular time and were struggling with particular issues. And if we neglect that then we are not doing justice to part of what God has actually told us about in his Word and that we need to take into account in order to understand the Scriptures rightly. We can go astray very badly. We can read passages that say things like "flee to the mountains"... if we ignore the historical situation of this passage, we can end up thinking that God is telling us to flee to the mountains and trying to figure out what it means to flee to the mountains today. And that may not at all be a proper allocation of that text. So that's fairly trivial. It's almost childish. But there are much more subtle and sophisticated versions of similar errors, and even the same error, that can happen if we don't do justice to the historical context. The Bible gives us, often, many indicators of the historical context or the occasion out of which the particular writing that we're reading has come out of. We must pay attention to that ... Sometimes the historical situation is not very much in the forefront or is largely unknown. In those circumstances, I think it's better for us to think about the implication of *why* we're not given more information rather than trying to engage in a kind of highly speculative reconstruction of a *supposed* historical occasion, audience, author, and what was being addressed, and then let that



drive our interpretation. If we're really committed to the idea that Scripture interprets Scripture and that... what God has given us in Scripture is sufficiently clear for us to understand it, then we ought to let where Scripture is silent also be a hedge, also be a discipline that we're willing to live within.

**Investigating the original meaning of Scripture helps us make responsible interpretations of Scripture. This means in our study of Scripture we always need to keep in mind the role of both the original author and the original audience through grammatico-historical exegesis. We should also remember the consequences of neglecting the original meaning. If we take the time to study the original meaning, we can work toward a responsible understanding of the text and identify *and* avoid improper interpretations of the Bible.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
FOUR

## APPROACHES TO MEANING



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Objective .....</b>	<b>2</b>
A. Background	3
B. Influence	4
<b>III. Subjective.....</b>	<b>6</b>
A. Background	6
B. Influence	7
<b>IV. Dialogical .....</b>	<b>9</b>
A. Background	10
B. Influence	10
C. Comparison	12
1. Authority-Dialog and Objective	13
2. Authority-Dialog and Subjective	13
<b>V. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>15</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Four

### Approaches to Meaning

#### INTRODUCTION

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At one time or another, we've all overheard people disagreeing about the meaning of a passage in the Bible. Often, these conversations end in a similar way. One person says, "Well, your interpretation is just your opinion." But the other person responds, "No, it's not just my opinion. It's a fact." These remarks reflect one of the most fundamental questions in biblical interpretation: When we read a passage in the Bible and come to a conclusion about what it means, is our conclusion an objective fact, a subjective opinion, or is it something in between?

This is the fourth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Approaches to Meaning." In this lesson, we'll look at some of the major ways interpreters have identified and described the meaning of Scripture.

As we begin to ask questions about the meaning of passages we find in the Bible, it will help to begin by making a basic distinction between objects of knowledge and subjects of knowledge. Objects of knowledge are the things that we try to understand. And these objects can be either abstract, like ideas, or concrete, like people or places.

For example, biologists study objects like animals and plants. And musicians study objects like music or musical instruments. By contrast, subjects of knowledge are the people that do the studying. In the field of biology, biologists themselves are the subjects of knowledge. And in the field of music, musicians are the subjects of knowledge.

So, when we interpret the Bible, we're the subjects, because we're the ones doing the interpretation. And the object of our study is the Bible, because that's what we're trying to interpret.

Now, it's easy to see that human understanding of every sort involves both objects and subjects of knowledge. But how do objects and subjects work together in the pursuit of knowledge?

Well, it's often helpful to talk about three major approaches toward the objects and subjects of human knowledge. First, some people tend toward an approach we call objectivism. Objectivists believe that under the right circumstances, it's possible to arrive at impartial or objective knowledge. Second, other people tend toward an approach called subjectivism. Subjectivists believe that our knowledge is always influenced by our personal biases, making impartial objectivity impossible. And third, some people have found a middle ground that we might call dialogism. This approach emphasizes the constant "dialog" or interplay between objective reality and our subjective perspectives.

Not surprisingly, all three of these approaches have been used in biblical interpretation. So, as we consider the meaning of Scripture in this lesson, we'll pay

attention to each of them as we try to answer the question: Is our understanding of the meaning of a biblical passage objective, subjective or dialogical?

In this lesson, we'll focus on each of these three major approaches to meaning. First, we'll consider objective approaches. Second, we'll look at subjective approaches. And third, we'll explore dialogical approaches. Let's begin with objective approaches to the meaning of Scripture.

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## OBJECTIVE

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We've all run into people who have opinions about this or that subject, but have no ability whatsoever to support what they believe with objective facts. Of course, the same kind of thing is true when it comes to interpreting the Bible. There is no shortage of opinions on what many biblical passages mean, but the vast majority of people don't even try to base their interpretations on objective facts. They simply assert what they believe a biblical passage means and leave it at that. When we run into this problem frequently enough, it can be very frustrating, and it can cause all of us to yearn for understandings of the Scripture that are at least somewhat objective.

Since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, objectivism has greatly influenced the interpretation of the Bible. In essence, scholars have believed that they can interpret Scripture impartially, and that they can know its meaning with relative certainty. Most objectivists don't argue that we can remove all our personal biases and perspectives when we interpret the Bible. But they do believe that we can prevent these from affecting our interpretations, so that we can arrive at a true understanding of Scripture. For example, we all know the first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, which says:

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).**

Most people would agree that it's relatively easy to understand the basic meaning of this passage. At a minimum, we can say with confidence that it means "God created everything."

When objectivists say that Genesis 1:1 means that, "God created everything," they believe that they understand the verse without bias. So, they tend to think that anyone who rejects their interpretation simply disagrees with an obvious fact.

Now, why have so many biblical interpreters followed this approach to the meaning of Scripture? And what have been the results of objectivism in biblical hermeneutics?

To answer these questions, we'll investigate objective approaches to interpretation by looking in two directions. First, we'll touch on the philosophical and cultural background of these approaches. And second, we'll mention their influence on biblical interpretation. Let's begin by looking at the background of objective approaches to interpretation.

## BACKGROUND

Objectivism can be identified with the most prominent current in the stream of modern philosophy — the current we'll call scientific rationalism. René Descartes, who lived from 1596 to 1650, is often called the father of modern rationalism because he promoted reason as the supreme judge of truth. From his point of view, things like religion, traditions, beliefs, intuitions and superstitions confuse our thinking and hide objective reality from us. But Descartes insisted that reliance on rigorous logical thinking frees human beings from confusion and enables us to discover objective truth.

Scientific rationalism was also affected by developments in the natural sciences. Francis Bacon, who lived from 1561 to 1626, is often called the father of modern science because he applied rational, logical thinking to the study of the physical world. In effect, Bacon promoted the idea that orderly, empirical investigation — what we often call the “scientific method” — restrains human subjectivity, enabling us to gain an objective understanding of the world around us.

Scientific rationalism was so influential that nearly every field of study from the seventeenth century through the middle of the twentieth century adopted its perspectives. Even disciplines like religion and theology have been subjected to rational, scientific analysis. Of course, the concepts of rationality and science have changed in a variety of ways over the centuries. But the fundamental assumption of objectivism has remained the same, specifically: by following rational scientific analysis, we can arrive at objective knowledge.

In the twentieth century, modern objectivism was taken to the extreme by a broad philosophical outlook known as structuralism. To put it simply, structuralists tried to use rational and scientific objectivity to obtain an exhaustive understanding of everything they studied — including sociology, art, language and literature. Their desire for objectivity in the interpretation of literature was so extreme that structuralists excluded every consideration that introduced any element of subjectivity. The intentions of authors, the needs of the original audiences, and the opinions of modern readers were thought to be too subjective for rational scientific analysis. But structuralists were convinced that rigorous rational analysis could provide them with an objective understanding of the texts they interpreted.

**God meets us as whole people. He's made every aspect of us. Thus he's made our minds; he's made our intuition; he's made our emotions. He's made it all, and he wants us to respond in love with all our heart and soul and strength and mind, so it's engaging every aspect of us. So a narrow intellectualist reading of the Bible is not sufficient, and a narrow emotional or intuitive reading is not sufficient. You've got to respond with everything that is in you. That's what God is asking for. And it's true also that sin can affect both our minds and our intuitions. So the Lord has provided so that we can in a sense begin to correct one with the other. Right? So people may be intuitively inclined to some idea and they read the Scripture and they say, “Honestly, when I apply my mind to this, I can see that my**



**intuition needs correction.” And vice versa, right? That sometimes I’ve got intellectual ideas and I need to say it’s bigger than that. And intuitive sense can warn me, you know, maybe you’d better stay away from this idea because it isn’t biblical.**

**— Dr. Vern Poythress**

Having looked at the philosophical and cultural background of objective approaches to meaning, let’s turn our attention to the influence objective approaches have had on biblical interpretation.

## **INFLUENCE**

Rational scientific objectivism has influenced biblical interpretation in two basic ways. First, it has led us to what we might call critical biblical studies. And second, it has also influenced evangelical biblical studies.

Critical scholars normally argue that the best way to evaluate the Scriptures is by means of rational investigation, such as those used by science, archaeology and history. Sadly, critical scholars often fail to recognize the limits of these kinds of investigations, so they end up rejecting many of Scripture’s claims and teachings.

In contrast to critical scholars, evangelicals insist that Scripture is absolutely true and authoritative, and that all scientific findings must ultimately be subject to its teachings. This doesn’t mean that we can’t learn important things about the Bible from science, archaeology and history. Used rightly and in submission to biblical authority, reason and scientific methods are very useful tools for finding meaning in the Bible. And insights from these disciplines often help us understand those aspects of Scripture that relate scientific, archaeological and historical information. But these disciplines should never be used to reject the claims and teachings of Scripture.

**Everyone who reads and studies the Bible has some method of interpretation. It’s a question of whether we’re really aware of the kind of method that we’re using and think carefully about the questions that we ask of Scripture and how we find the answers. I really encourage people who are just beginning to study and understand the Bible to have some regular step-by-step method that they begin to follow, questions that they ask of every passage that they study. But it’s important to say that biblical interpretation is not a science; it’s an art. And it’s not as if we just ask the right questions we can always understand the full meaning of a biblical text. And so, I think as time goes on, we learn not to just follow slavishly one method but to be open even to the Holy Spirit’s leading in interpreting any particular passage of Scripture.**

**— Dr. Philip Ryken**

When we employ a rigorous methodology in biblical interpretation, that is an advantage in that it keeps us honest. It prevents us from being either casual or less than properly informed when we go to Scripture... You know, a good methodological grounding drives us to do our homework, and so it fosters diligence and attention. At the same time, methodological rigor can lead at times to not allowing the biblical to say what it is saying. It can lead to reductive interpretations. One of my favorite examples of this is John 13, the foot-washing story. If you approach this with the sort of inductive methodology that a lot of us have learned along the way, it's all too easy to come away from John 13 with the conviction that it is simply a lesson in servanthood. But the more I consider that passage in the larger sweep of John and within the Canon as a whole, the more convinced I have become that John 13 is in fact a dramatization of the same story arc that Paul presents in Philippians 2 where he says, "Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself, taking the form of a servant and was obedient... even to death, death on a cross... For this reason God has given him the highest place that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." We have in both of these passages a story arc of prior glory, self-emptying and service, and then a subsequent return, a subsequent exaltation. It's like what Pelikan talks about as the Christology of preexistence, kenosis and exaltation. And there are textual clues in John that take you there, but they're subtle. And so, I think it's important that when we go to the Bible we always keep in mind that methodology is a means to an end. It is not an end in itself, and therefore the goal is to rightly understand Scripture. That's always the point.

— Dr. Carey Vinzant

Objective approaches to meaning can help us in many ways. They have the benefit of drawing from reason and sound methods of interpretation that can help us interpret the Bible carefully and responsibly. But as valuable as this approach to biblical interpretation may be, we always have to remind ourselves that ultimately only God is objective in his knowledge because nothing is hidden from his sight. As hard as we may try, human beings can never be completely objective, completely unbiased investigators of facts. So, without losing sight of the benefits of objective approaches, we need a broader understanding of what's entailed in discovering the meaning of Scripture.

With this understanding of objective approaches to meaning in mind, let's turn our attention to subjective approaches.

## SUBJECTIVE

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There are many different types of subjectivism. But in general, we can say that subjectivists recognize that human beings and the world, and especially matters of faith, are often too complex to be discerned by scientific rationalism. So, their search for meaning typically relies strongly on personal faculties like intuition and emotions. For example, in John 13:34-35, Jesus gave this familiar instruction:

**A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).**

On one level, Jesus' command is relatively obvious: we're supposed to love each other. But different people have very different ideas of what love is.

An objectivist might look through Scripture to find out what love is. But a subjectivist might be more inclined to define love on his own terms, and then to act in accordance with that definition.

Our discussion of subjective approaches to meaning will resemble our discussion of objective approaches. First, we'll touch on the philosophical and cultural background of subjective approaches. And second, we'll mention some of their influence on biblical interpretation. Let's begin with the background of subjective approaches to interpretation.

## BACKGROUND

Modern subjectivism gained prominence partly in response to the objectivism of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment. Philosophers like David Hume, the Scottish skeptic who lived from 1711 to 1776, argued that reason and scientific study can't lead us to objective knowledge about the world. Hume and others believed that our emotions, desires and mental categories always influence our thinking, making impartial objectivity impossible.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who lived from 1724 to 1804, also made tremendous contributions to subjective thought. Kant argued that we can't know objective reality as it really is; we can never know a *Ding an sich*, or "a thing itself." He believed that we only perceive the world as it appears to us, and then process our perceptions through the rational categories or concepts that already exist in our minds. Kant concluded that what we commonly call "knowledge of the world" always involves both our empirical perceptions and our mental conceptualizations.

After Hume and Kant, subjective approaches to meaning continued to develop in the nineteenth century through movements like romanticism. The romantics and those that followed them argued that expressive poetry, drama, music and visual arts provide an understanding of reality that can be far superior to rational, scientific discourse. They also insisted that rationalism had a dehumanizing effect because it devalues important human

characteristics like intuition and emotion. And so, they insisted that interpreters should rely on their own personal human characteristics when they interpret texts.

Subjective approaches to meaning shifted again in the late twentieth century in a movement known as post-structuralism. French theorists Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and a host of others rejected the objectivity of twentieth century structuralism. In fact, many moved so far from objectivism that they rejected all hope for objectivity. They emphasized that objective claims of knowledge can't be trusted because they're far too limited and far too influenced by subjective prejudices, feelings and existing beliefs.

Moreover, many post-structuralists agreed with the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as a number of twentieth century existentialists, who said that all claims to knowledge are primarily attempts to impose the prejudices of one person or group onto others. Some of them even extended these ideas to art and literature arguing that even artistic interpretation is a power-play designed to achieve social dominance.

In our day, subjectivism has become widespread, especially in the interpretation of art and literature. Subjective interpreters argue that since we can't discover the objective understanding of the world around us, then the meaning of art and literature, including the Bible, must be located within us. So, rather than speaking of objective meaning in art and literature, subjectivists talk about how music, paintings, books and the like are viewed by different cultures, different ethnic groups, different economic classes, different genders, and so on. And they're particularly interested in how these different groups use art and literature in service to their various social agenda.

Now that we've surveyed the historical background of subjective approaches to meaning, we're ready to consider their influence on biblical interpretation.

## INFLUENCE

Ideally, followers of Christ don't allow the currents of culture surrounding them to influence the way they interpret the Bible. But in reality, none of us can entirely escape the effects of culture on our approach to biblical hermeneutics. In recent decades, hermeneutical subjectivism has moved beyond the confines of academic discussions and has become so common that we run into more and more people who insist that claims of fact are actually no more than personal subjective opinions. And this is especially true in matters of faith and the Bible. For this reason, we all need to become more aware of the ways subjectivism has influenced biblical interpretation in our day.

Like rational scientific objectivism, subjectivism has influenced both critical biblical studies and evangelical biblical studies. Critical biblical scholars influenced by subjectivism often argue that no objective meaning can be found in a biblical text. So, instead of teaching their students to discover the original meaning of Scripture, they encourage readers of the Bible to create their own meanings by using the Scriptures to suit their own purposes. Some even argue that this is exactly what the writers of the New Testament did when they interpreted the Old Testament. They believe New Testament writers didn't care about what Old Testament texts meant in an objective sense, and that

New Testament authors were mainly concerned with how the Old Testament could be used to promote their Christian beliefs. And critical subjectivist interpreters argue that we should do the same thing — that we shouldn't worry about the objective meaning of Scripture, and that we should use the Bible to promote our own social, political and religious agendas.

In contrast to critical biblical studies, evangelical biblical studies have mostly avoided extreme subjective perspectives. At least in principle, evangelicals usually acknowledge that the Bible is God's Word, and therefore that its meaning is determined by God rather than by interpreters. But evangelicals haven't been immune to the negative influence of subjectivism on hermeneutics. They often ask, "What does this text mean to you?" without any thought of the objective meaning of the passage. And preachers and Bible teachers frequently read contemporary interests into Bible passages, without any concern for the historical setting of the text.

But despite errors like these, subjectivism has still made valuable contributions to Evangelical biblical hermeneutics. It has rightly pointed out that our cultural and personal backgrounds, skills, abilities, weaknesses and limitations significantly influence our understanding of Scripture. And it's helped us see that just as the Holy Spirit used the subjective outlooks of inspired human authors to write Scripture, he uses our own subjective outlooks to help us understand and apply the meaning of Scripture in our own day.

**The Bible always compels from us a personal response. The Bible is always giving us promises to believe, warnings to follow, commands to obey. And so there's always an element of personal response to the Word of God that is really called for. God himself is speaking to us in his Word. But I think it's important to recognize that's not the place that we start in interpreting the Bible, as if the very first, most important question is, "How does this passage make me feel?" Or "What is my personal response to this passage?" We need to understand what the Bible meant in its original context before we can get the full meaning that the Bible has for us in our contemporary situation. And so it's important to work hard to understand the meaning of the Bible in and of itself and then not stop there because we want to go on to the personal response. But both of those are important in the process of interpreting the Bible.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

Subjective approaches to meaning can be harmful when they leave us no standard for evaluating different interpretations of the Bible. The simple fact is that some interpretations of Scripture are better than others. But subjective approaches to biblical interpretation can also open our eyes to the ways in which our backgrounds, and personalities, even our intuitions and our emotions often affect our interpretations of Scripture. And recognizing these influences can help us manage them more effectively so that we can interpret the Bible more responsibly.

Now that we've explored objective and subjective approaches to meaning, let's turn our attention to dialogical approaches.

## DIALOGICAL

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At one time or another, we've all met people who have such strong opinions about something that they insist that everyone must completely agree with them. Now, many times we just go along with them to keep the peace. But at other times the issue at hand is so important that we insist on talking more about it. In a good conversation like this, both people will do their best to express themselves clearly and to listen to each other carefully. And hopefully, as the conversation continues, some measure of consensus will emerge. Well, in recent decades, this kind of conversation or dialog has become a model for interpreting all literature, including the Bible.

The word "dialogical" refers to the idea that interpretation involves a type of dialog or discussion between the reader and the text. The basic idea is that the text has an objective meaning, but that this objective meaning is best discovered through a subjective interaction or dialog between the reader and the text. We see an example of this kind of dialog in Psalm 119:18, where the psalmist made this request of God:

**Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Psalm 119:18).**

In this psalm, the Psalmist was talking about the way that he regularly mediated on Scripture. And he expressed a fundamentally dialogical view of interpretation. First, he believed that objective meaning could be found in the law. But at the same time, he realized that he needed a subjective, eye-opening experience in order to understand the law rightly.

The Psalmist wasn't asking God to eliminate his subjective influences, but to improve his subjective perspective by increasing his insight. And as the broader context of this verse shows us, the Psalmist kept returning to the text of the law in order to improve his understanding; he maintained a dialog with Scripture that continually improved his grasp of its meaning.

Our exploration of dialogical approaches to meaning will begin in the same way as our consideration of the objective and subjective approaches. First, we'll look at the philosophical and cultural background of dialogical models. And second, we'll consider their influence on biblical hermeneutics. But then we'll go a step further by offering a comparison between the objective and subjective approaches on the one hand and a biblical understanding of the dialogical approach on the other hand. Let's begin by looking at the background of dialogical approaches.

## BACKGROUND

In the field of philosophical hermeneutics, the dialogical nature of interpretation was emphasized by the German philosopher, theologian and linguist Friedrich Schleiermacher, who lived from 1768 to 1834. He offered a well-known model of interpretation called the “hermeneutical circle,” by which interpreters attempt to understand texts or other complex objects. The circle begins when we encounter an object and initially process it in our minds. Then we return over and over to encounter more of the object and to process more understanding. Schleiermacher’s hermeneutical circle has often been described by others as a hermeneutical spiral, a circular movement between interpreters and their objects of study that progressively moves toward greater and greater understanding.

Dialogical models have also emerged in science. Twentieth-century philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn, who lived from 1922 to 1996, have argued that scientific knowledge results from interactions between objective reality and the paradigms of understanding that we bring to scientific investigation. The basic concept of a paradigm is that all our beliefs are interrelated. They fit together in a complex structure, each one reinforcing and influencing the others. As long as a new belief doesn’t challenge our paradigm, it’s easy for us to adopt it. But we resist new beliefs that threaten the structure of our paradigm. Even so, when the evidence contradicting our paradigms is sufficient, it can compel us to change — sometimes in revolutionary ways that cause us to rethink everything we thought we knew. But regardless of the degree of change, a sort of dialog is always taking place between our mental paradigms and our experience of objective reality, constantly causing us to reevaluate each of our beliefs in light of the others.

Perhaps the most influential dialogical model for hermeneutics in the twentieth century was that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who lived from 1900 to 2002. Gadamer spoke of meaning in science, philosophy, theology, art and literature in terms of the fusion of two horizons. In Gadamer’s thinking, a horizon was everything that could be seen or understood from a particular point of view. In the case of hermeneutics, one horizon would be that of the text. Its horizon would include all the perspectives expressed in the text, and the legitimate conclusions that could be drawn from those perspectives. Another horizon would be that of the readers. This horizon would include all their perspectives, beliefs, feelings, prejudices, and so on. And these horizons would fuse when the readers began to incorporate aspects of the text’s horizon into their own horizon. As the readers learned from the text, or adopted viewpoints of the text, their own horizon would expand to include new elements from the horizon of the text.

Now that we’ve looked at the background of dialogical models, let’s turn our attention to their influence on biblical hermeneutics.

## INFLUENCE

For our purposes at this point, we’ll focus our discussion on some of the ways that evangelicals have used dialogical approaches to meaning to enhance their interpretations of Scripture. Specifically, evangelicals have emphasized that reading the Bible is different from having a dialog with a normal book because, unlike other books, the Bible

has absolute authority over us. For this reason, we'll speak of evangelical approaches to these matters as authority-dialogs.

During a normal day, most of us have conversations with different kinds of people. And these conversations take different directions depending on who's involved. When we're talking casually with our friends about something we all understand, we relate to each other as equals. The conversation goes back and forth, and we all try to listen and we all try to respect each other's outlooks. But when we dialog about important matters, like our health or raising children, and we do this with someone who has far more knowledge and expertise than we do, we're wise to approach the conversation differently. Although we know that experts make mistakes, we do our best to listen to them carefully.

But now, imagine that you're having a conversation with someone you know never makes mistakes, someone who's always right. You'll certainly come to that conversation with your questions and opinions, but you'll do all you can to understand and accept everything that person says to you.

Well, in many ways, that's how it is with interpreting the Bible. We can't escape coming to the Bible with our questions and our opinions, but because the Bible is infallible, because it's always right, we do everything we can to understand and accept everything it tells us.

Interpreting the Bible is like having a dialog with the most authoritative figure we can imagine, God himself. It's a dialog because it involves a type of conversational "give and take" between readers and the Scriptures. On the reader's side of the dialog, we all come to the Bible with many questions, preconceptions, cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. And each of these things influences what we understand from the Bible. On Scripture's side of the dialog, God continually speaks to us through his Word, sometimes confirming what we believe, sometimes correcting it.

**My background — my experiences from the past and so forth — is what I have when I read Scripture; I naturally interpret it, think of it in those terms. The point is that when I come to Scripture, I come conscious that do that. Obviously that's what enables me to hear Scripture, my background and so forth. But I come with the full intention of submitting that to Scripture. I come humbly before the Scripture, bring my own experiences. Yes, that enables me to understand the text but I'm submitting that back saying, "Okay, are my responses correct? Does the Scripture affirm or correct what I think it means?" So I continually come back and look at the text, listen to the text, wait before the text, understand the text of Scripture, look at it within its larger context to see where my responses need to be reshaped in order to conform to the text of Scripture, to what God is saying. And of course, the more they conform to Scripture, the better I understand Scripture. The better I understand Scripture, then the more I am able to bring my responses to Scripture and let them be shaped by Scripture.**

— Dr. Gary Cokerill



When we submit to the Bible's authority, we expect to receive wisdom, instruction, and encouragement from it. We trust that the Spirit can, at his discretion, illumine us more and more to the actual meaning of Scripture, and enable us to apply it more faithfully to our lives. So, the more we read and interpret the Bible responsibly, the more we can expect our understanding to be correct — and the more our gifts can be strengthened, our thinking challenged, our cultural backgrounds evaluated and our personal experiences transformed.

**It's crucial that we submit to the authority of Scripture because our doing so reflects a disposition to submit to the authority of God. As the very words of God, when we do or don't submit to the authority of Scripture, we're saying something about our disposition towards God himself. And so, we want to be careful that we do not come to the Scriptures as the judge of them, but underneath their authority, because we come underneath God's authority in the first place.**

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

Now that we've considered the background of dialogical models and their influence on biblical hermeneutics, let's look at a comparison of the dialogical approach to meaning with objective and subjective approaches.

## COMPARISON

Objective and subjective approaches to meaning oppose each other in some fundamental ways, but they have something very important in common. In the extremes, both models ultimately make the authority of interpreters equal to or even greater than the authority of the Bible itself. Objectivism tends to overestimate how reliable our rational and scientifically objective views are. Subjectivism tends to overestimate how reliable our personal intuitions and opinions are. But in both cases the result is the same: We sit in judgment over Scripture. So, even though these approaches offer some helpful insights, a dialogical model helps us deal more adequately with our own weaknesses and with the divine authority of the Bible.

In this lesson, we're concerned primarily with evangelical authority-dialog approaches to meaning rather than with dialogical approaches as a whole. So, our comparison will focus first on authority-dialog and objective models, and second on authority-dialog and subjective models. Let's begin with authority-dialog and objective approaches.

### Authority-Dialog and Objective

Like objective models, an authority-dialog model acknowledges that objective truth can be found in the text of Scripture. The Bible is God's word and revelation to us,

and everything it says is objectively true and meaningful. And methods of interpretation can help us understand this revelation as long as the methods comply with biblical standards. As Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15:

**Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).**

Here, Paul indicated that there's a correct way to handle the word of truth. And significantly, he compared this correct way to the labors of a workman. His point was that reading the Bible requires careful study and responsible methodology. These methods aren't sufficient in and of themselves. But they're still an important part of responsible interpretation.

While an authority-dialog model shares these wholesome outlooks with hermeneutical objectivism, it also avoids some serious dangers associated with objectivist extremes. It helps us avoid the danger of thinking that any of us can be utterly objective when we approach the Scriptures. And more than this, an authority-dialog approach helps us remember that rational and scientific judgments must always be viewed in submission to the authority of Scripture.

Having seen how an authority-dialog approach compares to objective models, let's turn to our comparison between authority-dialog and subjective models.

## **Authority-Dialog and Subjective**

Just as an authority-dialog model resembles objective models in some ways, it also has similarities with subjective models. It acknowledges that we all come to the Scriptures with perspectives and beliefs that influence the way we interpret biblical passages. Moreover, it agrees with Scripture and subjectivism that the personal, subjective input we bring to interpretation is valuable.

Scripture repeatedly emphasizes similarly subjective ideas, as in Psalm 119 where it speaks of meditating on God's law, seeking God's truth with all our heart, asking for open eyes to see what God has revealed in Scripture, approaching the Bible with an attitude of joy and obedience, loving the law because it's God's good gift, taking oaths to obey Scripture, and many other subjective aspects of our dialog with God's authoritative Word. As just one example, listen to Psalm 119:97:

**Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long (Psalm 119:97).**

In this verse, the Psalmist indicated that his personal love for God's law impacted his study and understanding of Scripture. And he wrote about meditating on Scripture — a subjective practice that isn't part of a rigorous methodology — indicating that he personally reflected on the Bible's words and perhaps even waited on the Holy Spirit to illumine him.

But even though an authority-dialog approach shares similarities like these with subjective models, it also differs from them in important ways. For example, unlike some subjectivists, the authority-dialog model warns that if we don't submit our subjectivity to the authority of Scripture, our interpretations of the Bible will be severely hindered. And this is confirmed by Scripture itself, in places like 2 Peter 3:16, where Peter talked about Paul's writings in this way:

**He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16).**

Peter admitted that some things in Paul's letters were "hard to understand." But he also said that some readers fail to work through these difficulties because of ignorance and spiritual instability. And as a result of these subjective failures, they read without submission, and distort the meaning of Paul's writings.

As our authority-dialog model indicates, investigating the Bible is a lifelong process in which Scripture changes us and causes us to grow and mature in our Christian faith. As we mature — assuming we use biblical methods of interpretation in responsible ways — the authority-dialog model will increasingly enhance our understanding of the objective meaning of the Bible. This, in turn, causes further personal, subjective growth, and the process continues. In this way, our dialog with the Bible can be thought of as a spiral that repeatedly circles between the authoritative text and the reader. The goal of our involvement in this spiral is to move closer and closer to the meaning of biblical texts. If all goes well, the more turns this spiral makes, the tighter it becomes, closing in on the true meaning of Scripture.

And what makes this dialog successful? As we've noted, it certainly requires hard work from us. But our efforts are useless unless the Holy Spirit of God moves us toward greater understanding and application of the Scriptures. Because of the Spirit's work, we can hope that when we sincerely submit ourselves to him and his Word, our ability to interpret the Bible will increase.

**You approach the Bible with your own worldview and your own hypothesis — how to understand it — but if you continue to interact with the text prayerfully, then the text will lead you in a spiral to come closer and understand deeper the real meaning of the text. So the story is, or the point is there, the more you interact prayerfully with the text itself, the more the text will influence your own view and understanding, and you will come closer to understand the real meaning of the living God in that text.**

— Dr. P. J. Buys

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've surveyed a variety of approaches to meaning that interpreters have taken throughout the centuries. We've looked at objective approaches that tend to locate meaning solely within the Scriptures themselves, subjective approaches that tend to locate the meaning of Scripture in the viewpoints of its readers, and dialogical approaches — especially the authority-dialog approach, which says that readers access meaning through their interactions with the authoritative biblical texts.

At one time or another, we've all met people who go to the extremes of objectivism and subjectivism. Neither of these approaches is adequate for understanding and applying the Scriptures. We must always keep in mind that our flawed, subjective viewpoints constantly influence our understanding of what the Bible means. But at the same time, we must always strive in good faith to listen and to submit ourselves to what the Bible means. As the Holy Spirit blesses our attempts to engage the Scripture in this kind of authority-dialog, we'll be able to move forward toward better and more responsible interpretations of the Bible.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
FOUR

Approaches to Meaning  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	How can identifying the proper genre help us interpret Scripture more responsibly? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	How does the process of interpreting Scripture resemble a spiral that closes in on God's authoritative meaning?.....	2
<b>Question 3:</b>	Why is it important to consider a biblical author's purposes and goals for writing? .....	3
<b>Question 4:</b>	What were the fundamental ideas underlying Descartes' rationalism?.....	5
<b>Question 5:</b>	What were the fundamental ideas underlying Kant's subjectivism?.....	6
<b>Question 6:</b>	How can overemphasizing our own responses to the Bible undermine the objective meaning of a text? .....	7
<b>Question 7:</b>	What are the strengths and weaknesses of following a rigorous methodology in our interpretation of Scripture?.....	8
<b>Question 8:</b>	What is the relationship between Bible study methods and intuition? .....	10
<b>Question 9:</b>	How can our gifts and abilities help or hinder the way we apply the Scriptures? .....	12
<b>Question 10:</b>	How should we evaluate interpretations that are different from our own?.....	13
<b>Question 11:</b>	Why is it important to do more than simply affirm the authority of Scripture? .....	16



# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Four: Approaches to Meaning

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Dr. Steve Blakemore

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

Dr. P. J. Buys

Dr. David W. Chapman

Dr. Peter Chow

Dr. Gary Cockerill

Dr. Dan Doriani

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Dr. John Oswalt

Dr. Greg Perry

Dr. Robert L. Plummer

Dr. Vern S. Poythress

Dr. M. William Ury

Dr. Simon Vibert

Dr. Brian J. Vickers

Dr. Carey Vinzant

Dr. Ben Witherington III

### Question 1:

**How can identifying the proper genre help us interpret Scripture more responsibly?**

There are several initial questions we should ask if we're going to interpret a book of the Bible responsibly. One of those questions deals with what type of literature, or genre, we have in front of us. So, how can identifying the proper genre help us interpret Scripture more responsibly?

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

Proper genre identification is vital for biblical interpretation. You have to know what you're reading. If you're in the book of Proverbs and you take it as absolute promises or as absolute law, you're going to make mistakes. Proverbs is a description of the way life ordinarily works, the path of wisdom. And we can see, for example, in contrasting proverbs, that we're supposed to hold things in a sort of creative tension. So, one place it says, back to back, "Correct a fool lest he be wise in his own eyes" ... "Don't correct a fool lest you," to paraphrase, "be dragged down to his level." Well, which one should you do? I mean, you have to figure it out. On the other hand, if you're in a place like Exodus 20 and you're having, "You shall..." and "You shall not..." you need to understand these are absolute, universally relevant, applicable laws of God. They're not counsel, they're not advice. They are the sure will of God.

#### **Dr. Ben Witherington III**

The question about genre — which means a literary type or kind of biblical books — really is a crucial question. The Gospels are like ancient biographies. They're not like modern biographies. The book of Acts is a historical monograph. It's not like biography. The letters of Paul are... wait for it... letters of Paul, and they have their own conventions. And the book of Revelation is a piece of apocalyptic prophecy, not just any kind of prophecy but *apocalyptic* prophecy, which is to say, visionary

prophecy. If you don't get the genre signals right, then you don't understand the sort of universe of discourse out of which this book is operating.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

It's important to identify the particular genre of biblical books because the author is sending signals about how he wants to be understood. We know right away when we see the words, "Once upon a time," for example, what to expect, that we can expect maybe a unicorn, or flying horses, because the genre signal has been sent that we are in a fantasy or a fable or a fairy tale. But if we have this sense of "St. Louis," and we have a particular date, and we have a particular location like St. Louis, then we know that it's... about events that actually happened, and we don't expect any flying horses... So the gospel writers, the writers of the New Testament, the writer of Revelation for example, are sending signals, these genre signals, about how they want to be understood. So we need to catch those signals so that we can read and understand properly.

**Question 2:**

**How does the process of interpreting Scripture resemble a spiral that closes in on God's authoritative meaning?**

Evangelical interpreters seek, first and foremost, to understand God's authoritative meaning in Scripture. At its base, this is what biblical hermeneutics is all about. Recently, this hermeneutical process has been described using the picture of a spiral. How does the process of interpreting Scripture resemble a spiral that closes in on God's authoritative meaning?

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Sometimes those involved in hermeneutics talk about the interpretive spiral by which we understand that the reader of a text goes to the biblical text. That text, in a sense, starts shaping and reforming a person's thinking. And as a result of responding to God's Word, you then enter back into reading the text again with renewed understanding and renewed focus. And in that respect, it is like a spiral that comes down to hone on a central meaning. And part of the hermeneutical task of reading the Bible is recognizing the whole baggage of theology that we bring to the text — some of which is good theology, some of which is just part of whatever we've inherited — that shapes the way we read the text, but the text then has to challenge that in some way so that our theology, as time goes on, becomes more and more biblical. And as this sort of two-way process goes on, one hopes that as the reader prayerfully responds and obeys God's Word, then the theology which they bring to the text in the first place is more shaped by the Bible. In that respect, the analogy is of a spiral that moves around, becoming closer to the understanding of the text itself.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill**

Sometimes we talk about interpreting the Bible being a spiral. Grant Osborne... is one who's made that term popular, a spiral as we approach God's intended meaning for Scripture. And the spiral takes into account my own spiritual condition, my own background, what I bring to Scripture. It says that... I will understand Scripture better if I submit myself to Scripture. If I submit my background, my own thinking... my own perspective and let Scripture reshape me. Then, when Scripture has reshaped me... I will come around the spiral because I will be better able to understand Scripture. I'll be more in sync with Scripture. I submit again. God uses Scripture to reshape me and to re-form me. That makes me again better able to understand Scripture because I'm more closely in sync with God's Word. And then I submit again, and God uses Scripture to reshape me, which brings me again into a closer relationship with God's Word. So it's a matter of submitting and God reshaping. That puts me closer to God's Word. So I submit again, and he uses it to reshape me, to conform me to Scripture ... So in that way, my understanding of Scripture is progressive. As I surrender to it, God reshapes me, and as he reshapes me, I'm able to better surrender to it. As I surrender to it again, he reshapes me. So, my understanding of Scripture then grows. I approach more closely, understand more deeply its meaning as it reshapes me and brings me into sync with it. This really describes a lot of the process of spiritual growth. You know, I study Scripture. God uses it in my life. That makes me better able to understand it. So I study again, continue to study it, he uses it again to change me, to make me better able to understand it. That's... what I understand by a hermeneutical spiral.

**Question 3:**

**Why is it important to consider a biblical author's purposes and goals for writing?**

Some interpreters believe that if they ignore the author and the original audience of Scripture and deal directly with the text alone, they'll arrive at a more rational and objective understanding of the text. But evangelical interpreters see the value in studying biblical authors and understanding their reasons for writing, especially when a purpose is explicitly stated. Why is it important to consider a biblical author's purposes and goals for writing?

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

It's important to consider the reasons why an author wrote to aid our interpretation. When you get a book that has a very specific focus and then a purpose statement made by that author, that enables you to read everything in the light of that purpose. Classically, John 20 says, in verse 31, John says that he wrote these things "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you have life in his name." And so, you know from that statement that's his purpose. And the whole book should be read with this in mind, that we should believe in Jesus, know that he's the Christ, have life. And of course, we understand from John that that life begins now. But, you

know, the statement pretty much says this is an evangelistic gospel. Not that it's only evangelism, but it has a driving evangelistic purpose. In other words, a purpose statement that says, "This is what I'm aiming for," is enormously beneficial. To stay with the Gospels, there's not a purpose statement as clear in Matthew, but it does say at the end as Jesus was leaving his disciples, "You must go make disciples of all the nations." And if you realize that somebody's last words are often their heaviest words — what's of greatest importance — you go back to the Gospel of Matthew, and you can see that this is not so much an evangelistic, but more a disciple-making gospel, lots and lots of teaching, practical answers to the basic questions of how you follow King Jesus ... It's also important to recognize that some books don't necessarily have a clear-cut purpose. You have books like, for example, 1 Peter and James that appear to be letters written for the whole church. This is the scope, the shape of the Christian life lived out in the presence of Christ our Lord, the Holy Lamb of God. In books like that — and maybe you mention Genesis in the same — they're of universal interest. They touch all of the Christian faith, all belief. And we have to accept that these are overtures, to the whole Christian experience, and that we shouldn't look for one particular purpose. The purpose is to present who God is and who we are in his presence.

**Dr. Peter Chow (translation)**

I think our hope when interpreting the Bible is to be able to grasp the original intention of the author, what he hoped to get across in the manner that he wrote, what sort of assumptions he was making about his original audience as he was writing. For example, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. The salvation from God that the Israelites experienced — the Passover lamb, the sparing of the firstborn, the crossing of the Red Sea, the eating of manna, etc. — with all of this as a background, God gave the Law to the Israelites through Moses. The Israelites had a responsibility to obey the Law, and Moses was calling them to be grateful because they had experienced God and his salvation. It's for reasons like this that we need to understand the implied relationship between the original reader and the writer ... By better understanding this tacit agreement between the author and original reader, we can more accurately, and more deeply, understand the Bible.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

One of the important things to take into account as you're interpreting Scripture is to learn as much as you can about the author because the author is going to convey things in ways that are consistent with other purposes and other books that the author has written and have their own distinct emphases. So, if you think of the book of Acts, for instance, it's very useful and important to know that the same author is the author of the Gospel of Luke. And then you can see that Luke and Acts forms a continuous storyline, where the emphases that are in Luke, in the gospel, continues into the book of Acts. And you can see this important transition between Jesus and his mission and the apostles and their mission. Another example would be that, with the apostle Paul, you see this diversity of letters written to different purposes and peoples, and yet, you see a unity to the corpus. Sometimes if there's something difficult to understand in one writing of Paul, to read another of his epistles might add clarity to

it. But you also see a broader sense of his aims and purposes if you read the collection as a whole.

### **Question 4:**

#### **What were the fundamental ideas underlying Descartes' rationalism?**

When we begin to interpret Scripture, one of the first questions we have to ask is, "How do we approach meaning?" Throughout history, philosophers and theologians have formulated a variety of ways to answer this question. One of the major proponents of a rational and objective approach was the French philosopher René Descartes. What were the fundamental ideas underlying Descartes' rationalism?

#### **Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Descartes was very concerned about the lack of certainty in philosophy, in knowledge. And he was on a quest to try to find a method, a philosophical method that could offer the kind of certainty for philosophical ideas that math enjoyed, that you could find in mathematics, for example — in his quest, he turned to doubt and a kind of radical doubt — so that you could get down to those things which were certain and sure, and then you could begin to rebuild your foundation on that. I think the unintended consequences for Descartes, of his method, was that it created a very self-centered, egocentric sort of approach where now *you* became the center and were deemed to be confident, and your reason sufficient for assessing what was certain and what was true. And measuring everything else so that those things which were certain to you and that your reason could be confident in would become the foundation. Everything else would be built upon that foundation ... This meant that reason had a kind of priority and authority that turned out to undermine tradition or other sources of authority. It meant that the individual was at the center. And therefore, there was a loss of need and dependence upon the community and those around you. Once again, it was an attack and assault that undermined tradition and the contributions of others around you. And it led to a kind of form of rationalism where truth, on the good side, was seen as objective — that is, independent of what you happen to know or think about it — but on the negative side was identical with that which was eternally valid, these ideas that could be extracted straight out of history and straight out of their cultural context and so forth. And that's what truth was, and that's what we were aimed at, and that's all we're interested in. As you see this work itself out historically, you see a great emphasis on trying to recapture the "essence" of Christianity. And usually that became code, in the sort of Cartesian tradition of rationalism, for trying to identify eternally valid, often moral teachings in Scripture and isolating those from the historical husk and the positive husk. All the particular things that were thought not to be necessary could be discarded. And this, of course, is a major agenda of higher critical exegesis going forward.

**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

René Descartes is considered the father of modern philosophy. He's the one who introduces what most people consider now the epistemological problem that has plagued modern thought. And that problem is this: how can I be sure that anything I think I know is really true? How can I be confident that my beliefs are grounded in reality? And he's famous for going through this process of doubt — What could I doubt? I could doubt this, I could doubt this, I could doubt this — He doubts all the way down to the final conclusion of his doubt where he says, "The one thing I could not doubt, so long as I was doubting, was that I was doubting. If I'm doubting, I can't doubt that I doubt. Therefore, if I'm doubting, I'm thinking. If I'm thinking, I must exist." Now what does that lead to? That leads to a central focus on the human rational self as the source of all authority. The other thing Descartes was wanting to do, though, was to try to get a starting point upon which all reasonable men could agree. Everybody is going to agree that you can start with yourself and the certainty of your own existence and your own selfhood. So, those are the two fundamental premises of Descartes' rationalism. First is a move toward the centrality of the self as the source of epistemological certitude. And secondly, a kind of foundationalism upon which all rational persons could begin to agree.

**Question 5:****What were the fundamental ideas underlying Kant's subjectivism?**

**When considering ways to approach meaning in the Bible, some modern interpreters reject objectivism and its flaws in favor of a subjective approach to meaning. This approach can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. What were the fundamental ideas underlying Kant's subjectivism?**

**Dr. Peter Chow (translation)**

Whether it is Descartes or Kant, they all start from a humanist point of view, man-centered epistemology ... Kant divided the world into the phenomenal and the noumenal, placing man's moral consciousness, God, and matter into the noumenal world, which, in Kant's philosophy, means they are unknowable. If that is true, then we can never know anything about God. So, in effect, Kant is denying the possibility of any kind of theology. He believed that the phenomenal world can be studied by science, but since this study is restricted to the phenomenal level, it's impossible to know the true nature of anything. The scientist and philosopher Alexander Pope believed that all true scientific theorems must be falsifiable. And that sooner or later all such theorems would be disproved since what science studies is just the appearance, and not the true nature of things. In this way, a humanist basis of knowledge results in the destruction of true knowledge.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Kant admitted that Hume was a significant influence on him — "Awoke him from his dogmatic slumber," a famous line that Kant stated about Hume. To understand what's going on, I think, in Kant, then, we need to spend a little bit of time thinking about what's going on in Hume. Hume had taken the sort of rational theology that had become all the rage in the United Kingdom and subjected it to a pretty strong critique showing, exposing, that if you're going to be a strong empiricist that you were not going to be able to know nearly as much as you thought you could. His critique was so radical that he pointed out that even things as basic as causality could not be known on purely empiricist principles or lines. Kant comes across this argument. He sees that Hume is onto something here. That there's been in this sort of rational theology that had grown up both with Cartesian background on the Continent, and with more of a British empiricism, which Locke has a contribution to although is not identical with. And that Hume was onto something. That if we were to restrict ourselves to just those principles, we really couldn't know very much at all. And that troubled Kant. Kant was more optimistic than Hume. He wasn't willing to live with that kind of restriction, and yet he embraced Hume's principles to a large extent. So he's working on, how can we know? How can we claim to have knowledge of things like cause and effect? And as he sits down, and he thinks about this. He strikes upon a very creative idea, and that is that the human mind is not just a blank slate. It's not just something that is impressed upon with ideas objective and external to ourselves, as the empiricists had construed it. But rather, it makes an active contribution to knowledge, so that, in our mind, we have something vaguely similar to Aristotle's categories. And we bring those to the experience of reality around us, and we make that contribution with our mind. So that knowledge is actually downstream of that contribution of our mind so that it's how we read reality as it presents itself to us through the categories of the mind as we actively contribute to the knowing process. What that means is that, in an ironic sense, we're cut off from the world as it is in itself. We can never know the world as it is independent from or apart from our thinking about it. We can only know it as it appears — to our sensory experience and to the categories of our mind — and as we process that. So we can only know the appearances, and we can only know those appearances as we have construed them in our mind and as we've thought about them ... This emphasis on the contribution of the mind and the implication of how we're cut off from reality as it is in itself gives rise to a kind of creeping and ever increasingly radical subjectivism in the history of Western thought.

**Question 6:**

**How can overemphasizing our own responses to the Bible undermine the objective meaning of a text?**

**At the heart of subjectivism is the individual reader's response to the text. But while it's helpful to see how we personally respond to a text, overemphasizing this aspect of study can cause us to miss other helpful interpretive approaches. How can**



**overemphasizing our own responses to the Bible undermine the objective meaning of a text?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Sometimes we emphasize a reader's own response to the biblical passage at the expense of the objective meaning of the text. Now clearly, the way in which somebody responds to the text is important. And there is a whole school of hermeneutics that speaks about reader response to the text, which quite rightly emphasizes the fact that the perspective from which we read the passage has an influence upon us. And what we are able to see in the text depends on from where we read it. To use a trivial illustration, I bought a secondhand car for the family, and I was intrigued to discover that the following week everybody on the road had bought the same model. Well, of course they hadn't. It was just that I was now looking at the traffic on the road from a completely different perspective. And that's a positive insight from reader response, but the danger is that it forgets that actually God has stamped his authority on the pages of Scripture. And it is a message that is timeless, that is not actually shaped by the responder. Rather, the text of the Bible itself should dictate the way in which the reader responds.

**Dr. Vern S. Poythress**

Some people focus almost completely on their own response to Scripture. I've seen Bible study groups where the question is, "Well what does it mean to *you*? And what does it mean to *you*?" The trouble with that kind of thing is that everybody is encouraged just to have his own ideas without disciplining their own minds to focus on what is Scripture really saying rather than, "What do I imagine or like it to mean?" So there's danger there. I believe there is danger in the opposite extreme, too, that we never take to heart what Scripture says. We never apply it. So it's a "both-and" process.

**Question 7:**

**What are the strengths and weaknesses of following a rigorous methodology in our interpretation of Scripture?**

Sometimes people are under the impression that if they just learn the best hermeneutical principles, they can unlock the meaning of a biblical text. And if they follow this mode of interpretation consistently, they will always have new and wonderful insights into the Bible's meaning. But this is not always the case. What are the strengths and weaknesses of following a rigorous methodology in our interpretation of Scripture?

**Dr. Vern S. Poythress**

What are the strengths and weaknesses of following a rigorous methodology in studying and interpreting Scripture? Well, the strengths are that your method, if it's a good method, can lead you to notice many things about Scripture that you might



overlook, that you might slide over. The weakness is that a method can make you notice only what the method tells you to notice, so you're leaving out something else.

**Dr. Howard Eyrich**

Following a rigorous methodology in our approach to studying and understanding Scripture has both strengths and weaknesses, as so many things in life are that way. I think one of the weaknesses of rigorous study is that we can fall into the trap of putting God in a box and making him look a certain way because it fits with what we think we have developed as a systematic system. I think that's something we have to be careful for, because we can't put God in a box. He is much bigger than any box we could ever create. I think the second weakness is, is that we tend to lock ourselves into a certain format of interpretation. And in the process it's easy to become a follower of a man, for example, Calvin on this side, or a man, Arminius on this side. And in doing so, we end up many times making those men say what they weren't saying and making Scripture say what it doesn't say because it seems to make a consistent system. So, those are the weaknesses, I think. But the strength is, is that it keeps us from going into emotional extremes. It keeps us from developing our own ideas and making our own ideas that which we superimpose on Scripture. So it has strengths and it has weaknesses. But in the long run, a consistent methodology, it certainly has a lot more in its favor than an inconsistent methodology does.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Some of the strengths of being rigorous in your methodology when it comes to the interpretation of Scripture, of course, is that it can be a very useful and helpful check on ourselves. It's so easy to allow other factors, biases and things like this, to enter in. And it can help to correct for blindnesses in us if we are consistent in our application of these methods and so on. On the other hand, we need to be careful about the reduction of the interpretation of Scripture to a kind of abstracted, objective methodology, a kind of meat grinder approach where you pour in the words of Scripture at one end and crank it, and out comes readymade meaning on the other end. God has given us his Word. And the point that I want to emphasize there is, he's given *us* his Word. That we're supposed to bring our humanity to the text and allow the text to speak to us as human beings and the idea that, through a rigorous methodology, we can check our humanity and sort of bracket it and keep it separate from the text. That's never what God has intended in his Word, and that is likely to lead to a skewed understanding and interpretation. And we've seen some of the results of that in higher criticism, for example. Instead, we are to bring our humanity to the text and submit it to the text and be vulnerable before the text and allow the text to have its way with us because it is God's own word.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think it's important when we study the Scripture that we do have a rigorous and sort of well-thought-out method for doing so according to and depending on what we're reading, the parts of Scripture we're reading, the kind of thing we're reading in Scripture. And the great strength about having a rigorous methodology when we're studying Scripture is we're applying, sort of, careful investigation to the study of

Scripture rather than just, say, opening it up and waiting for something to pop out at us, or whatever sort of strikes me that day as being important. And to me, the greatest strength about following a methodology for studying the Scriptures is that it makes it less likely that I'm just going to make the Bible say what I want it to say, which we all have a tendency to do that anyway ... Now one of the dangers, and one of the things that we have to be aware of, is that it's easy to have a methodology and develop a methodology. And then, therefore, feel like all I have to do is have a text of the Bible, take my methodology — my method, my steps, my questions, what have you — and sit it down over the text, and that it is just by its very nature going to give me the right interpretation apart from anything else. So we have to be careful and keep even the best methodologies that we use — even the most rigorous study that we apply to the Bible — we have to keep that in check and remember that just because we have a sound interpretive method, that doesn't mean we're necessarily going to have a sound interpretation. Because we can come to rely on those methods, say, more than anything else, and just assume, oh I have the right method, therefore, I have the right interpretation. And so, we just have to be careful. I mean, we need to apply rigorous methods of interpretation but do so in such a way that remembers, hey, you know, we're fallen. Even as the redeemed, we still struggle with sin. We still have our own issues that we bring to the table, all kinds of things that can cloud interpretation. And so, we just want to be careful we don't rely on our methodologies ultimately.

### **Question 8:**

#### **What is the relationship between Bible study methods and intuition?**

**Bible study methods have always had an important part in the life of believers. Sound Bible study methods can help guide readers to ask the right questions and, in turn, come to the right answers. But, we may sometimes overemphasize Bible study methods at the expense of useful intuition. So what is the relationship between Bible study methods and intuition?**

#### **Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Do we sometimes overemphasize Bible study method at the expense of useful intuition? Yes. Very simply, yes. And I think this is one of the fundamental arguments that's going on in the time of the Reformation. The relationship between the Reformation and Renaissance humanism is very important in this regard because humanism, most importantly, is a rejection of the method-driven approach to learning represented by scholasticism. The humanists took a different approach in that. Where the scholastics tended to say, "We're going to teach you how to learn, and then you apply this method to whatever situation or source you may encounter, and you will come out having learned rightly," the humanists looked at this, and they said, "Well, that sounds great, but your method is producing some conclusions that we simply find repugnant; they're unacceptable." And so, humanism grounded its confidence — where learning is concerned — in "sources," reading the good stuff. And this is one place where I think that has an important lesson to teach us in biblical interpretation.

When we approach the text from such a method-driven perspective that it will not allow the text to say what, in fact, it does say, we need to hear the humanist complaint. It's always important that we hold the text of Scripture as primary, and that the clear voice of God speaking through the Bible gets to trump our methodological assumptions.

**Dr. David R. Bauer**

The relationship between Bible study method and intuition is an important one. It is true that intuition plays a role in our construing of sense, our obtaining sense from the biblical text. Quite often connections or insights come to us intuitively. The relationship between intuition and Bible study method, I think, is twofold. One is a good, solid, appropriate method in Bible study *tests* intuitions. So, often we get a sense, or an intuitive sense of the meaning of a passage or connection between passages or the like. And those intuitions may or may not be valid. And so, it's helpful to have — as a matter of fact, it's critical, I think — to have a method in place that can test those and can determine whether those initial intuitions turn out to be right or not, turn out to be valid or not. A second relationship between intuitions and Bible study method has to do with the fact that developing good method practices actually aids in helpful intuition. It trains us intuitively. I actually teach courses that rely heavily upon method in Bible study, so I do a lot of teaching on Bible study method. And I alert students that as they learn method they will often at first be distracted by method. But as they become comfortable with methodical practices — with Bible study method and the practice of various steps in proper Bible study method — these will become second nature. They'll become internalized; they don't have to think about them anymore. And as they become internalized and second nature, then they really kick in and are helpful in the study of the Bible, so that students often become surprised at what they're able to discern, what they're able to gather from passages. And they're not quite sure how they got there, but they were able to do so because the principles and processes in Bible study method have actually shaped in very profound ways the way they think and the way they read. And that turns out in the end to be extremely helpful for them.

**Dr. Stephen J. Bramer**

I think we always want to be careful about trying to dismiss proper methods. We *want* to have those there. And, as you understand, hermeneutics is partly a scientific job. We understand the words and the principles. But if the Spirit of God is also present helping us to apply this to our lives, we must allow the Spirit to work within us. And so it becomes that balance of a science and art. We never want to go with intuition *against* proper methods, but *within* the methods, we want to give the Spirit of God a chance to work within our minds, our hearts, our emotions, our wills. Because we're not just a head; we're a whole person.

**Question 9:****How can our gifts and abilities help or hinder the way we apply the Scriptures?**

Looking at different interpretative approaches can be helpful as we seek to learn methods that do not come naturally to us. And yet, we all have natural gifts that can affect the way we look at a text before we ever learn a different approach. How can our gifts and abilities help or hinder the way we apply the Scriptures?

**Dr. M. William Ury**

I believe our gifts and abilities can both help and hinder the way we interpret the Scripture. Our gifts and abilities help in the regard that we're the body of Christ and we have to have — and the Lord's given to us, provided for us — various ways of viewing reality. Revealed truth is reflected upon by the body of Christ in ways that no one person could ever ascertain. So we come to Scripture with our different personality types, our different gifts, our different backgrounds, and we see different things. It's really a beautiful thing. My wife views the Bible, in many ways, more intimately than I view it. I study it. I take it apart. I look at the text. I look at the Greek. She sees the love of Jesus for the human heart. And I need that in terms of my interpretation. I have gifts. She has gifts. And so we need to be aware of that. I think it's a very important part of interpreting the Scripture, that not *just* scholars can interpret the Scripture. We need people in the church, people who have worshiped and prayed for all their life; they also help us to see the deep meaning of Scripture. Many, many non-schooled people that I've met are very much more aware of what's happening in the Word than I will ever be with all of my language or Bible study background. So I need them, and I think they need me as well. There's a body of Christ mutuality here. So we help each other. I think hindering can also be a factor, and that is, of course, we have minds and abilities, and we think, "Well, I'm able to take apart a passage, I'm able to use my Bible study methodology, I can cut it apart." And that, although it can be good, it can actually be a destruction of the intention of the revealer himself. We turn it into a science. We turn it into another thing that you do just perfunctorily to get, to mine a gem that I think I need rather than receiving with awe and with wonder and with gratefulness the one who has spoken to me through his Word and is revealing to me through his Spirit what is true. So as in every gift, there is a positive potential, but also there can be an abuse if I'm not careful. And there again, we need the Holy Spirit to guide us, to help us, to say, "Don't deny the gifts, the abilities. Those are gifts to you. But do not overuse them. Don't use them without my presence and without the correction of the body." We need to make sure that's always the case in interpreting the Bible.

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

Our gifts and abilities help or hinder our interpretation of Scripture in a variety of ways. First of all, if you have linguistic gifts, you can learn the Greek and the Hebrew and study the Bible in the original languages. And it's a great blessing in many ways. The capacity to enter imaginatively into other worlds is something enormously

helpful if we want to read the Bible well, to refrain from judging other cultures but accept them as they come. Now, you may have picked up an ability to enter imaginatively into other people's experiences because your mother or father was very good at that, and it was of value in your family. And you would look people in the eye and listen to them. Well, that same skill that enables you to listen well to somebody today who might be quite different from you — and, therefore, relate to people of a different social class or a different background, training, experience, profession — can actually help you read the Bible well. You can say, "These people were very different. They were shepherds. I'm not a shepherd. They were farmers. I'm not a farmer. But I've worked with animals. I've spent some time trying to grow things, and therefore that imagination can help. Probably the greatest hindrance is if we're not willing to grow — if you are not willing to do the work, read the books, go into the backgrounds, read the Bible in different translations or in the original languages if you have that ability. Everybody can learn something. And if you become lazy and don't labor to know the world, the culture of the Bible, the background of the Bible, or your own people, you're not going to be a very good interpreter. So stay imaginative, label your skills, hone them as best you can, and you'll slowly become a better interpreter and expositor, teacher of the Bible.

### **Question 10:**

**How should we evaluate interpretations that are different from our own?**

**Even when evangelicals place a high importance on finding the original meaning of a text, responsible interpreters sometimes reach different conclusions about what a passage is saying. If the Bible's original meaning is sometimes complex and multifaceted, how should we evaluate interpretations that are different from our own?**

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

One thing that's helpful when you're interpreting the Bible is to have a clear vocabulary, because sometimes people use terms in different ways. And Robert Stein, a retired New Testament professor, has written a little book called *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, and in that he suggests a clear vocabulary where he has meaning as the conscious intent of the human author. And then you have implications, which are things that the author might or might not have been conscious of but legitimately flow within that pattern of meaning. So, for example, in Ephesians 5:18, Paul says, "Don't get drunk with wine." Well, Paul wasn't thinking about whiskey, or vodka, or marijuana, or all these other... substances that could enter your body and cause you to lose control and do things you shouldn't do. But, by implication, certainly the apostle Paul would have understood that his original statement is including those unconscious — or conscious possibly in some cases — implications. So we want to understand, when you have various interpretations of Scripture, are they just different implications in different contexts, or are we really

saying the meaning is different? So if we're just dealing with different implications — and what are legitimate implications — that's one thing, but sometimes interpreters actually violently disagree. For example, Christians who disagree, should infants be baptized? Does the Bible teach that infants should be baptized? Or is that only for conscious believers who are able to assert their faith consciously and verbally? Or, the role of women? Are women to be pastors, or are women not allowed to be pastors? And so when you come to those kinds of disagreements, I think the first question is, is everyone at the table and discussing that agreed to the Scripture's final authority? Because if someone says, "Well... Paul said that but I don't agree with it," then we can't really have a conversation. But if everyone at the table says, "Whatever the Bible teaches, because it's God's Word, I submit to it," then we have to begin saying, well, let's look at the context. And let's look at what the author says elsewhere, and let's prayerfully ask God to help us to see the evidence clearly and to hear his Word and to submit to it. One thing that's illegitimate in a conversation like that, I think, is for someone to just appeal to the Spirit's guidance. They say, "Well, you know, the Holy Spirit told me this and so I know that's the interpretation." Well, that's not the way the authors of the New Testament write. They appeal to the Scripture, "Does not it say here...?" and they're proving their point by pointing to particular things in the Scriptures. And so even as we ask God's help to see things clearly, we realize that we have to reason with others with a finger on the text and showing them what it actually says.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

It can be difficult to evaluate interpretations. And I mean specifically, interpretations among Christians, among people who profess that the Bible is God's Word, and for all intents and purposes they have the same sort of beliefs and practices, those kinds of things. It can be difficult because you can have two people, both claiming to be, and who give every evidence of being the people of God, who believe in Christ, who have different interpretations on a text. And so, can we know? I think the first step is when we confront other brothers and sisters who have different interpretations, I think our first approach should be, we should interpret that person "in love." In other words, we don't just come to them thinking, "I'm going to prove you wrong," or "I'm here to show that you're wrong." What I want to do is understand why you think that way. Because it could be that my view at a particular point is wrong ... I think one of the things we have to do, then, is we have to take the time to sit down with that person. And what we want to do with ourselves and with the person that we disagree with is try to determine how it is we came to that conclusion and whether that conclusion is based on reading that text in its context, and then, as it matches other biblical teaching. Or perhaps an interpretation, whether mine or someone else, perhaps that came from other places than the context of the Bible itself. And so, I think that's what we have to do. We have to come and try to evaluate as best we can, "Does this fit?" This interpretation, does it fit, not just this sentence, but does it fit the teaching of the Bible as a whole?

**Dr. David R. Bauer**

The question of relating our interpretation to the interpretation of others — which may be different from our own — is extremely important. I do believe that there is some problem in making a blanket statement that says in essence, every passage of Scripture has one single meaning. That's really too simple a way of putting it. But rather, it seems to me that... all passages in the Bible are positioned somewhere on a continuum of — and I'm going to use, a technical term here — "determinate" on the one hand or on the one extreme, and "indeterminate" on the other. Passages that are relatively determinate are those whose range of possible meaning is relatively narrow. There's still a range there of possible construals within boundaries, but the boundaries are quite narrow. Indeterminate passages, those that stand on the other end of the continuum, have a much broader range of possible, plausible meaning. There are boundaries even there. No passage can mean just anything. A passage that can mean anything means nothing, so there are always boundaries there. But indeterminate passages tend to have wider range of possible meanings or construals. And it's actually because you have some range of possible construals that even indeterminate passages — say nothing of those that are more indeterminate — that it is possible for two or three interpreters to come up with somewhat different interpretations within limits of a passage and for those interpretations all to be equally right, especially if those interpretations are not self-contradictory. And as a matter of fact, that possibility is reinforced by the consideration that in the Bible we often have passages that are pretty clearly multivalent. That is to say, that certainly can mean more than one thing. In narratives especially, and it's and particularly in Old Testament narratives, you seem to have in many cases intentional multivalence, where the writer presents a passage which could be construed with equal confidence in two somewhat different ways — again not contradictory — with the suggestion perhaps that the reader should consider those two or three possibilities. And perhaps, recognize that the passage can be understood in any of those and even consider how they interact with one another. It's where one comes down within the range is dependent upon that person's background including the religious tradition out of which that person came. This is where, really, differences of personal background including, as I said, religious background, but also cultural background, plays a role. It's a healthy thing, actually, to become aware of other interpretations of the passage and to ask whether those other interpretations are, in the end, more plausible than your own. And if you judge them to be equally plausible, then to recognize that the passage may have that kind of dynamic robustness to it, and that simply becoming aware of those other possible interpretations can provide us with a kind of appreciation of the richness of passages that otherwise we might now have.

**Question 11:****Why is it important to do more than simply affirm the authority of Scripture?**

Objective approaches can sometimes emphasize Bible study methods over God's authoritative meaning, and subjective approaches can sometimes emphasize our personal responses over God's authoritative meaning. Both of these methods become faulty if we fail to realize the Bible's authoritative place in our lives. Why is it important to do more than simply *affirm* the authority of Scripture?

**Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

You know, as a Christian it's one thing to *affirm* the authority of Scripture, it's another thing to actually *follow* the authority of Scripture. Christians proclaim that the Bible is the Word of God, but that claim really is hollow unless we actually live like the Bible is the Word of God. So, Christians have to be careful when we follow Scripture that we just don't follow the parts we like, that we follow the parts that make sense to us, or that we follow the parts that happen to be conducive to what we already believe. We have to follow the Bible in all its parts, in all parts of our life. In other words... the Bible's authority over the Christian is an absolute authority in every part of their life. To do otherwise is really to set ourselves up as God. To look at the Bible and say, "Well, I'm not going to follow that part but I'm going to follow this part," or, "I'm going to obey this little verse and not this little verse," is, in one sense, to set ourselves *over* Scripture and to determine what is true and what is not, what we follow and what we won't. And when we do that, we've become little gods ourselves. We set ourselves up as the god of the universe. And that is idolatry. So, to deny Scripture and not live by its authority in one sense is to try to supplant God and make ourselves that authority. So, it's very important that Scripture dominate the Christian's life in almost every area, or in every area, so that they really do give God his proper place as the ultimate authority.

**Dr. P. J. Buys**

To submit to the authority of Scripture actually means to submit to the real author, the Living God. And so people who do not submit to the authority of the Bible actually rejects and rebels against the real author. And he's the one that really conveys or provides understanding and meaning. And if you don't submit to him, you will never understand the real meaning of Scriptures.

**Dr. John Oswalt**

The Bible comes to us as a unique book. There really is no other book like it in the world in terms of its understanding of reality — Monotheism for instance, the idea that God is transcendent, he's not part of the world, he's other than the world, and a whole host of other ideas. Now we could explain that as accident — "Well, that just happened." But the Bible's explanation is, this transcendent God, this one transcendent God, broke into time and space and revealed these truths to people in the context of their life. If that's true, if he's the one creator God and he has revealed to us



why he made the world, what the purpose of our life is, then that book is the supreme book in the whole universe. And if we are to know why we're here, if we're to know what life is about, if we're to know what our destiny is, we've got to read that book. And it's not ours to alter as we wish to make it say what we want it to say. If it is from God, then we must submit to its authority.

**In biblical interpretation, we can benefit from both objectivist and subjectivist approaches to meaning, but neither approach can fully capture the process of interpreting Scripture. Interpretation is a dialog in which we ask questions of the biblical text in submission to its authority. We must always be willing humbly to submit to the authority of Scripture. This submission then becomes key for a right interpretation of the text.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
FIVE

## THE COMPLEXITY OF MEANING



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Literal Sense .....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Multiple Meanings	2
B. Singular Meaning	6
<b>III. Full Value.....</b>	<b>8</b>
A. Original Meaning	9
B. Biblical Elaborations	10
C. Legitimate Applications	14
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>17</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Five

### The Complexity of Meaning

#### INTRODUCTION

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There's an old adage that comes up frequently in discussions of biblical hermeneutics. It goes something like this, "There is one meaning, but there are many applications of that meaning." For example, the Bible gives us a simple, straightforward instruction like, "Love your neighbor." But we must apply this instruction to our lives in many different ways as we deal with different neighbors in different circumstances.

Now, as helpful as this insight may be, when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures, we need to acknowledge that the meaning of every biblical passage is complex or multifaceted. So, rather than saying, "There's one meaning but many applications," it's much more helpful to say something like this: "There is one meaning, but, there are many partial summaries of that one meaning. And there are many more applications." The one meaning of every biblical passage is so complex that we should learn how to summarize it in many different ways, and then apply it to our lives.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*. We've entitled this lesson "The Complexity of Meaning" because we'll be exploring the ways in which Christians throughout the ages have attributed different types and numbers of meaning to biblical passages.

Our discussion of the complexity of meaning in the Bible will divide into two parts. First, we'll look at what interpreters have often called the "literal sense" of Scripture. And second, we'll focus on the full value of a text, which extends beyond the literal sense in a variety of ways. Let's turn first to the literal sense of Scripture.

#### LITERAL SENSE

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The term "literal sense," sometimes called by the Latin expression *sensus literalis*, is often confused in our day with the term "literal interpretation." "Literal interpretation" refers to wooden or mechanical approaches to understanding the Bible. But historically, the term "literal sense" has always meant something much more akin to what modern evangelicals have called the "original meaning" or the "grammatico-historical meaning" of a passage.

The literal sense takes the words and phrases of Scripture according to the intentions of the author and the historical contexts of their original audiences.

It pays attention to the different genres in Scripture. It acknowledges figures of speech like metaphors, similes, analogies, and hyperbole — to name just a few. It takes history as history, poetry as poetry, proverbs as proverbs, and so on.

**There are a number of different genres of biblical books, and it's important to understand the differences in those genres in order that we can understand them and interpret them appropriately. We don't understand all genres to be doing quite the same thing in quite the same way. And so by understanding and paying attention to the genre of the biblical books, we allow the books themselves to set the agenda for how we are to interpret those books.**

— Dr. Brandon Crowe

When we see that the literal sense of a biblical passage includes much more than the mere words written on the page, we begin to become aware of how complicated the *sensus literalis* of every passage can be. The intentions of authors are multifaceted. Genre considerations complicate the meaning of a passage. Figures of speech and the like also introduce a host of considerations. These factors reveal the manifold intricacies of the original meaning of every biblical passage. And these complexities have led many well-meaning Christians to approach the meaning of Scripture in different ways.

Throughout history, Christians have nearly unanimously affirmed the need to find the literal sense or original meaning of biblical texts. But there have also been other voices arguing that Scripture's meaning is so complex that it can't be sufficiently summarized under the heading of the literal sense. So, in this part of our lesson, we'll explore the history of the term "literal sense," in order to see how the literal sense, properly understood, can help us investigate and describe Scripture's complex meaning.

We'll look at two major ways the complexity of meaning in Scripture has been associated with its literal sense. First, we'll see that some followers of Christ have said that the literal sense is only one of Scripture's multiple meanings. And second, we'll focus on the idea that the literal sense is the singular meaning of the Bible. Let's look first at the belief that the literal sense is only one of Scripture's multiple meanings.

## MULTIPLE MEANINGS

In the early church, the idea that Scripture has multiple meanings largely resulted from allegorical approaches to hermeneutics. An allegorical approach is one that interprets the historical people, places, things and events described in Scripture as if they were symbols or metaphors for spiritual truths. A tree might represent a kingdom, a war might represent an internal struggle with sin, and so on. In allegorical interpretations, the physical realities described in the Bible are often downplayed, and can even be dismissed as unimportant or untrue. And the spiritual ideas represented by these physical realities tend to be treated as the more important matters of Scripture.

Christian allegorical approaches are sometimes traced to the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria, who lived from around 20 B.C. to perhaps A.D. 50. Philo laid the foundation for Christian allegorical methods by viewing the Hebrew Scriptures as allegories that revealed higher spiritual truths.

After Philo, during the early centuries of the church, leading Christian scholars took a similar approach to interpreting both the Old and the New Testament of the Bible. This was especially true in Alexandria's Catechetical School, which taught theology and interpretation of the Bible to theological students.

One of the more famous teachers at the Catechetical School was Origen, who lived from A.D. 185 to approximately A.D. 254. Origen divided the meaning of Scripture into two categories: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. Drawing from Paul's distinction between the letter and the Spirit of the Law in 2 Corinthians 3:6, Origen said that every passage of Scripture has two main types of meaning: the letter of the text and spirit of the text. By "letter," Origen meant the plain meaning of the words in their grammatical context. And by the "spirit" of a text, he meant the figurative senses — meanings that went beyond the plain sense of the words themselves. Origen tended to equate the letter of the text with its literal meaning, and he defended the authority of the literal meaning. But in addition to this, Origen argued that mature, spiritual believers should look beyond the literal meaning to find the spiritual sense of Scripture.

For example, in his work *On First Principles*, book 4, chapter 1, section 16, Origen argued that the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 were contrary to reason, and therefore that Christians should ignore their literal sense and look for deeper spiritual meanings. Not surprisingly, Origen's allegorical methods have been criticized many times throughout history. But his approach still had significant influence on the direction of early Christian hermeneutics.

**Some ancient interpreters like John Chrysostom had some brilliant insights on biblical narratives like the book of Acts, and he tended to read them more literally. The way we normally read narratives, we try to hear what the narrative is saying and we try to draw lessons or morals from the narrative. You have other interpreters like Origen who tended to allegorize, turn them into a series of symbols, and the danger of that methodology is it's not really the way the Bible was written for us to grasp it that way. You have that method actually being derived from Greek philosophers who were trying to explain away the old myths, the embarrassing things in the old myths, and sometimes the approach to the Bible in that method borders on that. They're no longer trying to hear what the text itself said. They're trying to make it more inspired, in a sense, by reading something else into it. At the same time, even Origen sometimes has some really good insights.**

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Origen's propensity toward spiritual or allegorical approaches to the Bible reflected the influence of Neo-Platonism on the early church. In this view, the Scriptures



came from God who was pure celestial spirit. And as a result, it was assumed that the Scriptures didn't actually teach about the material world. Matter was, by its very nature, evil. So, when the Scriptures referred to physical things that took place in history, they actually pointed to heavenly, spiritual truths that could be discerned by allegory. The true meaning of Scripture, in this view, was in these greater spiritual truths, and discerning these truths was the highest goal of biblical interpretation.

Sadly, many Christian theologians embraced these notions. And as they did, they encountered serious problems with the Bible's accounts of the material world. The Old Testament focuses on things like: the creation of the universe, earthly blessings in the lives of God's people, Israel's physical deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and the establishing of an earthly kingdom for God's people in the Promised Land. And the New Testament focuses on physical events in Jesus' life and the lives of the apostles. For Christians influenced by Neo-Platonism, the physical aspects of these histories were problematic because they portrayed the material world as God's good creation. So, they appealed to the schools of allegorical interpretation as a means to reconcile the Bible and Neo-platonic philosophy. Their hermeneutical approaches downplayed the physical realities recorded in the Bible, and encouraged Christians to look for the deeper spiritual truths they were intended to teach.

The spiritual sense of Scripture was explored and categorized in a number of different ways. One influential approach was known as the *Quadriga* — a Latin term for a Roman chariot drawn by four-horses. The image of a quadriga was applied to Scripture to indicate that the Scriptures were harnessed to four distinct meanings.

John Cassian, who lived from approximately A.D. 360 to 435, described this approach in some detail in his work *Conferences*, conference 14, chapter 8. Cassian followed Origen's basic distinction between the literal and spiritual senses. But he went beyond this by identifying three kinds of spiritual meanings: the allegorical sense, which was the doctrinal teaching of a passage; the tropological sense, which was the moral teaching of a passage; and the anagogical sense, which was the passage's teaching about heaven and eschatological salvation.

For example, according to the *Quadriga*, when a biblical passage mentions "Jerusalem," the reference may be understood in four ways. In its literal sense it's the ancient capital of Israel. In its allegorical sense, it refers to the Christian doctrine of the church. In its tropological sense, Jerusalem might be either a faithful believer or the moral qualities of the human soul. And in its anagogical sense, it could be the heavenly city described in the book of Revelation.

Now, it's important to note that throughout the centuries biblical interpreters debated just how closely the spiritual meanings of a biblical passage should be tied to its literal meaning. Some argued that all meanings were vitally connected to the literal meaning, but others said that each sense of the text was independent of the others. And they appealed to hidden spiritual meanings that had nothing to do with the literal sense.

As just one example, the influential French theologian Bernard of Clairvaux, who lived from 1090 to 1153, promoted some extremely imaginative interpretations of Scripture that divorced its spiritual senses from its literal sense. For instance, his interpretation of the Song of Solomon was completely unrelated to the literal sense of the text.

Listen to these words from the Song of Solomon 1:17:

**The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs (Song of Solomon 1:17).**

When we read this passage in its historical context, it isn't difficult to see that it was a description of Solomon's actual palace. It exalted the king by calling attention to the wonder of his royal dwelling.

But Bernard of Clairvaux didn't allow the literal, grammatico-historical sense of this verse to govern his interpretation. From his point of view, this passage actually symbolized spiritual realities. The house itself represented the people of God. And the beams and rafters of the house corresponded to church authorities. He went on to say that this verse taught how the church and state were to operate alongside each other as well. The spiritual meanings Bernard thought he found in this passage didn't emerge from, or even coordinate with, its literal sense.

**Martin Luther, in his lectures on Genesis, he talks about this allegorical style of interpretation — and by allegorical I mean not the author's intended allegory but taking a text and allegorizing it in a way that the author did not intend. And he says that in his youth, in his younger years, Luther says I was pretty good at this, too, and I received a lot of applause for it. But this is not faithful to the Scripture. Calvin also speaks of this allegorization and says it's like putting a wax nose on Scripture and you can just turn it whichever way the interpreter wants rather than being faithful to the author... However, I do think there is value in reading the church fathers, and Luther obviously read them, too, even as he criticized them. We learn from them, even as they often illegitimately took true doctrines and put them on texts that weren't saying that, we understand what they were trying to do. They were trying to understand how to interpret the Old Testament and make it relevant for Christians, even as they, we would say, I think often sometimes went astray in that. So we can learn about how they interpreted Scripture. And there are also many faithful examples of interpretation throughout church history that we can learn from.**

**— Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

The idea that Scripture has multiple meanings has gained wide acceptance in the contemporary world too but mostly for different reasons. Instead of arguing that God designed Scripture to communicate on multiple levels, many modern interpreters believe that the Bible's multiple meanings result from the inherent ambiguities of language itself. They argue that language is so ambiguous that it can never have a single precise meaning. And because of this, the best we can do is to determine some vague limits or boundaries of a biblical passage's meaning. But in this view, these multiple meanings of the Bible cannot be verified and they must simply be accepted as one person decides it means this and another person decides it means that.

Now that we've seen that many Christians have believed the literal sense of Scripture to be just one of its multiple meanings, let's consider the idea that the literal sense is the singular meaning of Scripture.

### SINGULAR MEANING

The famous theologian Thomas Aquinas, who lived from around 1225 to 1274, championed a much more responsible approach to the *Quadrige*. Unlike many of his predecessors and contemporaries, he insisted that the literal sense of Scripture was foundational to all its other senses. For instance, in his *Summa Theologica*, part 1, question 1, article 10, he insisted that every legitimate spiritual interpretation was rooted in the literal sense of a passage. He also taught that nothing necessary to faith was communicated as a spiritual meaning without being taught elsewhere in Scripture in the literal sense. Not all scholars would agree that Aquinas always followed these principles as he interpreted the Scriptures. But nevertheless, he insisted in principle that every sense of a passage of Scripture must be tied to its literal meaning.

Although Aquinas' efforts to anchor spiritual meanings in the literal meaning of the Bible may seem like common sense to most of us, his point of view wasn't adopted by everyone. Spiritual interpretations that were disconnected from the literal meaning of passages had been used to support many doctrines of the medieval church. And church authorities asserted that they had special God-given insights into spiritual meanings that had no connection to the literal meaning of the Bible.

But the Renaissance in Europe during the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries set the stage for a dramatic shift in the interpretation of Scripture. In brief, Renaissance scholars began to study classical literary, philosophical, and religious texts in their original languages. As they did, they also interpreted these texts apart from the authority of the church by highlighting the literal, historical sense of these texts. And it wasn't long before this approach was also applied to the Scriptures. This strategy of interpretation equated the literal sense with what we've called the original meaning of biblical passages. And it emphasized the centrality and authority of this literal, original meaning.

**Well, in the medieval church, most believers affirmed that God's full intent in Scripture was known through a fourfold approach: The moral following the literal, the anagogical, and the allegorical. So the Reformers of the sixteenth century — called Protestants by most of us — objected to this, part in theory but especially because of what came out of that, which was a tradition of teaching that they felt was, in some cases, a corruption of Scripture, or it obscured the original intent or authorial intent of Scripture, in favor of church authority.**

— Dr. James D. Smith III

The *Quadrigo*, or the fourfold sense of Scripture, has a long and ancient history and tradition within the Christian church... So, and the Reformed fathers were pushed on this by some of their Catholic counterparts during the time of the Reformation, because the Reformers were insisting that there's only one sense or meaning to Scripture. But in response, people like William Whittaker, for example, said we don't reject the *Quadrigo*, the sense that there's four senses to Scripture; we do reject the idea that there's four meanings or senses to Scripture. There's just one, and it's the historical, the literal, the grammatical. But the other three are collections or what we might today think of as applications, something along those lines. The idea is that they're grounded in that one sense, but they are the proper sorts of lines to think about how that one sense applies to us as readers of the Bible today. And so, it wasn't a complete rejection of the *Quadrigo* so much as a reformation of it, a reworking of it, so that there's the one sense now with these various three lines of application along the lines of faith, hope and love.

— Dr. Bruce Baugus

During the Renaissance, Protestants continued to develop the ideas that had been championed by Aquinas. But they didn't argue that all spiritual meanings are merely grounded in the literal meaning of Scripture. Instead, they said that all the spiritual aspects of a text that were intended by the author for his original audience are actually aspects of its literal sense. They believed that Scripture's literal sense, or original meaning, is both singular and complex. We might say that Renaissance Protestants broadened the concept of the term "literal" so that it included everything the author intended the "literature" of Scripture to convey. As a result, leading figures like Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther and John Calvin thought of the literal or original meaning as including everything that each biblical passage means. They saw the literal sense as a complex meaning that included historical, doctrinal, moral and eschatological aspects.

It can be helpful to illustrate the Protestant conception of the literal sense of Scripture by comparing it to a cut gemstone. Cut gemstones have multiple "facets" or "faces," just as there are many smaller senses that contribute to the literal sense of Scripture. Each passage of Scripture was intended by its author to communicate something about historical facts, doctrines, moral obligations, salvation and eschatology, and so on.

Moreover, each facet of a gemstone is a distinct surface that contributes to the beauty of the whole, and no single facet can claim to be the entire stone. In a similar way, biblical passages have distinct aspects that contribute to the meaning of the literal sense, and none of these smaller aspects can claim to be the whole literal sense.

Put simply, the meaning of Scripture is multifaceted. Each passage's meaning has many smaller parts or aspects that contribute to the singular, unified meaning we've called its literal sense.

**The Bible is a rich book. It's a deep book. It comes from the mind of God, and I would dare say the mind of God is pretty vast, and the ideas that are expressed are vast and they have many angles... And so evaluating interpretations is simply a matter of sitting down and asking yourself, is this angle an appropriate way to read the text? ... And so you just have to think through the options in terms of the potential for multiplicity and the appropriateness in the context of looking at things from a variety of angles in that way, and then be open to the possibility that meaning in fact is and can be complex. As a result, it actually enriches your interpretation because a passage can be doing more than perhaps the initial understanding, the initial impression I may have, and I can learn from someone else's reading of the text as a result.**

**— Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

Every passage of Scripture of significant size has implications for many different aspects of theology and Christian living. So, it's easy to understand why many people throughout the history of the church have thought that biblical passages have multiple meanings. But the most responsible approach to the richness of the Scriptures is to ensure that everything we say about a biblical passage is tied to its grammar set within the historical context of the ancient world. And if we approach the Bible in this way, we'll be better prepared to discover the complex meaning that God and his inspired human authors intended to communicate to the original audiences of Scripture.

So far in our discussion of the complexity of meaning in Scripture, we've seen why Protestants strongly affirm the importance and scope of the Bible's literal sense. So at this point, we're ready to turn our attention to what we'll call the full value of scriptural passages.

## **FULL VALUE**

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From time to time, evangelicals use the expression *sensus plenior*, meaning the “full sense” of Scripture. While we affirm the importance of the literal sense or the original meaning of a biblical passage, we also realize that later portions of the Bible often refer to earlier portions of Scriptures in ways that do not simply repeat the literal or original sense. This is especially true when New Testament authors point out how the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ. New Testament authors interpreted Old Testament passages correctly. They never contradicted their original meaning. But they did not simply confine themselves to the original meaning. Instead, they discerned a fuller sense, a *sensus plenior*, for these Old Testament passages. And so, along these lines, we will speak of the “full sense” or the “full value” of every biblical passage.

In this series, we'll define the full value of a biblical text as:

**The total significance of a text, consisting of its original meaning, all its biblical elaborations, and all its legitimate applications**

The original meaning is the literal sense of Scripture, which is the most fundamental aspect of the text. Biblical elaborations are places where one part of Scripture comments directly or indirectly on another part of Scripture. And legitimate applications are the implications that Scripture has for the lives of its readers.

In accordance with this definition of the Bible's full value, our discussion will divide into three parts. First, we'll focus on the concept of original meaning. Second, we'll discuss biblical elaborations. And third, we'll explore the legitimate applications of Scripture to our lives. Let's begin with original meaning.

## **ORIGINAL MEANING**

In a previous lesson, we defined original meaning as:

**The concepts, behaviors, and emotions that the divine and human writers jointly intended the document to communicate to its first audience.**

As we've said, the original meaning of a passage is equivalent to its literal sense. And as this definition shows, the original meaning is multifaceted. Scripture was supposed to communicate to its first audience on many levels. It communicates concepts, which are ideas the original audience should have been able to recognize in the text. It communicates behaviors, which are activities that were either performed or not performed in the text. And it communicates emotions, the attitudes and feelings that are either conveyed by or expressed in the text.

Let's illustrate how a text can communicate concepts, behaviors, and emotions by looking at Exodus 20:13, which states:

**You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).**

Let's think about this passage in terms of our definition of original meaning. What concepts, behaviors, and emotions did the divine and human writers jointly intend the commandment against murder to communicate to its first audience? Well, with regard to concepts, this verse explicitly communicates the idea that the wrongful taking of human life is forbidden. By implication, it communicates that human life is valuable to God. And the fact that it takes the form of a command implies that God is sovereign over human beings.

With regard to behaviors, this commandment is part of the record of God's historical actions — God himself engaged in the behavior of delivering this commandment to Moses, and Moses presented it to God's people. And this indicated that God wanted the people whom Moses led through the wilderness to the Promised Land — the original audience of the book of Exodus — not to engage in the behavior of murder.

And with regard to emotions, this passage teaches us that God hates murder, and that he is determined to uphold justice.

The original meaning of the commandment against murder was multifaceted, intended to communicate the explicit concepts, behaviors and emotions of God and Moses to its original audience, and also to teach them what God required of them regarding their own concepts, behaviors, and emotions. And something similar is true of every biblical passage.

As a result, if we want to gain the full value of the text, we have to appreciate the complexities of original meaning. If we ignore these complexities, we'll miss a great deal of what Scripture has to teach us.

**The Reformers developed two methods for interpreting the text: the grammatical and the historical. On the one hand, they ask what does the text say grammatically speaking? On the other hand, what did it say in its first setting? Those two answers to those questions provide parameters, as it were. Within those fences, a variety of interpretations are valid and legitimate, and that means that within those parameters we need to exercise humility as we say yes, it could be understood a different way. Now, if one of those interpretations is in fact grammatically impossible, we say no, that's wrong. Or if one is historically impossible — they couldn't have meant that in that setting — that is to be dismissed. But within those two parameters, a variety of interpretations is possible, and as I say, we need to exercise humility in regard to our own understanding.**

— Dr. John Oswalt

**Scripture can fairly be read in more than one way. Now, this doesn't mean that anything goes. Some things are clearly right out. And this is once again where the, for example, the major themes that are set forth in the creeds are so helpful. The rule of faith safeguards us against errant readings of Scripture... There's something fundamentally wrong when we engage in dialogue with another biblical interpreter and we do it with an arrogant, doctrinaire spirit.**

— Dr. Carey Vinzant

Now that we've seen how original meaning contributes to the full value of Scripture, let's turn our attention to biblical elaborations.

## **BIBLICAL ELABORATIONS**

Biblical elaborations are:

**Places where one part of Scripture directly or indirectly comments on an aspect of the meaning of another passage in Scripture**

Because all Scripture is inspired and infallible, these elaborations always accord with and confirm original meaning. Sometimes, an elaboration is stated as a repetition of a facet of the original meaning. At other times, a biblical elaboration may be stated as a clarification of things that weren't entirely apparent or well understood. And at still other times, a biblical elaboration can be an expansion of the meaning of a particular passage. For example, the Bible elaborates on the commandment against murder in many places. The commandment is first recorded in Exodus 20:13, which says:

**You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).**

The first biblical elaboration of this passage we'll mention is primarily a repetition of these exact words in Deuteronomy 5, where Moses reminded the nation of Israel of the content of the Ten Commandments. In Deuteronomy 5:17, Scripture again says:

**You shall not murder (Deuteronomy 5:17).**

This repetition confirmed the commandment and reminded God's people of the terms of his covenant. Of course, even when an elaboration is stated in the form of a repetition, it never merely repeats what was said before — the context of the elaboration always adds something to its meaning. Even so, it's helpful to recognize that some elaborations are repetitions in form.

The second type of elaboration we listed was clarification, and we find a clarification of the commandment against murder in Numbers 35. In that chapter, Moses distinguished between murder and accidental manslaughter. Listen to what Moses wrote in Numbers 35:20-25:

**If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer... But if without hostility someone suddenly shoves another or throws something at him unintentionally or, without seeing him, drops a stone on him that could kill him, and he dies, then ... the assembly must protect the one accused of murder (Numbers 35:20-25).**

This clarification provides information that was crucial to understanding the commandment against murder. It makes it clear that not every unlawful instance of killing a human being is also an instance of murder and that accidents shouldn't be punished in the same way that murder is punished. When a killing includes "malice aforethought," that is, when the killing is intentional and motivated by wickedness, the



commandment requires a harsh penalty. But when the killing is accidental manslaughter, the commandment actually forbids the murder of the one who committed the act. The third type of biblical elaboration we listed was expansion, in which Scripture provides additional information about the passage or topic it references. We find an expansion of the commandment against murder in Matthew 5, where Jesus criticized the rabbis of his day for wrongly limiting the commandment's scope. Listen to what Jesus taught about the commandment against murder in Matthew 5:21-22:

**You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21-22).**

Here, Jesus expanded the commandment against murder by applying it beyond the physical act of unlawfully taking a human life. According to Jesus' elaboration, unrighteous anger violates the same principle that murder does. Anger isn't as bad as murder, but it offends the same aspect of God's character.

**Jesus, of course, in the Sermon on the Mount, he quotes many commands, one of them being, “You’ve heard it said you should not commit murder.” And then he says, “But I tell you this, it’s not about murdering, it’s about hatred. That’s the issue.” And so I think reading Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is incredibly important for us to understand the true meaning of the commandments, because I think that’s what Jesus is doing... Jesus is getting to the heart of the issue. What Jesus is showing us — and I think we have to just apply what Jesus is saying — is that the command of murder, it’s not an issue of I’m a good person because I’ve never committed murder; I’ve kept the command. What Jesus is saying is this ... it’s about the intent in the heart that murder arises from, and that is hatred.**

**— Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

**Jesus invites us to go back to the principles behind Exodus that it’s not just enough not to commit the sin, but you shouldn’t want to commit the sin. That is, Jesus is interested not only in our behavior but in our character, not just in what we do but in who we are. So he says, “You have heard it said you shall not kill.” Jesus says you shall not want to kill... So he looks for the heart of the Law. He looks for the principle, and that principle is transcultural and invites us to want what God wants, and we can do that only when our hearts are transformed by God's grace, by the power of his kingdom at work in us.**

**— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

When Jesus and other teachers referred to Scripture, they normally talked about what was “written.” But in Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus talked about what was “said,” not what was “written.” This was a common way of referring to what the Jewish teachers had said about what was written. Far from challenging the Old Testament, Jesus was refuting the popular interpretations of the Old Testament that had strayed from the Old Testament’s original meaning.

This elaboration was an expansion of the original meaning of the commandment because it went beyond clarification. It didn’t just explain the meaning of the words of the commandment itself. Instead, it brought additional information from other passages to bear on the commandment in ways that revealed the original intention of the commandment within the broader context of God’s revelation. Seen against this backdrop, Jesus pointed out that the commandment against murder had always been intended to reveal God’s care for humanity, and that its original implications went far beyond the mere prevention of murder.

**Well, God certainly does forbid murder in Exodus, and when Jesus addresses that command in the Sermon on the Mount, he proceeds to say that it embraces hatred and anger, what we would call “heart sins.” Now there have been a number of ways of explaining what’s going there. What is Jesus doing with that original command? Some have said he’s setting it aside and he’s introducing something new. Others have said that while the command given in Exodus was simply something external, and now Jesus is coming along and he’s adding something entirely new, something unforeseen and uncontained in that Exodus command, and he’s internalizing the law. I think the best approach is to say that Jesus is not saying something brand new, but he’s simply drawing out what’s in the command already. I think that’s evident, for instance, when you look at the Decalogue, the tenth commandment, “Though shalt not covet.” That is a command that addresses the heart and heart sins. And that, I think, is intended as a key to the whole Decalogue, that we shouldn’t understand the commands of the Decalogue to be addressing merely external behaviors but also addressing heart actions, heart sins, heart attitudes underlying those behaviors. And so what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount is he is restoring and he is drawing out the Law in its full intent, even as he is sweeping away the corruptions that have come alongside in the course of history, the history of reading those commands in the life of God’s people. So Jesus is standing, giving us the true intent of the Law and showing us the Law in its fullness.**

**— Dr. Guy Waters**

The more we study the Scriptures, the more we see that the Bible elaborates on itself over and over. The prophets and psalmists regularly refer back to Moses’ Law. Jesus continually referred back to the Old Testament. And New Testament writers did

much the same time and again. At times, we may have difficulty understanding how biblical authors came to their conclusions. But in each case, biblical elaborations confirm other parts of the Bible by repeating them, by clarifying them and even by expanding on their original meaning. And they did all of this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And for this reason, as we explore the meaning of Scriptures, we must acknowledge and submit ourselves to all the places where the Scriptures elaborate on themselves. So far in our discussion of the full value of Scripture, we've looked at original meaning and biblical elaborations. So, now we're ready to focus on the legitimate applications we can draw from a biblical text.

### LEGITIMATE APPLICATIONS

We'll define legitimate applications as:

**The conceptual, behavioral and emotional impacts that the original meaning and biblical elaborations of a passage should have on their audiences**

Original meaning and biblical elaborations are inspired, and hold full authority over all believers in every age. That's why all legitimate applications of Scripture must be derived from and consistent with the Bible's original meaning and elaborations. But our applications are not inspired by God. We make mistakes, and our applications are always subject to modification and improvement. Even so, to the extent that our applications are true to Scripture, they're part of God's intended use for the Bible, and therefore part of the Bible's full value.

The *London Baptist Confession of Faith* from 1689, a famous Protestant summary of biblical doctrine, expresses this idea in its chapter 1, section 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 Scripture delivered by the Spirit.**

Protestant churches almost universally acknowledge that human interpretation and application of the Bible are fallible. So, while human authorities are legitimate, they can never be the ultimate judges of truth. And while the application of Scripture to our lives is necessary, we should never treat our applications as if they were infallible like the Bible.

**When we preach, there is an exposition — an explanation — and an application. The meaning of God's Word should be one, the meaning of the text should be one, and it should be the same throughout the centuries. But later, when it comes to seeing the text in context, it**

**could have different applications for yesterday and today; it isn't a variation of the standard. It's a simple difference of application.**

**— Dr. Miguel Nunez, translation**

**There can only be one interpretation of Scripture. We can get multiple applications off of that one interpretation, but the application must stay true to the interpretation. We must seek to always exegete God's Word, bring out God's intended meaning of that particular passage or that particular verse, or we end up with eisegesis, which is where we bring in or put in our own opinions and our own interpretations, our own thoughts into what they may mean. From that you can get very faulty applications, which can lead to harm to the people that you may be teaching or preaching to... And so the interpretation has to be true to the application; the application has to be true to the interpretation.**

**— Rev. Thad James, Jr.**

Keeping in mind that legitimate applications are part of the full value of Scripture, let's see how another Protestant tradition, represented by the *Heidelberg Catechism*, applied the commandment against murder. This catechism was written in sixteenth-century Europe in order to provide a helpful yet fallible summary of the teaching of Scripture. Question number 105 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* asks:

**What is God's will for you in the sixth commandment?**

And the Catechism answers:

**I am not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbor, not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds, and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself either.**

The Catechism interprets the commandment against murder in light of many biblical elaborations, including Jesus' elaborations in Matthew 5 as well as Paul's teaching about revenge in Romans 12.

As we can see, the full value of the simple command "do not murder" can be extremely complex and multifaceted. Following Jesus and Paul, the writers of the *Heidelberg Catechism* legitimately applied this commandment not only to the unjust taking of human life, but also to all that is similar to murder in kind if not in degree, such as hatred and insults. Applications like these are based on the original meaning of the prohibition against murder, as well as on its biblical elaborations, and they're appropriate

in our contemporary situations. For these reasons, they're part of the full value of the commandment against murder.

Well, if you ask the question, "What are the legitimate ways to apply the commandment 'You shall not commit murder?'" quite obviously it means that we shouldn't kill people. But it would be insufficient to infer that that is all that commandment is saying. Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount that if you are angry with your brother, then you have committed murder. And he would then encourage us to see that our anger and our displeasure of the people is breaking that particular commandment. So in terms of applying it to today, I think that it is important that we help people see that the Ten Commandments still are deeply relevant because they understand the severity of offense against God, and they also make us appreciate that even our smaller actions, as we perceive them, whether they be lust, or anger, or other emotions and passions, actually have the potential of going so much further if God doesn't deal with them at the heart-level issue. So application of that biblical text should help people see how they, as it were, nip in the bud problems that could become much worse. And actually the problems even at the level of bud-level, Jesus tells in the Sermon on the Mount, are still serious.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is giving us his authoritative teaching on the Law, and one of the things he does is take commands and push them down to a deeper heart level as it were. And so when he says, "You have heard it said 'do not murder,'" that remains true. But Jesus goes beyond that and shows us the true intent of the law. He tells us that not only are we not to murder, but we're not even to say murderous words, words that might be hateful, words that would be equivalent to saying, "You fool." Or, we're not to hate our brother. And he's showing us, in other words, that the Law in Exodus, in the Ten Commandments, is not simply about not doing something. He's showing us there's a deeper intent that we should understand when we read these laws. And so the way to understand these laws is not simply a bare prohibition but is a positive command as well. It's not simply "don't murder," but "do promote life" ... And so as Jesus breaks down the important parts of the Old Testament, he actually boils it down to two things: Loving God with all of our heart and loving our neighbor as our self. It's a positive command to love that is the true intent of the Law.

— Dr. Brandon Crowe

In the modern world, Christians have to make judgments about all sorts of issues related to the Bible's prohibition of murder. We have to deal with abortion, euthanasia, suicide, war, abject poverty and many other threats to human life and dignity. In each case, the commandment against murder places responsibilities on us. And one of our tasks as interpreters of Scripture is to figure out what those responsibilities are. As we do, we reveal more fully what the meaning of the commandment really is.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on the complexity of meaning, we've discussed the history of viewing the literal sense of Scripture as its singular, grammatico-historical meaning, and we've described the full value of a biblical text in terms of its original meaning, biblical elaborations, and legitimate applications.

As we've seen in this lesson, there is one complex original meaning for every biblical passage. And it's so complex that it touches the concepts, behaviors and emotions of the original audience in many different ways. But beyond this, there are many partial summaries to be made of this complex original meaning. The original meaning provides an infallible framework, a foundation for our understanding. But to gain an awareness of Scripture's full value, we also have to find guidance in biblical elaborations and we also have to make many legitimate applications to our world today.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
FIVE

The Complexity of  
Meaning  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	How can we develop the skills we need to understand the original meaning of biblical passages?.....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	What is the proper way to use Greek and Hebrew dictionaries when we interpret the Bible? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b>	Why is it important to identify the genre of a biblical book? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b>	How did the Reformers' approach to interpretation differ from the <i>Quadriga</i> ? .....	6
<b>Question 5:</b>	Since many early Christians interpreted the Bible in "spiritual" rather than "literal" ways, is there any benefit to reading their interpretations?.....	7
<b>Question 6:</b>	How did Paul use allegorical interpretation in his writings? .....	9
<b>Question 7:</b>	Why is it important to distinguish between Scripture itself and our applications of Scripture? .....	10
<b>Question 8:</b>	How does Jesus' teaching on the commandment against murder help us better understand God's commandments in Exodus chapter 20?.....	12
<b>Question 9:</b>	What are some legitimate contemporary applications of the commandment against murder? .....	14
<b>Question 10:</b>	How can we avoid legalism when we emphasize the behavioral implications of Scripture? .....	16

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Five: The Complexity of Meaning

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Jimmy Agan

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Dr. Steve Blakemore

Dr. P. J. Buys

Dr. David W. Chapman

Dr. Andrew Davis

Dr. Dan Doriani

Dr. David T. Lamb

Dr. Robert G. Lister

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Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Dr. Stephen Um

Dr. M. William Ury

Dr. Simon Vibert

Dr. Brian J. Vickers

Dr. Carey Vinzant

Dr. Peter Walker

### Question 1:

**How can we develop the skills we need to understand the original meaning of biblical passages?**

Discovering the original meaning of any passage can be challenging. And because a passage's original meaning isn't always apparent, we can't simply rely on our intuitions to find it. Instead, determining original meaning takes practice and a certain level of skill. So, how can we develop the skills we need to understand the original meaning of biblical passages?

#### **Dr. Robert G. Lister**

In our growth as Christians, one of the things that we want to be sure that we're constantly doing is growing in our ability to interpret and understand Scripture accurately. To the degree that we understand it better, to that same degree our Christian walk will be shaped in ways that it should. And there are a variety of ways that this can take place. Some of them on the more scholarly level, but here's where I would start for every Christian: Find a gospel-preaching, Bible-believing local church where you can sit under the discipleship of godly pastors who will not only preach to you the Scriptures on a weekly basis, but in their preaching model for you how to understand, how to interpret Scriptures. And just in the process of being involved in that kind of fellowship with that kind of gifted teaching, we're unavoidably going to absorb good habits about reading the Scriptures and interpreting them ... So, one of the things that would additionally be helpful would be to learn to read the Scriptures on a broad level and a narrow level. And when I say read the Scriptures for their breadth, I mean maybe something like a "read the Bible in a year" plan where, in the course of a year, you get the full scope of the Bible's teaching. And as you have the full scope of the Bible's teaching, that's going to help you understand individual passages... So we don't only want breadth, but we also want to learn habits of good

Bible study for individual books of the Bible where we go down a little bit deeper than you might in your four chapters a day reading in your annual Bible reading plan. But having that depth now is going to help us when we come around to read the Scriptures again next year and we get back to that passage. We're bringing more information about its context, both historically and grammatically to understanding those materials. And at a more academic level, someone who's involved in seminary or some advanced discipleship courses, you could certainly learn biblical languages. That would be helpful. The basic ability to recognize and interpret different forms of genre that are in the Bible are basic principles that are helpful for good Bible interpretation. So we know, for example, on the one hand, that a poem is to be interpreted differently than an epistle, and we bring different expectations to poetry than to epistles. Those would be some things that I think would be helpful, particularly in the early portion for beginners to get involved in a local church and have their reading of Scripture shaped and informed by very positive examples from the pulpit on a weekly basis.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

It's so important to try and find the original meaning of Scripture. And we can sometimes be put off, perhaps, by a translation which gives us an impression that the original meaning was this but we've slightly misunderstood the translation. And so, there's a real value, if it's at all possible, if you're working in a language where there is another translation of the Bible — more than one — then you could actually compare. And so you can see, well, this is perhaps a more literal translation of the original. This one is translated in a way which tries to apply it to our own culture, but in so doing it has slightly shifted what the original meant and I need to get back to find out what the original was. Sometimes using a different translation will actually help. Let me just give you an example. I love the verse in Psalm 23 which says that truth and mercy, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And I've been wondering recently if that could possibly mean that when I go through life, goodness and mercy will be what I leave behind. I will follow and leave in my wake behind me goodness and mercy. And it's a lovely idea that perhaps when I go on from a place I will leave behind goodness and mercy. But I've learnt recently that's a complete misunderstanding of what the original Hebrew means. Actually the word "follow" there means God will pursue us. He will actively chase us. Goodness and mercy will find us out, will pursue us all the days of our lives. And so my interpretation was entirely wrong. It was a nice meaning, it made me feel good, but it wasn't actually what the Hebrew was meaning, and I needed to actually have a bit of word study there to find out what the Hebrew word really meant, and I discovered I had misunderstood the word "follow." It actually means to "pursue," actively to pursue. And this is one example of how knowing individual words of the Bible in their original meaning can just help us to keep on track.

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

The Bible, of course, is full of many, many different passages, some of which are very easy to understand, some of which are very complicated to understand. And God has given to the church the gift of teachers to help us understand many portions of

Scripture. And many of those teachers have written down things in books we call commentaries or Bible dictionaries. And when available, those can be a great help for us to develop our own skills and learning how to read the Bible well. But if those things aren't available, and even if they are available, there's something more important that any believer can do in reading Scripture, and that is, first, to pray that God would illumine him and to read with a posture of reception toward God. Read with a desire to hear from God ... And secondly, after praying for God to reveal, just to read actively, to be an active reader who pays close attention to the text, reads it again and again and seeks to just observe things. Write down questions, or think of questions to ask the text so that you can be engaging it at a very personal level. Those skills will open up the texts of Scripture and help you receive it as a word from God and apply it to your personal life.

### **Question 2:**

#### **What is the proper way to use Greek and Hebrew dictionaries when we interpret the Bible?**

**One way we can discover the original meaning of a passage is by looking at how the author used particular words and phrases in their historical setting. To do this, many scholars today promote a healthy understanding of the Bible's original languages. This often involves the use of dictionaries. So, what is the proper way to use Greek and Hebrew dictionaries when we interpret the Bible?**

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

Greek and Hebrew dictionaries are an aid to our own study. They do not supplant our study. So if you're looking up a word, what does it mean in the original language? It's vital to recognize that almost every word has multiple meanings except for technical terms. Almost every word you read in the New Testament or Old Testament has at least two meanings that are possible, two shades of meaning. And the best way to find out which meaning is in your text is by reading your text carefully. In other words, the context will drive you toward the proper definition. Now, that doesn't mean the dictionaries can't help you. They can help you nuance, they can help you go deeper in understanding what a word may mean. Or you may be totally ignorant of it and you have to start from there. But they're not a magic answer. You don't go to a dictionary and say, "This is the meaning of this word." You've got to put it in its contextual speech. It's contextual. We get into problems when we miss that, or when we say, "Oh, the word 'save' can mean 'rescue from hell and damnation' or it can mean 'to preserve something,'" and then when we try to pour both meanings into a passage. The term for that is "illegitimate totality transfer." That is to say, to take all the possible meanings of a word and say they're all in this use. It's very rarely the case that we do that. In the English language, for example, I'm sitting in a chair. A chair is an object where you sit in it; it holds our weight and so forth. But "chair" can also be a verb. It can mean to chair a meeting or committee meeting, to be in charge. Well, when I say I'm sitting on a chair, I don't mean I'm sitting on being in charge. We

don't want to pour both meanings into one use. We say, "Is this a literal use of this physical object that keeps us off the ground, or is this the metaphorical use of being in charge of something?" You don't try to pour all possible definitions into any one use of a word. If you do, if you do try to make that, you will make mistakes.

### **Question 3:**

#### **Why is it important to identify the genre of a biblical book?**

**We should always consider many different questions when we begin to interpret Scripture. This will help guard us against seeing a meaning in the passage that the author didn't intend. One of these questions concerns the literary genre of the book or passage we're studying. But, why is it important to identify the genre of a biblical book?**

#### **Dr. David T. Lamb**

When we approach any book of the Bible, or any passage of Scripture, it's very important to think about genre. Genre is, it's the style, the form, the type of literature that you're talking about ... As we think about the different genres of the Bible, we've got law in the Pentateuch — the early books. We've got poetry. We've got psalms. We've got historical narrative. We've got wisdom literature. We've got proverbs. We've got gospels. We've got epistles. Then we have apocalyptic literature towards the end in the book of Revelation. And actually, we actually have some apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament as well. But each of these different genres need to have different unique characteristics that are true for them, that, as we understand these genres, it will help us to have a better understanding of the text itself. One of the biggest things to be thinking about is, is the language figurative or poetic? "Figurative or literal" may be a better way to think about it. I know a lot of people will say, "I take Scripture seriously. I take Scripture literally." And while I appreciate the enthusiasm for taking Scripture seriously — and I think that's a high value for myself as well — but figurative texts are not meant to be taken literally, and literal texts are not meant to be taken figuratively. An example that one of my colleagues here, Todd Mangum, uses is... chapters 2, 3, 4 of John's gospel. When Jesus is speaking about the temple, he says, "Destroy this temple," in John 2. He is speaking about the temple of his body, but his audience understands him to be speaking of the actual temple. They understand Jesus speaking literally there, and they misinterpret it. They don't understand Jesus. In John 3, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, and he says, "You must be born again." Well, Nicodemus is really confused. Nicodemus does not understand Jesus' genre. Jesus is speaking figuratively there. Nicodemus says, "How can I enter back into my mother's womb?" A classic example of trying to understand what Jesus is saying literally when that doesn't make sense. In John 4, Jesus is speaking to the woman at the well, the Samaritan women, and he says, "I will give you living water." And this woman is confused. "Living water? What are you talking about? You don't have a bucket; the well is deep." It doesn't make sense to her. In each of these examples, the person, the audience, is

interpreting Jesus literally when he is speaking figuratively. So that's, I think, a classic example of what we're talking about ... Poetic books often speak in figures. Historical books like Kings — that's where I spend a lot of my time doing my research — are giving you a lot of very historical information: this king reigned for this many years; this king came to the throne when this other king was reigning. They mention other people from Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. Or Tiglath-Pileser, the Assyrian king, shows up. Kings is a historical book, and we can understand it historically. I mean, that's one of the primary interests of Kings. So in each case, we need to be thinking, what is the genre of this text? And as we think about that, that's going to help us understand that text better.

**Dr. Glen G. Scorgie**

It's very important... to understand, among other things, the genres of literature that we have before us. God, in his wonderful work of condescension, speaks our languages. He speaks Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek — the language of the original audiences for these texts — and comes and enters into the languages of human beings. But more than that, he enters in and speaks his truth through the literary genres that are also part of human communication. The Word becomes incarnate in words, and in images, and in language forms and structures. It's a very penetrating incarnational act, this speaking — "lispering," as Calvin says, to our baby-talk ears. And so, it's very important that we understand the words aright, but it's also equally important that we understand the genres correctly, or we will misunderstand. When something is presented in hyperbole, we should recognize it as hyperbole. This is not God deceiving us. This is God speaking through a legitimate form of discourse. Sometimes he speaks history. Sometimes he speaks poetry. Sometimes he speaks command. And occasionally he'll use metaphors, sometimes literal description. And sometimes, as we find in the book of Revelation, he utilizes the genre of apocalyptic communication — a way of speaking characterized by vivid, symbolic imagery and used to present cataclysmic events. The first century audience was very familiar with this, knew how to interpret it correctly, probably no problem for them. But we have to take a few extra steps of effort to enter into their thought-world, and read it in such a way that we understand the image they understood much more easily than we do today.

**Dr. John E. McKinley**

It's important to really understand what kind of biblical book we're reading because there are different types of literature. We've got poetry and law and narrative and that sort of thing. The importance of it is so we have the proper expectations and know how to respond to what we're reading. So, if we're reading a narrative, we shouldn't be thinking, "Oh, I need to obey this and do everything that happened to these people." We need to be observing the narrative and learning from it, what is God revealing to us in it? But if we're reading an epistle, one of the letters, often cases, there's going to be command there, and we need to respond by obeying. Now, by extension, if we're reading apocalyptic, there are going to be symbolic depictions. And we need to try to hold off sometimes trying to imagine what it would look like or what it would be like, and instead try to interpret, what is the reality that these



symbols are conveying? Listen to that part. So, genre identification all has to do with making sure we're understanding things the way they were intended to be understood and not responding in a way that's not appropriate to the genre.

#### **Question 4:**

#### **How did the Reformers' approach to interpretation differ from the *Quadrigena*?**

**Before the Reformation, many biblical scholars believed that each passage of Scripture contained four distinct meanings: the literal, the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical. This approach to Scripture was commonly known as the *Quadrigena*. But Reformers approached biblical interpretation differently. How did the Reformers' approach to interpretation differ from the *Quadrigena*?**

##### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

One of the cries of the Reformation was the Latin phrase, "*ad fontes*," which meant "to the sources." And that was a wonderful thing at the Reformation, that they were no longer wanting to just read centuries of accretions and discussions of what the Scripture meant — "this person says this," almost a rabbinical, "Rabbi so-and-so says ... Rabbi so-and-so says ..." or "this teacher says ... this teacher says ..." — but, what does the Scripture actually say? And going back, then, to the original Greek and the Hebrew. And as a result of that, the long tradition of seeing four levels of meaning — the ... literal-historical meaning, allegorical meaning, the moral meaning, the "heavenly" or eschatological meaning — there was a lot of critique and criticism of that in a good way in saying, hey, much of this has deviated from the true sense, the true author's intended sense. An example of this would be the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. From post-New Testament time all the way up to the 1500s, every person who interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan allegorized it and said, "Well, you know, the good Samaritan is Christ, and the beast represents his body. The inn is the church," and, you know, "the two denarii is the knowledge of the Father and the Son," and all of these allegorized interpretations. But if you look at the actual passage ... someone just doesn't say, "Could you please give us an allegorical interpretation of salvation?" But they say, the person asks him, "Who is my neighbor?" And then Jesus tells this parable to show that we have a tendency to excuse our obligation to love the other by saying, "this person is my neighbor and this person is not." And then he ends the parable by saying, "Who proved to be a neighbor?" This is a parable about loving other people and who's a neighbor. Not an allegorical story about salvation. And Calvin really latched onto that and criticized the way that that parable had been interpreted for the last 1,400 years. At the same time, in the Reformation, several Reformers made these pronouncements, but then they erred in interpretation. Luther is well known for having railed against allegorization and then engaged in it himself. Augustine laid out all these sound principles for Scripture interpretation a thousand years earlier, and he also deviated from that. So, that's a warning to us, too. That even as we feel like now we have the

right answers or we can see better because we have this perspective, we can lay out these sound interpretive principles and then violate them ourselves.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

On the heels of the Italian Renaissance and a real growth in humanities and appreciation for how literature works, reformers like John Calvin really wanted to return to what they called the "*sensus literalis*" — what's the real sense of what a text is meaning and how it communicates to us? And that really was a challenge to how people were reading the Bible in terms of the medieval Catholic Church and the influence, particularly, of the Greek fathers in this system of understanding called the *Quadrigo*. As we look at a passage like the parable of the Good Samaritan — if you think of the *Quadrigo* — people would read it with a sense that each part of the parable would represent something. Not something real but something sort of ahistorical, a deeper metaphor. So, like the inn where the Samaritan takes the one who has been robbed, it's like the church. It's like where we recover and how the gospel sort of does its work. And what readers like Calvin insisted upon is, wait, how does the text itself invite us to understand it? How can we cooperate with the choices of the author, with the intention of the author? That really, in the context of Jesus' parable, he's talking about a very real threat regarding robbers between Jerusalem and Jericho. He's talking about very real racial relationships between the Samaritans and those who lived in Palestine, and that we're to understand the real sense of the text. Now, the fact that it's a parable is indicating that it's representing something. But not something that's necessarily ahistorical. Jesus takes things from real life, and he illustrates how the kingdom of God is like that. And what's shocking about the parable is how the Samaritan really embodies the law of God and how we're to love our neighbor. Not the sense that the inn represents the church and where the gospel sort of recuperates us.

**Question 5:**

**Since many early Christians interpreted the Bible in "spiritual" rather than "literal" ways, is there any benefit to reading their interpretations?**

Teachers in the early church used a variety of interpretive methods. But many early church leaders and theologians approached Scripture as spiritual allegory and didn't pay as close attention to the literal text of a passage. Since many early Christians interpreted the Bible in "spiritual" rather than "literal" ways, is there any benefit to reading their interpretations?

**Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Can we as evangelicals benefit from reading early Christian interpreters who dealt in spiritual interpretation or allegory? I would say, yes, for a couple of reasons. First of all, the tradition of the tradition of spiritual interpretation of course begins with Philo in the first century. And Philo more or less, if you take his principles and kind of put

them together, anything goes. But the Christian tradition actually doesn't take Philo uncritically. Origen is actually a very important example of that, because where Philo will say, "Oh no, feel free to deconstruct the grammar in a passage," Origen says, "No. In fact, grammar does matter." And where Philo says, "The historical sense doesn't matter. You know, what matters is the spiritual sense." In fact, Augustine comes along and builds on Origen and says, "No, grammar matters and history matters as well." And so, there is a basic concern for the integrity of the text of Scripture. And I would say, in an implicit way for authorial intent, the difference in how these writers look at Scripture versus how we tend to is, for the early church, the primary author of Scripture was God. And so they don't see Scripture as a playground for fanciful interpretation. They see Scripture as the one voice of God, speaking throughout the Canon. And not just through the Canon. Augustine actually talks about God revealing himself through two books, the book of Scripture and the book of creation. And so, there is a common misconception that what these early allegorists are doing is sort of "well-intentioned" deconstruction. First of all, there is no such thing as well-intentioned deconstruction. Second, there's a fundamental difference in that, where deconstruction and the like has the tendency to be an inward-turn approach to interpretation, a self-centered approach to interpretation that is founded on the conviction that meaning is kind of illusory. The fathers, the allegorists in the early church are the polar opposite of that because their interpretive approach is fundamentally turned outward to God's voice in Scripture and in all of creation. And it's not founded on a dearth of meaning. It's founded on a flood of meaning. God is speaking richly everywhere ... First of all, I think we misunderstand what the allegorists in the early church are doing. But secondly, I think they're good for us to read because they are devout readers of Scripture who don't have our cultural blind spots. And we're very good at seeing their blind spots, but we're probably far less humble about letting them put their finger on our blind spots. We need that. I think the early interpreters, even where we differ from them in their methodology, are good for us in that they are iron on iron for us.

**Dr. Vern S. Poythress**

Observing that Christians in the past have interpreted the Bible spiritually as well as literally, should we pay attention to them? What should we do? Can we benefit from that? I believe we can benefit. We have to remember that every Christian believer is fallible. So it all has to be checked out with the Scripture itself which is infallible. That's true both for so-called "spiritual" interpretations and spiritual meanings and for literal interpretations, right? Because we need to check it out with Scripture. We also need to recognize that the Holy Spirit has indwelt believers throughout the ages. So frequently he's led them into truth. Frequently their ideas have value even if perhaps the idea that they have doesn't come from the passage that they're referring to when they're talking about the idea. Still another thing to bear in mind is — I'm convinced and I believe it's there in the New Testament — that the Old Testament has many types pointing forward to Christ and to the church and to the final salvation which God has brought in Christ. So, the Old Testament has depth-meaning. We're not simply to dismiss somebody who finds a relationship to the New Testament and saying, well, I don't see that in the sort of immediate surface of the text. We're to

understand that the Old Testament points forward to the New, but we're to check everything by Scripture itself.

**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

A lot of the early fathers of the church, such as Origen and others, interpreted the Bible through what we call the "spiritual" interpretation or sometimes the "allegorical" interpretation of Scripture. And that's caused a lot of people, especially modern evangelicals, to say, "Well, what benefit is there for reading them? They don't do exegesis in a disciplined sort of textual manner the way we do." Well, I think there's great benefit in reading them for three reasons. First of all, when you look at what they're doing with some of the apostolic writings, they're actually engaging them and trying to understand them theologically. Not just textually — what is being said? — but, what is the meaning of it? What does it mean beyond just the bare words of the text? And so, in doing so, many times what they try to do is interpret a passage or a set of passages in light of the larger narrative of Scripture itself. That's not unlike what the apostolic writers did in the New Testament with the Old Testament. So, that sort of example of theological reading of texts is instructive to us. Secondly — there's a good reason for reading them — is that much of what they say, while we might say that's not the exegetical point, often it is exactly on point in some larger meaning of what Christian discipleship is about. And so, so long as we're careful not to confuse their exegesis with the truth that their spiritual method sort of unveils for us, it can be very beneficial to help us see theological meaning or see a deeper spiritual application. And the third reason it's beneficial to read them — I'll break this into two parts — first is, it teaches us how we need to be careful that we don't read our own interpretations spiritually into the Scripture. But also, that way of approaching Scripture can have some real benefit especially for preachers as they deliver for us, sort of, allegories that can capture our imaginations. It might help us think more imaginatively when we are trying to unpack the meaning of an exegetical study that we've done. So, so long as we're careful and we utilize them as examples of how the sanctified imagination can work, there is benefit for reading them.

**Question 6:****How did Paul use allegorical interpretation in his writings?**

As Evangelicals, we value the literal interpretation of Scripture over what we would call an "allegorical" approach to interpretation. Still, it's important to realize that biblical authors, including the apostle Paul, occasionally used allegory when they approached the Scriptures. How did Paul use allegorical interpretation in his writings?

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

In Galatians 4 we definitely see Paul using what we could call allegory. Simply put, saying one thing equals something else. In this, Paul is not unique either in the history of interpretation — or "ancient practice" — or in Jesus' teachings himself. We can

easily think of something like the parable of the four soils where Jesus gives an explanation that is entirely allegorical, as it were — the seed equals the word of God, etc. and the four soils are different responses. So, in that sense, there's nothing new or unique about Paul's use of allegory in Galatians 4. I'd like to suggest, however, that a more helpful term than allegory is the broader term of "figural." That, really, what we see in Jesus' teachings and Paul's teachings there — 1 Corinthians 10 and many other places — represents or shows a certain way of thinking about the world. That under God's providence, all things do connect to each other. Words and trees and actions and events and all kinds of objects in the world do connect because there's one God and Creator over them all. And I think that term, "figural," is more helpful than allegorical because allegorical has such negative connotations for most of us. So, I do think that is, though, in practice what Jesus models and Paul does at key points — the recognition that some things relate to and are figured by other things.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

There are one or two places in the New Testament where the New Testament writers seem to use the Old Testament in ways which are slightly different to their fellow New Testament writers ... Sometimes they'll use perhaps a meaning which is more allegorical, a way of interpreting the Scripture which sees perhaps some slightly bizarre things there. Are they, again, being unfaithful? No. I believe we've been given apostolic examples of a faithful reading of Scripture which can sometimes use these different tools. Sometimes the literal meaning is right, sometimes the Christ-centered one. Yes, sometimes Paul will use an allegory — in Galatians 4 — and that's legitimate. There is an interesting question as whether we are allowed to do the same thing or whether this was something which was supremely the role of the apostles, which they were distinctly able to do. And we should be a bit hesitant in emulating them. But were they being unfaithful in their use of Scripture? Absolutely not.

**Question 7:****Why is it important to distinguish between Scripture itself and our applications of Scripture?**

As we look at the complexity of meaning, it's important to remember that the original meaning of Scripture can be different from the applications we draw from Scripture. But, why is it important to distinguish between Scripture itself and our applications of Scripture?

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

It's important that we distinguish between Scripture and our applications of Scripture for several reasons. Have you ever had the experience of having read a passage, being convicted by it, being helped by it, encouraged, corrected — whatever the case might be, God having used it powerfully in your life in a particular area? And then you come back to that and maybe you think that you've exhausted the meaning, as it were, of the value of that passage for yourself. And you come back to it the next year.

You're reading through the same passage of Scripture and suddenly it strikes you all over again afresh in a whole different area of your life. I think that those of us who read Scripture through over and over again have had this experience. And one of the things that we need to understand is that Scripture itself is not changing. It's not that the meaning of the text has changed. But what's going on is that we're seeing and we're drawing out of that, with the help of God, a different way that that meaning, that what he has said, is applying to our lives differently this year than it did last year. That former application is legitimate, the present application is legitimate, but there's an application that's being made. And the next time we're going to come back to it, there might be an application in a different direction that's being made. Or God is continuing to use that text as an instrument to save us and deliver us and mature us into Christ-likeness. The same thing happens — you can go from church to church, and you can hear pastors handling the same passage. And this pastor might bring to bear on his congregation from this same text an application that's rich and that's powerful for his people. You might go the very next week to a different church and find the pastor preaching on the same passage and bringing out a very different application, still consistent with, still driven by and defined by the meaning of the text, but yet rich and full. If we confuse application with meaning, we might come away thinking that meaning is ever shifting, and it's not. Or on the other hand, we might think that meaning is overly narrow. That it only has meaning along this particular line of application and not upon any of the others and think that if this person's application does not match with mine, or this other application that we heard that was very rich for us, that they're wrong, that they're going astray, and they may not be at all. Application is rich and unending. Meaning is fixed. It stays the same. God continues to use his Scripture to do everything that's necessary for our salvation.

**Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Most fundamentally, the first step towards being a responsible theologian — and I say this to my students all the time — is recognizing that there is a distinction between what Scripture says and what I assume it means. When we do biblical interpretation, we do it within the context of an interpretive tradition that we've inherited. Nobody reads the Bible in a vacuum. All of us received the Bible from someone else, and we read the Bible within a set of cultural assumptions within a worldview. And so it's important then that just as a personal discipline, really, when we approach Scripture that we do all we can to set aside those assumptions ... What we are about as biblical interpreters is allowing Scripture to speak prophetically to us, to challenge our assumptions and to reshape the way we see, not just the Bible, but our world, our lives. So, one of the things that we need to be very careful of in any case is going to the Bible and saying, "Oh yeah, I know what that verse means." Well, we know some things that it means, but there always needs to be an openness for the Spirit to show us something that we hadn't seen before. And I'm firmly convinced that God speaks without contradiction. So, you know, God opening the Bible to us in a new way doesn't mean throwing away what we've already known before. It simply means that we can come to understand the Bible on deeper levels over time through ongoing study.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Well, we believe it is important to distinguish between Scripture itself and our applications of Scripture because there is just that extent to which the biblical material that's been given to us is full, and final, and sufficient for every age and every generation. But nevertheless, the writer of the biblical text pointed in the direction of ways in which their material would be understood by an original audience and then understood by a subsequent generation. And to that extent, within the biblical text, there is application that is implied. But nevertheless, they didn't anticipate every context in which the Bible would be read. And so we draw our inferences from the text on the basis of not only how the text might have been understood by the first readers and hearers, but actually how subsequent generations have sought to apply the text in their context. And we see ourselves, as it were, falling in line with a tradition that has helped us understand what the text might mean in previous contexts. And that enables us to see how it applies to today.

**Dr. P. J. Buys**

We need to keep in mind always that Scripture is inspired, and our interpretations and applications are not inspired. And therefore we must be open to continuously review our own applications. Then the situations in which we want to apply Scriptures often change. People come with new questions that they experience. And we need to carefully understand the questions of our time and then apply in such a way that we contextualize the basic meaning of the gospel for every time and age that we are called to minister in.

**Question 8:**

**How does Jesus' teaching on the commandment against murder help us better understand God's commandments in Exodus chapter 20?**

On a number of occasions, New Testament authors quoted or referred to passages from the Old Testament in their instructions to the church. Jesus did this many times as well. This type of teaching can be very beneficial when we attempt to discern the original meaning of an Old Testament passage. For instance, in Matthew 5, Jesus elaborated on the commandment against murder found in Exodus 20. How does Jesus' teaching on the commandment against murder help us better understand God's commandments in Exodus chapter 20?

**Dr. Stephen Um**

Well, we see in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, and also Deuteronomy 5, the sixth commandment which says, "You shall not murder" — two simple words in the Hebrew: "no killing." And often times when we look at the particular commandment, most Christians assume falsely that we are able to obey that commandment perfectly. So, no one wakes up in the morning thinking that they're going to violate the sixth commandment. But when you look at the interpretation that Jesus has in the Sermon on the Mount, he says that it's not just about what we do on the outside ... And so he



is trying to help the readership to understand, — and the audience — that you commit murder when you harbor bitterness in your heart towards someone, when you hurl insults, when you are unwilling to forgive. And so he's trying to help us to recognize the radical interior significance of the human heart. And who is not guilty of committing those struggles within the heart? And so he's trying to help us understand, it's what happens in the heart that really matters. And so he actually elevates the high standard of the radical demands of the Law. It's not just about something that you do on the outside, but it's actually something that happens on the inside.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

Jesus refers to the commandment against murder in Matthew 5, and in doing so I think he gives us a fuller sense of what the commandment means. It's in the context of his saying that he came to fulfill the law and the prophets, and I think in doing so, he's teaching us a deeper righteousness than what was being taught in his day by the scribes and the Pharisees. And there he teaches that you might think that the murder commandment, as the scribes and Pharisees would have taught, was predominantly a legal charge, a charge as to whether somebody has committed murder or not. You can physically see whether there's a body and whether they've actually murdered somebody or not. But Jesus instructs us that the commandment against murder in the Ten Commandments refers to our own hearts, so that when we're angry with somebody else — so much so that in our own hearts it's as if we would kill them — that we've actually already infringed on the commandment even though we've not committed any physical act. In fact, on our outside we may look like we're being very pleasant. And I think one of the things Jesus is doing there, not just for the murder commandment but for all the commandments of the Old Testament, is saying, these predominantly speak to not just, when can I be brought before a judge, but when do they refer to my heart. And how can I, in my own life, live these out spiritually and truly before others?

**Dr. Thomas J. Nettles**

The Bible, as a book of revelation, has a capacity, or has the reality, that truths increase as we go along. God adds layer upon layer of revelation. But that does not, in any sense, diminish the power or the truthfulness of prior revelation, but it just shows us that there is more opening up. And we recognize that when we die and we get in heaven, the things that are revealed will have a much clearer meaning to us than they do now. And there will be more revelation than that will be infinite and we'll never exhaust it. So when we look at the Scripture, we need to recognize that it is not just filled with separate propositions that have nothing that can be expanded in our understanding of them. But at the same time, it doesn't mean that they were inadequate when they were given. An example of this, I think, would be the commandment, "thou shalt not kill" and then Jesus' treatment of it in the Sermon on the Mount.

[Jesus said,] "You have heard it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment;



whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire" (Matthew 5:21-22, ESV).

Well this is clearly a statement in which Jesus is taking the understanding that people have of the commandment, "thou shalt not murder," and is telling them that "you have isolated its meaning; you have not understood the foundation of all the commandments." There is an internal component to every commandment that we must take seriously.

**Dr. Philip Ryken**

Some people when they read the Ten Commandments are tempted to think, "Oh, that's not a commandment I've ever broken." So for example, the commandment says, "Thou shalt not murder," and it's easy to say, "Oh, I've never actually murdered anyone." And then Jesus came along to give what I think is the true, full interpretation of that commandment as it was always intended to be understood. It's not just about the physical act of murder. It's all of the other sins that are in that same category, including simply the sin of hatred in the heart. That's a kind of spiritual murder. And I think Jesus was right to call us out on that and say this commandment isn't just about actually killing somebody; it's about all the murderous attitudes in the heart. And Jesus gives us the full, true interpretation of the commandments of Moses.

**Question 9:**

**What are some legitimate contemporary applications of the commandment against murder?**

**The Old Testament commands recorded in Exodus 20 are commonly known as the Ten Commandments. But God gave these commands to Moses thousands of years ago. So, how are we to apply them today? For instance, what are some legitimate contemporary applications of the commandment against murder?**

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think the way to apply the command not to murder is to begin with James, and James begins with Jesus. Jesus says, "You've heard it said, you shall not commit murder ... but I tell you the truth, if you hate your brother you've committed murder in your heart." James, I think, takes that interpretation and then applies it to people he's writing to. Because James actually tells the people he's writing to that they're murdering each other. Now, I think it's impossible that James means you're actually committing homicide. Of course that's wrong. I mean, there'd be no question about it. I think James is applying the teaching of Jesus, and when he says, you're murdering each other, I think he's speaking about they're hating one another. And hate is the cause of murder. And so, in a Christian community, hatred is entertaining exactly what the Mosaic law was condemning, and that is murder. But the issue is not just killing, but hating. And so, I think that gives us, then, the key to applying it in contemporary situations. Because anybody can apply the command "You shall not

commit murder" by simply not murdering someone. I mean, most of us go our whole lives and that we don't even get close to maybe doing that, probably. On the other hand, we're all, at different points of our lives and in different places and at different points and towards different people, we all have hatred in our hearts. And I think that's how we have to apply it. And that can be applied across the board, whether it's hatred that we harbor against even our enemies, but hatred that we harbor against people who just simply look different than we do or that we just don't understand. Or hatred that we harbor towards even people that we call brother and sister and see all the time. I think what we have to do is we have to always be remembering, this is really an issue of my heart, and as a member of the new covenant where I'm meant to have, and do have, a new heart, a heart that is given to me so that I can obey God and fulfill his commands. And so, I think that's what we do. We have to apply the principle of hatred to the command, "You shall not commit murder."

**Dr. Robert K. MacEwen**

If I feel angry at someone who I disagree with, or they disagree with me, I need to take that before the Lord and ask him to give me a pure heart and a positive attitude towards people. In debates, I need to have an irenic, or a peace-loving, attitude towards people... You know, Jesus also said, "Love your enemies," and so how much more should we love our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ even when we strongly disagree with them.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

I think, probably when many Christians hear the Ten Commandments read, and in Exodus 20 the commandment not to murder or not to kill, they think, oh, that's no problem, I've never killed anyone ... But when you begin to think about it more deeply, the taking of another human life and the devaluing of another human life, what does that mean? ... Jesus, when he spoke, referred back to the commandment not to murder in Matthew 5, he got more to the heart intent of the commandment. And he said, even if you're angry with your brother and call your brother a fool, or "*Raca*," that you're in danger of judgment. And we realize that it's not simply the act of murder but the hatred in the human heart that... God is not content with someone who would stew in anger towards their neighbor and murder them if they could get away with it, but actually not committing the crime. I think about in James 4. In James 4 it says:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something; [you] don't get it.  
You kill and [you] covet ... you cannot have what you want (James 4:1-2).

And interpreters recognize James is probably not talking there about literally them killing each other, but the covetousness, the hatred, the exploitation of the rich to the poor — where the rich are denying the poor the ability to have a living, to put bread on their table for their children — is in essence insipient murder. It's denying the very livelihood of that person and their ability to provide for their family.

**Dr. M. William Ury**

Some legitimate contemporary implications to the biblical command not to murder I think would involve a variety of things. As we all know, Jesus took the Old Testament command to not murder and expanded it broader than most of us would have taken it, so that you can murder somebody by actually taking their character and running it in the mud. So he's very serious about not killing people in a volitional way that is based upon a sinful grasping for power or trying to abuse somebody else. Now the Bible never says that we're not to kill. And that raises a whole other element of application for just war and for defense and police and having police and armies and those kinds of things. That's not quite our question, but that is a distinction. I think in the modern world, some of the most graphic implications, of course, would have to pertain to the rampant murder of the unborn in the abortion industries around the world. I think there is nothing more horrendous nor necessary for the church to repent and to confront than that slaughter of innocent children. We in the West talk about it, and we may be making some headway in some ways, but it's the millions of dead children stare us in the face, and the church is accountable for our lack of voice there. On the other end of the spectrum, I think there's also an implication that we're going to have to face very soon, and that is the aspect of euthanasia. That murdering people because they're not quite functional enough is a direct confrontation to the image of God created, that God has made all of us in and is unequivocally murder in the sight of God. So, for whatever reasons, even those issues I know that are very painful to talk about, those who are in extreme situations where they have lost all human hope, and they live in extreme pain, those kinds of things. Very difficult, of course, to deal with. But I think there are other answers than ending life, which I consider murder. So, there are a lot of implications. And they're going to get more intense as the days go on. As science and medicine are able to do things with human beings — or not even full human beings — we're going to have to ask our ethicists who are evangelical and biblically based, to give us a lot more guidance in this issue, because it's going to get more and more dark in the days ahead and more difficult to make right decisions. So, a proper biblical statement would be to not take anyone's life in any way, where that person is innocent of a crime or innocent of aggression, causing somebody some kind of physical or bodily pain. Those are issues that I think the church can say we will not go beyond that line; we will not do that, because that is murder in our perspective. There are a lot of issues that a theologian cannot touch on here. This is a very deep issue, but it's an area where the church must continue to talk and have a hard discussion about it because of its radical implications for the ethics in which we live today.

**Question 10:**

**How can we avoid legalism when we emphasize the behavioral implications of Scripture?**

**The Bible has a lot to say about what God expects of us in regard to our concepts, behaviors, and emotions. But as we seek to apply the Scriptures, we can sometimes**

**overemphasize behavioral application and become legalistic. So, how can we avoid legalism when we emphasize the behavioral implications of Scripture?**

**Dr. Andrew Davis**

One of the common errors in the Christian life, as we read the commandments of God and all that, is the error of legalism. And the idea of legalism, when it comes to salvation, is that I can use my present obedience to God's commands to pay for my past disobedience. And that is completely wrong. We cannot wash away our sins, our past sins, by present obedience, because present obedience is expected and commanded. There is no extra credit for finally obeying the command now. What about the past sins? Well, as the hymn writer put it, "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." Only by the atoning work of Christ can our sins be forgiven. So, that's what I would call "soteriological legalism," legalism related to how we're made right with God. And that's completely wrong and destroyed by the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works. But after that, there are other types of legalism. You know, Christians can behave as a community in a legalistic way as they add to the commands of God or go beyond what God wants. And that can be very damaging to fellowship. Groups can require certain things of dress or whatever. I mean, Jesus did tell us if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. But that's a personal, individual command. For a community to decide, "That is causing you to sin. Give me your right hand so I can cut it off"; that's a community legalism. Like the use of the Internet. Let's say a church decides the Internet has lots of evil things on it. "None of our members can use the Internet." That's an example of community legalism. They're saying that if you do that, then thereby, you'll be saved, but they've instituted some legalistic rules. And it's very important for the elders of a church, the leaders of a church, to be very careful on the one side of legalism in everyday life. But then there's the danger on the other side of license. Because the world is a constant assault on us and we need to have... community holiness.

**Dr. Philip Ryken**

I think every human being is a legalist at heart. We all want to justify ourselves to God by the things that we do. So it's really hard for us in interpreting and applying the Bible to have a strong, grace-centered focus. But it is possible. And the gospel does have implications for the Christian life. And there are things that God commands us to do and things he tells us not to do. The question is, is the motivation for that obedience really coming out of the gospel, out of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? And I think you'll find that Christ-centered Bible interpretation that is grounded in the saving work of Jesus Christ puts the commands of Scripture into their proper context. Not as some legalistic thing that you would try to use to justify yourself before God, but simply as a life of grateful obedience for what God has done for you in Jesus Christ.

**Dr. Jimmy Agan**

If you're going to put a stress on what behavior Scripture requires, how can you do that in a way that doesn't lead to legalism? The first thing we've got to say is we've

got to make up our minds that calling people to do what Scripture calls them to do is not legalism. It is not wrong to ask someone to do what Scripture asks them to do. So, when we start with that basic commitment, now we've got to look at a framework. And the framework is this: any time Scripture emphasizes a behavior to pursue or to avoid, Scripture does that within a framework. And the framework is one of human response to divine provision. And so anytime we talk about a human response, whether it's commanded or prohibited, we've got to ask, what divine provision is it linked with? And we see that pattern throughout Scripture. God commands his people to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. But he only asks them to do that after he has already provided for them everything they need for life to flourish. God calls his people to obey the Ten Commandments, but he only does that after he has already delivered them from slavery in Egypt. That's the biblical pattern when we talk about a requirement behaviorally. We're also asking, what has God provided that this requirement is a response to? We're never talking about just one-half of that equation. A couple of other strategies we can do here to make sure that we avoid legalism in applying biblical commandments. One would be, don't mistake a good idea for a divine command. It might be a good idea to wake up every morning at 5:30 and spend fifteen minutes in prayer, but the Bible never commands that you have to wake up at 5:30 and spend fifteen minutes in prayer. It might be a good idea for you. Certainly, the Bible commands that we pray regularly, but it doesn't give all those specifics. We've got to make sure that we don't become legalistic about specifics that the Bible just hasn't commanded. Another thing we do is make sure we address the "why" and the "how" and not just the "what". So, when we come to Scripture, but we're not just asking, what does Scripture require me to do, but we're asking: Why am I required to do that? What is it that's going to motivate me? If Scripture requires me to forgive someone, how does it motivate that forgiveness? By pointing me to the fact that Christ has forgiven me. So, the motive is just as important as the behavior that flows out of that motive. And then the question of "How?" This is a power question. How will a sinner like me find the power to obey this biblical commandment? How will I be changed that much? If I can't answer that question, willpower is only going to get me so far. I've got to know that the power of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is transforming me from the inside out. So, every time I read a biblical command, I want to be asking the question, why am I supposed to do this? What will motivate me to do it? And how am I going to find the strength and the power to do this? If we just focus on the "what?" legalism is never very far away. But if we're asking not just the "what" questions but also the bigger framework: How has God provided for me that would give me motive and power to obey him? Now, we're making proper use of his biblical commandments.

**The meaning of any biblical passage can be multifaceted and complex. This complexity has led some to engage in allegorical interpretation. But even though evangelicals rightly insist on a literal interpretation, we should allow for the fact that biblical authors often elaborated on the original meaning of Scripture in complex ways. If we keep this complexity in mind, we'll be better suited to avoid faulty interpretations and to apply Scripture appropriately.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
SIX

## DISCOVERING MEANING



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Guides.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A. Writer	3
B. Document	5
C. Audience	6
D. Interdependence	9
<b>III. Summaries .....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. Complexity of Passage	12
B. Uniqueness of Interpreter	15
C. Needs of Audience	16
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>18</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Six Discovering Meaning

### INTRODUCTION

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Children usually don't appreciate how much their teachers do for them. Their teachers work hard to give them all kinds of new discoveries. But often, young students do little more than grumble and complain every step of the way. Now of course, as adults we look back on our childhood teachers, and we understood how good it was that we didn't have to learn our lessons on our own. We're grateful for all they did for us. But when you think about it, we should be even more grateful for the countless opportunities our childhood lessons have given us to learn more and more every day of our lives. In many ways, that's how it is when it comes to the meaning of Scripture. God didn't leave us to discover the meaning of Scripture on our own. He provided guides to help us. But more than this, one of the most remarkable things about the Bible is that as we go through our lives, we can return to the Bible over and over and always learn more about its meaning.

This is the sixth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Discovering Meaning." In this lesson, we'll focus on some hermeneutical strategies that can help us figure out the original meaning of Scripture.

Countless factors contribute to the process of discovering meaning in the Bible. But for our purposes, we'll draw attention to just two. First, we'll talk about some important guides that help reveal the significance of a biblical text. And second, we'll see the value of making multiple summaries of that meaning. Let's begin by looking at the guides that point us toward Scripture's meaning.

### GUIDES

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In an earlier lesson, we mentioned that most evangelicals today refer to their general hermeneutical strategy as the grammatico-historical method. Now, this terminology is relatively recent, but it represents an approach that can be traced back throughout church history, especially from the time of the Reformation. In effect, the grammatico-historical method seeks to discover the meaning of Scripture in terms of the grammar of Scripture — what's written on its pages — and in terms of its ancient historical context, especially the context of its human authors and audiences. These grammatical and historical factors serve as guides to discovering the meaning of Scripture.

In this lesson, we'll focus on three main guides that help reveal the significance of a text in Scripture: the writer of the text, the document itself, and the original audience for whom the text was written.

When the Holy Spirit inspired the writings of Scripture, he worked through the talents and personalities of the writers. So, knowing something about the writers can help us understand the things they wrote.

The Holy Spirit also crafted each book as an integrated whole, providing enough written content for each passage to be understood within its own grammatical and literary context. So, the document itself can guide our interpretation since it contains the literary context in which all its passages should be interpreted.

And the Spirit made sure that the books he inspired would make sense to their original audiences and be relevant to their lives. So, we can also learn something about the meaning of Scripture by exploring the identities and lives of its original readers.

Imagine a man in a restaurant who finds a note discarded on the floor. The note has just one word scribbled on it: "HELP!" He shows the note to his friends at the table to see if any of them can figure out what it means. But there just isn't much to work with. "I wish there were more words," the man complains. "If we just knew who wrote it," another adds. And another friend comments, "I wish there were some way to know who was supposed to get this note." The fact is that the note could mean a lot of things. It could be part of a game children were playing at another table. It could be a request for help with the menu. It could be a desperate cry from someone in serious trouble. Without further guidance, there's simply no way for the man and his friends to understand what the note really means.

And something similar is true about the Bible. When we know little or nothing about its authors and audiences, or when we read passages without knowing their broader context, the Bible's intended meaning will be unclear to us. But the good news is that any knowledge we gain about the writer, the document or the audience has the potential to improve our understanding of Scripture's meaning.

**If we don't take into account the grammatical and historical context of the Scriptures that we're studying, we will inevitably read them in light of just what we already are assuming. For example, and this may sound absurd to some people, but when Jesus speaks of being born again, or born from above, there are people who have read that as reincarnation — being born again, being literally reborn, a kind of, you know, not entering your mother's womb but entering someone else's womb a second time, which was Nicodemus' misunderstanding in the passage. So we need to understand the grammatical sense of it, the literary context. And in that case, some historical background would help as well. For example, the Jewish people when they spoke of being reborn, they would think of it especially in terms of when a Gentile converted to Judaism. But this is something that wouldn't make sense to a teacher of Israel. How could he be treated as if he's on the same level as somebody who wasn't even a part of God's people? But it's like where Jesus says later on, going to the larger context, in John 8, he says that people are children of the devil until they become**

**children of God, so a person needs to be spiritually reborn. And you could multiply with examples throughout the Bible because, again, everything has a cultural context and a grammatical context in Scripture. All of Scripture is for all time, but we need to also recognize the circumstances, the settings that it addressed, so that we can recognize the principles, the universal and eternal principles that we can apply to other settings.**

**— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

**We believe that a greater knowledge of the grammatical or historical context will help the modern reader gain more out of reading the Bible. Now of course, you can read the Bible with little education, with no extra tools other than the biblical text and it's been the conviction of Christians down the centuries that you can understand what the text means without all the extra biblical tools and resources that are available to us in our modern age. But nevertheless, an understanding of the way in which paragraphs and sentences are put together and understanding of the context in which the passages were written will bring greater clarity and greater understanding for the reader.**

**— Dr. Simon Vibert**

Our discussion of the guides that help reveal the significance of a biblical text will divide into four parts. We'll begin by looking more closely at each of the guides: the writer, the document, and the audience. And we'll conclude this section by exploring their interdependence. Let's look first at the guidance offered by the writer.

## **WRITER**

Whenever we consider the human author of a portion of Scripture, we have to be ready to answer all kinds of questions. First, we want to know the identity of the author. Who was he? At times, the Scriptures actually identify the author of various books by name. For example, the Old Testament books of Amos and Isaiah are directly attributed to the prophets Amos and Isaiah. The New Testament epistles of Peter and Paul explicitly name these apostles as their authors. But at the same time, many books in the Old and New Testaments, like Judges and Kings, as well as Acts and Hebrews, are anonymous. In these cases, we often have to settle for some general observations about authorship. But whatever the case, to one degree or another, general historical research and the Scriptures themselves always enable us to create a profile for every biblical author. We can always gain some insights into questions like these: What role did the author have among the people of God? What were his special interests? What kinds of concepts, behaviors and

emotions did he emphasize in his book? And everything we know about a biblical author guides us toward the goal of discovering the meaning of Scripture.

Let's consider the influence our knowledge of the writer should have on our interpretative efforts by focusing on the writer of John 3:16. In this familiar verse we read:

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).**

The Gospel of John was written by the apostle John, who was the brother of James and the son of Zebedee. He was one of the inner circle of Jesus' most trusted companions and a pillar of faith in the early Christian community. Besides the Gospel of John, he wrote four other books in the New Testament: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John and Revelation. Through his books, and through the things said about John by other biblical writers, such as Matthew, Mark and Luke, we can gain a useful understanding of John's beliefs and the way he communicated those beliefs to his audience. For instance, in John 20:31, John stated his purpose for writing his gospel. He told his audience:

**These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).**

This passage makes it clear that John's overarching purpose was to call his readers to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [they] may have life in his name."

When we have some knowledge of the writer and his purpose, it isn't difficult to see this same twofold goal in John 3:16.

Most editors of modern translations rightly consider John 3:16 as the beginning of John's comments on the words of Jesus that end in John 3:15. The first half of John 3:16 states that, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." This portion of the verse corresponds to the first half of John 20:31: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." And the second half of John 3:16 states, "that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This portion of the verse corresponds to the second half of John 20:31: "that by believing you may have life in his name."

Noting these parallels verifies something that many interpreters have recognized for millennia. John intended this passage as much more than a mere factual, historical statement. The historical fact that God gave his unique Son Jesus was important to John, but his real purpose in mentioning it here was to call his audience to saving faith in Christ so that they could have eternal life. As we can see, understanding John's purpose and beliefs, helps us interpret his gospel more appropriately.

Having considered the benefits of relying on the writer as a guide to the meaning of Scripture, let's turn our attention to the biblical document.

## DOCUMENT

Our use of the word document will include all the features of the text we're studying, including its vocabulary, grammar, figures of speech, sentence structure, formal structure, the outline of its argument, the surrounding literary context, and so on. To interpret Scripture responsibly, we must pay close attention to the actual words and phrases the inspired author wrote.

One of the most important things to remember when we explore a biblical document is that it conveys its meaning in units of different sizes. Now, these various units of meaning are different in different genres, but in general terms, meaning is conveyed by morphemes, which are small features of words that indicate things like singular and plural and verbal tenses. Meaning is also conveyed through words, then phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs in prose, and stanzas in poetry. Larger sections like whole narratives, speeches or law codes and even entire books serve as units of meaning. And interestingly enough, the meaning of smaller units becomes clearer in the light of larger units. And the meaning of larger units becomes clearer in the light of smaller units. So, anytime we want to see how a biblical document guides us toward its meaning, we have to be ready to explore it on all of these levels.

To illustrate what we mean, let's look at a facet of John 3:16 that's often misunderstood.

As we saw earlier, John 3:16 begins "For God so loved the world..." It's quite common for evangelical Christians to take this phrase to mean something like: "For God so greatly loved the world...", "For God so dearly loved the world..." or "For God loved the world so much..." This understanding of the opening of John 3:16 is so longstanding and widespread that many of us never even question whether or not John meant for the word "so" to be taken as "so greatly," "so dearly" or "so much." But when we look at John 3:16 in its larger context, it soon becomes evident that this isn't the significance of the word "so."

To begin with, the word "so" is a translation of the Greek word *houtōs*. This Greek adverb occasionally has the connotations of "so greatly" or "so much," but far more often it's used to mean "thus," "in this way," or "in this manner." We can see that this is how it's used in John 3:16 by comparing John's use of "so" in verse 16 with the verses that come just before it. John 3:14-15 says:

**Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15).**

In these verses Jesus set up a comparison between the time when "Moses lifted up the snake in the desert" and the time when "the Son of Man" — Jesus himself — "must be lifted up."

In verse 15, Jesus referred to Numbers 21:4-9 where God punished Israel in the wilderness by sending poisonous serpents against them. The people of Israel cried out for deliverance. And at God's command, Moses made a bronze serpent, put it on a pole, lifted the serpent into the air, and all the Israelites who looked to the bronze serpent were

healed. By this analogy, Jesus made it clear that as he is lifted up, all people everywhere who look to him will be saved from God's judgment.

It's important to note here that Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake ... so the Son of Man must be lifted up." In this comparison, the Greek term translated "so" is the same word that appears at the beginning of verse 16, the word *houtōs*. Jesus said that just as the serpent was lifted up, "thus," or "in the same way," the Son of Man must be lifted up. And John picked up this comparison when he used this same term in verse 16.

In effect, John repeated the word, *houtōs*, to make a second comparison with Moses lifting the serpent. But in verse 16, the comparison is between what Moses did and what God did when he gave his one and only Son. Or as we may put it, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert ... *in the same way* God loved the world [and] gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." This example illustrates just one small way that carefully considering the document of a biblical text helps us understand its meaning.

With this understanding of how the writer and the document serve as helpful guides to interpretation, we're ready to consider the audience as a third guide.

## AUDIENCE

**It's important to understand the historical setting in which a book of the Bible is written because one of the remarkable things about biblical literature is that God chose to speak to his people in a particular time and to particular individuals, taking into consideration their cares and their concerns, their fears and their hopes about the world around them. God spoke to them in this way in order to reveal himself, and we get to be a part of that message, receiving it for ourselves, however, as it's mediated through their particular historical setting.**

— Dr. Scott Redd

Whenever we consider the original audience of a portion of Scripture, we have to be ready to ask all kinds of questions. First, we want to know the identity of the audience. Who were they? At times, the Scriptures tell us explicitly who the audiences were. For example, the New Testament epistle of Romans identifies the audience as Christians living in Rome. Galatians identifies the churches of Galatia as its audience. But at the same time, most books in the Old and New Testaments don't directly identify the audience. And in these cases, we must settle for indirect clues. In all events, to one degree or another, general historical research and the Scriptures themselves always enable us to create a general profile of the original audiences. We must do all we can to answer questions like these: Where did the audience live? What were their historical circumstances? What challenges did they face? What conceptual, behavioral and emotional needs did they have? Everything we know about original audiences guides us toward discovering the meaning of Scripture.



Although the original audience didn't directly contribute to the writing of Scripture, biblical writers usually composed their books with original and secondary audiences in mind. They wrote for some people directly, but they also wrote for others who would be exposed to their books indirectly. This was because when the Scriptures were first written literacy was the privilege of only a few. So, biblical authors didn't expect very many people to actually pick up their books and read them. Still, the more we know about the primary and secondary original audiences, the better we're able to investigate the original meaning of biblical passages.

Let's return once again to John's gospel to illustrate the importance of keeping the original audience of a biblical book in mind. In the case of John's gospel, we have to rely on indirect clues about John's primary and secondary audiences. For one thing, John frequently felt the need to explain customs in Palestine. Listen to what he wrote in John 4:9 regarding Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman:

**The Samaritan woman said to [Jesus], "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) (John 4:9).**

It would appear from John's comment that at least some of his audience didn't know about the separation between Jews and Samaritans. So, it's very difficult to believe that John wrote primarily for people living in Palestine where such customs were known to all. In fact, at least some of John's audience was most likely Gentile because twice — in 1:41 and 4:25 — he even felt the need to explain that the Greek word *Christos* was the equivalent of the Hebrew term "Messiah." As just one more example, listen to John's comment in John 9:22:

**The Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue (John 9:22).**

In this passage, to "be put out of the synagogue" was to be excommunicated, excluded from the life of the Jewish community.

Not only can we assume that John's audience included Gentiles and people from outside of Palestine, but it seems clear that his audience was also facing a crucial challenge. One clue to this challenge appears in the fact that John used the terminology "the Jews" as a way of referring to those who opposed Jesus and his followers. This theme is so prominent that some interpreters have argued that this gospel is anti-Semitic. Of course, Jesus, John and the rest of Jesus' apostles were Jewish, so this was no mere reference to ethnicity. Rather, John had in mind Jews who didn't believe in Jesus and persecuted the church.

The frequency with which John referred to unbelieving Jews as opponents of Jesus and his followers strongly suggests that John's audience was also facing persecution for their faith. And John's gospel often addresses the reasons that unbelieving Jews rejected Jesus and the converts to Christianity. For our purposes, we'll mention just two.

On the one hand, unbelieving Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy because he claimed to be God's Son. Listen to the way Jesus rebuked his Jewish opponents in John 10:36:

**Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, "I am God's Son"? (John 10:36).**

As this verse indicates, Jesus' claim to be the Son of God was one of the main reasons the Jews rejected him.

On the other hand, Jesus' Jewish opponents also disliked him because he brought the hope of salvation to Gentiles as well as to Jews. John makes it clear to his audience that Jesus was not just the Savior of the Jews but of every group in the world. For instance, in John 4:42, we read the Samaritans' response after hearing the testimony of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well:

**We know that this man really is the Savior of the world (John 4:42).**

From John's point of view, Jesus was not just the Savior of the Jews but "the Savior of the world."

The importance of these two themes for John's original audience helps explain passages such as John 3:16 where John stressed that Jesus is God's "one and only Son" and that the Father sent him because "God so loved the world."

**Every book in the Bible was written to an original audience, and we here in the twenty-first century are not the original audience. I think it's interesting and maybe helpful to us to realize that the majority of the individual books in the New Testament are epistles or letters, so when we read those epistles — and I think you could expand that to the whole Bible but certainly the epistles — we're reading other people's mail. They are for us because we belong to the church, but they were first written to an original audience, in the case of the New Testament, an original first century Christian audience. And so if we do the hard work of understanding the original situation and concerns of the original audience and the original biblical writer writing to that audience, we will be able to have a better understanding of the book. And we should seek to get that original understanding before we move on to applying it to our own situation today.**

**— Dr. Robert K. MacEwan**

Now that we've considered the ways the writer, the document, and the audience can serve as guides to the meaning of Scripture, let's turn our attention to their interdependence.

## INTERDEPENDENCE

In order for us to interpret the Bible responsibly, it's very important for us to understand that each of the guides we've mentioned informs and is informed by the others. Our knowledge of the author helps us understand his document and original audience. The things we know about the audience help us understand the writer's intentions and the nuances of his document. The document's words and grammar give us information about the writer and the audience. So, as interpreters, we need to gain as much guidance as possible from all these sources, so that our readings of Scripture aren't skewed by an imbalanced emphasis on just one or two of them.

The writer, the document, and the audience are interdependent guides to meaning. If we fail to account for their interdependence, it's very easy to fall into error.

If we overemphasize the author, we often fall into an intentional fallacy. An intentional fallacy relies too heavily on what we think we know about a writer and his intentions, and de-emphasizes the things we learn about the document and audience.

There are many ways to commit intentional fallacies in biblical interpretation. For instance, we might make unwarranted assumptions about an author's intentions by speculating about what he was thinking when he wrote. Or we might overemphasize valid information about a writer by wrongly assuming it was very relevant to the text we're interpreting.

Let's illustrate some possible intentional fallacies by looking at John 3:16. We can be sure that when John wrote this verse, he intended to draw his readers' attention to the love of God shown in the death of Christ. But we can't be sure of all the subtle, psychological influences that motivated John to write these words. Scripture and reliable history simply don't give us enough clues about John's inner thoughts to draw these types of conclusions. And even if we could, his inner thoughts might not be particularly relevant to the meaning of John 3:16.

**Those interpreters who hold a high value on the authority and intent of a text are sometimes accused of committing the intentional fallacy, which is the idea that we somehow speculate at what we thought the author really meant in the biblical text... That doesn't mean that we're not able to say that authors are able to communicate what they want their hearers to understand and actually for that to be able to still be comprehensible down the ages. So, whether that be me writing an email to my wife on the other side of the world, or whether it be somebody writing something in a newspaper today, or an author writing a modern book, all authors assume that there is a way in which they bring their message through who they are and through the writing of that text, and they convey some of themselves through that text. And, of course, added to that is the fact that we believe that the ultimate author of Scripture is not the human authors alone, but actually the divine Author working alongside the human author, and therefore we do believe that the Holy Spirit helps those human authors to write the Bible in the first place. But it also helps the**

**modern readers to read it so that we can understand what the author meant in the mind of God.**

**— Dr. Simon Vibert**

A second type of mistake we can make is overemphasizing the document. This kind of error is often called a graphic fallacy. The term “graphic” comes from the Greek word *graphē*, which means “writing.” Correspondingly, the graphic fallacy overemphasizes the document itself, to the relative exclusion of contextual considerations like the writer and audience. This is a fallacy, or mistake, because the same document can mean very different things depending on who wrote it and for whom it was written. We might commit this fallacy by thinking that we can sufficiently grasp the meaning of a passage merely by analyzing its vocabulary, grammar, and structure without regard to its author or original audience.

In our example from John 3:16, think about what could happen if we focused exclusively on the document and ignored John and his original audience. How would we know who God’s Son was? After all, this verse doesn’t explicitly identify him. If readers didn’t know that John was a Christian and that he wrote to a Christian audience, they might make all sorts of irresponsible assumptions.

A pagan worshipper of the Canaanite gods might think that the “son of God” was Baal, the son of the Canaanite god El.

Someone familiar with the fact that Adam is called the “son of God” in Luke 3:38 might wrongly conclude that Adam is the Son of God in John 3:16, or even that Adam and Jesus are the same person.

Other readers might be confused by terms like one and only or world, or the concept of eternal life. There are many mistakes we can make when we ignore the writer and the audience.

A third type of interpretive mistake we can make is overemphasizing the audience. This is often called an affective fallacy because it focuses too heavily on how Scripture affects its audience. This fallacy is often committed when an interpreter speculates too much about the mindset of the original audience, and fails to pay enough attention to the writer and the document. It’s certainly legitimate to consider Scripture’s effects on its original audience, as well as things we learn about the audience from reliable history. But the affective fallacy goes beyond this by overemphasizing the audience’s personal reactions to the text, and almost always results in subjective, unreliable readings of Scripture.

For example, in John 3:16, the affective fallacy might speculate too much about the original audience’s circumstances and response to John’s teaching about eternal life. It might suggest that when John talked about life, what he really meant was earthly escape from the persecution his original audience was enduring and not a spiritual renewal and blessing that we enjoy forever. This interpretation would overemphasize the passage’s impact on its audience, ignoring John’s broader teaching and the details of the document itself.

**It is possible to overemphasize the importance of the original audience to whom a book of the Scripture was written in this way: First of all,**

by making it too specific, in particular, thinking we know more about them than we do. Because the truth is for most New Testament books — and Old Testament books too, but I'll speak for the New Testament — most New Testament books, we don't know a whole lot about the audience to which they were written. And so, when we try to hypothesize about the audience, we are likely to misinterpret because we dream up an audience that is not fair. You know, Hebrews... is a book I've been a specialist in, and all kinds of people dream up particular audiences to which Hebrews was written... And in fact, it skews their interpretation because we don't know the specific audience. So it is important to realize the books were written in the first century. It's important to understand the culture and the language of that century and how they were written and so forth. But it's also important not to develop an idea of an original audience that goes beyond what we know. For the Gospels, for instance, we know they were written, written to Christians to nurture the church, but we don't know much more than that. And it's important not to think that we do. If we do, we will misinterpret Scripture.

— Dr. Gary Cockerill

Sadly, mistakes like the intentional fallacy, the graphic fallacy and the affective fallacy are easy to make — especially when we don't have very much information about some of the guides. And the truth is that we can't always know much about the writer or audience of a text. Many biblical books are anonymous, and many don't explicitly identify their audiences. And sometimes we even lack important information about the document. We don't always have access to resources that help us understand all its features, like the implications of the way things were stated in the original languages of Scripture. When our information is more limited, it's generally wise for our interpretations to be more generalized. Even so, when we properly account for the interdependence of the guidance we receive from the writer, the document and the audience, everything we learn from any of these guides has the potential to improve our interpretations.

So far in our discussion of discovering meaning, we've addressed three important guides to meaning. So, now we're ready to turn our attention to the value of making multiple summaries of the meaning of biblical texts.

## SUMMARIES

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If you've been in the church long enough, you've probably heard more than one pastor preach from the same biblical text. And often the sermons are very different. As a matter of fact, it's possible to preach different sermons, very different sermons, from the same text without violating its meaning. How can this be? Simply put, no mere human

interpretation of the Scriptures can be complete or exhaustive of its meaning. There's always more to learn. And for this reason, we must always look for new ways to summarize biblical passages so that we can further our understanding of what they mean.

One of the most useful ways to discover meaning in Scripture is to make multiple summaries of a passage. In the context of this lesson, we'll use the word summary to mean:

### **A description of a passage**

Normally a summary will come from a particular vantage point or emphasize a particular concept that appears in the passage. Since every passage has a complex meaning, summaries help us by narrowing our study, allowing us to focus on just a portion of what the passage has to say.

We can illustrate the concept of a summary by thinking about a group of students that watches a complex, dramatic play. After the presentation, the students are asked to summarize the meaning of the play. One student summarizes the play by describing how the characters developed throughout the story. Another summarizes the events in chronological order. Still another describes the way the playwright was criticizing cultural values of the day. And finally, one student describes how the beautiful staging and expressive language affected him personally. All of these responses are legitimate summaries of the presentation's meaning. But none of these summaries completely captures the play's full meaning. If we were looking for the full meaning of the play, we would need to include all these summaries and more. But that's one of the reasons that making multiple summaries is so useful — it helps us focus on individual aspects of meaning, and it also allows us to learn more and more of the play's full meaning.

And the same thing is true of Scripture. There can be many legitimate ways to summarize the meaning of a passage in the Bible, and these summaries can help us better understand aspects of its meaning. And taken together, multiple legitimate summaries bring us closer and closer to the passage's full meaning.

We'll consider three main factors that illustrate the benefit of making multiple summaries of Scripture's meaning. First, we'll look at the complexity of the passage. Second, we'll mention the uniqueness of the interpreter. And third, we'll focus on the needs of the audience for whom the text is summarized. Let's start by exploring the complexity of the passage.

## **COMPLEXITY OF PASSAGE**

As we learned in an earlier lesson, the complexity of Scriptural passages is largely due to the fact that their original meaning, or literal sense, is multifaceted, like a cut gemstone. They have facets representing things like historical facts, doctrines, moral obligations, salvation and eschatology. Every text of Scripture communicates moral implications for our thoughts, words and actions. Every text teaches us something about history and salvation, and helps form our hopes and expectations regarding the future.

And each of these things that a passage communicates can be used as the basis for a summary.

In fact, because Scripture's meaning is multifaceted, we can summarize it in many different ways and still be true to its literal sense. Scripture's complexity implies that our summaries will never be exhaustive, and that we can always make more summaries that are both true and distinct.

Let's explore this idea by looking at some of the places where one passage of Scripture actually summarizes another. Consider these words from Psalm 110:1:

**The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." (Psalm 110:1).**

The New Testament frequently quotes Psalm 110:1. But each time it focuses on a different aspect of the original meaning. And none of the quotations contains everything that other verses say about the psalm's original meaning.

For instance, Jesus quoted it in Luke 20:41-44 to show that the Messiah must be more than simply David's son.

In Acts 2:32-36 Peter used it to demonstrate that Jesus was both Lord and Christ since he was David's heir that had ascended to a heavenly throne.

The New Testament also recognizes that the words of Psalm 110:1 are spoken to David's Lord; therefore, many New Testament passages use Psalm 110 to refer to Christ's reign on earth. Ephesians 1:20-22, 1 Corinthians 15:25 and Hebrews 10:13 all summarize this aspect of the psalm's original meaning with reference to the present reign of Christ until he returns. Hebrews 1:13 even uses it to demonstrate that Jesus' authority is superior to the ministry of angels.

Each of these New Testament references to Psalm 110:1 is faithful to the original meaning of the psalm. But each is also an incomplete summary of that original meaning, and has a distinct emphasis. This is possible because of the complex, multifaceted original meaning of the verse.

**New Testament writers are using the Old Testament in ways that are very common in terms of the use of prior text in Jewish interpretive traditions. And some people call these *midrashic* techniques. One of the common passages that's confusing is in Matthew's gospel, and Matthew has what some have called a formula of fulfillment — "it has been fulfilled..." And in Matthew 2, where Christ and his family are fleeing to Egypt and then coming back from Egypt, Matthew quotes from Hosea and says, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." And often times, biblical commentators have cited that passage and said, well, how can that in any way correspond to what Hosea originally meant when he penned those words so many hundreds of years before? What we see if we look at the first four chapters of Matthew in particular is that Matthew is showing how Jesus really embodies Israel. That he's the ideal Israelite; he's the ideal son of God. In the same way that Israel was called "to be my son," as we read in Exodus, Jesus goes into the wilderness, he's tempted, and he survives that**

temptation and survives the test of sonship. But before that in chapter 2, when he and his family flee to Egypt and they come out of Egypt, he represents all of Israel as he sort of comes back. And that's the idea of what biblical authors call typology: he's fulfilling a pattern, that Israel had come out of Egypt and in the same way he comes out of Egypt, and we're to understand by that that he is representing Israel. And that pattern, that typology really is borne out as we look at the other passages that depict Christ in the first four chapters of Matthew in particular, that he's the Son of God, he's the son of David, he's the ideal Israelite.

— Dr. Greg Perry

People are often troubled when they see the way the New Testament writers use the Old Testament literature, because we particularly in seminary often teach, no, you have to use it very, very carefully just in line with how they, the Old Testament writers, used it, and so forth. First of all, we need to understand that the New Testament writers use the Old Testament in three different ways: Sometimes they quote it directly, and when they do, they interpret it very, very closely to the ways we would. Other times, they use it as an allusion where they're simply alluding to something that the Old Testament says. They're not really interpreting it; they're simply picking up a thought. And a third way that they use it is to illustrate. To illustrate a point that they're making, they pull something from the Old Testament as an illustration, and they're not really concerned about its setting or any of that sort of thing, they're just using it illustratively. If we assume that every use of the Old Testament in the New Testament is intended as a direct interpretive quotation, we're going to have trouble, because many of the uses of the Old Testament are allusive or illustrative. I think if we understand that, if we make those kinds of distinctions, in most cases, the problems disappear.

— Dr. John Oswalt

In fact, the same thing is true of every passage of Scripture. Every text leads to multiple legitimate summaries. And the summaries that are most valuable to us vary from place to place, time to time, and person to person. Not every summary of Scripture is equally valuable or legitimate. But there are many summaries of the original meaning of biblical passages that are faithful and useful for the church in every age.

Now that we've seen how the complexity of the passage can lead us to multiple summaries, let's turn our attention to the uniqueness of the interpreter.



## UNIQUENESS OF INTERPRETER

In an earlier lesson, we advocated using an authority-dialog approach to the meaning of Scripture. You may remember that an authority-dialog model acknowledges that objective truth can be found in the text of Scripture as long as the methods comply with biblical standards. One valuable aspect of an authority-dialog model is that it highlights the fact that all interpreters come to biblical writings with different sets of concerns, assumptions, backgrounds and questions. Each of us reads Scripture differently because God has gifted each of us differently. We all have strengths and weaknesses, and we process information in a variety of ways, based on our unique knowledge and experience. God has designed his church so that we each can benefit from the strengths of others.

People's gifts and backgrounds lead them to summarize biblical passages in distinctive ways. For instance, an historian may summarize the meaning of Genesis 1 differently than an artist. The historian might describe the order in which God created light and dark, water and dry land, and plants and animals. But an artist might talk about the beauty and goodness of the stars in the night sky, and the fish and birds throughout the world. The personal strengths of the interpreters lead each to bring out important but different aspects of the passage's original meaning.

At the same time, both types of summaries can also be hindered by the interpreters' weaknesses; each one omits important truths that the other includes. Let's assume, for example, that we want to understand the nature of God, and we choose to begin by exploring Genesis 1. If we read the historian's summary, we see that God is an organized planner, but we may overlook the delight God took in his creation when he declared in Genesis 1:31 that creation was "very good." However, if we focus solely on the artist's summary, we may see God as flawlessly creative but ignore his intentionality and orderliness. These potential weaknesses help us see that no summary should be ignored simply because it's not the same as ours. In many cases, we can learn a lot about a passage from other peoples' summaries.

**Since we all have strengths and weaknesses in the body of Christ, it is so important that we not study Scripture simply by ourselves, but we learn from what others have seen in the Scriptures. I think of several examples of this. I've done a lot of study in the New Testament. I've studied the Old Testament, I see the unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the Old Testament coming to fulfillment in Christ in his work in the church, but I benefit greatly from my friends who have focused their thoughts and attention in Old Testament passages and can bring wisdom to bear on their understanding of the Hebrew text, of the backgrounds of the ancient Near East. As I look at a text that may be quoted in the New Testament that comes from the Old and I want to understand its original setting as well, I benefit in that way. I also know that I have my own blind spots, not just because of a lack of education but because I'm not fully conformed to the image of Christ yet. And I learn from the wisdom of those who have**

walked with Christ longer. They see things in Scripture. They see implications of how it applies to my life and to their lives in ways that I don't fully recognize. So from that standpoint of my spiritual immaturity being less than fully mature, I benefit greatly from brothers and sisters who have walked with Christ further.

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

God intended the Bible and Bible interpretation to be understood in a context of fellowship with other believers. One of the instructions we get almost sixty-five times in the New Testament is just the simple word “one another” — encourage one another and build up one another and lead one another, and so forth. In Ephesians 3:18, the apostle Paul says that only when we are in fellowship with other believers we fully really comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and the length and the depth of the love of Christ. So alone we can't do it. We need to do it in fellowship with other believers. And then usually they will... I've experienced that myself sitting and doing Bible study in a mixed group of people, and it always amazing with which insights people enrich one another when they study the Bible together.

— Dr. P. J. Buys

Having looked at the ways the complexity of the passage and the uniqueness of the interpreter make multiple summaries possible, let's consider the needs of the audience.

## NEEDS OF AUDIENCE

When we summarize the original meaning of Scripture, we often do it in ways that anticipate the needs of different audiences. Sometimes we summarize a passage to preach a sermon to adults. Sometimes we're preparing a Bible study for children. Sometimes we read the Bible because we're wrestling with a particular problem, or even just for our own spiritual growth. Different audiences often have very different needs. And this means that in order to apply the Bible in responsible and relevant ways, we have to find summaries that are helpful to our specific audiences. As an example, consider Jesus' words in John 16:33:

**I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (John 16:33).**

There are many legitimate ways to summarize this verse. We could create a summary that focused on peace, or on the fact that Jesus reveals truth to us. But let's assume we need to summarize it for an audience that's dealing with suffering.

First, we would need to look at the reason for the suffering. Some Christians suffer because they endure persecution from unbelieving political authorities. Others suffer from poverty or natural disasters. Others suffer as a result of unwise or even sinful behavior. And there are other causes of suffering, too. Because of these vast differences in our own experiences, no single summary will responsibly apply the teachings of John 16:33 to all these different audiences.

For example, summarizing the passage for an audience suffering persecution might look like this: Be encouraged because Jesus will eventually end your persecution and establish a world in which you will never be persecuted again.

But to those suffering from poverty or a natural disaster, the summary may look like this: Jesus has permitted your suffering for a time, and will eventually bless you in ways that more than make up for the losses you've experienced.

In general, we can all be encouraged by the fact that Jesus has overcome the world, and we can all hope to find peace in the midst of sufferings. But since we all suffer from different troubles, we have to adapt the complex teaching of this passage in different ways in order to minister to the needs of different audiences.

And there are cultural differences that we should take into account, too. Each culture has a different history, different societal structure, different competing religious viewpoints, and different strengths and weaknesses. In order to apply the Bible in the most helpful ways, we need to find summaries of Scripture that minister to the needs of specific people in their own specific circumstances.

**One of the privileges of pastoral ministry is to teach the Bible and proclaim the gospel to a wide variety of audiences — people that are well educated, people that are not educated at all, people who are young, people who are old, people in very different kinds of work situations. But that is a very demanding task because it requires a pastor really to have a sense of the people to whom he is giving the Word of God. And two things that I've found very helpful in that area: first of all, just asking people in my congregation, "Was that clear? Did you understand that? Talk to me. What have you been learning from recent sermons?" And not just speaking to people all the time but listening to people in their response to God's Word. The other thing that I've found very helpful is to teach the gospel regularly to young children. In fact, often times in pastoral ministry I have taught the same sermon that I am teaching to an adult congregation in shorter, simpler form to young children, and that's a great way for a pastor to develop a gift of simplicity. And we should always try to be simple and clear when we're communicating something as important as the gospel.**

**— Dr. Philip Ryken**

**It's very important to adapt our message so that people can hear it. One of the ways to do this is in terms of right- and left-brained people. Say, left-brained is very analytical, likes to deal with the facts. Right-brained is much more given to stories and demonstrations and examples. And I tend to be kind of in the middle of those things, so I kind of need both. And it depends on the culture you go to because there's going to be some places in the world that are exceedingly right-brained, some people that are exceedingly left-brained, and it's good to adapt to those places. In the time of Jesus, it's very interesting that he was willing to seek correlations of scriptural truth to things like other Scriptures, other experiences: look at the birds of the air; this is like the story about a Samaritan that's going down the road. He did it all the time... And I think he adapted very well to various audiences with both right- and left-brained contingencies.**

**— Dr. Matt Friedman**

When we interpret the Bible, we should always have in mind both the original meaning of the passage and the needs of our contemporary audiences. In many ways, the investigation of Scripture is all about bridging the distance between the original meaning and our contemporary audience, so that we can all benefit from the full value of biblical texts. None of us can do this perfectly. But we can trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us to biblical summaries that minister to his church in valuable ways.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In this lesson on discovering meaning: we've focused on two main ideas: the important guides to meaning we find in the writer, document and audience of Scripture; and the multiple summaries we can make from Scripture.

We all have to admit that sometimes the Scriptures are difficult to understand. But the good news is that God has given us a variety of ways to discover the original meaning of his Word. He's given us the documents of Scripture themselves, and these documents contain the grammatical and literary context we need. And he's also provided us with ways of gathering information about the writers and the original audiences of Scripture. And beyond this, the original meaning of every portion of Scripture is so rich that we can gain new insights into it every day of our lives. If we keep these things in mind as we study the Bible, we'll be able to discover more and more about the original meaning of Scripture.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
SIX

Discovering Meaning  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	Why is it important to understand a biblical book's historical setting?.....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	Why should we consider the author and original audience when interpreting a biblical text?.....	2
<b>Question 3:</b>	What are some drawbacks to over-emphasizing the original audience in biblical interpretation? .....	5
<b>Question 4:</b>	How can becoming familiar with Greek help us to interpret the New Testament? .....	6
<b>Question 5:</b>	How important to our interpretive efforts is knowledge of a passage's grammatical and historical contexts?.....	7
<b>Question 6:</b>	What kinds of copying errors did scribes typically make when copying biblical texts?.....	8
<b>Question 7:</b>	Were New Testament authors sometimes unfaithful to the Old Testament?.....	10
<b>Question 8:</b>	How can learning from other interpreters help us interpret the Bible better? .....	13
<b>Question 9:</b>	How can pastors and teachers learn to adapt their teaching to the needs of different audiences? .....	14



# **He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation**

## **Lesson Six: Discovering Meaning**

### **Faculty Forum**

With

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Dr. Darrell L. Bock

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

Dr. Gary Cockerill

Dr. Brandon Crowe

Dr. Dan Doriani

Dr. Howard Eyrich

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Dr. David Redelings

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

Dr. Simon Vibert

Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace

### **Question 1:**

#### **Why is it important to understand a biblical book's historical setting?**

There are many factors to consider when we come to interpret a passage of Scripture. One of the first is the historical setting, or time and place, in which a biblical book or passage was written. But if Scripture is still relevant to our lives today, do we really need to learn what was happening thousands of years ago? Why is it important to understand a biblical book's historical setting?

#### **Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

It's important to understand the historical setting in which each book of the Bible was written, as far as we can determine that setting, for several reasons. One is that it helps us really see the Bible as a real document written to real people in real circumstances. Not simply written and tucked away and sealed for another day, but actually written to living, breathing people who struggled with the same kinds of issues we do. And when we can understand their circumstances, we can see a more direct line of application sometimes to our own lives. That's part of it. Another reason is we're able to discern the applications for those original readers. For example, the book of Revelation was written to people struggling under sometimes what was perceived as a chaotic world where maybe God wasn't in control or a world in which the authorities or people in general were hostile to their faith. And so, they had real questions about, could they persevere in this kind of world? Was God in charge? And if he was, was he working for their good? And so, as an example, the book of Revelation, we see what those early Christians received from it if we look at the historical situation instead of simply looking past it to our time. And finally, an important reason why we want to look at the historical setting is because the human authors of Scripture, as they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they used the language, they used the literary forms. And they also, at times, used historical reference so that, if we understand those things, we tend to read them in their original

context rather than try to force them into our context. So we can understand how biblical writers used poetry or used imagery on their terms rather than forcing them to do it on our terms.

**Dr. Brandon Crowe**

Why is it important to understand the historical setting of biblical books? Well, for one, these books are written a long time ago to a people that shared a certain language, and culture, and situation... And these are the types of things that are simply assumed by the biblical writers whenever they write their books. And so, for example, to understand the point of what a biblical author is trying to make is — to understand that point, it helps us to get as close back to that era as we can, because we are separated by more than 2,000 years ... A second reason why it's important to understand the historical context of biblical books is so we don't exploit the book and use it for our own purposes. As the old saying goes, "Any text without a context can become a pretext for whatever we want to do with the book." And so to make sure that we are understanding the book as God intended it to be understood through the original human author, then we should understand that human author's historical context so we can appropriately make the transition from their day to our day. It's been noted that even the Devil can cite Scripture for his own purposes. And simply citing a Bible verse does not ensure that we are understanding or appropriating the biblical text in the right way. And so, part of the safeguard against exploiting those texts in that way is understanding, in a robust fashion, the historical context in which the books were originally written. A third reason might be illustrated with the New Testament letters. And here is where we see in a very clear way the importance of historical context. If someone were to approach 1 Corinthians, for example — the letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth — and not understand that that church was dealing with some very specific troubles, then someone might run the danger of applying that book, without any adjustments, wholesale to the church today. But we should be careful about simply doing that because Paul was writing as a pastor to a church with some very specific issues, and part of the way he addressed those issues is unique to that church in that time. Now, does that mean 1 Corinthians is not a book for us today? Of course it is. It is true always, in all places, in all times. But part of understanding it rightly in our own day is understanding how Paul tailored his response to that church in their particular historical circumstances.

**Question 2:**

**Why should we consider the author and original audience when interpreting a biblical text?**

When we study a biblical passage, we need to look at its historical setting, but we also need to understand something about the author and original audience of the book or passage. We should always ask, who wrote this book? And who first heard it? But, why should we consider the author and original audience when interpreting a biblical text?

**Dr. Gary Cockerill**

The question about understanding something about the original author and the audience of a biblical text is one that's been important to me, since Hebrews has been a focus of my study and we don't know who wrote it, and we don't really know to whom it was written. Our only clues really are within the text itself. And of course in understanding a biblical book, it is important to understand what we can about the era from which it came — the culture of the first century, the language of the first century, how expressions were used, and so forth, and the their meaning — to put it in that much context. And to understand it then with the more specific information we are given ... I don't think we can know the actual name of the writer of Hebrews. I think we can know a lot about the person. I mean, he was a deep theologian with a profound understanding of the Old Testament and how it was fulfilled in Christ, with a real pastoral heart for the people to whom he was writing. He was a consummate rhetorician. I mean, his structure of the book, the way he has put things together is beautifully done to impact his hearers. So he was very cultured in that way in ancient Greek rhetoric. And so we need to understand him within that context. He certainly bases what he said — there's many ways to see how he bases what he says — on common Christian tradition that was believed by all the writers of the New Testament. And yet he has his own unique way of expressing that and bringing that home. Now, his hearers obviously were people who could benefit from this kind of thing. They had to be cultured themselves enough to appreciate, to receive this kind of rhetoric. We can understand from his concerns something of the things they faced. They were becoming perhaps lax in their Christian faith. They were facing persecution, exclusion from the world. They were perhaps tempted by the rewards the world could give if they gave up... or soft-pedaled their Christian commitment.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

To understand the original audience of a writing is actually very crucial to understanding what's being said and why it's being said the way that it's being said. We could take, for example, books like Galatians and Colossians which are dealing with issues in the church — specific issues. In Galatia we're dealing with, "Should someone follow the Law?" And in Colossae we're dealing with a particular heresy that's never actually named for us but is only described. The more we know what the background of those that Paul is writing in opposition to, what they hold, the better grasp we have of what's going on in the book. And so we see in the book of Galatians an emphasis on people who want to go back to the Law, and Paul says, no, you left that in Christ. And all you need to do to understand that is have an understanding of what Second Temple Judaism was about, what the Judaism of the time was about. Colossae is a little more difficult. You're trying to figure out what this teaching is that says that there is this kind of super-spirituality *above* simply believing in Christ. And it's debated whether it comes out of a Jewish background, or Greco-Roman background, or perhaps a mix. And that makes a little bit of difference as to how you interpret some of the passages about special calendars, and moons, and special days, and special diet, all those kinds of things... So, understanding what that background is does impact the way you read the book and the way you understand it. And

depending on which version of that heresy you pick will impact how you're reading those passages. Being able to decide that at one level is very important to know what the details are about. At another level, fortunately, we can step back one level and say, well, whatever it is we know Paul wasn't for it... Whether it's Jewish or Greco-Roman, doesn't really help us very much to get closer to God through what Jesus Christ has already provided. You have everything that you need in what he's already given you. That's where your attention should be. That really is the stress of the book, and that helps us to appreciate what Colossians is about.

**Rev. Thad James, Jr.**

It's important to understand and know who the audience is, because that's going to have a direct effect on how we interpret Scripture... Is it the disciples? Is it the Pharisees? Am I speaking to the Samaritan woman? To the Syrophoenician woman? Because all of these are going to have a direct effect on how I interpret. What are the circumstances of the people? What are they going through to prompt this particular writing? And also, it's going to prevent me from, again, giving a faulty interpretation. I can easily place myself in there and say that God is speaking this directly to me when, if I don't understand what's happening with the original people, then again I can come up with a severely faulty interpretation ... And so, understanding the recipients again will give me a clearer, fuller understanding of what this particular passage, what this particular verse, and even what the particular chapter or book is about.

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

Information about a biblical book's original audience helps us in understanding a book's meaning because it helps us to understand the purpose for which God spoke a particular portion of Scripture. God is an infinitely wise pastor, and he always speaks his word right into the hearts and the needs of his congregation. So Paul speaks the letter to the Galatians under the inspiration of the Spirit specifically to Gentile Christians who are under pressure to, perhaps, think that they will become full-fledged children of Abraham if they observe all of the laws given to Israel through Moses. And Paul speaks into that situation and demonstrates the reality of the gospel from the Old Testament Scriptures. So he will quote Scriptures even as his opponents are quoting Scriptures, but also from the experience of the Galatians — "You received the Spirit as the Spirit drew you to faith in Christ crucified, not through your keeping the Law but in believing this message of what has been accomplished for you." God is always speaking into the hearts and lives of his people. So, for example, the letter to the Hebrews is speaking to people who are under the pressure of some sort of exclusion from the Jewish community, uncertain about whether Jesus' high priesthood, which they cannot see, is as effective as the priestly sanctuary and the priestly sacrifices that are still going on in Jerusalem. So the writer to the Hebrews speaks to their situation. The more we can understand their spiritual struggles, the better we'll be able to see how those struggles manifest themselves in our experience today. Maybe on the surface looking somewhat different in the way we would experience spiritual temptation or trial today, but there is a continuity as well. And the more we grasp what God said to them and why in the light of their situation, the

occasion for the text, the better we'll be able to see how he speaks his word to us in our setting today.

### **Question 3:**

#### **What are some drawbacks to over-emphasizing the original audience in biblical interpretation?**

The writer, document and original audience all play a role in the interpretation of Scripture, and each is important. Sometimes, though, we're tempted to place too much importance on one of these factors. For instance, some interpreters may concentrate only on the original audience of a passage and ignore the other factors. What are some drawbacks to over-emphasizing the original audience in biblical interpretation?

#### **Dr. Peter Walker**

Whilst there are real benefits in knowing the original audience of a particular part of Scripture, there is a real danger, I think, of it being overemphasized. In the last twenty to thirty years, a lot of energy has gone into people trying to find the original audience of, say, of John's gospel, and you have whole books being written about the Johannine community. And you get the impression at the end of reading these books that the Johannine community was a group of about ten or eleven people sitting in a tiny little church building next door to the synagogue in Ephesus, and they had all these problems. And John was writing these great truths just to help this tiny group. And suddenly you stand back and think, "Well, therefore, this text is irrelevant to me because I'm in a different context. And maybe it's just a sectarian document just designed to help a few people." And instead, you stand back and think, "No, John's gospel was written with everybody in mind. It's painting Christ's glory on a cosmic scale." And therefore, this overemphasis on finding the original audience, it almost reduces the text and makes it too particular, too contextual. And instead we want to say, this is a book which is universal in appeal. And let's read the text as it is, a book for everyone.

#### **Dr. Bruce Baugus**

When we're interpreting Scripture, it is important to pay attention, and to think through carefully, the audience. And we can think about that in terms of what is often referred to as the *original* audience, meaning, for example, the people of Corinth who were the recipients of Paul's letters ... Paying attention to the audience is very important. However, there's also some pitfalls with this. Historically speaking, I have thought many times that interpreters have a speculative reconstruction of what must have been the case with this original audience. And then their own speculation drives and determines and dictates what may or may not be possible regarding the meaning of any particular text ... If we ever think that the actual meaning of the text is dependent upon our responses and our reactions to that text, for example, then we've gone astray and we're not likely to end up with what God has said to us.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

It is possible that we could over-emphasize the role of the original audience — those who first heard a letter or book of the Bible read, or read it for themselves — to such an extent that we don't think that we still have continuity in the way that we would hear that same message today. Now, it might well be that our circumstances have changed, that we live in a different geographical area. We also live in a different time. We live in a different cultural context; so therefore, we may need to make some changes to the things that are said to an original audience. But nevertheless, we still believe that the human condition is the same. We believe that God is the same, and we believe that there is a sense in which the words of Scripture still resonate even though we may live many thousand years away from when the original audience first heard them read.

**Question 4:****How can becoming familiar with Greek help us to interpret the New Testament?**

To interpret the Bible responsibly, we need to set up safeguards that keep us from reading meanings into passages that the author didn't intend. One practice that can help us with these safeguards is to study the original languages of the Bible. So, how can becoming familiar with Greek help us to interpret the New Testament?

**Dr. Daniel B. Wallace**

I think when we're wrestling with how to interpret the New Testament, all the tools that we can possibly use to help us are important. But what I mean is that the best we can do is to try to put ourselves in the place of the original author. Now, that would include trying to understand the culture. It would be to try to understand some of his background, the religious background, where he's writing, the geography, who he is, what his own upbringing is. And it also includes knowing the language in which he wrote. And consequently, seminaries have courses in Greek and Hebrew so that we can get into the text of what these biblical authors actually wrote ... Now, does that mean that I'm going to read something in Greek that is going to radically change my view of Jesus or theology? I don't think it's going to affect the larger parts of it, but it will affect some lesser parts ... So I think one of the bridges that we need to try to cross as best we can is to cross the bridge of the biblical languages, get into the first-century world ... We're making a commitment, on one hand, to people in our culture that we're trying to reach with the gospel. But on the other hand, it's important for us to begin with the text of the Bible and try to live in that culture and that language as much as possible.

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

Developing skills for biblical interpretation is a tricky matter. It's not something that's easy to do on your own ... So, what you want to do is, when you're learning how to

interpret the Bible, is develop as many background skills and resources as you can. So, skill in the history of Israel, skill in the geography of Israel, skill in the languages in which the Bible came to us, early church history, first century history, Greco-Roman history ... And as you do that, I would say one of the most important things, if you have the resources, is to begin building skills in the biblical languages. There are all different levels of biblical language facility. And even a fundamental language so that you can look up words in a dictionary or a lexicon or theological dictionary or read a journal article, an electronic journal article that has Hebrew or Greek words in it. Those kinds of things will really pay off in all the work you do, not just attacking a specific topic. I would say that's one of the best ways is those background resources.

### **Question 5:**

#### **How important to our interpretive efforts is knowledge of a passage's grammatical and historical contexts?**

**When we interpret Scripture, many scholars believe it's valuable to have an awareness of both the grammatical and historical contexts of a passage. And they try to learn as much as they can about both. But why does this matter? How important to our interpretive efforts is knowledge of a passage's grammatical and historical contexts?**

#### **Dr. Miguel Nunez (translation)**

When we study the Word of God, we have to remember that the Word of God is a book too. It is inspired by God, but it is a book. Therefore it has grammatical rules, syntactical rules that continue to be true today in this book, the Bible. For example, an adjective is an adjective in the Bible too. A name is a name in the Bible also. They work in the same way. The verbs work in the same way in the Bible as in a Shakespearean play. But when we recognize the authority of the Word of God, this is different. The Bible has been inspired by God. Therefore, it is inerrant, infallible, and authoritative. Still, when we read the text, we cannot forget that we need grammatical rules to understand the Bible. In the same way, we have to remember that the Bible was inspired a long time ago. And many times we have to know what words meant then. Otherwise, we won't be able to come to a true meaning. God's truth doesn't change, but words can change meanings ... We have words in the past that don't mean exactly the same today. When we know what it meant in the past, we can read a text and say, "Oh, now I understand what the apostle Paul said because I can understand the grammar of that time, the syntax, the sentence construction, the paragraph." It's vital to be able to understand the grammar of the meaning of the words from those times, but secondly the historical context. These are books written at an historical time with real people. Paul writes a letter and it is a real church with real problems at that time. Therefore, I need to know the historical context and what was happening ... Understanding the historical context and also understanding the grammatical matters of that moment will help us understand the Word of God much more precisely. And that is vital for the study of the Word.



**Dr. Howard Eyrich**

The grammatical and the historical context becomes very important to our interpretative study. Particularly, I think, the grammatical framework does, *everywhere*. The historical is more important in some passages and some contexts than it is in others. But my favorite example of the grammatical is the passage that gets quoted at almost every missionary conference: "Go ye [therefore] into all the world." And the "go ye" is always, almost always, stated as an imperative verb. But in the text it's not an imperative verb... If you take in its grammatical structure — "while going, this is what we should be doing" — it gets very specific ... We should be making disciples, we should be baptizing, and we should be teaching those disciples to observe all that Jesus has taught. And so while the intent of the passage is imperative, it's set in the context of a process of living. Now, unfortunately, some people have gotten ahold of that and so they want to say evangelism should always just be casual, along the way. Now, I think that's a misuse of it ... And on the other side of the coin, there's no excuse for hammering people, but it's a process that should be the characteristic of our Christian life as we walk in this fallen world.

**Question 6:**

**What kinds of copying errors did scribes typically make when copying biblical texts?**

**Anyone who has attempted to hand-copy a letter or a document of any length will tell you that it's easy to make mistakes. In many respects it's very tedious work. And this is the way the Bible was copied for thousands of years. Given its difficulty, what kinds of copying errors did scribes typically make when copying biblical texts?**

**Dr. Daniel B. Wallace**

When we think about the handwritten manuscripts over the centuries, one of the questions that comes up is, what kinds of mistakes did scribes actually do? And you can divide them a number of different ways: one is they made intentional changes — where they don't regard it as a mistake — and unintentional changes. So we could talk about intentional changes in the Gospels, and here's what's going on. If a scribe is copying Mark's gospel, and he has just finished copying Matthew's gospel, and he sees in the margin of his text that, oh, here's a parallel to Matthew that seems to fit the wording better than what he has in his text of Mark. And then he begins to think, you know, even though the scribe that copied this out regarded this as Scripture like I do, he made a bunch of mistakes. And so, that later scribe might take that marginal reading and put it into his text. And you end up with a harmonization. And that's one of the most common kinds of changes we have in our manuscripts, is harmonizations in the Gospels where it's not that they're discrepant to the point where there's errors. But there are going to be some disagreements in the sense of exactly what they're saying. That's even too strong of a word. There are really going to be some *differences* and different motifs, emphases, this kind of thing in the Gospels. But



you'll get scribes that are going to change the wording to make it say the same thing. Now that would be an *intentional* change. *Unintentional* happens when they're not hearing. Maybe they're in a scriptorium where they're copying this out and there's a lecturer who's reading the text out loud. That doesn't happen as much. Almost all the copies we have are copied by a scribe looking at a manuscript and writing down what he sees. Now in the process of doing that, he sees the text, then he has to remember what he just saw. And then he has to write it out, and he has to make sure that what he's written is the same thing as he saw. And that often has a lot of mistakes. And anybody who has copied out a lengthy text by hand is going to recognize that — "oh, I just made this mistake," "I just duplicated this line," or "I just skipped this line." And that kind of thing happens with the scribes all the time. So you've got these two categories of intentional and unintentional. Now you can think about the nature of the scribal changes in a different way besides the two categories of intentional and unintentional. You can think in terms of, what are the kinds of mistakes that they make that are not meaningful? That is, it's not a meaningful change at all; it doesn't affect the meaning of anything. It's just an error that a later scribe... will easily correct. ... So, here's a scribe who — maybe through fatigue, or because his handwriting isn't as clear, or a number of reasons — is going to put the wrong word there. And a later scribe is going to be able to correct that. Those are the kinds of mistakes that we'd say are the vast majority of the kinds of scribal changes that were made in the manuscripts, unintentional changes that are nonsense, or they're spelling changes. Another kind of spelling change that we actually do see in the manuscripts is the word for "John" in Greek is either "Ioanes" or "Ioannes." Well, those sound the same, but one has a single "n" in the middle of the word, and the other has two "n's". And whenever you see the name John in the New Testament, you've got some manuscripts that spell it with two "n's" and some that spell it with one "n." And consequently that counts as a textual variant. The most common kind of variant we have when it comes to the nature of these differences is what's called a "moveable *nu*," and that's the "n" at the end of the word when the next word starts with a vowel. It's just like "a book," "an apple." And the moveable *nu*, it accounts for more textual variants than any other single category among our manuscripts. About 70 percent of our textual variants are spelling differences that affect *absolutely nothing* — 70 percent. And then you've got kinds that are transpositions of "this word versus that word," or "this letter versus that letter." A transposition is where you might say, "In the beginning," and instead somebody else puts "in beginning the" or "the in beginning." And that's just a transposition. That happens through inattention, through poor memory of what was said, writing it down quickly, there was fatigue. There's a number of reasons why you have that. And sometimes you'll get that where you have a transposition of letters. So instead of — and I'm sure all of us have done this — if you type out the word "the" — t-h-e — often I type it out as t-e-h. It's just called a transposition, and it's something that my computer typically corrects. And I'm grateful for that kind of correction, because I make that error all the time. Now, those kinds of mistakes happen very frequently as well. When you combine that with another kind which is called "synonyms" where, like in John 4:1, some manuscripts say, "...when *Jesus* knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was baptizing, making more disciples than John..." Other manuscripts say, "...when *the Lord* knew that the

Pharisees had heard..." So it's either, "when Jesus knew" or "when the Lord knew." There's no manuscripts that say "when Peter knew" or "when Mary knew." It's always the Lord or Jesus. Those are the two variants. But you've got that kind of thing that's a change of synonyms, and that happens very frequently. You take those kinds of transpositions and synonyms that are, they're sort of meaningful. They're not nonsense errors but they really don't affect much. That's another 15 percent or so of the kinds of variants. When you look at all the variants we have for the New Testament manuscripts, 99 percent, at least, essentially affect nothing. That is, they're nonsense errors. They're spelling differences. They're transpositions. They're synonyms, this kind of a thing. There's less than 1 percent of all the textual variants that are both meaningful and viable. And what I mean by "viable" is that it has a good possibility of going back to the original text. What I mean by "meaningful" is that it changes the meaning of the text to some degree. For example, in Mark 9:29, Jesus is talking to his disciples after they tried to cast out demons, and they said, man, this one's really stubborn, we couldn't get rid of him. So Jesus says, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer." Well, later manuscripts add two words: "and fasting." So did Jesus say, "... by prayer *and fasting*" or did he say that you can cast out this demon just by prayer? That's a textual variant that is meaningful, and it's sufficiently early that it may be that "and fasting" was what he actually said. So it's a difficult one to determine. But approximately one-fourth of 1 percent of all textual variants are both meaningful and viable. So, the nature of these things — the vast majority of them — are the kinds of errors or the kinds of changes that scholars have said, "This is a 'yawn,' and we have to deal with it so we can establish the wording of the original text." But the debates that have gotten into the public forum are about that one-fourth of 1 percent, and that's it.

### Question 7:

#### **Were New Testament authors sometimes unfaithful to the Old Testament?**

Many students of Scripture have noticed just how frequently New Testament writers relied on the Old Testament in their writings. But many times it's difficult to understand *how* those writers used a particular passage, or why they chose that passage in the first place. In addition, New Testament writers weren't always precise with their quotations. Were New Testament authors sometimes unfaithful to the Old Testament?

#### **Dr. David Redelings**

A lot of people wonder sometimes when they look at the way the New Testament writers quote the Old Testament, there's a concern, that when you go back and look at the original context of the Old Testament, that it doesn't seem to be talking about the same thing. It's as though the New Testament writers have misquoted the Old Testament. I think this, probably, mostly reflects on our lack of familiarity with the Old Testament more than anything else. And the example I like to give is the example

from Matthew 2 where the evangelist Matthew says... he quotes from the prophet Hosea 11 saying, "Out of Egypt I called my son." And Matthew uses this in reference to Jesus, referring to Jesus returning from Egypt where... his family had fled from the authorities. And so, then when you turn back and you look at Hosea 11, and you find that Hosea begins that same section by talking about Israel. He says something to the effect that he had loved Israel, and then he says "out of Egypt I called my son." And he's clearly referring to the book of Exodus and the nation of Israel coming out of Egypt. So, the first thing, I think, in giving this as an example, is to point out that Matthew didn't just misunderstand what was happening. People think, "Well, Matthew just didn't understand," or "He made an error and he didn't know." ... Well, Matthew is obviously, throughout his gospel, quoting the Old Testament a number of times, quoting the Hebrew Scriptures. And he clearly is doing so because the audience he's writing to has a concern for, and values the importance of, the Old Testament Scriptures. And so, it's not as though he's writing to an audience that doesn't care, or won't know, or won't catch him out if he's trying to... you know, pull the wool over their eyes, so to speak. So instead of either of those ways of looking at it, I think we're kind of left with this, that if Matthew is trying to write a persuasive book — if he's trying to bring people to faith in Christ, or confirm those followers of Jesus in their faith in Jesus as the Messiah — then we can be confident that Matthew's not going to, sort of, put at risk his entire reputation or the reception of his book by introducing some sort of quotations which would actually just diminish or eliminate his credibility to his readers. So, then we need to take a look and say, well then, what exactly is Matthew doing? What is he thinking when he looks at these texts? And there are a couple of options which I would suggest, and I think other commentators would suggest at least one of these — you would find if you looked at other commentators. The first would be that Matthew conceives of Jesus as being, since he is called God's Son — the Messiah is called God's Son even in the Old Testament when God promises to David that his son would rule over the throne of the nation — since Jesus is the Son, and since Israel is also called God's son in the Old Testament, Matthew has this sort of sense of theological linkage. That since they both stand as God's son, that Jesus, in fact, fulfills that role in an ideal way which the nation of Israel failed to do. And an indication that this is the way Matthew looks at things would be found, for example, in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness where you see Jesus referring to the temptations of the nation and then experiencing those same temptations. And yet, in his case, he does not succumb to the temptations. And there are other examples in Matthew's gospel you could find along those lines. Another way to look at this is that Matthew may be thinking of God's fulfillment, or I should say God's actions in the present time in fulfillment of his plan. And he may be reading Old Testament Scriptures in the light of what he knows has already happened. And so because of that... the thinking would be that when God speaks to the prophet Hosea and says, "out of Egypt I called my son," that God himself knows and anticipates that, of course, the Messiah also will come out of Egypt. And so that, in a sense, there's sort of a double entendre, or two senses, in which God intends this prophecy to be carried out. And I think, maybe, an example of that kind of thing also would be where the evangelist refers to "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." If you look back in the Old Testament context, you see that this seems to have reference to a child of

Isaiah, if you look at Isaiah 8. And so, again, Matthew seems to be looking back at this and seeing some sense in which God spoke something which, unknown to anyone else at the time, he actually had in mind a double fulfillment.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

The short answer to the question that New Testament writers were unfaithful to the Old Testament is, no. But let me explain what that means, because the fact is, these New Testament writers do use the Old Testament in a variety of ways, and some writers will appeal to the same text but make a different point from it. That's because those texts themselves are making multiple points. And sometimes a writer, rather than summarizing everything that a passage is doing, is zeroing in on one thing that a passage is doing. Another thing that produces a difference that's important is, is that sometimes writers are citing a passage kind of by itself, and other times they're citing a passage in light of a larger context, which they may not name but that they presuppose in making the point that they're making. This also allows them to bring in a larger frame of reference, and in that larger frame of reference, bring this passage in and look at it from a certain angle. That results, perhaps, in a slightly different reading with a slightly different emphasis than if you're just looking at the words themselves. A good example of this is a place in the Gospel of Luke where Luke is citing Isaiah 40, and he comes to the end, and he talks about, "all flesh will see the salvation of God." Well in fact, the text reads at that point, "all flesh will see the *glory* of God." That's what the Old Testament reads. But if you read the context in which the glory of God is being discussed, we're talking about the coming of salvation to God's people. And so he makes the substitution in light of the totality of the context so that he doesn't have to go on and cite five or six more verses but simply collapses the meaning of the text by making that substitution. So sometimes that explains where a difference is coming from. And that larger frame — it can be a near context of just the paragraph, it might be a book, it might even be the whole theme biblically — sometimes impacts the way a particular passage is being read and what's said about it.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

When we look at the way that the New Testament writers used the Old Testament, I think we can conclude a number of things. Number one, the persons in the New Testament, whether they're authors or not — Jesus, the disciples and the apostles who wrote the New Testament — first off, they viewed the Old Testament as historical and as factual. They refer to people, events, circumstances as if they're referring to actual historical, factual events, not legendary events. Secondly, I believe that they used these Old Testament texts in a way that the original authors would have agreed with ... Now at the same time, we need to realize that many of us in modern times come to the Bible not understanding one of the main methods that the New Testament uses in interpreting the Old, and what the Old Testament authors shared was this sense of correspondence in history divinely ordained by God. It's sometimes called "typology." So when people say, you know, there are three hundred-something prophecies of Christ that are fulfilled in the New Testament, oftentimes people think, "Oh, that means if I look that up it's going to say something specifically about a propositional prediction." And there are those. Isaiah 53, I think, is very clear and

propositional, fulfilled only in Christ. Or Micah 5 fulfilled with Jesus born in Bethlehem. But there are also those patterns that find their climactic final statement in the New Testament, and that's called typology. And if we understand the Old Testament authors do the same thing, and point lines of trajectory out, that they show they expect future authors to use their text in that way ... So I think when you understand that the Old and New Testament authors shared that assumption of correspondence in history and God's divine superintendence over that, that then you see that the New Testament authors are very faithful to the Old Testament authors' intent.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How can learning from other interpreters help us interpret the Bible better?**

**We all have strengths and weaknesses in the body of Christ. And as biblical interpreters, we also have strengths and weaknesses that can affect how we interpret a particular passage. This can lead to variety in interpretation. So, how can learning from other interpreters help us interpret the Bible better?**

#### **Dr. Greg Perry**

It's so important for us not to read the Bible in isolation, first of all because the Bible really is given to the whole people of God. And as we're told, the Spirit has given gifts, and each part of the body really is interdependent on the other. And so gifts of teaching, gifts of discernment, gifts of exhortation and encouragement really bring to light different aspects of meaning within the text that, if we're in relationship with people who have those gifts, we can really benefit from the way that they're reading. But also, I would say in terms of just building relationships across cultures as well. I know that in terms of my own upbringing, there are great benefits and strengths to how I was brought up in a particular place at a particular time. But there are also cultural blind spots associated with that place and time. And so, I've really benefited from some of my African students who have a much stronger sense of spiritual warfare, the importance of prayer, of the demonic, and things that they have seen in their life. And so as we read the gospel narratives about demon possession and these types of things, I have really benefited from listening to them and appreciating things that I might have discounted as a Western Christian were really an everyday reality for them. So, building relationships with people with different spiritual gifts, building relationships even across against gender as we read as men and women, building relationships across cultural lives really brings a richness of gifts and insights into the text that we all need that we wouldn't have if we just read as isolated individuals.

#### **Dr. Simon Vibert**

So, we have strengths and weaknesses in the body of Christ, and we can learn from people who have different approaches to reading the Bible that can help us in our interpretive process. At the most basic level, if somebody reads the Bible from the

perspective of the farmer, then they can have better insight, I think, in terms of how you care for animals or how you might till the ground and things like that ... I think we've established quite clearly that the meaning is inherent in the authorial intent, in the fact that God still stays close to his Word and is able to make his meaning plain today. But nevertheless, a Christian sister who reads a biblical passage from the perspective of being a woman, perhaps being a woman who's experienced at the hand of oppressive male views, certain perspectives on the Bible, can bring insights to the text that I really need to hear. And that's something very positive, I think, about reading from the perspective from which you come. Similarly, those who have experienced extreme poverty or deprivation can identify more closely with certain passages within the Bible. The thing that keeps a control, as it were, on this hermeneutical process is helping us appreciate that God does have a meaning in the text that he wants to get over. And that our own interpretive perspective should be submissive and humble under God's Word, not thinking that we're standing over it judging it in some way.

**Dr. Stephen J. Bramer**

The great strength of learning from other interpreters is that we recognize the gifting of the Holy Spirit. That he has gifted others with the gift of teaching and that the Spirit can work in their lives as well as in our own. Each one of us comes with certain biases, presuppositions. Hopefully most of them are based upon Scripture, but we all come from a different background. And by consulting other teachers who the Holy Spirit has worked with, we can actually see how we either have been in error or have been too narrow. Or actually open up for us some applications and insights that we might never have noticed. It's possible to actually skip over something in our humanness and not recognize the importance of a word or a statement or a tense even within the verses — a feature of the narrative. And by having other teachers who can point this out to us, it actually allows us then to be a better teacher. And we recognize the giftedness in the way the body of Christ is supposed to work... collaboratively working together to sense what the Spirit of God is saying to us.

**Question 9:**

**How can pastors and teachers learn to adapt their teaching to the needs of different audiences?**

For pastors and teachers, the work of interpreting Scripture responsibly is simply the first step. Once they come to a proper understanding of a passage, they must then think through how best to explain that passage and make it relevant to their audiences. How can pastors and teachers learn to adapt their teaching to the needs of different audiences?

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

Adapting our message to the needs of various audiences is actually a very biblical approach. For example, when Paul preaches in a synagogue in Acts 13, he gives a

message that's full of Scripture quotations. He uses standard Jewish approaches as he's speaking to the synagogue audience. In Acts 14, he's speaking to farmers and he speaks of how God gave us rain in fruitful seasons. In chapter 17, he speaks to Greek intellectuals and he quotes from Greek poets. So Paul contextualizes the message for different audiences, but the message is still the message. It's still a biblical message that he preaches in each case. When we adapt the message for different audiences, we need to make sure, first of all, we understand what the message of the biblical text is. But having understood that message, we can see how it relates to the struggles and the questions that people have. You don't start with the struggles and the questions in a way that makes you twist the text, but their questions may, and their struggles may lead you back to the text saying: "How does God speak to this? Where in Scripture is this addressed? And how can I put this in ways that they can best hear it?"

Contextualization is not a matter of watering down the text to make it fit our culture. It's a question of helping people hear the text — sometimes it may be more comforting, sometimes it may strike us more forcefully — but to hear what the message of God really is. In Revelation you have messages to the seven churches, and each church there's a different message. But in each case it concludes by saying, "Let the one who hears hear what the Spirit is saying to the *churches*..." So that there's something even to the churches that are addressing different situations, that can also speak to our situations too if we're going to hear it.

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

Well, teachers and preachers must adapt their teaching to different audiences, and I'll specify, *even* the different audiences within their audience. So for example, let's suppose a pastor or teacher is talking about work. Now there will be some people in this group that are working too hard, they have too many responsibilities. Others will be unemployed or under-employed and they don't have enough to do. Some will be working exactly where they always hoped to work — not many, but some. Others will be close. Others will be very far from what they ever expected or wanted to do. And in a sense, all you have to do is look at the people, or imagine them in advance as you prepare, so that you don't spend all of your time talking about people like you ... One of the mistakes we sometimes make — to stick with the question of "calling" or "work" — is teachers tend to think in sometimes elitist terms. We're leaders, and so we tend to think of other people as being vaguely like ourselves. The great number of people, we must remember, are simply trying to bring enough food to the table to eat this day. And they'll take really almost whatever they can that's honest in order to do that. And so for them, the notion of "calling" is not something noble, but the most basic call to have enough food, clothing and shelter to care for themselves and for the people who depend on them. And we must address them in the reality of their daily struggle... if we want to bless them, nurture them, pastor them.

**Dr. Luis Orteza**

Pastors and teachers need to be aware of their language that they use to communicate with their audience. For example, the language of the 50's will sound different from the language of today. And so that, I think it's necessary sometimes, you know, for pastors and teachers to learn what the current thought forms are in terms of the way

people are expressing themselves ... To be aware and know these expressions, I think will be helpful as far as learning to adapt and communicate with your audience.

As we seek to understand the original meaning of a particular passage of Scripture, we must realize that we have been afforded multiple guides in this process. We can look to the writer, the audience, the text itself, and its historical context to help in our interpretations. When we keep all of these in proper balance, they can guide us toward a responsible interpretation. Then we have a firm foundation for preaching and teaching God's Word in ways that are relevant and applicable to God's people.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
SEVEN

## APPLYING SCRIPTURE



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Necessity.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>III. Connections .....</b>	<b>5</b>
A. God	5
1. Eternal Counsel	6
2. Character	7
3. Covenant Promises	7
B. World	8
C. People	9
1. Sinful Images	9
2. Religious Divisions	10
3. Classes	11
<b>IV. Developments.....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. Epochal	12
B. Cultural	13
C. Personal	15
<b>V. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>15</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Seven

### Applying Scripture

#### INTRODUCTION

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We all know that in ordinary life we write down some things for temporary use and others for very long-term use. Well, for followers of Christ, there's certainly one book that will never grow obsolete: the Bible. Generation after generation, the people of God have cherished the Scriptures — and we should, because the Bible has a lot to say about living for God in every place and in every age. Jesus looked at the Bible as the Word of God that would remain the standard for God's people until all is accomplished. And as his followers, we do the same.

This is the seventh lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Applying Scripture." In this lesson, we'll suggest some approaches to application that are very useful in making the original meaning of Scripture relevant for modern audiences.

In this series, we'll define the process of application as:

**Appropriately connecting the original meaning of a biblical document to contemporary audiences in ways that impact their concepts, behaviors and emotions**

Since this definition makes use of our earlier definition of original meaning, it may be helpful to recall that original meaning is:

**The concepts, behaviors and emotions that the divine and human writers jointly intended the document to communicate to its first audience.**

**We need to understand what the author truly said, and then we can make the application. The application must come from the meaning of the passage, and knowing that original as far as we can helps us to understand, are we in the same theological position as the original hearers of this? Are we under the Mosaic Covenant? Are we under a certain covenant? And therefore, understanding the original setting, history, theological and contextual helps us then to properly understand it. We now know whether we need to bring that meaning through the finished work of Christ since we are now under the finished work of Christ.**

— Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

Now, the process of application isn't always easy, because we have to account for significant developments that have taken place between the times when the Bible was written and our own day. But the goal of the process of application is the same now as it was when Scripture was first written: to impact the concepts, the behaviors and the emotions of God's people according to the will of God.

The most important distinction we can make between original meaning and application is that our investigation of original meaning focuses on the impact Scripture was intended to have on the concepts, behaviors and emotions of its first audiences. But the interpretive process of application is concerned with how the modern audience should be impacted on all these levels.

The original meaning of the text is critical to our application because it's the inspired and authoritative meaning of the text. So, the proper modern application of a text must always be faithful to its original meaning. At the same time, our modern applications also have to go beyond original meaning in some sense, because they have to take into account modern times, cultures and individuals.

**Knowing the original meaning of a biblical passage helps us to apply it to our own lives because we recognize that a key component to its original meaning is understanding its original purpose, that is, the change that God designed that text to accomplish in its first audience, in its first readers, in the light of their situation, in the light of their frame of reference, how much of Scripture they knew at that point or had access to, in the light of the trials, the temptations that they were facing. That was God's application to them. The meaning really was serving the purpose of effecting his Holy Spirit's sanctifying purpose in their lives. Well, the Spirit's purpose in their lives is in continuity with the Holy Spirit's purpose in our lives. So the more we can understand their situation, their need, and therefore the purpose for which God gave that text in the original setting and to the original audience, that sets a trajectory for how the Spirit intends to apply that text in our life, in our situation. And that should be our guide as pastors, preachers, teachers in the way we apply the text. We ask how did God intend it to make a change, to make a difference in their lives then and then how does that carry over into the Holy Spirit's purpose in conforming us more and more to the image of Christ today?**

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Our discussion of the process of application will touch on three issues: First, we'll consider the necessity of application. Second, we'll examine the connections between the original meaning and modern audiences that make application possible. And third, we'll take a look at some of the major developments that have taken place between the times when the Bible was written and life today. Let's begin with the necessity of application.

## NECESSITY

---

Listen to how James talked about the necessity of application in James 1:21-25:

**Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:21-25).**

James taught that it's not enough to know what Scripture says. In order to benefit properly from Scripture, we have to be impacted by it; our concepts, behaviors and emotions have to be changed. This kind of application is absolutely necessary for every believer if we want to receive the blessings of God. But what about the process that leads to this result of application? Is it really necessary to exert the effort to determine how our concepts, behaviors and emotions should be impacted?

**Well, the best way to make the Scriptures relevant and applicable ... to one's everyday life is to think about the context in which the values of Scripture, or the teaching of Scripture, or the theology of Scripture applies. And again, it kind of depends on the kind of text that I'm dealing with, but usually there are attitudes that are important in Scripture — why we think about God, the way we think about our neighbor, the kind of compassion that I'm supposed to show, that kind of thing — that tells me how I'm supposed to live. And those values are very important. I think when we tend to study the Bible as a history book or an abstraction in terms of its theology and we don't add the ethical dimension of what the passage is calling us to do and be as people, we have a problem. But if we keep the relational, ethical dimension of Scripture which runs all the way through it very much on the table, then virtually any passage can have an application that calls us to think more sensitively about the way we live.**

— Dr. Darrell L. Bock

In 1 Corinthians 10:11, Paul demonstrated the importance of searching for contemporary application with these words:

**These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11).**

In the context of this chapter, Paul was reminding the Corinthians that the books of Exodus and Numbers told stories about the judgments that the Israelites of the Exodus suffered because they had rebelled against God. And in this verse, he took the necessary steps to apply these stories to the church at Corinth.

Paul applied the Old Testament stories to the New Testament church both by taking into account connections or continuities between the original audience and his Corinthian audience and by considering developments or changes that had taken place between Moses' day and his own day.

On the one hand, Paul connected the two audiences by urging that these stories "were written down as warnings for us." It wasn't difficult for Paul to make this connection. Exodus and Numbers had originally been written for the second generation of the Israelites of the Exodus from Egypt. They were written to warn these people not to repeat the failures of the first generation. So, Paul focused first on a similarity between the Corinthians and the original audience: the Corinthian church was in danger of failure. So these stories warned them just as they had warned the original audience.

On the other hand, Paul qualified his application by noting important developments that had taken place since the time of Moses. Israel's failures happened to the first generation Israelites, but they were written down for Paul's audience and all other believers. The scriptural record turned the Old Testament experiences into examples and warnings for the church, "on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come."

The expression "the fulfillment of the ages" is one of many ways New Testament writers distinguished the period of the New Testament from the period of the Old Testament. With these words, Paul acknowledged that the Corinthians had the benefits of developments in redemptive history that the original audience of Exodus and Numbers did not have. The Corinthians were living over 1,000 years after Moses. They weren't on a journey from Egypt to Canaan like the original audience; they were on a journey to the new heavens and new earth. The fulfillment of the ages had come on them. As a result, Paul's application for the Corinthians had to account for those developments. And Paul highlighted these differences throughout the rest of 1 Corinthians 10, where he warned the Corinthians not to fail in their personal Christian lives or in their relationships in their church.

Paul's application of the Old Testament books of Exodus and Numbers to the Christians in Corinth reflects the basic process that takes place every time we apply the Scriptures. Application must always take into account both the connections between original and modern audiences and the developments that have taken place between them. We need to recognize these connections and account for these developments if we're to make appropriate applications of the Scriptures to our lives today.

Now that we've seen the necessity of application, let's turn our attention to the many connections or continuities between the original readers of biblical books and modern audiences.



## CONNECTIONS

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It's the connections or continuities between ancient and modern audiences that make biblical texts relevant for modern people. And there are countless ways to describe these continuities.

In this lesson, we'll divide these connections into three main categories. First, we'll see that both audiences have the same God. Second, they live in a similar world. And third, they're the same kind of people. Let's look at each of these categories, beginning with the fact that both audiences have the same God.

### GOD

The Scriptures are clear that there is only one God to whom all audiences of Scripture owe their loyalty and obedience. And as traditional Christian theology teaches, God is immutable, meaning that he doesn't change. Since God is immutable, and since loyalty and obedience to him are universal obligations, there are strong connections between the impact Scripture was intended to have on its original audience and on its modern audience.

**To say that God's immutable means that he's unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes and promises. So his being, his nature, his essence, his perfections, the degree to which he possesses those characteristics, his purposes, what he has determined to do, and his promises, what he's told us he'll do. So God's unchanging in those ways. That's not to say that God doesn't relate to us in a dynamic, relational, personal way. So he listens to our prayers, he grieves over our sin, he delights in our faithfulness. And so it's been said that God is essentially immutable, but relationally mutable. There's a degree to which he adapts what he's doing to our relationship with him, while at the same time maintaining his essential attributes.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

**One of the many significant attributes of God, the Triune God, is immutability. That's the term that you'll find in many theology texts. Immutability might be translated "unchanging." And that's really wonderful news because we are so aware of the impermanence and the transience of just about everything in our lives, in our world, in our relationships, and even in our own fleeting lives. I think of that descriptor of God as the still-point in a turning universe. What is there that draws our restless souls to a vision of the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever? I think it's this profound**

**psychological and spiritual need we all have for that which is rock solid, that which is trustworthy, that which can function as an anchor for the soul when the mountains shake and everything appears to be falling into the sea... We find our strength in this immutable God.**

**— Dr. Glen Scorgie**

The biblical concept of divine immutability doesn't imply that God is inactive. In biblical terms, an inactive god is a worthless idol. But the God of Scripture is constantly interacting with his creation in real and meaningful ways.

Traditional Christian theology has rightly insisted that there are three critical aspects to God's immutability. First, God's eternal counsel, or ultimate plan for history, is immutable.

## **Eternal Counsel**

Although different Christian traditions understand God's eternal plan differently, we should all agree that everything God has done, is doing, and will do is part of a unified plan. God knows everything, and he is using that knowledge to direct history toward the ends for which he created it. As God said in Isaiah 46:10:

**I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please (Isaiah 46:10).**

And as Paul explained in Ephesians 1:4, 11:

**He chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world... In [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:4, 11).**

Paul made it clear that God has a plan that covers everything. And this plan has existed since the time when he "chose" or predestined believers to salvation. Of course, different traditions interpret the concept of predestination differently. But what is beyond question is that God predestined before he even created the world. Predestination was just part of his eternal counsel. And this counsel is immutable because God causes everything to conform to it.

The immutability of God's plan assures us that if we look closely enough, God's ways in ancient times accord with his ways today. At some level, God's will for his ancient people and his will for us are similar because they both fit within his one immutable purpose for his creation.

In the second place, God is also immutable in his character. His essence, persons and attributes never change.

## Character

Now to be sure, God reveals different aspects of his character more prominently at some times than others. Sometimes he displays his mercy, sometimes his wrath. Sometimes he reveals his omniscience and other times he hides it. But the full range of his attributes — his eternal nature — always stays the same. That's why in James 1:17, James referred to God as:

**The Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17).**

God's immutable character helps us see that there will always be significant connections between the original meaning and modern application of Scripture. When a particular passage spoke about one divine attribute, the original audience was always expected to understand that attribute within the context of God's other attributes. In much the same way, modern audiences are expected to apply the emphases of every Scripture in ways that never disregard any of God's attributes. For this reason, the immutable attributes of God always form a measure of similarity between original meaning and modern applications.

In the third place, God is unchanging or immutable in his covenant promises. God will fulfill everything he has ever sworn in covenant.

## Covenant Promises

Sometimes Christians make the mistake of thinking that everything God ever says is a promise. But the reality is that God only promises when he takes a vow, or makes a covenant, or swears an oath. As we read in Numbers 23:19:

**God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? (Numbers 23:19).**

When God promises, his word is immutable. Otherwise, he's free to change his mind. Consider Genesis 15 where God said he would make Abraham's offspring as numerous as the stars. Abraham was thankful for this offer, but he still asked God to make the blessing certain. So, God responded by making a covenant with him.

In cases, though, where God hasn't made a promise, his words are best understood as threats of curse and offers of blessing. For instance, recall that in the book of Jonah God threatened to destroy Nineveh, but then he relented when its people repented. Without question, God changed his mind about destroying Nineveh at that time. But he didn't break any promises when he spared them. Covenant promises are those things God has sworn to do by covenant oath.

Every revelation of God in Scripture assumes that God will keep his covenant and his covenant promises. The original audiences were supposed to understand every passage of Scripture in this light, and modern audiences should do the same. We should have absolute confidence in God's unchanging promises. And his offers and threats should motivate us to obedience.

Now that we've seen that we have the same God as all the first recipients of Scripture, let's look at the fact that we live in a similar world.

## WORLD

Throughout the ages philosophers have wrestled with whether the world is stable or changing. Common experience tells us that, in many ways, both are true. God's creation is always changing, but many features of the world have remained constant for every audience of Scripture. When we apply the Scriptures to our day, we need to keep both of these truths in view.

There is an old adage that says "history repeats itself," and we understand that current events often resemble events that took place in the past. Like the original readers of Scripture, we live in a world created by God. And though we've fallen into sin, we've also experienced God's redemption. God's faithful people in the Old Testament faced opposition from other people and from demonic powers, and we face similar opposition today. They depended on God's help to overcome; we depend on his help too. We can also see the stability of what we often call the regular patterns or laws of nature. When the Scriptures speak about the rising and setting of the sun, human sickness, the need for food and water, and countless other things, it's obvious to us that we live in a similar world to the one inhabited by the first audiences of Scripture.

And even in more specific and narrow ways, we find important parallels between the world of the original audiences of Scripture and our world. For example, the Ten Commandments given to Israel in Exodus 20 provided essential background for the lives of God's people in the rest of the Old Testament. These same commandments were used again to guide the lives of his people in the New Testament. And as Paul taught in 2 Timothy 3:16, 17, these same commandments continue to guide the church today.

In a similar way, God's choice of David as the head of a permanent dynasty for God's people provided the historical background for God's kingdom in the Old Testament, as well as the background for Jesus' kingship as the great son of David in the New Testament. And as we learn in places like Revelation 22:16, the church continues to serve Jesus as our King and Lord because of his permanent rule as the Davidic king.

As examples like these illustrate, the connections between our world and the worlds of Scripture's first audiences can help us determine the proper modern applications of the Bible.

Now that we've seen that all audiences of Scripture have the same God and live in a similar world, let's consider the connections that exist because we're the same kind of people.

## PEOPLE

There are at least three ways in which modern people are very similar to the people who first received the Scriptures. First, all human beings, no matter when or where they live, are sinful images of God. Second, we suffer religious divisions. And third, humanity still includes the same classes of people. We'll explore each of these similarities, beginning with the fact that all human beings are sinful images of God.

### Sinful Images

In passages like Genesis 1:27, we're told that when God created humanity, he created us in his image. Among other things, this means that all human beings are rational, linguistic, moral and religious vice-regents of God.

At the same time, all human beings have also fallen into sin. Humanity today no longer uses our rational, linguistic, moral and religious capacities to glorify God the way we should. Unbelievers act as if they aren't required to submit to God's rule. And even believers fail in their loyalty to him. As Solomon said at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8:46:

**There is no one who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46).**

**In systematic theology, you know, there is this teaching known as total depravity. And what that means is that in the totality of man's being, in his thinking, feeling and behavior, it's all been tainted with sin so that there is that basic assumption that everything he does, he does it in defiance of God's commandments and holy standard. So yes, there is such a thing as a sinful nature. And the Bible talks about how basic of a problem that is, especially in relationship to God.**

**— Dr. Luis Orteza**

**One of the great questions that is asked especially these days in anthropological and sociological studies is whether human beings have a sinful nature. And over the years, again and again, theories about human education, human development, human learning have foundered on the rock of original sin, because the fact is all of us have a fallen nature... That means, in fact, that we humans are controlled by a selfish desire for accomplishment, achievement, possession, and that thing warps everything we do. You cannot understand human behavior if you assume that humans are naturally good. In fact, as you look at the history of the race, you have to say, no, we're not naturally good; we're naturally evilly self-centered. The fascinating**

**thing about the Bible, however, is it also at the same time says, we are created in the image of God. And that, in my mind, is the wonder of the biblical view of humanity, because many other anthropologists and sociologists, recognizing the presence of evil, will say, “Oh, human beings are incorrigibly hopelessly evil; we’re just the most aggressive of the apes, that’s all.” And the Bible says, “Oh no, we are fallen, but we are marred in the image of God.”**

**— Dr. John Oswalt**

All recipients of Scripture, whether ancient or modern, share the same sinful nature. And in one way or another, the original meaning of every portion of Scripture addressed this human condition. We are all images of God that have been corrupted by sin. Because we share these qualities with all the original audiences of Scripture, these similarities can help us draw meaningful modern applications from every biblical text.

Besides being sinful images of God, the original and modern audiences of Scripture are also similar because we both suffer religious divisions.

## **Religious Divisions**

From the time the first Scriptures were inspired, it has always been the case that readers of Scripture have fallen into one of three religious groups: unbelievers, false believers, and believers.

Unbelievers are people who make themselves the enemies of God by refusing to submit to him. This division of humanity includes all those who haven’t heard of God’s special revelations to Israel and the church, as well as many who have.

False believers make superficial commitments to God. They may have the external appearance of believers, but they don’t have true faith, and as a result they aren’t redeemed from his eternal judgment.

By contrast, believers are people who make sincere, faithful commitments to God and who are thereby redeemed from sin and saved from God’s eternal judgment.

In general terms, the modern applications of Scripture to these three religious groups should be very similar to the original applications to these same groups. For unbelievers, the Scriptures were first designed to restrain sin, to expose their lost condition, and to call them to saving repentance; in modern application, we do the same. For false believers, biblical texts were designed to restrain sin, expose their hypocrisies, and call for saving repentance; in modern application, we work toward the same goals. For believers, biblical texts were designed to restrain their sin, to warn against failure, and to lead them toward grateful living in the grace of God; and as modern Christians, we apply the Scriptures toward these same ends.

In addition to being sinful images and suffering religious divisions, the original and modern audiences are also similar because the same classes of people continue to exist throughout history.

## Classes

Human beings can be classified in many different ways. For example, we might be classified according to particular traits or attributes we have. Some people are old and others are young; some are male and others are female; some are rich and others are poor; some are powerful and others are weak; and so on. We can also be classified according to our relationships with other people. We might be parents, children, siblings, masters, servants, friends, or just about anything else. Or we can be classified according to what we've done, like heroes and criminals; or according to our jobs, like pastors and farmers. And the same thing was also true of the original audiences of Scripture.

In fact, many portions of Scripture are specifically directed toward particular classes of people. We find passages that focus on people who are angry, or loving, or lazy, or repentant, or rich, or poor. We also find passages that specifically address people identified as husbands, or wives, or children, or deacons, or thieves, or employees.

Because these same classes of people exist in every age, they form meaningful connections between the original audience and all subsequent audiences. And these connections help guide our application. Ancient and modern rich people can draw similar applications from passages about wealth. Ancient and modern leaders can draw similar applications from passages about leadership. And so on. All our efforts to apply the Bible to our lives can be helped by recognizing that we share these kinds of connections with the first audiences of Scripture.

Now that we've explored the necessity of the application of Scripture, and considered some important connections between the original and modern audiences, let's turn our attention to the developments between the original and modern audiences that should influence our application.

## DEVELOPMENTS

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Many people who carefully read and study the Bible say that it sometimes seems foreign, as if it came from a different world, and there's a very real sense in which this is true. The books of the Bible were written long ago. They were written in languages that most of us don't read, and to cultures that are very different from our own. And our own personal lives are also vastly different from the lives of people in the original audiences of Scripture. So, in one way or another, we need to account for all of these factors when we apply the Bible to modern life.

In a later lesson, we'll look closely at specific ways to account for these kinds of differences. So for now, we'll simply identify three major kinds of developments that have occurred since Scripture was inspired, and that need to be considered in our modern application of biblical books: epochal, cultural and personal developments. Let's look first at epochal developments in redemptive history.



## EPOCHAL

Christians have frequently summarized the Bible's perspective on world history in three stages: creation, when God first made the world; fall, when humanity first committed sin and was cursed by God; and redemption, the period following the Fall, in which God redeems us from our sin. Soon after Adam and Eve fell into sin, God began a long, slow process of redemption. And throughout the millennia, he has mercifully built his kingdom of redemption within and alongside the cursed creation.

Many theologians have recognized that the progressive nature of God's rule over creation has resulted in periodic developments that create discontinuity between the various epochs mentioned in Scripture. Perhaps the most obvious epochal development occurred between the Old and New Testaments. But theologians also commonly identify epochs according to God's various covenants throughout the Bible, especially those associated with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David in the Old Testament, and with Jesus in the New Testament.

For instance, the laws regarding atoning sacrifices required different things at different points in redemptive history. In Moses' time, they required sacrifices at the tabernacle. In Solomon's day, they required sacrifices at the temple. In the early New Testament, they required Jesus' death on the cross. And in the later New Testament, they ceased to be offered altogether.

**When we read the Old Testament in particular, as believers today — after Christ has died and rose again and is ready to come back — the way we understand and apply Scripture at times has to be different than the way the Old Testament folks perhaps applied it. But, of course, there are also many other times in which we don't really have to make any adjustments at all... So take for example the sacrificial system. We no longer have to offer sacrifices because Christ is now our sacrifice. So there is very little application in that sense. I don't have to go to the temple ... to the nearest temple to slaughter an animal and lay my hands on the animal so that the animal can bear all my sins. So, yes, there are times in which where we are today in redemptive history changes the way we would apply Scripture.**

**— Dr. Daniel L. Kim**

**It's so critical that we take stock of where a passage occurs in redemptive history relative to where we sit in redemptive history as we interpret and apply that to our lives, because it's quite clear that some passages in their redemptive historical context involve a different economy, a different administration of things than our own context. I'll just give one simple example — the sacrificial system in the Old Testament... The passages in the Old Testament about animal sacrifice are not irrelevant to us, but they are relevant precisely to the**



**degree that those sacrifices have been fulfilled in Christ. So when we read those texts, our conclusion is not, oh, I've got to find a lamb, a bull or a dove somewhere, but I need to look to Christ for the covering of my sin. And so in many ways — that's just one obvious example — but in many ways as we read the Scriptures, we need to take stock of the fact: oh, this is taking place in the old covenant aspect of the administration of redemptive history. We no longer live in a theocracy, for example, so there are things that would have been true for the life of Israel that are not true for our lives as believers today. We always want to keep in mind not only the immediate grammatical context of a passage but its redemptive historical context as well so we can make proper application to believers in our position of the post new covenant reality.**

**— Dr. Robert G. Lister**

In many ways, biblical history is like a growing tree. Every tree grows from a seed, becomes a sapling and eventually develops into a fully-grown tree. Everything that tree will become is contained in the initial seed. But over time the tree has to grow and develop in order to become fully mature.

In a similar way, redemption has grown and developed throughout biblical history. And we have to account for these developments as we apply the Bible to our lives. This developmental model teaches us that the whole Bible is relevant and authoritative for us, but also that older revelation must always be applied in light of later revelation.

With this understanding of epochal developments in mind, let's explore the idea of cultural developments that distinguish our cultures today from the cultures directly addressed in the Bible.

## **CULTURAL**

In thinking about the cultural developments between the original and modern audiences of Scripture, we need to recognize both similarities and differences. With regard to similarities, we need to ask questions like “What cultural patterns do we face that closely parallel Abraham's experience?” and “How is our culture like David's?” And with regard to differences, we need to ask questions like “How has human culture significantly changed from the ancient societies of the Old Testament?” and “What customs and practices are different?” The answers to these kinds of questions have important implications for the way we apply Scripture today.

**The culture in which the Bible was written was clearly very different to our own. Many of us are not living in agrarian, rural economies. Some people are, but for us in the West that's certainly not the case. And so we've got to make some transitions. And nor are we living**

**1000 B.C. where business was done in the city gate outside Bethlehem — read it in the book of Ruth. And you know how you conducted a legal contract in those days? Well, you took off your shoe and you kind of did a handshake based on that. Well, of course, that's bizarre. We live in a different culture where you sign contracts and you have different agreements. Different cultures will have different ways of doing business, of conducting a relationship between men and women. All kinds of things will have different cultural expressions. We just have to be sympathetic to that and realize the Bible had its own way of doing things. We live in cultures where things are done differently. However, the Bible has given us principles of how we should do our business; we should do it with integrity. You can read that from the book of Ruth. And so we have to apply the principle of moral integrity in our business dealings, even if we don't take our shoes off as they did.**

**— Dr. Peter Walker**

**As we think of our own current situation and compare that to the time of the original audience, we have to recognize that there's been at least 2,000 years back to the time of the New Testament and often 3,000 or more back to the time of the Old Testament. So there can be differences, cultural differences, that remove us from the experience of the original audience. One of the most obvious is that technology has dramatically changed. So, for instance, we're a highly visual culture, a culture that's used to a rapid pace of communication, a culture that is very enveloped in using technology to communicate to others. And in antiquity, just thinking 2,000 years ago, when John wrote the book of Revelation, he did so as a cyclical letter where one person was going to carry it from community to community. This probably took a period of many days as he traveled from church to church to church. There wasn't that kind of instant communication. Another aspect of that, that is very evident also as you think of the book of Revelation, is the book of Revelation was primarily meant to be heard. So, at the very beginning of the book it says there's a blessing that's pronounced on the one person who reads and the many who are hearing, which is indicative of the way it was originally understood, which was, a person read the entire book all the way through to an audience. For us, it's very easy to slow down as we read through the book of Revelation. We can stop and meditate on a verse and try and understand whatever it means. Whereas, for the original audience, 22 chapters just came flowing over them. So, the experience of the book is quite different. And I think one of the repercussions of that is the original audience of the book of Revelation probably was overwhelmed, could not figure it all out and at some point had to less**

worry about figuring out the details and instead understand the general intent of the whole and to allow the whole to really speak to their own affections. And the images really begin to touch one more and more in terms of our own heart reality instead of being able to figure out everything. So, there's one example of how that cultural difference can really change our understanding and our approach to reading Scripture.

— Dr. David W. Chapman

Besides epochal and cultural developments, we also need to pay attention to personal developments that distinguish people today from the original audiences of the Bible.

## PERSONAL

There are considerable similarities between the people of the Bible and people living in our contemporary world, but we need to recognize that there are also many differences between modern and ancient people. And if we hope to apply biblical texts properly, we have to take these personal variations into account.

For example, we need to ask questions like “How do our personal lives compare with those that we see in the Bible?” “What roles do we have in society?” “What is our spiritual condition?” “How are we serving the Lord compared to this character or that character?” “How do our thoughts, actions and feelings compare to those that we see in biblical writers?” By taking account of the variations between ancient people and modern people, we can better understand how to apply the Bible to the specific circumstances of our own lives.

Identifying the epochal, cultural and personal developments between the original and modern audiences of Scripture may be the most challenging aspects of applying the Bible to our times. But if we do it carefully, it will go a long way toward helping us apply the Scriptures in ways that are honoring toward God, responsible toward others, and suitable for our time.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on applying Scripture, we've explored three basic factors that can help us connect the original meaning of the Bible to our modern situations. We've spoken of the necessity of making modern applications of Scripture. We've discussed the connections between the original and modern audiences that help us determine how to apply Scripture. And we've considered some of the developments that have taken place since the days when Scripture was written, paying particular attention to the ways these developments might obligate us to adapt our applications for contemporary audiences.

We always need to remind ourselves that the Scriptures were not written to be set aside by later generations. On the contrary, they were written for God's people to love and obey throughout all of history. And for this reason, the Bible is just as relevant, just as true in our time as it was when it was first written. We have to assess the developments that have taken place between biblical days and our own, but when we do, we can discern the will of God not only for his people in the past, but also for his people living today.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
SEVEN

## Applying Scripture Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b> What guidelines should we follow when we apply biblical passages to modern life? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b> How does knowing the original meaning of a passage of Scripture help us apply it to our lives? .....	2
<b>Question 3:</b> In what ways is God immutable?.....	3
<b>Question 4:</b> Do all human beings have a sinful nature? .....	5
<b>Question 5:</b> How does God's later revelation influence our understanding of his earlier revelation? .....	6
<b>Question 6:</b> What are proper motivations for obeying the Scriptures? .....	7
<b>Question 7:</b> Is obeying the Bible different from obeying God? .....	7
<b>Question 8:</b> What are some cultural features of the Old and New Testaments that distance the Bible from contemporary readers? .....	8
<b>Question 9:</b> How should we account for differences between biblical cultures and our own as we apply Scripture to our lives today? .....	10
<b>Question 10:</b> How can believers today apply Scripture to their lives in light of changes in redemptive history?.....	12
<b>Question 11:</b> How can believers make the Scriptures relevant and applicable to their lives today? .....	14



# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Seven: Applying Scripture

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. David R. Bauer

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Dr. Steve Blakemore

Dr. Darrell L. Bock

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Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Guy Waters

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

### Question 1:

**What guidelines should we follow when we apply biblical passages to modern life?**

For any newly acquired skill, it's important to know the guidelines in place before we can practice that skill appropriately. The same is true as we learn to apply biblical passages to our lives today. What guidelines should we follow when we apply biblical passages to modern life?

#### **Dr. David W. Chapman**

One of the dangers I've seen in application is that we can drive our own needs and desires into the text. So, I've been in untold number of Bible studies where we'll get done studying a passage that may be about the glory of Christ or about the need to learn more in Scripture, and we'll go around the room and start sharing about what have learned from this that was applicable to our lives. And prayer — everybody will want to apply it to their prayer life because we all feel inadequate in our prayer life. And that's a good thing, to want to work on our prayer life, but in doing so we can often overlook what Scripture is actually calling us to in the moment. So, if we're very careful to interpret the passage of Scripture first and then understand not only what was the author trying to say and have us believe, but also what was the author originally trying to have the audience do with it, then as we connect our application with the intended application of the original audience. Then that ties us to the text and we know that we're applying rightly. We're not just reading applications in that are particular needs in our life. We're actually letting the text challenge us.

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

To apply the Bible to modern life, we have to make sure we have the right categories and enough categories. One thing we do sometimes is reduce application to telling

people what to do. Telling people what to do is no doubt important. God has laws. We should obey them. That's clear. But application has much more to it than "doing." I'd like to say there are four questions that people ask. Christians ask them and, candidly, secular people, people from every religion, every ethical system, tries to answer these questions. First question is, "What should I do? What's my duty? What do I owe to other human beings?" The second question is, "Who should I be? What kind of character is godly? What kind of person is able to do what we heard we should do up above in question one? I mean, we often know what we should do but can't do it. So how do we get the character? What kind of person should we be?" The third question, sometimes neglected, is, "What should my goals in life be? Where should I go?" Or better yet, "Where should *we* go?" Because there are lots of things you can do only with others. It's a group project. The question, "Where should I go?" also has to do with my calling, my purpose in life. That is to say, I have things that I'm supposed to do because of my history, my experiences, my training, that might be quite different from what somebody else should do. My gifts, the necessities, the problems I see are different from yours. The last question is, "How can I see? How can I see the world the way God does? How can I have God's perspective, God's vision of the world?" In other words, there are often competing ideas of what's right or what's wrong. What's God's way of seeing it? So let me run through those again. Four questions: What should I do? Who should I be? Where should I go, or where should *we* go? And how can I see? Do, be, go and see. To say it another way, the same thing said another way: What's my duty? What kind of character should I have? What should my goals in life be? And what's a God-given or proper perspective on this world? Those are the four most basic questions. If you're applying the Bible to a group, if you studied a part of the Bible and you want to apply it to a group, you should not be just stuck on one of those. Try to use at least two, sometimes even all four in some lesson that you prepare. The Bible answers all those questions many times over.

### **Question 2:**

**How does knowing the original meaning of a passage of Scripture help us apply it to our lives?**

**As we seek to interpret a passage of Scripture, one of the first questions we ask deals with the original meaning of the text. This gives us a solid foundation for applying it to our lives. How does knowing the original meaning of a passage of Scripture help us apply it to our lives?**

#### **Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

If we don't first understand what the original meaning of a passage in Scripture meant to the original author, then we're going to have a very difficult time faithfully and with authority applying that text to the modern lives of either ourselves or the people we're preaching and teaching to. So, one way to think of it is this: A particular passage in Scripture, let's say, has one fundamental meaning or one fundamental

thing to teach. Now from that one fundamental meaning or one fundamental thing to teach, there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of applications to that in the different lives of different people. The preschool teacher may have different needs than the contractor who may have different needs than the lawyer or the doctor. And so how a particular passage applies to a person can have a variety of different implications in a particular life. But in order to do that well, in order to get that right application into the life of the person in the pew, you must first understand the right meaning of that particular text. So the right meaning leads to the right application, we hope. Now, let's talk about an example. In John 13 when Jesus washes the disciple's feet. In our culture we can think that's gross, and that's weird, and I'm not going to do that because I don't wash people's feet, and that some people would be offended if I would tried to take off their shoes and wash their feet. But the point of that passage is not that we have to go and physically wash everyone's feet. What Jesus was doing is, he was showing that, as the teacher, as the rabbi, as the leader, that he could perform for his disciples, for his students, the most base and humble act of service. And understanding that culture, the original meaning of what foot washing was in their culture, a base act of service, now we can properly apply it to our culture as what are those acts of service in our lives that are the lowest possible things that we're now able to do because of what Christ has done for us? For example, can we change that diaper? — a terrible and lowly act as a father of four. Can we pick up the trash? ... Foot washing in its original context meant something, and we have to discover what that meant in its original context. We have to properly understand it in its context in order to properly apply it in our context. So we don't go around doing foot washing, but we do go around and do acts of service like that because, as it says in John 13, we know where we're from, and we know where we're going; therefore, we can act like Jesus as this type of servant.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Knowing the original meaning of Scripture does help us apply the Bible to our own lives. When the author of Scripture wrote, he did so with a sense that there was an audience in mind immediately, and therefore, we'd do well to not only consider what the text said, but also how the text was received by an original audience. But then that also helps us to apply it to ourselves today, because we have a lot in common with the ancient audience. Human nature is the same. We believe that God is immutable, that he's unchanged. We believe that his promises are secure and trustworthy, and therefore the things that apply to a community of believers thousands of years ago actually still apply to us. Even though we may need to make some cultural changes to apply them to today, there's more in common than there is less.

**Question 3:****In what ways is God immutable?**

**Our world is constantly changing. Growth, progress, and decline happen on a daily basis everywhere, in every corner of the globe and in every person who calls it**

**home. And yet, the Bible speaks very differently of God. God never changes. In what ways is God immutable?**

**Dr. Robert G. Lister**

God's immutable in his essence and in his character. So, as God, he's fundamentally unchanging. He's fundamentally self-sufficient. He's fundamentally not dependent on his creation. In his character, he's fundamentally faithful. He's fundamentally committed to keeping his promises. So, we can rely on him in those capacities. Because God is changeless in his essence and changeless in his character, we can also be confident that, in keeping those promises that he has pledged himself to keep, God will change in relationship to his creatures in ways that are appropriate. The most obvious example of that being God's keeping the promise to forgive sinners ... When a sinner lays hold of the promise of salvation, it's not just a change on the part of the sinner, but God changes in relationship to the sinner from a status of wrath and judgment to a status of peace and reconciliation. Now, God's keeping that promise which involves changing in relationship to the sinner is predicated, or based on, the very fact that God is changeless in his character and his essence. It is the fact that God is reliable in his promise-keeping yesterday, today and tomorrow that a sinner can know that on any day he or she repents, that promise stands for him or her and that God will change in his disposition from wrath to reconciliation.

**Dr. Miguel Nunez (translation)**

The concept of God implies perfection. And perfection cannot change because then it would become imperfect. God is immutable in every way. God is immutable in his essence. God is immutable in his characteristics as God. When God speaks, that word is immutable. When God is powerful, that power is immutable. When we talk about God's wisdom, that wisdom is immutable precisely because it belongs to God, and God is perfect. God is eternal, the same from eternity to eternity. The attributes of God are all immutable. When we think of a mutable or changeable being, we are no longer thinking about the Creator. We are no longer thinking about God. We are thinking of a creature. The creature is the one who changes, changes when she gets old, changes because he is not perfect, changes because we can improve. When we exist or believe or think something, since we are creatures, we can improve in the future, and therefore, change to improve. But God is perfect. He does not need to improve. He cannot improve. It is not only that he is immutable. He cannot change because, by virtue of being God, he is a perfect being in himself, independent of everything, not dependent on anybody. Nothing affects him. Nothing transforms him. Nothing changes him. He does not age. He exists outside of time and space. He is a being without comparison, set apart, and therefore, we can only talk about the immutability of God. So, regarding the question: How is God immutable? In every way that we can think of God, God is immutable. His decrees are immutable. His word is immutable. His essence, as we said, is immutable. His Spirit is immutable because he is God, and God by definition is immutable. God has not *become* immutable. He is: "I AM WHO I AM" and always will be. In God's case, what he once was, he is today. What he once thought, he thinks today, and he will think the same tomorrow, because everything God conceives is perfect. Therefore, he doesn't

have the need to change opinions tomorrow, or change his being, or change his methodology, because from day one he thought of everything immutably; he thought of everything perfectly.

**Question 4:**  
**Do all human beings have a sinful nature?**

**Christians believe that human beings are born with a sinful nature. For believers, this idea seems all too self-evident. But most nonbelievers argue that all people are basically good and only do bad things because of outside influences. So, do all human beings have a sinful nature?**

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Every human being who has ever lived has had a sinful nature, except for two — Adam before the Fall, and Jesus — who were both truly human. But before the Fall Adam didn't have a fallen human nature and Jesus never did, even though he had a true human nature. But the situation for every other human, besides those two situations, is a depraved nature where sin has affected us throughout and holistically and is defined fundamentally as being in opposition to God, being in rebellion against him and a twistedness that's produced in our natures.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Well, we believe that all human beings have a sinful nature, which means that none of us come *tabula rasa*, as a "blank slate," to reading the Bible. We come with our own preconceptions. We come with our own prejudices. We come with our own inherent desire to run from the holy and the living God. But actually, the Bible also gives us a diagnosis of our sinful human condition and a remedy. And there is just that sense in which we are the same human beings, the same *kind* of human beings as received the original Bible. They speak of a holy God; they speak of a fallen, sinful human nature. They speak of a coming Savior and Redeemer and a returning judge and King. And we read the Bible realizing that we cannot read it perfectly, but actually, the whole of the Bible is addressed to human beings like you and like me with a sinful nature, addressing our human condition and providing a cure in Christ.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

All human beings have a sinful nature, except one, and that is Jesus Christ. So when we think about all human beings having a sinful nature, being totally depraved and so on, we want to think about all who are in Adam fell in Adam, and thus all who are the natural descent from Adam are fallen. And in that sense of "all," yes, all human beings have a fallen nature. But there is one, of course — a second Adam, a last Adam — who is free from the taint of sin, though fully human, and was, therefore, a fit redeemer of those of us who have fallen.

**Question 5:****How does God's later revelation influence our understanding of his earlier revelation?**

**Biblical interpreters have long understood the value of interpreting Scripture with Scripture. For instance, Paul's writings in one part of the New Testament shed light on his writings in other parts of the New Testament. And Old Testament history provides background for New Testament teachings. But, how does God's later revelation influence our understanding of his earlier revelation?**

**Dr. David R. Bauer**

The Bible itself testifies to a growth, a progress in the way in which God reveals himself to his people over time. And so that, even within the Old Testament, you have a progress of revelation. Later Old Testament writers make use of and readapt earlier canonical material, earlier revelation, and don't simply take it up but carry it further and sometimes even clarify or modify how it was originally understood and used. Of course, the major development that you have in terms of "progressive revelation" is between the Old Testament and the New Testament, what Hebrews refers to as a first covenant and the new covenant. Progressive revelation means, then... that we are to judge or evaluate earlier revelation in terms of its applicatory value, the way we apply it, on the basis of later revelation.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

The Bible is the timeless Word of God. At the same time it would be a distortion to think of the Bible as some abstract set of moral principles that's fallen from heaven. In fact there is a progressive development in terms of a revelation of God's plan, greater and greater clarity in terms of prediction of how he'll deal with the sin problem and the coming of the Messiah. And there's some aspects of earlier revelation in the old covenant that clearly find their fulfillment outside of those specific regulations. So, for example, the food laws related to the Old Testament. I wouldn't want to use the word that those are irrelevant because all the Scripture is relevant and timeless, but do we try to avoid eating catfish — fish without scales? Or are we worried about wearing garments that are woven with two different kinds of cloth? Obviously we are not, and so we have to read the Scripture knowing that the end of the Scripture, the New Testament, the revelation, provides the hermeneutical grid through which to understand how these regulations in the Old Testament... do they find their fulfillment in Christ? Are they expressing timeless moral principles? Jesus did not see himself as rejecting prior revelation, but as fulfilling it. A key verse for us in this is Matthew 5:17:

[Jesus said], "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;" — the prior revelation of God — "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17, ESV).

### Question 6:

#### What are proper motivations for obeying the Scriptures?

The Bible is full of instructions regarding what we should believe and how we should live. But the Bible isn't just a list of do's and don'ts. Scripture also tells us *why* it's important to obey God's Word. What are proper motivations for obeying the Scriptures?

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

When Jesus was asked, "What's the greatest commandment?" he offered that plus a bonus track. He offered the second greatest commandment as well. And they are both centered around the greatest Christian virtue, and that is love, wholehearted love and devotion. First, the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second commandment Jesus teaches is like that one, to love others, to love our neighbor as ourselves. At the end of the day, our goal in reading and applying Scripture to ourselves is nothing short than worship of God and service toward others. It has both a vertical component — love for God — and a horizontal one — love for neighbor. And in fact, that's not only our goal in reading Scripture. That will actually help us ask the right questions when we read Scripture. It's actually the closest thing to a method we could have in reading Scripture. It's reading texts and saying, "How does this teach me about loving God?" and "How does this help me to love others as well?"

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

There are certainly practical implications in our lives for obeying the Scriptures. Our lives will be more abundant and full, and our relationship with God will be deepened. But, sometimes obeying the Bible actually can make your life harder. It can bring persecution, and even martyrdom and loss. So, the practical implications for our lives can't be the primary motive. The primary motive for obeying Scripture needs to be that God wrote it. And we obey God because he's God, and we obey his Word because it's his Word. And that will have a profound effect on our relationship with God. But obeying him, and bringing delight to his heart in that obedience, needs to be the primary reason we obey the Scriptures.

### Question 7:

#### Is obeying the Bible different from obeying God?

We strongly affirm what the Bible says about itself, namely, that it's the inspired and authoritative Word of God. There is no other book that carries the same power and influence for humanity. And yet, the Bible is not equal to God himself. So, is obeying the Bible different from obeying God?



**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

When people think about obeying what the Scripture teaches, we need to keep something, I think, pretty clearly in mind. On the one hand, obeying the Scripture, if it is the Word of God, is an act of obeying the Lord, because the Lord has given us the Scripture. It fills out for us what his will for our moral lives is. It tells us how we should conduct ourselves in relationship to him. How we should think about our need for him. It teaches us to pray. It teaches us what pleases God. So when we understand that the Bible is the Word of God, and the Bible points us to God, and we obey the Scripture because the Scripture is, to us, the Word of God, then obeying the Scripture is obeying God. However, there are many people, I fear, for whom the Bible, keeping what the Bible says, is what they think the faith is all about. "If I just believe these things, if I just live my life according to this, I'll figure out where the loopholes are. I'll do just enough to make sure that I'm keeping the spirit of the Law or the spirit of the teachings of Jesus. I'll do what I need to do." That way of thinking can actually become a replacement for obeying God. The Bible is not an instruction manual. The Bible is a gift from God to us to tell us what his will for our lives is. And as we respond to God through the witness of the Scripture, we can be obeying God. But if we're just looking at the text, looking at the teaching and trying to figure out how to conform our lives to that without reference to, "I just want to please God," then obeying the Bible is not obeying God.

**Question 8:**

**What are some cultural features of the Old and New Testaments that distance the Bible from contemporary readers?**

When we apply the teachings of Scripture to our lives today, we have to consider the distance between biblical cultures and our own. Believers sometimes struggle to apply a passage of Scripture because most modern cultures are unlike the cultures described in the Bible. So, what are some cultural features of the Old and New Testaments that distance the Bible from contemporary readers?

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

The Old Testament and New Testament are distanced from us in different ways depending on who we are. In the West and prosperous countries, also in Asia, we simply have to remember how very poor people were by our standards. People might eat meat once a week, might have one or two meals a day. The average person probably had six or seven or eight articles of clothing *total*, counting shoes. This is almost inconceivable to us. Food was scarce. Water was scarce. People traveled by foot. And when it says, they went from here to there, just think of them walking. So that's very different from our culture. It's also true that it was a land where people lived close together, densely populated. Towns were close to each other. People knew each other by name. A lot of cultures are like that today, but not all by any means. Even something as simple as envisioning the question, how could Jesus send out his disciples saying, go to a worthy village, go to the next town and they'll receive them.



How could you possibly imagine that when you go to pronounce the kingdom, people will receive you? Well, let's see. For one thing, towns were very close to each other. So, nobody received you in one town? It wasn't a death sentence. You'd be in another town very shortly. And word of Jesus' proclamations spread very quickly because, again, towns were close, densely populated. And so, when a messenger arrived saying, "I want to tell you a little bit more about what Jesus was saying," a good chance there'd be people who were very hungry to hear what they had to say. So, we just have to get out of our own mindset of abundance, the way we travel and, depending on where you live, maybe populations are concentrated in cities that are far apart from each other. Those are just a few of the ways in which biblical culture was quite different from our own.

**Rev. Thad James, Jr.**

When we look at the distance as far as the Old Testament and the New Testament and then trying to bring that into the twenty-first century, we must understand, one, that we are far removed from the time of the Old Testament and New Testament periods. So we have a time gap. We equally have a space gap. And so we still struggle today with understanding the Middle Eastern mindset. We have a severe language gap. They spoke in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek... so we try to find the best English word to be that Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek word, but inevitably you're going to lose something in the translation. We have the intended hearer and reader gap. So, I'm trying to put myself prayerfully into the place of that first century or that early Near Eastern person as far as their mindset is concerned. And then we have a writing gap. The writing of Hebrew, the writing of Greek is dramatically different than how we write in English today. Then we have all the other cultural aspects as far as, the Old Testament Jews were living by the 600-plus Levitical laws which governed every aspect — moral, civil, spiritual — of their lives, which governed the relationships of men and women, animals, farming, feast. All those aspects are governed by those laws. And then you have in the New Testament, again, you have the Greco-Roman culture and worldview, which, again, is similar to our thought process today but still far removed. So, we don't live in an agricultural society anymore ... We're not governed by seasons and by times and by weather. We don't understand the significance of the animal life. What really do we know about sheep and camels? And what do we know about fig trees and grapevines? So, all those were very important to the culture of the Old Testament world and also to the New Testament world — the relationships of people as far as the different cultures of the Hebrews to the Moabites to the Edomites. And then we get into, again, into the Greco-Roman cultures and the relationships of Jews and Gentiles, males and females. So, all those issues are crucial to our interpretation and understanding and not, again, trying to place a twenty-first century world into the first century or into the B.C. world.

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

I think the major feature that distances the Bible from most contemporary readers today, at least in industrialized countries, is the urban environment in which we live. Whereas much of the Bible was written in contexts that were much more rural, agricultural, certainly not industrialized in the way that we think about it, with all the

dynamics that come with that difference in lifestyle. And so, many of the illustrations that we have coming out of both testaments reflect people who live on the land, live from the land, live in relationship to the land, that kind of thing. Whereas, much of the way we earn money today and gain a living has very little to do with our connection to the land. So, that's one, certainly, major difference. Culture is also more patriarchal in its structure generally speaking than ours is. Ours is a more egalitarian culture. That produces some differences in the reading. You have a more literate culture today versus a less literate culture then, which means that a lot of the Bible is presented in narrative and in pictures so that literacy is not an issue. At least in the New Testament period, the literacy rate is estimated to be somewhere — at least full literacy — somewhere between 5 and 10 percent, very low in comparison to our cultures today. So there are a lot of cultural differences in terms of the way the Bible functions ... Another difference that's important is the fact that the Bible was heard and not read, and experienced orally as opposed to experienced on a page. People didn't own a Bible. They didn't walk around with a Bible. The way they heard the biblical message was either in the church, or in the synagogue, or at the temple. And when you write for an oral audience, so that you hear rather than read what's on the page, that produces a certain kind of style and certain kind of way of presenting the material. That works well with narrative, but it can sometimes make reasoned discourse a little more difficult. It works well with the psalter because you balance the lines and you work with rhyme and that kind of thing, and that helps to make things memorable. So, all of these feature go into the way in which the Bible is presented when it's presented orally. And that's a very different way from the experiencing the Bible than, generally, the way we do it.

### **Question 9:**

**How should we account for differences between biblical cultures and our own as we apply Scripture to our lives today?**

**Today, we're separated from the cultures of the Bible by thousands of years. And with this separation comes marked differences in how we speak, think, and act. How should we account for differences between biblical cultures and our own as we apply Scripture to our lives today?**

#### **Dr. Daniel L. Kim**

I've always wondered, if I could get ten people seated in a room and have a dialogue with them, all from different cultures and different parts of the world, I wonder what kind of dialogue we would have when we start investigating specific passages of Scripture. For example, when I think of the example of Abraham talking with the elders of the Hittites as he is about to purchase a cave to bury his beloved wife, the interaction between the two groups is very interesting. There's a great deal of nonverbal communication going on. Whenever Abraham steps up to speak, he is bowing repeatedly as a sign of respect, something that we typically would not do here in the West. And then when the dialogue actually begins between him and Ephron,

from whom he eventually buys the cave, it's interesting how they never actually address each other directly, but it's always in the third person. And whenever I look at a story like that, I am reminded once again how various cultures deal with a business transaction in a way that is different than something that I have experienced. And the question that comes to my mind is, "How can I best understand it?" One of the theories that we learn in cultural communication is from a fellow named Edward T. Hall. He wrote a book called *Beyond Culture* in which he decided to look at culture based on how that culture communicates. Now, of course, there are variations in any culture. Between every culture there are variations. There are gender variations. There are personality variations as well. But in the broadest strokes, Edward T. Hall suggested there are two primary ways to look at culture. One is the culture that is driven by low-context communication, and in that culture, most of the information is in the actual speech itself. So, for example, he uses the illustration of in the courtroom in the United States. A lawyer, when he stands up, and he gives a sentence, every single word in that sentence has only one possible meaning, and that's why it is so complicated and confusing to anybody else who is not a lawyer because they have to come up with specific words to represent a particular case or situation. So, that's considered low-context in which it's irrelevant what the lawyer is wearing, or how he's gesturing, or how she is walking. Those are all irrelevant. It's only what he or she says. But then there's the other end of the spectrum which is a high-context culture in which, in fact, the vast majority of what is being communicated is actually not at all in what is being said, but it is through nonverbal communication. And when I look at something like that, we begin to sense and recognize that that could perhaps help us understand not only what's going on in the biblical context, but also, perhaps, what's going on in our context — how we can best appropriate or apply Scripture. I would suggest that most of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East was more a high-context culture than it was a low-context culture. And so, when we begin to start seeing Abraham and Ephron dialoguing with each other, and yet never actually physically addressing each other in front of the elders, we can begin to recognize that because most of what they're saying is going to be indirect. So Abraham says, "How much is the land?" And Ephron says, "Oh, what is a thousand shekels between us?" He was essentially saying, "It's going to be a thousand shekels, buddy." But Abraham, knowing that that's the way that they communicate, he immediately sets out and gives him the thousand shekels to buy the land. And yet for those of us who are from a low-context culture, we would say, "But that's not what Ephron said. Didn't he actually say, 'You can get the land without paying for it'?" But that's not at all what is being communicated. And yet, likewise, for a person who is from a high-context culture, they might pick that up very quickly, and they might recognize and go, "Okay, that's how we do things in our context as well." And so I would encourage all of our listeners here to be able to acknowledge and recognize if they are from a low context culture, to pay close attention. To not necessarily pay attention only to what is being said, but the context, the broader picture, Abraham bowing. Why are they before the elders? Well, that's a business transaction. Why is Ephron and Abraham not speaking directly to each other? Why are they speaking in such indirect ways? Because that's the way the culture communicates these things. And for those of us who are in the high-context culture, that would make perfect sense and would probably require very

little to apply to their context. But for us, we would have to ask ourselves in the low-context culture, "How do I communicate something like that?" and have to make necessary adjustments in such a way that it is done properly.

**Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong (translation)**

When you see that the ancient Greek culture has things that don't relate to current times, then you have to realize that those things are what were needed for that age. For example, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." It would be ridiculous for Chinese people to kiss while greeting each other. So, the focus of this verse is the *essence* and not the literal meaning. We are to clearly discern which concepts are cultural, which are literal, which are spiritual, which are temporary, and which are eternal. That way, we won't be in error.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill**

How do we account for cultural differences between the biblical times and our own time when we want to apply the Scripture in our own lives today? There's some simple illustrations. Of course, you can talk about the "kiss of peace" that was a sign of fellowship in the early church and the instructions to give the kiss of peace ... Of course, that wouldn't really work very well in our culture today because of what the meaning of a kiss is. So instead of giving a kiss of peace in Western culture, we shake hands. In other cultures, people may shake hands in a different way. They may embrace or do different kind of things that become that symbol of fellowship. But the truth is still there, the truth of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood. The way... the culturally appropriate way to express that is still in effect. In some cultures, and where I lived in Africa, a kiss is only used for sexual purposes. So if you started doing a kiss of peace in church... it would not only be ineffective, it would actually be wrong and misunderstood and so, an appropriate equivalent that expresses the same thing. So the husk, the kiss of peace, if you will, helps us to understand how the principles of Christian fellowship were expressed in the culture. We'd find something that's appropriate for this culture. But the basic understanding of Christian fellowship is there.

**Question 10:**

**How can believers today apply Scripture to their lives in light of changes in redemptive history?**

As we read through the pages of Scripture, we see significant developments in redemptive history that affect how God relates to humanity. These developments provide ways for us to understand our own place in redemptive history. So, how can believers today apply Scripture to their lives in light of changes in redemptive history?

**Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

Reading Scripture, it's important to realize that Scripture doesn't come to us all at once. It's a progressive revelation. God has chosen to reveal his plan to us over time through the biblical covenants, culminating in our Lord Jesus Christ. With that in mind, we have to realize that as we apply the Scripture to our lives, not all aspects of Scripture come over to us in application, especially now as Christians, in exactly the same way as it did, say, under the old covenant or in the Old Testament era. As we then think of what applies to us, we have to see how the Old Testament specifically comes to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the lens and grid by which we then say, "This applies and this doesn't apply." You think of some examples of, say, circumcision. Circumcision under the old covenant had direct application for those who were under that covenant. Now, in light of the new covenant, it doesn't apply in exactly the same way. The same with various food laws. And the same with some of the priestly system. It all reaches its fulfillment in Christ; it applies to us in and through him. And that's the basic principle that we have to follow as we read any portion of Scripture, placing that portion in its place in redemptive history, seeing how it is brought over to fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and then how it comes over to us as the people of God living in light of what Jesus has done.

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

When you think about applying the Bible, one of the things you need to be really sensitive about is where you are in redemptive history. There are certain things that apply to the people of God in the Mosaic era, for example, that do not apply to us. For example, we're not stoning disobedient children. We're not circumcising every male. Those were things particular and peculiar to the Mosaic covenant ... And so, knowing where you are in redemptive history, between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, helps you to understand where you fit into, the rules and regulations part of the game. In the old covenant, even in the patriarchal era, certain things are different and expected than now, and... we have a fuller revelation. We have the full word of God. We have his Son coming externally to testify to the veracity and the truthfulness of these things. And therefore, we're sensitive to our fuller revelation, and so, "to whom much is given," in some sense, "much [is] required." And therefore, we're sensitive to where we are in redemptive history, not only in terms of how we act because of Christ's work on our behalf, but also in terms of the body of literature we have to live in light of.

**Dr. Guy Waters**

When we read the Bible, I think we understand instinctively that we can't simply open up a passage at random, take a command, and say, "I must do it." To take an obvious example, circumcision. We know that God commanded circumcision under the old covenant — Genesis 17 and many following passages. But even a casual glance at the New Testament shows — Acts, Galatians — that circumcision was not required of God's people under the new covenant. Now, there may be health, medical reasons why a person may choose circumcision, or why a parent may choose to circumcise their son, but we're clear from the New Testament that it's not a requirement of God, and we're not sinning against God by not being circumcised. Well, we could look at

many examples along those lines. And that shows us something of the importance of being sensitive to the epochal character of Scripture, that circumcision was commanded of Israel, of God's people, at a certain point in redemptive history. But at this point in redemptive history, we can say very confidently from the authority of the Scripture that this is no longer required. So we don't practice circumcision not because we're uncomfortable with it, but because we're respecting the authority of God himself.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

Readers of the Bible today need to be aware of their location in redemptive history. We live in the days of the new covenant, the New Testament, after Christ. And therefore when we look at the Old Testament, we've got to be aware we are in a different time zone, if you like. That's important. And there are some changes between the Old and New Testament which we need to take into consideration. I think, for example, of the ritual associated with the temple. We no longer have a physical temple. So some of that ritual stuff in Leviticus, we have to read that differently. Secondly, there's stuff to do with the ethnic nature of the nation of Israel, for example the requirements of circumcision or some of the Aaronic rules which related to the nation of Israel, the ethnic nation of Israel. Well, again, we have to universalize those. Thirdly, I'm aware also there are some particular things which are what we may refer to as geographical. The Old Testament is focused on three great things: the temple, the city and the land. Now those are really important in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament each one of those is transformed by the coming of Christ, and the New Testament is operating on a universal, not a particular plane, and therefore those things which relate to the land, to the city of Jerusalem, etc., and to the temple in particular, we need to learn how to universalize them and apply them to ourselves. And fourthly, there's the area of politics. A lot of the time in the Old Testament the nation of Israel is actually running its own affairs; God's people are in charge of their own political life. And now Christians throughout the world rarely are actually in control. We live as part of larger societies. And so there are going to be some transitions we need to make as we read the stuff which is governing Israel's life, but actually, how do we apply that in our own context that is slightly different.

**Question 11:**

**How can believers make the Scriptures relevant and applicable to their lives today?**

**For many, the Bible seems to be an outdated and irrelevant book. After all, it was written a really long time ago to people who were very different from us. How can believers make the Scriptures relevant and applicable to their lives today?**

**Dr. Steve Blakemore**

One of the big questions for a minister, or a preacher, or a believer, is how can I take what I read in Scripture or what I hear preached in a sermon, and how can that be

relevant to my life? How can I make it applicable? That is, on one level, that's the question of discipleship. I'd like to flip it around and ask this question: Maybe the way we ought to think about it is this: how does my life become relevant to what God has revealed in the Scripture? And how do I apply my life to what God has shown us through his Word? That way of just casting it just slightly in a different way helps us get a better perspective, I think, in that the Word of God, the revelation of God, the teaching of Scripture, it's automatically relevant to my life whether I know it or not. Whether I believe it or not, it's relevant. For me to say, to think to myself and to say to myself, my calling as a Christian is to learn the Scripture, let the narrative of Scripture shape my understanding of my life so much, let the story of God's salvation so soak into my being that I cannot think one thought about any aspect of my life outside of the narrative of God's mighty work to save and redeem and fill and cleanse and make pure his people. When I can think about my life in those terms, then the Scripture begins to come alive to me in a different way. I can begin to live in that message in a new way... A part of the way we would make the Scripture relevant to our lives is by a consistent, ongoing study of the Word, both in my own private life, but also in the fellowship of other believers who help me read it rightly, who help me understand it correctly, who help me obey it with all of my heart. So, first of all thinking about my life as needing to become relevant to what God has revealed, surrendering my life over to what God has revealed about himself, and then learning to study, not just by myself, which is always a danger, but learning to study the Scripture in the fellowship of the church in harmony with God's people. That helps me, then, not only learn the Scripture, but it helps me begin to see how it applies to my life in ways that I might not have imagined on my own when someone can help point me to this aspect or that aspect of scriptural teaching that may not have occurred to me in the privacy of my own prayer closet. Or it might not have occurred to me if I haven't become a person who understands I must make myself relevant, by grace, to what God has revealed of himself in the Scripture.

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

The Bible is an historical book. It has a variety of epochs within it, and those epochs are, on many occasions quite old, and there are elements of the Bible that are four thousand years old. And so it's not always easy to see the relevance, the importance, the truth, even, when we're reading about things that are so old. What we have to do, of course, is be patient and realize that the Bible is a book that speaks to people in their cultures. You might say the principle of the incarnation — Jesus came to live with humans — is also true with all the Bible, namely that God enters into our sphere of life. And so when the Bible gives commands or describes the way of faithfulness in the Old Testament, it's spoken to that culture. And that culture in the Old Testament was agrarian, shepherding, even nomadic at times. And so we have commandments or teachings that are sometimes very broad and clear in their significance. "You shall not murder." That still applies today. But then, since we want to know exactly what that means, the Bible then gives particularizations that seem far away from us. So for example, it says if you have a bull and it gores someone, it's in the habit of goring, you must destroy the bull lest it gore somebody else. And if you do have a bull that gores somebody and you don't destroy the bull and it gores somebody else, your life

is forfeit, or at least in principle it's forfeit. So we think, "Wow, that just doesn't even speak to me at all as I live in a city. I don't spend time with bulls. I don't have a bull." Let's assume that the Bible is true, that the principles are valid. There's something behind the word about bulls, and the word is, "Watch out for your neighbor. Protect people from danger. Don't do anything careless with any powerful thing" — a bull — "under your control." Now when you say it that way you think, "Okay, I have to preserve life, avoid letting powerful things harm other people." Then we realize quickly enough that that would apply to heavy machinery, to cars, to trucks and so forth. And we would then realize that in an industrial age there are very specific things we can do to obey God and preserve life, much as they did in times past. So, for example, under the idea of "You shall not kill," we understand that that can be turned around, and we have an obligation to preserve life. That's why we have in the Bible commands — a command in Deuteronomy 22 — which says when you're building a new house, put a parapet around the roof. Well, we don't put parapets around our roof today. Are we violating the law? No. People had flat roofs in those days, and they still do in some parts of the world ... So, when someone puts up a house, they put a parapet around their roof to protect people from falling off. Why? Somebody might say, "I'm not going to fall off my roof. I don't need to go to the expense." But no, the Bible is teaching us that we should preserve the lives of other people, even people who would heedlessly, foolishly hurt themselves by sleeping too close to the edge, by playing too vigorously. You might think to yourself, "Not my problem." The Bible says, yes, it is. We love our neighbors. We love our neighbors as ourselves. And in fact, it's of the very character of God. It is the God who gives commands like, "put a parapet around the roof," that leads to our salvation. Who are we but people who are prone to foolishly damage ourselves, foolishly fall off a roof — maybe a literal roof, maybe some other foolish behavior. God cares about people who don't watch out for themselves. He cares for us. That's really ultimately what led to the plan of redemption and to the work of Christ.

**In order to apply the Bible to our lives today we need to account for the differences between ourselves and the original audiences of Scripture. Thankfully, we have the same God, and human beings have the same nature today as they did in biblical times. Similarities like these can help us take into account changes throughout redemptive history and responsibly apply the Bible to our own lives and cultures.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
EIGHT

## MODERN APPLICATION & OLD TESTAMENT EPOCHS



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# Contents

- I. Introduction.....1**
- II. Epochal Divisions.....1**
  - A. Variety 2
  - B. Outline 3
  - C. Implications 5
- III. Epochal Developments.....7**
  - A. Characters 8
  - B. Storyline 9
  - C. Authors 11
    - 1. About the Past 11
    - 2. For the Present 12
  - D. Connections 14
    - 1. Backgrounds 14
    - 2. Models 15
    - 3. Anticipations 17
- IV. Conclusion .....18**

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Eight

### Modern Application & Old Testament Epochs

#### INTRODUCTION

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Have you ever noticed that Christians tend to go to extremes when they think about applying the Old Testament to modern life? On one extreme, some believers think that we need to do precisely what God's people in the days of the Old Testament did. On the other extreme, some believers think that we should simply forget what God commanded his people to do in Old Testament days. But in reality, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes.

When it comes to applying the Old Testament to our day, we need to remember two things: we should never return to the past, but we should never forget the past.

This is the eighth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Modern Application and Old Testament Epochs." In this lesson, we'll explore the ways Old Testament faith developed through the great ages or epochs of history, and explain how these developments impact our own application of Scripture.

In a prior lesson, we saw that the original audiences of Scripture differed from contemporary audiences in at least three ways. The original audiences lived in different historical epochs than we do. Their cultures were different from ours. And they were different kinds of people than we are. Although these three differences interconnect in countless ways, in this lesson we'll focus our attention on the epochs of the Old Testament and how they affect modern application.

We'll explore the association between modern application and Old Testament epochs in two ways. First, we'll look at the epochal divisions of Old Testament history. And second, we'll consider the epochal developments that these divisions represent. Let's begin with the epochal divisions of Old Testament history.

#### EPOCHAL DIVISIONS

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The Old Testament reports many theological changes that took place throughout history. Theological changes occurred every time God altered his expectations regarding the concepts, behaviors and emotions of his people. And when the changes were significant enough, they became the basis for identifying epochal divisions.

Christians have described these changes in many ways, but one common and helpful illustration compares Old Testament theology to a growing tree. A healthy tree goes through many changes as it grows from a small seed to full maturity. But the growth

of trees in most parts of the world is tied to annual weather cycles. Trees tend to change slowly in colder seasons, and rapidly in warmer seasons.

The growth of Old Testament theology was seasonal, too. Sometimes it changed relatively little. But at other times it changed dramatically and reached new stages of maturity. These stages of maturity correspond to the epochal divisions of the Old Testament. Each epoch is a period of time characterized by substantial and long-lasting transitions in Old Testament theology.

We'll discuss the epochal divisions of the Old Testament in three steps. First, we'll acknowledge the variety of ways scholars have divided the history recorded in the Bible. Second, we'll describe a helpful epochal outline that many Christian traditions use. And third, we'll point out some implications this outline has for the modern application of Scripture. Let's begin with the variety of ways Old Testament history has been divided.

### VARIETY

It shouldn't surprise us to learn that theologians have found different ways to divide the history recorded in the Old Testament. For one thing, time doesn't pass in sharply segmented periods. So, transitions between epochs generally took place gradually, and the epochs themselves often overlapped. For another thing, the divisions theologians draw depend on the criteria they use. Think about the way this happens in science. Archaeologists tend to divide history according to developments in metallurgy. So, they talk about the early, middle and late Bronze Age; and the early, middle and late Iron Age. Sociologists tend to emphasize political developments. So, they talk about the tribal period, the early national age, the monarchical times, the exilic period, and the post-exilic period.

In a similar way, theologians obviously tend to use theological criteria to delineate the epochs. But they still don't always agree on the divisions because theology within the Old Testament developed in different ways at different times. When a tree goes through stages of growth, its different parts don't grow at the same time or at the same pace. Sometimes disease will actually stunt the growth of one branch as the others move forward. The bark of a tree's trunk might grow rather slowly and inconspicuously, and its tiny branches and leaves might grow quickly by comparison. In a similar way, some parts of Old Testament theology advanced slowly, others proceeded at a medium pace, and others changed rapidly. And many of these parts did their growing at different times. If every aspect of Israel's faith had shifted at the same pace and at the same time, it would be easier for interpreters to agree on its divisions. But as it stands, theologians have divided Old Testament history in a variety of ways.

**Given that Scripture is a progressive revelation, that it's come to us over time, it's important to know exactly where we are in the unfolding plan of God. Theologians often talk about dividing God's plan into various eras and epochs... We have a number of examples in the New Testament of how the New Testament divides up the Old**

**Testament. You think of Matthew’s genealogy. It begins with Abraham, works through David. It looked through Old Testament history in terms of Abraham to David, David to exile, exile to Christ. That’s a way that the Bible divides up Old Testament history, seeing its unique importance and then how it comes over to us. There’s other ways that the New Testament also divides it up. You think of Paul in Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15. You can speak of Adam and Christ before the Law, after the Law. So, the New Testament shows a number of ways to do this. I do think, in reflection upon the whole counsel of God, one crucial way that we can do this is through the biblical covenants. It’s very interesting that as you walk through Adam — creation covenant — through Noah, through Abraham — the Abrahamic covenant, the old covenant associated with Israel — and Moses, the Davidic covenant, and then the anticipation of the new covenant, this is, I think, a God-given way that redemptive history unfolds as covenant leads to the next covenant and ultimately its culmination in Jesus Christ. This is a really, really helpful way of thinking through how we move from Genesis to Christ, how the whole counsel of God fits together. And indeed many of the ways the New Testament speaks of Old Testament history, redemptive history, follows this covenantal pattern.**

**— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

Now that we’ve acknowledged the validity of a variety of epochal divisions of Old Testament history, let’s consider one helpful outline that many interpreters have adopted.

## **OUTLINE**

One of the most popular ways to divide Old Testament history is by associating each epoch with one of God’s covenants. God’s covenants with his people always entailed significant theological shifts, and therefore provide helpful boundaries for epochal divisions.

Many Christian traditions identify six major divine covenants in the Old Testament: the covenants associated with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, and the new covenant that Old Testament prophets predicted would come at the end of Israel’s exile from the Promised Land.

With regard to Adam, we should note that the record of Genesis 1–3 doesn’t use the Hebrew term *berith*, which we usually translate as “covenant.” Even so, Genesis forcefully implies that God made a covenant with Adam. As just one example, in Genesis 6:18, God said that he would “establish” his covenant with Noah. The Hebrew verb translated “establish” is *qum*, which was used to describe the confirmation of something that already existed, rather than the start of something entirely new. So, we can be



confident that the book of Genesis presented God's relationship with Adam as covenantal. Also, it's likely that in Hosea 6:7, the prophet referred to a covenant between God and Adam, or to a covenant between God and the entire human race as represented by Adam.

God's covenant in Noah appears in Genesis 6:18 before the flood, and in 9:9-17 after the flood. God's covenant in Abraham is mentioned in Genesis 15:18 before Abraham sought an heir through his wife's servant Hagar, and in 17:2 after he sought an heir through Hagar. God's covenant with Israel under Moses is recorded in Exodus 19-24 at the foot of Mount Sinai, and his closely associated covenant with the courageous Levite Phineas is mentioned in Numbers 25:13. God's covenant with David is recorded in 2 Samuel 7 and in Psalms 89 and 132. And finally, we find a prediction of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31. This same covenant is also called a "covenant of peace" in Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel 34:25. And passages like Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 8:6-12 assure us that this covenant has come in Christ.

These covenants represent times when God moved mightily in history, and they introduced long-lasting theological emphases. Adam's covenant relationship with God took place in the context of creation and God's initial reaction to humanity's fall into sin. It emphasized the foundations of humanity's service to God, and described how sin had complicated this service. It also contained God's promise that humanity would eventually succeed in this service.

In the days of Noah, humanity's horrific corruption of the world led God to send a great flood of judgment. Not surprisingly, the covenant with Noah emphasized God's promise to establish the enduring stability of nature, in order to give sinful people the time and opportunity to restrain their sin and fulfill their original service to God.

In Abraham's day, God chose Israel as the people who would lead humanity in service to God. So, the covenant with Abraham was oriented toward the election of Israel. This covenant epoch emphasized Israel's need to have faith in God's promises and to remain faithful to him.

God made a covenant through Moses after he had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and set them on their course to the Promised Land. Not surprisingly, this covenant was oriented toward Moses' codified national law, which guided the Israelites as they moved forward in their service to God.

In the days of David, God raised up David as king over Israel. His covenant with David established David's family as the permanent royal dynasty that would lead Israel's imperial expansion. This expansion was a significant aspect of Israel's service to God.

Finally, Old Testament prophets predicted that a new covenant would come at the end of Israel's exile, when God fulfilled all history. The Messiah would redeem God's people and spread God's kingdom throughout the world.

Each of God's covenants established different ways in which he related to human beings, and each provided his faithful people with new principles to follow in his service.

So far in our discussion of epochal divisions, we've seen the variety of ways biblical history has been divided, and provided a helpful outline of the epochs. At this point, we're ready to look at some implications this outline has for the modern application of Scripture.

## IMPLICATIONS

The divisions of the Old Testament into ages makes it clear that God wanted his people to understand and apply theological themes in different ways at different times. And just as Old Testament believers weren't supposed to serve God as if they lived in earlier periods of history, New Testament believers should never apply the Scriptures as if they live in earlier periods of history.

Imagine that you're an Israelite living shortly after Solomon built God's temple in Jerusalem. You know you're living during David's covenant age. You know that in the earlier Mosaic epoch, Israel sacrificed at Moses' tabernacle. You also know that in your own epoch, God has commanded you to offer sacrifices only at the temple. In your historical context, sacrificing at Moses' tabernacle would violate God's will. The same would be true if you lived under Moses' covenant and returned to building altars and sacrificing in various locations, as Abraham and other patriarchs had done. Once God commanded a new way for sacrifice in worship, he expected his people never to return to the old ways.

In the same way, when we think about the modern application of the Old Testament theme of sacrifice in worship, we have to be aware that we live in the epoch of the new covenant. As the New Testament explains repeatedly, Christ's once-for-all-time, perfect sacrifice has superseded every earlier form of sacrifice. His death on the cross changed how God's faithful people are supposed to offer sacrifices in God's worship. That's why the New Testament author of Hebrews so strongly condemned Christians that wanted to return to Old Testament sacrifices. First, he argued that Christ has inaugurated the new covenant that Jeremiah has predicted in Jeremiah 31. Then he said that the new covenant was making the old system of sacrifices obsolete. Listen to what he wrote in Hebrews 8:13:

**By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear (Hebrews 8:13).**

Here, the author of Hebrews said that the arrival of the new covenant made the old ways “obsolete,” using the Greek term *palaioō* which may also be translated “made old” or “outdated.”

Now, we have to be careful, because many well-meaning Christians take this to mean that followers of Christ should simply discard the Old Testament and pay no attention to its teaching. But nothing could be further from the truth. The book of Hebrews itself applies the Old Testament to Christians. Its author wasn't telling Christians that the Old Testament was irrelevant. Rather, he was saying that we live in a different epoch, and that the new covenant requires us to reorient the practice of sacrifice. We don't ignore the old ways, but we should never try to serve God as if we still lived in the old days.

Another striking example is the theme of leadership in battle. Imagine that you live in the period of David's dynastic covenant. You know that God has ordained the kings of Israel to lead his people into war against evil. The kings receive direction from God, and in turn direct the ways that you participate in war. But now imagine that you

personally don't like the Davidic king, and want to return to the covenant epoch of Moses' national law. You might prefer to follow a local judge like Gideon, or an Ephraimite like Joshua, or a Levite like Moses himself, just like your ancestors did. But if you followed one of these instead of the house of David, that would be sin. You would be violating God's command for your epoch. You would be making a similar mistake if you lived in Moses' day but preferred to follow a tribal patriarch as God's people did in the covenant age of Abraham. In every age, we need to follow the military leadership that God has established for that age.

And that includes modern Christians. As people living under the new covenant, we follow Jesus, the great Son of David. He is our God-ordained king. And God has given him the exclusive right to lead his people into war against the forces of evil. But how do we do that? What is our current strategy for war? Listen to the way the apostle Paul explained new covenant war in Ephesians 6:12:

**Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).**

This is a very different strategy from those of earlier epochs, when leaders like Moses and David led God's people into physical, flesh and blood battles. There were still spiritual battles, too, but these leaders didn't head up God's spiritual armies. By contrast, Jesus doesn't lead the church into physical battles. But he does lead us in spiritual warfare, and we violate God's will if we ignore this strategic shift.

**The New Testament mainly sees the battles and the wars of the Old Testament as part of the massive battle between God and Satan and between God's people and Satan trying to destroy God's plan. So then it is also applied to Christians nowadays who are in the same way part of the same battle, if you think of Ephesians 6, that your struggle is against the evil forces of Satan and that Christians must put on the full armor of God to be able to stand firm in this battle.**

— Dr. P. J. Buys

**The New Testament writers take Old Testament depictions of spiritual and national warfare and really radicalize it in certain ways and apply it in a very different trajectory than people might popularly understand today. First of all, Christ came to fight spiritual warfare. He came to overcome the darkness, John 1 tells us. The problem wasn't the darkness not comprehending him but trying to overcome him, and he does battle against the darkness — we see that particularly in John's gospel. And so, Christ comes as the divine warrior fighting against the ruler of this world, that is, Satan. In fact, in John 12 Jesus says the hour of his glorification has now come,**

**which is the hour of his crucifixion, and he says at that moment the ruler of this world will be cast down... So when Paul says the weapons of our war are the word of God and prayer and faith and so on, as he does in Ephesians 6, saying this is no longer geopolitical, national warfare, that Christians must not be nationalistic in how they perceive war... There's the sword and there's the cross, and the tendency of us as human beings is to put down the cross and take up the sword. But Jesus said no one can be my disciple unless he take up his cross and follow me. So the way we fight spiritual warfare today is by the self-sacrificing, self-giving kind of love that Jesus demonstrated from the cross and in his whole earthly life and ministry.**

**— Rev. Mike Glodo**

God has always expected his people to serve him in ways that were appropriate to the covenant age in which they lived. So, understanding how Old Testament history divided into major covenant epochs is essential for applying the Scriptures in our day. Rather than turning the clock back, as if God hadn't moved history forward, we have to trace every theological theme as it develops through every covenant age all the way to the new covenant in Christ.

Now that we've considered modern application and Old Testament epochs in terms of the epochal divisions of the Old Testament, let's explore the ways epochal developments should inform modern application.

## **EPOCHAL DEVELOPMENTS**

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To illustrate the concept of epochal developments, let's think once again about a growing tree. This time, imagine that you have a photograph of a seed, and a photograph of a tree grown from that seed. The seed and the tree look so different that it's hard to believe they're the same thing at different times. But they are. They are the very same organism at different stages of development. They even have the same genetic structures in their DNA to prove it.

In the same way, earlier and later Old Testament epochs have countless theological differences between them. But if we learn about their underlying theological structures, their DNA as it were, we discover that these theological changes actually reflect the organic development of a single growing faith.

We'll explore Old Testament epochal developments in four parts. First, we'll see that the two main characters behind these developments remain consistent throughout biblical history. Second, we'll see that each epoch connected to the others in a unified storyline. Third, we'll see that the Old Testament authors themselves often applied earlier epochs to later audiences. And fourth, we'll highlight some connections between the epochs that Old Testament authors relied on to make these applications. Let's begin with the main characters of biblical history.

## CHARACTERS

Throughout the history recorded in Scripture, the same characters are engaged in the great conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

In literary terms, we can say that the forces of good are led by the protagonist or hero of the story, namely God himself. And the forces of evil are led by the antagonist or villain, the supremely evil creature Satan, who tries to prevent God from accomplishing his goal. Satan is very powerful and clever. But he's still a creature, and always under the Creator's sovereign control. Even so, God has permitted Satan to stand against him while the divine drama plays out.

God is the supreme Creator-King who rules from his heavenly throne and fills his celestial palace with his brilliant glory. The creatures serving him in heaven already honor him. But God has always been determined to increase his honor by extending his glory throughout the earth. To accomplish this goal, God plans to extend his kingdom to earth, so that earth becomes like heaven. When that happens, every creature above, on and beneath the earth will render him unending worship and praise. God employs myriads of spirits that work toward this end. But he's given his earthly image, humanity, the honor of filling and subduing the earth. Throughout the Bible, we're God's representatives, preparing the world for the ultimate display of his glory.

On the other side of the conflict, Satan resists the spread of God's glory by trying to prevent humanity from filling and subduing the earth for God. In order to resist the spread of God's kingdom throughout the earth, Satan leads many spirits and human beings in rebellion against God, and into conflict with God's spiritual and human servants. He gains human allies in his cause through a wide variety of means, including lies, deception, false religion, and appeals to fallen humanity's sinful desires.

**In every great story there is a hero, and there is someone who stands against that hero. There's the protagonist, which is the main character of the story, and the antagonist who stands against that character. And the Bible is the greatest of all stories, and so it's not surprising to see, as you read through the Old Testament, that there is a battle that has been joined between God and his promised Messiah and the Devil who is trying to do everything he can to prevent that Messiah from ever coming. So, already in the Garden of Eden when God gave the promise that a seed would be born to the woman who would crush the Devil, from that point on you see the Devil opposing God at every turn. And it strikingly, even when there's a young child, many times the Devil is trying to take the life of that young child, or when the people of God are thriving he tries to bring them into captivity and crush them. You see that story worked out time and time again all the way through the Old Testament.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

**In the storyline of Old Testament history, right from the beginning, God is the protagonist and Satan is the antagonist. You see that right from the beginning in the Garden, because it's Satan who comes and tempts Adam and Eve, but he tempts them over against God... And then of course after the fall, we get this mention of this ongoing struggle that's going to take place throughout the rest of the Old Testament, and of course into the New Testament that is between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, Eve. And of course this finally reaches its climax, its fulfillment in Christ who puts the Devil to shame and defeats him once and for all... And I think then you see that that keeps playing out over time in the Old Testament as the seed of the serpent, which I think we can generalize as the enemies of God, continually resist God, resist his people, go to war with his people, oppress his people, and so you see that throughout. And so you know, when you have Israel, say, being oppressed and in battle with, say, the Philistines, just for one example, that's more than just Israel verses the Philistines. I think behind that, under it, is that ongoing sort of warfare between God and Satan.**

**— Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

Now, we should admit that modern Christians often miss the importance of this struggle between God and Satan. Many of us come to the Bible with very little awareness of how the empirical world is influenced by God and by the spirits that serve him, as well as by Satan and the spirits that serve him. But the original audiences of Scripture did not have this problem. They already understood the dynamic interconnections between spiritual and empirical realities. In fact, this belief was so common in the ancient world that the authors of Scripture never felt the need to provide a complete description of it. So, as modern people, if we begin to look at the drama of Scripture in terms of this spiritual conflict, we'll discover what the original audiences of the Bible already knew: this conflict underlies everything the Bible says.

With the main characters of Scripture in mind, let's turn to a second aspect of Old Testament epochal developments: the Bible's underlying storyline.

## **STORYLINE**

Despite the countless differences between covenant epochs, all these variations fit within a unified, all-encompassing narrative about the conflict between God and Satan. For the sake of convenience, we'll treat the covenant epochs of Scripture as major chapters in the Bible's story, in which God is spreading his glory in order to obtain endless praise.

The drama opens in the first chapter, the epoch of Adam. In the beginning of this chapter, God put the first human beings in the one place where his visible glory initially appeared on the earth: the Garden of Eden, which served as his sacred palace. In accordance with his purpose for creation, God commissioned Adam and Eve to expand the boundaries of his holy garden by filling and subduing the earth. The goal was to turn the earth into an appropriate place for God to manifest his visible glorious presence.

Of course, Satan resisted this plan by leading the first humans into rebellion against God. And in response, God cursed his creation and made humanity's task difficult. He also announced that humanity would divide into rival factions from this point forward: the seed of the woman would consist of people that served God's purposes, and the seed of the Serpent would consist of people that joined Satan's rebellion. At the same time, God promised that the seed of the woman would eventually be victorious over Satan and his seed.

The remaining covenant epochs of the Old Testament form the body of the biblical storyline.

In the second chapter, the epoch of Noah's covenant, God cleansed the earth of the horrific violence humanity had committed as they followed Satan. He also rescued the remnant of the seed of the woman, Noah and his family, and established a stable world in which human beings were told to oppose further corruption as they filled and subdued the earth.

In the third chapter, the covenant epoch of Abraham, God chose Abraham's family as the portion of the seed of the woman that would lead humanity into conflict with Satan and his followers. God promised to multiply Abraham's descendants and to give them the land of Canaan. From that geographical starting point, they would eventually overcome all opposition to God and his plan. They would inherit the entire earth, and spread God's blessings to every family of the human race.

In the fourth chapter, the age of Moses' covenant, God gave Israel a great victory over the Egyptians and their satanic gods. He also constituted Israel as a nation, ruled by his law, and charged them to dispossess the Canaanites. As the Israelites moved into Canaan, God gave them victory over the Canaanites and the satanic spirits they served. He established and prospered the Israelites in the land, and moved them toward their ultimate goal of spreading God's kingdom throughout the earth.

In the fifth chapter, the covenant epoch of David, David's family was ordained to rule over God's people, and to lead them into further conflict with the nations that served Satan. David's dynasty brought security in Canaan and continued to extend Israel's borders in service to God's plan for the world. Sadly, over time Israel's kings flagrantly rebelled against God, to the point that God destroyed their empire and sent them into exile. During the exile, they suffered under the tyranny of foreign empires and their gods. Eventually, God offered to end the exile and returned a small remnant to the Promised Land so that they could attempt to restore the kingdom in Canaan. But even that remnant failed to remain faithful, so the exile continued under the tyranny of evil.

The final chapter mentioned in the Old Testament is the climactic new covenant God said he would establish when a remnant of Israel repented and the great son of David, the Messiah or Christ, atoned for their sins. The Messiah would lead Israel in final victory over Satan, the evil spirits and the nations that served them. He would crush Satan and judge all who followed him. In the end, the Messiah would make all things new,

reigning over the earth with God's people. God's glory would fill creation, and every creature would praise him endlessly.

This summary of the biblical story shows us that despite the differences between Old Testament covenant epochs, these epochs build on each other like chapters of a long narrative. Rather than contradicting, displacing, or even discounting each other, each of these stages of history contributes cumulatively to the developing, unified story of Scripture.

So far, we've considered the main characters behind Old Testament epochal developments, and shown that each epoch connected to the others in a unified storyline. Now we're ready to see that Old Testament authors frequently applied earlier epochs to later audiences.

## AUTHORS

You'll recall that in the beginning of this lesson, we summarized the application of the Old Testament by saying: "Never return to the past, but never forget the past." We don't live in the past, and for that reason we should never think, behave or feel as if we lived in earlier times. But we're part of a story that includes the past. And the Old Testament authors knew this well. They recognized that the one true God had been revealing himself through the one true religion over time. And this meant that the things God had said and done in the past would continue to guide his people throughout time. In light of this, Old Testament authors regularly took what they learned from the past, and applied it to their own day. Think about it this way: There are six major covenant epochs mentioned in the Old Testament. But all our information about the three earliest epochs — the periods of Adam, Noah, and Abraham — comes from biblical books written in the later epochs of Moses, David and the new covenant.

We'll consider two common elements that Old Testament authors included in their writings that revealed their understanding of epochal developments. First, we'll see that Old Testament authors wrote about the past. And second, we'll see that they wrote for the present. That is, they wrote for audiences that lived in their own day, in their own present. Let's look first at the fact that Old Testament authors wrote about the past.

### About the Past

All Old Testament books explicitly deal primarily with the past. Consider the Pentateuch — the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Moses wrote all these books during his covenant epoch. But in Genesis he reported events that had taken place in the distant past, during the covenant epochs of Adam, Noah, and Abraham. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, he didn't reach back as far into history. But even there he focused on events that had taken place before the books were written.

The rest of the Old Testament books were written in David's covenant epoch. And they also took their audiences into the past. For example, the book of Job was most



likely written during the monarchical period of the Davidic epoch. But it reports events that had taken place in the Abrahamic epoch, long before the monarchy. The books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth were written in the age of David's covenant, but they reported events that had taken place near the end of the Mosaic epoch, before David became king. The books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther primarily referred their audiences to recent events in the past. This is also true of all the Old Testament prophetic books, Isaiah through Malachi. The prophets first ministered through prophetic speeches and actions, and only later recorded their ministries for the sake of expanding their contemporary audiences. So, their books were largely written records of prophetic actions and speeches that had already been delivered. In much the same way, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes were also theological reflections on the recent past.

Now that we understand that Old Testament authors wrote about the past, let's turn to the fact that they wrote for the present, that is, for their own contemporary audiences.

## **For the Present**

**When the biblical writers started writing the Scriptures ... they wrote to meet the needs of the readers, their people. And they didn't sit down and write just for the love of writing. Instead, they wrote to meet their people's need for learning, guidance and structure. For this reason, there was an intended purpose behind every book. The inspiration was not the issue of just "sit down and write." No, the issue was that there was a need — "rise up and write." That's why each writer took into account the need of his people to provide the information in a way the people could understand.**

**— Dr. Ghassan Khalaf, translation**

**Scripture authors paid close attention to the circumstances of the audiences they were writing for. We don't want to go overboard there. We don't want to say they're so tailored to the original circumstances that they can't mean anything for later readers. We know that from Romans 15:4 among other places where Paul says whatever was written was written for our encouragement. And yet, still, the Scripture writers did pay careful attention to what was going on in the lives of the people they were writing for... Genesis, for instance, is written to a group of people who had just left Egypt. They had just made angry the mightiest empire on the face of the earth. They are getting ready to go into a land where they're going to have to battle other enemies. They need to know that they don't have anything to be afraid of, and so the book of Genesis opens with this**

**picture of God who made everything, who is in control of all the nations, who has made promises to the patriarchs and is keeping those promises. Israel doesn't have to be afraid... So, once we know the circumstances of the original audience that actually helps us to see not only what Scripture says but why it says it. And then we can start to ask questions like, where are we facing similar circumstances to those of Israel in the desert after they had left Egypt? ... And we begin to see how God cares for his people as a shepherd and shows compassion for our needs.**

**— Dr. Jimmy Agan**

The authors of Scripture understood that the past represented earlier stages in the organic development of biblical faith. But they were called to minister first and foremost to audiences that lived in their own day. So, they wrote about the past in ways that built bridges to the lives of their original audiences. They highlighted historical people, actions, words, institutions and the like in ways that connected these historical topics to the lives of their audiences. For the most part, the original audiences of Old Testament books were familiar with the literary conventions that biblical authors followed to build these bridges. So, the authors didn't normally bother to explain these connections. At other times, the authors provided small clues that pointed to the connections between the past and the present. And in still other passages, biblical authors offered rather direct explanations to help their audiences see how the past applied to them.

Just as the authors of the Old Testament found ways to connect the past to their own present audiences, modern Christians need to connect those writings about the past to ourselves. Yes, modern application is concerned with what's happening in our day. But it's always based on the ways of the past.

As God's people living in the modern world, our faith is deeply connected to what God revealed long ago. We're devoted to the modern application of Old Testament books that deal with the past. And even when we're applying New Testament books, we're still looking to the past. Now, some books like Revelation focus on the future quite a bit. But even Revelation is a record of the visions that its author John applied to his original audience in the past. In one way or another, every book of Scripture concentrates on what God did in the past. So, in order to apply those books in the modern world, we have to concentrate on the past, too.

To this point, our discussion of epochal developments has covered the main characters behind Old Testament epochal developments, the unified storyline of Scripture, and the fact that Old Testament authors applied earlier epochs to their contemporary audiences. So, now we're ready to focus on the types of connections biblical authors drew between the past and the present.

## CONNECTIONS

We'll speak of three types of connections Old Testament authors drew between the past and the present. First, they provided their audiences with historical backgrounds to different dimensions of their faith. Second, they presented models for their audiences to imitate and to reject. And third, they provided anticipations of their audiences' experiences. Let's look first at how biblical authors provided their audiences with historical backgrounds.

### Backgrounds

Old Testament authors most often showed the relevance of the past by explaining the background or origin of their audiences' current experiences. For instance, after Moses described the marriage of Adam and Eve, he paused his narrative to connect this event directly to his audience. Listen to Moses' words in Genesis 2:24:

**For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).**

In this verse, Moses explained how a feature from Adam's covenant epoch was relevant to audiences in the Mosaic epoch. Specifically, the marriage of Adam and Eve established the lasting ordinance of marriage, which extended to the days of Moses.

Once we see that Moses used this event as background for his original audience, we can connect it to ourselves in the same way. Adam and Eve's marriage was the background of marriage in ancient Israel, and it's also the background of marriage in our day.

At other times, biblical authors used backgrounds in ways that revealed God's approval or disapproval of historical figures. For instance, the book of Ruth finds no fault in Ruth, Naomi, or Boaz, and shows that they had God's full approval. We find the reason for this at the end of the book. Listen to the genealogy that closes the book in Ruth 4:21-22:

**Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David (Ruth 4:21-22).**

This genealogy shows that Boaz is a direct ancestor of King David. This ending connects the events in Moses' epoch to the time of the original audience, who lived in the time of David's covenant.

In all likelihood, questions had been raised as to the legitimacy of David's kingship because he descended from the Moabitess Ruth. But the story of Ruth demonstrates that her inclusion in Israel was exemplary in every way, and that God fully approved of her. In this way, the book of Ruth provided background that reinforced the selection of David as Israel's king.

And once again, in modern application we have the opportunity to extend the bridge that the author of Ruth built for his original audience. Just as God's approval of Ruth showed the legitimacy of David's dynasty in David's time, it also provides background that validates the kingship of David's greatest heir, Jesus, in our day.

Besides providing backgrounds the connections authors drew between the past and present also presented models for their original audiences to imitate or reject.

## Models

**Sometimes when we're reading a Bible story we ask ourselves, "Now, is this a good example or a bad example? Should I be doing the same thing that this person in the Bible has done, or should I do something different from that?" And answering that question may be different in different passages, but here's one very important principle that applies to a lot of biblical stories, and that is what I like to call the rule of outcomes, and that is looking at the end of the story and seeing what happens to that person. Do they receive God's blessing or do they receive God's judgment? And that's often all the clue that we need to figure out if someone is setting a good example for us or a bad example.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

Let's look at two examples of models from the book of Joshua, which recorded events from the Mosaic epoch for an original audience living in the Davidic epoch. The author of Joshua provided a positive model in Israel's performance in the battle for Jericho in Joshua 2–6, and a negative model in their performance at the battle for Ai in Joshua 7.

In the lengthy account of the battle of Jericho, there is no hint that Joshua, his spies, or the army of Israel did anything contrary to God's will. They showed their full devotion to God by submitting to circumcision a few miles away from Jericho in Gilgal, and they followed the Levites and the priests as they marched around the city singing, shouting and blowing trumpets, just as God had commanded. So, the author of Joshua concluded the story of Jericho with these positive words in Joshua 6:27:

**So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land (Joshua 6:27).**

But listen to how the account of the battle for Ai begins in Joshua 7:1:

**But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things (Joshua 7:1).**

This verse contrasts the positive model of Israel at the battle of Jericho with the negative model of Israel at the battle of Ai.

When Israel first attacked the tiny city of Ai, Israel's huge army was defeated because the Israelite Achan had stolen property from Jericho in rebellion against God's command that all the spoils of war be devoted to him. Joshua and Israel did not defeat Ai in battle until they had first been confronted by God, repented of their sin, and rendered severe judgment on Achan and his family.

The contrast between the battles of Jericho and Ai provided the readers of Joshua with both a positive model to follow and a negative model to reject. By observing these models, the original readers in David's epoch were supposed to learn how to follow their own kings into battle.

Of course, as followers of Christ, we no longer wage physical war like Joshua did, because the New Testament only calls us to spiritual warfare. Still, in modern application we extend the bridge of these same positive and negative models in order to learn the proper ways to engage in spiritual warfare. Simply put, we have to be devoted to God like Joshua was at Jericho, and we have to avoid neglecting his commands like Achan did at Ai. Of course, there are countless details related to these broad modern applications. But the connections that the author of Joshua drew to his original audience can all be extended in ways that help us determine those details for our own situations.

**The Bible teaches us in many ways what a godly life is to look like, what sin is, etc., sometimes simply by stating it straight out, — thou shalt, or thou shalt not, or you shall, or you shall not — but also by giving us the history of real people who lived out their lives, everyday lives. And as we read them, we know that we are supposed to learn from their example positively or negatively. It says in the book of Romans, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” So we have positive examples that we are to emulate, and we have negative examples that we are to shun... Like when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, we know from the Ten Commandments that that was wrong; we know it from the account as Nathan accused him of sin. And we have other indications. So we know that that's a bad example by a man who generally was a good example, a man after God's own heart... So what enables us to know the difference? The law of God, the clear teachings, the precepts, and then it's acted out, and we can put the two together.**

**— Dr. Andrew Davis**

**You know, sometimes it's very hard when you're looking at the Scriptures to figure out if a personal character or his life is one that we ought to be imitating. And we have to remember the only one that we know we can imitate is Jesus himself. That's the only one that gets a total pass on our critique. Everyone else we must examine very**

**carefully. The reason they're in the Bible is normally not primarily to be exemplary for us to imitate... But when we're trying to figure out when are we getting a life lesson to emulate and when not, you have to look at context, what's said about those actions, the outcomes of those actions, whether they contribute to the expansion of the kingdom or not, but primarily look to the moral precepts that are in the Scriptures and make your judgment there, and everyone's fair game except Jesus. We know that whatever he said and did is good, true, and beautiful. Everyone else comes under the microscope of biblical morality.**

**— Dr. Sanders L. Willson**

Finally, besides providing backgrounds and models, Old Testament authors also drew connections between the past and present by incorporating anticipations of their original audiences' own experiences.

## **Anticipations**

Biblical writers frequently wrote about the past in ways that pointed out how events from the past were very similar to the situations their audiences faced. This kind of bridge is similar to a literary device called “foreshadowing.” In foreshadowing, an author presents earlier details of a story in ways that anticipate later details. And biblical writers sometimes wrote about the past with similar intentions. They wrote about past events in ways that anticipated the experiences of their readers.

One well-known anticipation occurs in Moses' story of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, recorded in Genesis 12:10-20. Of course, Moses told the truth of what happened in Abraham's epoch, but he explained the story in ways that helped his original audience recognize many parallels between Abraham and themselves. For instance, Abraham went to Egypt because of a famine, just as Moses' original readers had been in Egypt because of a famine. Pharaoh unjustly held Abraham in Egypt by taking Sarah into his harem, similar to the way the Egyptians unjustly held the Israelites as slaves in Moses' day. God delivered Abraham by sending a plague on Pharaoh's house, and he delivered Israel in Moses' day by sending plagues on Egypt and Pharaoh's house. Pharaoh sent Abraham away with great riches, and in the Exodus in Moses' day, Pharaoh and the Egyptians sent the Israelites away with the riches of Egypt.

Moses drew these parallels to show that Abraham's experience anticipated their own. Moses wanted to encourage his original readers to turn away from idealizing their time in Egypt, and to see their deliverance as a mighty act of God on their behalf.

Once again, in modern application our task is to see the bridge that Moses built from Abraham's life to his original audience, and to extend that bridge to our modern lives. For instance, the New Testament teaches that Christ has delivered us from the tyranny of evil, just like God previously delivered Abraham and later delivered Israel.

Through similarities like this, Abraham's sojourn to Egypt also anticipates the ways modern Christians should understand our faith and service to God.

Whenever we apply Scripture, we need to consider the epochal developments that have taken place between the times of the Bible and our day. And the connections Old Testament authors drew through backgrounds, models and anticipations provide patterns that help us bridge the gap between these historical epochs.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on modern application and Old Testament epochs, we've looked at the epochal divisions of Old Testament history in terms of their variety, a common outline of the epochs, and the implications of these divisions. And we've considered the epochal developments between these divisions in terms of their consistent characters, unified storyline, use of earlier epochs by biblical authors, and the connections between the epochs that aid our application.

As we've seen, God's covenants divided biblical history into major epochs that had different theological orientations. So, we should never try to serve God in our day by returning to the ways of the past. But we are never to forget what God revealed in the past. When we factor in the ways that theological themes developed organically from one age to the next, we find that everything God revealed in earlier covenant ages has much to teach us about serving him in our age, even the age of the new covenant in Christ.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
EIGHT

Modern Application &  
Old Testament Epochs  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	Why is Scripture authoritative? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	How should we understand the Bible's authorship? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b>	How much were the authors of Scripture influenced by the circumstances of their original audiences? .....	5
<b>Question 4:</b>	How can we tell which characters in the Bible are positive examples for us to follow and which are negative examples we should reject? .....	6
<b>Question 5:</b>	How can we determine from Scripture the major epochs or eras of redemptive history? .....	9
<b>Question 6:</b>	What criteria do theologians use to divide Old Testament history into eras or epochs? .....	11
<b>Question 7:</b>	How does God function as the protagonist and Satan as the antagonist in the storyline of Old Testament history? .....	13
<b>Question 8:</b>	How should we apply the Bible's depictions of divine and national warfare to our lives today? .....	16
<b>Question 9:</b>	How should Jesus' office of king influence the way we apply the Bible to modern life? .....	17

# **He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation**

## **Lesson Eight: Modern Application & Old Testament Epochs**

### **Faculty Forum**

With

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Dr. Steve Blakemore

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

Dr. Andrew Davis

Dr. William Edgar

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Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

### **Question 1:**

#### **Why is Scripture authoritative?**

**Christians have long believed that the Bible should have a profound impact on the way we act, think, and feel. Both the Old and New Testaments provide doctrinal insight and practical instruction for believers. But the Bible isn't just another useful book. It actually has authority over our lives. Why is Scripture authoritative?**

#### **Dr. Simon Vibert**

Christians believe that Scripture is authoritative because God stands as the author over Scripture. Now, for sure, God used human means — men moved along by God — in order to write the Bible. But actually Scripture's authoritative because when the Bible is read we hear God's voice and are supposed to respond submissively and in humble obedience.

#### **Dr. Peter Walker**

Christian believers see the Bible as quite different to other books because it's a divine revelation, a revelation from God, and also it's something which has been inspired by him. Concerning revelation, the Bible is seen as something in which God himself is revealing his character and his deeds, his works. So, the Bible contains events in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, which Christian believers see as a sign of God actually at work in his world. It could be the Exodus redemption in the Old Testament. It could, of course, be the resurrection of Jesus in the New. So, at the very least, the Bible is the book which is an account of the acts of God in human history. But more than that, when God does something in the world, it's important that, actually, it should be properly explained. So, what we need is not just an account of the acts of God. We need an authoritative account which has come from God. And the Christian claim is that the Old Testament and the New Testament are, both together, books through which God has been at work to give an account of what he's

done in the world, authoritative revelation about God's words and his works. Going a little bit further, there's a biblical understanding that the God of the Bible is a God who speaks, very powerful, his word. His word brings about creation, his word inspires people through prophetic writings. And so, it's long been taken that the words of Scripture are also words which God himself still speaks. So, here comes the idea that the Bible is actually a word from God — in fact, *the* Word of God. And then it's worth remembering again that the God of the Bible, who is seen as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a God who has power by his Spirit to inspire men and women, and to inspire people in their task of writing words of Scripture. And so, we have this understanding that the Bible is inspired, or breathed out by God. There's a text in the New Testament that says that all Scripture is inspired, or God-breathed, or breathed out by God, and that is because of this doctrine of the Spirit. God is able, by his Spirit, to bring forth words which really explain who he is. So, the Bible is quite different — revelation from God, and inspired by God.

**Dr. John Oswalt**

When we look at the Bible, we see a book which the Christian church has regarded as authoritative for its entire history. There are a number of reasons we could give for that, but one — or two really — that I want to lift up here is the remarkable theology of the Scriptures. There are really only two worldviews. One worldview says, "This cosmos is all there is; there is nothing more." The other worldview says, "No, there is something *beyond* this cosmos." There are really only three religions in the world which take that position: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And they all got it from one single source, the Bible. Where did the Jews, the Hebrews, the Israelites, where did they get this bizarre idea that God is not the world? Everybody around them believed that deity is intrinsic to the world. But the Jews, the Hebrews, the Israelites say, "No." We ask them, "Where did you get this idea?" and they say, "Oh, God revealed it." People a hundred and fifty years ago in Europe said, "Oh no, the Jews had a great religious propensity." Ask the Jews: "Religious geniuses? Ha-ha, no, we were religious knuckleheads. God dragged us kicking and screaming into this understanding of him. We didn't want it, but we couldn't escape him." The second thing that marks the uniqueness of the Bible is "iconoclasm." You cannot make God in the shape of anything in this world. The same three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Where did they get it? Same single source: the Bible. So, the Bible is revealed. Obviously, we could offer many other explanations or illustrations of that truth, but those two really catch me and say the only way you can explain this is the one they give us, revelation. And that means if God has revealed himself to us in this book, then this book is authoritative.

**Dr. Derek Thomas**

What authority does the Word of God have? It has the authority of God himself. The Bible is God's Word. It is God speaking. Every part of it from Genesis to Revelation, all 66 books, 40 different authors in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, 2 million words in nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and so on, all of them, every single one of them, given by God. The Bible is what God intends it to be. All Scripture is given by the out-breathing of God and is profitable for doctrine, reproof,

instruction, correction in the way of righteousness. Holy men of God wrote as they were driven along by the Holy Spirit. Now, Calvin in the 16th century introduced, I think, a very, very important term. In book one of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he coined the phrase that the Bible is "*autopistos*," was the term he used. It is self-authenticating; it authenticates itself. If the Bible is God's word, there can be no higher basis of authority. You can't appeal higher up than the Bible because the Bible is God's Word. So you can't have the church corroborating its authority, or tradition corroborating its authority, or some inner peace that as we read the Bible we detect it to be the word of God. Although, that is true. The Holy Spirit does witness to the Bible's self-authenticating nature, and that's an important concept, but ultimately, the Bible authenticates itself. Now, this sounds like a secular argument. The Bible is true because it says it's true. The Bible is authoritative because it says it's authoritative. And that is circular. It sounds circular, and it is circular. But in ultimate issues, one can't avoid circularity. There is no higher corroboration than God himself, and the Bible is God's Word.

### **Question 2:**

#### **How should we understand the Bible's authorship?**

**The Bible tells us that all Scripture was "breathed out" by God. And yet, we also see clear indication that the human authors of Scripture wrote using their own personalities and abilities. So, how should we understand the Bible's authorship?**

#### **Dr. Steve Blakemore**

Well, when we think about the Bible as the Word of God, we need to remember that the Bible was written through human authors. But there's another sense in which you could say, the Bible was written *by* human authors, of course, under the inspiration of the Spirit, fully guided by the Holy Spirit. But the question is, what does that mean? Do we think of them as kind of sitting down in some sort of meditative state dictating thoughts that came into their minds? Or do we think about the Spirit working through human language, working in terms of human concepts that were in them and utilizing them as the chosen instruments of God to produce faithfully the Word of God. I think oftentimes we get confused with the concept of the Scripture as the Word of God, and we think of the Scripture as the *words* of God. I don't think Scripture was given in any sort of dictatorial manner. Rather, it seems to me that God used their human cultural concepts to give deep abiding spiritual truth. For instance, when John writes in 1 John — I think chapter 2 — that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the whole world — that's what he says — the concept of an atoning sacrifice, if that had come through an author in the 12th century A.D., would have been incomprehensible to people. The atoning sacrifice was a concept that was very culturally specific. And so that cultural language is used to describe something that is irreplaceably important to us about Jesus. So, the Holy Spirit uses human intellectual concepts. He takes them, and the writers are writing in their own particular context. But the Spirit knew that this same truth expressed in these concepts would be

applicable to the life of every believer who ever came after them and who ever read these truths. So there is a great amount of human involvement in the production of the Scripture, but that doesn't make the Scripture a human document. It simply means that there is something beautiful, and God-givenly beautiful, about the capacity of human beings filled with the Spirit, guided by the Spirit, seeking after God, surrendered to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Something beautiful about the capacity of human language to express the truth of God.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

We know that the Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture. We believe that as Christians. But we have to remember that he inspired human authors. And so it's important, it's obviously important, that we be aware that the Scripture is inspired, "breathed ... by God," as Paul said. But we have to remember that God doesn't inspire the writers of Scripture in a way that sort of overrides them as individuals, as people. So it's very important, we have to remember, these are human authors and they're using human language, and they're communicating with human beings. And so, we need to pay attention to them because they are the messenger, so to speak. You could put it that way. They're God's messengers to us — to the people they were writing to and then also to us. And we have to remember, God accommodates himself to us in every way. And one of the greatest ways that God has accommodated himself to us is by giving us his Word in words that we can understand. I mean, God's not limited to language. God's not limited to any language at any time. God accommodates himself and speaks to us through human beings. And since he's speaking to us through human beings, we have to take those people seriously and see them as the ones who are... they are the ones who are most directly communicating to us what God is saying. And so, if we kind of skip over or dismiss the human authors of Scripture, in many ways, we're dismissing the divine author of Scripture by ignoring the fact that he, in fact, spoke through human beings. So we have to take them seriously and understand when we say Paul is my authority, we shouldn't mean anything other than God is my authority. You know, Paul speaks as the messenger of God. He makes that very clear. And all the biblical writers. I mean, when the prophets say, "Thus says the Lord," we can say legitimately that Isaiah is authoritative on this matter... Just pick your text from Isaiah. But by saying that Isaiah is authoritative, what we're saying is God is authoritative as the one speaking through Isaiah. So it's two things. We shouldn't reject either side but see that's how God has revealed himself through human beings. And we have to take those human beings seriously and understand that what they say is authoritative because it's God speaking through them.

**Question 3:****How much were the authors of Scripture influenced by the circumstances of their original audiences?**

Many times biblical authors had specific audiences in mind when they penned their letters or other writings. And knowing who those recipients were is very helpful as we interpret and apply their writings today. But, how much were the authors of Scripture influenced by the circumstances of their original audiences?

**Dr. Andrew Davis**

The authors of Scripture paid very careful attention to the circumstances of the people they were writing to. They had a message from God, a word from God, for those people at that time. But God had a bigger purpose for those writers. Those writers of Scripture, whether it's Old Testament prophets, Moses, the apostles, did not always fully understand what God would do with their writings. This is stated very clearly in 1 Peter, that it was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but future generations. Daniel was told to seal up his prophecy because it was for a later time. And he didn't understand it. He clearly asked many questions about it, and he was told, "Don't worry about it, you're going to die and you're going to rise again and you'll be fine, and I'll take it from here." And so future generations then would read those Scriptures and understand them far more fully than the original writers did. But they were writing to specific circumstances. And God orchestrated, I think, those circumstances to be universally helpful and beneficial to later generations. So things going on in the church in Corinth or the church in Galatia, etc., are still helpful to us today. So, Paul was addressing specific situations. He sat down that day to write to those situations. I don't know that he was intending to write Scripture like Moses or Isaiah was writing Scripture. He was just desiring, in an apostolic way, to be helpful. He was conscious that everything he said was by the Spirit, etc., but I think he wrote many things that didn't make it into the Bible. And so, my feeling is that God orchestrated those circumstances, the apostle would write into them, address their questions, answer them, but God intended that those questions would be strategically chosen to be helpful for future generations. So, I think that's the best way to understand the immediate circumstance, the author writing, and how it's still useful to us twenty centuries later.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think to a large extent, the circumstances of the audience to whom the writers of the Bible were writing play a major role in the content of those books. Now, that's not true in every case, because sometimes we don't know the original circumstances. But just take the epistles, for example. They're often called "occasional letters." And what that simply means is that they were letters written at a particular time, by a particular person, to particular people in particular circumstances. And so, they're written to address certain issues. I mean, 1 Corinthians is a great example. Right? We know they had questions for Paul, and we know that there were lots of issues. And Paul addresses those large sin issues among the Corinthians and then goes on to address



some things that they have asked him. We know, for instance, like in Philippians, that they're being hounded by these sort of Judaizers who are coming in and promoting circumcision. And Paul addresses that in chapter 3. Or the Galatians, again, similar kind of situation, probably a little more intense even than Philippians. And we know what Paul has to say both to the Galatians about their tendency to sort of tilt away from the gospel, but also very strong words for those who are coming and leading them away by a false gospel. And so, the original circumstances are very important for us for understanding the content of the books of the Bible. But at the same time we have to remember we only know as much about those circumstances as the author of the letter tells us, or the gospel, or what have you, any book of the Bible. So, when we come to Colossians, just to give another example, we know that there is something called "the Colossian heresy." Well, we only know about that through what Paul reveals. And there's a good reason why, if you read commentaries on Colossians, that there's a lot of different opinions about what the Colossian heresy was, because we don't know exactly what it was. But we know enough about the problems there that we don't have to know exactly what the Colossian heresy was to know the kind of issues that Paul's addressing. So, we need to be aware of it insofar as the authors make us aware of it. But it's not as though if we don't have a clear understanding of the original circumstances that we can't understand the books of the Bible.

**Dr. Howard Eyrich**

I think if you consider the Scriptures overall, you will find that the authors consistently had their audience in view. You can look at Moses; you can look at Joshua; you can look at Isaiah, Jeremiah; it follows through. But the two best examples, I think that we can relate to the best, are 1 Corinthians and 1 Peter. I always find it fascinating that God sent Paul to plant a church in Corinth, the most immoral city in the world. And he goes there to plant a church, and God establishes that church. And then Paul leaves. He knows the people, he knows the culture, and now he gets this letter from them that says, "We've got some problems over here in Corinth. Can you help us?" And so, as a result, Paul writes the book of Corinthians in which he addresses these six or seven problems, depending on how you want to construe them. And they are problems that we face in the church today. So, the context became very important, the actual people became very important. They were people that Paul knew, but he was writing to them about common issues that God in turn set it up so we would all have access to how to think about those common issues ... So, the people, the circumstances, the culture, all were important to the author of the books of the Bible.

**Question 4:**

**How can we tell which characters in the Bible are positive examples for us to follow and which are negative examples we should reject?**

**The Bible's original audiences would have been familiar with most of the individual characters found in Scripture. But audiences today sometimes have difficulty**

**pinning down Scripture's view of a particular person. We want to know whether Scripture views a character's actions and words as praiseworthy, and whether or not we should follow their example. How can we tell which characters in the Bible are positive examples for us to follow and which are negative examples we should reject?**

**Dr. Jimmy Agan**

The Bible doesn't immediately tell us in every setting which characters are to be imitated and which ones are bad examples to be avoided. So we have to have some principles in place. The first one is to make a distinction between prescription and description. Sometimes the Bible prescribes certain behaviors to engage in or to avoid. It directly tells us what to do or not do. Other times the Bible encourages certain behaviors and discourages others by describing, showing us a picture of what faithful human life before God looks like. And so that's a good place to start, is with that general distinction. Another question to ask is: does another part of the Bible shed light on the conduct of this character? An example here would be maybe Abraham's polygamy in the book of Genesis. Well, if we've read Genesis 1 and 2, we know that God's intention is for one man and one wife to cleave to one another and become one flesh, and Genesis 1 and 2 says nothing about polygamy being part of God's design. So if we're reading carefully, we know, "This part of the Bible tells us how to evaluate Abraham's conduct in this respect." We could ask a question of whether a narrative, a description of a character, leaves us any clues of how to evaluate that character's conduct. A great example of this is in the book of Ruth where Ruth has a nearer kinsman redeemer than Boaz. And Boaz goes to him and asks if he will do what Scripture requires in terms of caring for Ruth, and he refuses. And Scripture sends us a signal by not even bothering to record the name of that nearer redeemer. That's the Scripture's way of saying, this guy's a scoundrel, don't behave like this, don't ignore God's law when it calls you to redeem someone who's in need. We can move on from those kind of general principles to some specifics that have to do with the Gospels and the book of Acts where things get even a little more crazy in terms of evaluating behaviors and characters. Who's good? Who's bad? One thing we do when we look at the Gospels is we ask, "Is this character embodying something that Jesus has taught?" And so we come, say, to the book of Acts, and we see Barnabas selling land and giving the money to the apostles to take care of those in need in the church. Well, Jesus has taught on that. Jesus has taught about giving possessions to those who are in need. Jesus has taught about generosity. And so that sets us up when we get to the book of Acts to say, "He's living out what Jesus has taught. He's an example of what faithful discipleship to Christ ought to look like." Another question we could ask when we're looking at the Gospels and the book of Acts is: Is there any conflict here between this approach and the approach that Jesus has embodied himself? We see a lot of conflict between Jesus and other leaders whether those leaders are Pharisees, scribes or even his own disciples. So, when we start to see certain models of leadership that look like they're intentioned with what Jesus has modeled for us, that's a dead giveaway that we're not supposed to practice that kind of model of leadership.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf (translation)**

If we ask, "Why does the Bible speak to the depths of our hearts more than any other book," what would our answer be? Our answer would be that the Bible doesn't consider the matter of God's existence or non-existence, but rather, it talks to us about the experience of the people that have lived with God. And the Bible recorded their lives according to their relationships with God. Therefore, when we read the Bible, we read about people like us. And when we read about people like us, we find extraordinary spiritual things in them. But we also find mistakes, shortcomings and despicable things. All of this is to teach us to learn from them when they lived out spiritual heroism and showed virtues in their lives. And to learn *not* to do what they did if they sinned, stayed away from God, languished spiritually, or left the faith. Therefore, we always have these two issues in the Bible: At times, people live a good life and sometimes they fail and make mistakes. And other times we find very bad examples of people who, at the end, rarely repent. So there is a lesson for us to learn. We learn to follow those who lived a good life of faith. But we don't follow the footsteps of those who make mistakes. This is a great moral challenge. But our morality grows when we see people live morally before us. And in the Bible there are virtuous men and women who lived truly heroic lives of faith, and they are examples to follow if we are going to mature in our faith and live spiritually courageous lives.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

It's vital to understand that there are things in the Bible, some of which are commended to us, and some things which we're not supposed to do. I often say to my students, "Do not think that everything in the Bible is biblical." And they get worried. And then I say, well, the Bible contains lots of things which it's not mandating or requiring us to do. So it's not actually a biblical thing to go and hang yourself just because Judas happened to hang himself. And that helps people, the students, to understand that the Bible has got things which it's not commending. Not everything in the Bible is biblical. Not everything in the Bible is biblically required of us. There are examples which we're not supposed to follow. It's crucial we understand this. Read the book of Judges or Joshua, especially the book of Judges. It's really quite a low time in God's redemptive purposes. The people of God are nowhere. And it says at the end of the book of Judges, they "had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes." Now that is a clue from the writer of Judges that everything he's been describing in the previous twenty-plus chapters, you've got to put a big question mark against it. Is this actually what we're supposed to be doing? Is Samson really meant to be a role model for how we're meant to behave today? Now that episode of Jephthah as he ends up sacrificing his daughter because she comes out of the house, the first thing he sees, that is horrendous. And that's why some people have moral problems with the Bible because it seems to be describing these things. But actually the Bible has been very careful. The biblical writers are saying, "No, this is not how God's people are meant to behave." And this is a low time, a dark time in God's purposes. And it's really important to get that distinction. Normally the biblical writer will give us the clue and will give us that steer, that guidance, to say, "Don't do this. No. Do this." And when you come to the New Testament, you've also got issues like in the book of Acts. The disciples, the early apostles, they would do certain things, and is

that actually required that we do exactly the same thing? Should we throw lots, for example, when we're trying to choose our next deacon? Well, because they did that doesn't mean to say that we have to do that. It's biblical, it's permitted, it's allowed. But we've got to realize that not everything in the Bible is actually required of us. And there may be other practices to which we say, "Yes, that's fine." But there are different ways of cutting the cake.

### **Question 5:**

#### **How can we determine from Scripture the major epochs or eras of redemptive history?**

**When we look at God's redemptive plan throughout history, it's important to see how Scripture divides history. It's also important to see what the Scriptures have to say concerning those divisions. So, how can we determine from Scripture the major epochs or eras of redemptive history?**

#### **Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

Scripture gives us clear clues as to the major eras or epochs of redemptive history. The first one we can see as we open any English Bible, we see two main divisions: Old Testament and New Testament. That is actually reflective of the way the Bible itself views the whole span of the history of redemption and revelation. Old Testament and New Testament are really reflective of the biblical language of old covenant and new covenant — language that Paul uses in 2 Corinthians. But, of course, new covenant language goes back much earlier to the prophecy of Jeremiah, where God promises a new covenant not like the covenant made at Sinai, but one in which God will forgive all his people's sins, and he will write his law into their hearts. So there we have a basic breakdown of two epochs of redemption. Old covenant: the period of promise, the period of, as Hebrews says, the period of anticipation and shadow. And the new covenant: the period of fulfillment established by Christ and his death and resurrection. Now if we look back at the period that we think of as the period of promise or shadow, certainly the Law of Moses marks a clear point in that the Law is given. Now written Scripture is given for the first time to Israel in the five books of Moses, and the Law governs Israel's life. But we do see references in Genesis to the earlier history, the history of the patriarchs in which there were key covenants that God made with his people. We have the implicit covenant. Hosea 6 calls it a covenant with Adam. It's not labeled as such in Genesis 1 and 2, but it's a covenant that God makes with Adam and Eve. Adam is a covenant head of the human race with obligations, with consequences, a commitment that God makes, that if Adam and Eve obey, if Adam sustains the test of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there will be eternal life and blessing. Adam does not, as we know, and so we are plunged, then, into a new period, a period that begins with a promise, in a sense. It's judgment on the serpent, on Satan. But it's a promise implicitly to us that a seed of the woman will come to crush the head of Satan — the beginning of what theologians call "the covenant of grace" — that's then worked its way out in the

various epochs of revelation and redemption. Abraham, a key figure as God makes a covenant commitment to Abraham to grant him a land, but even more, to grant him a seed, a line of descendants, and to be a blessing to all the nations. Christ is that ultimate descendent. And in Christ, all the nations become Abraham's descendants by faith in Christ. So, those covenants are key markers. We've looked at the covenant with Adam before the Fall; a covenant, in a sense, with Adam and all humanity after the Fall; Abraham; Noah before Abraham, a covenant in which God promises to sustain the world as he works out his redemptive plan; the covenant made with Israel through Moses; and then, of course, there is the covenant that God makes with David. And we find more clarity now, more focus, that the seed of the woman, who will be the seed of Abraham, who is the seed of Israel, in fact, even in Moses' day and before, we learn will come from Judah. Now he's to come from the line of David. And then we have the fulfillment in the new covenant. And the fullness of things that were shown in types and shadows in the Old Testament, now the reality comes in the person of Christ.

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

When trying to discern or figure out the major eras or epochs in redemptive history, probably the best way to begin is to begin in the New Testament where they start to parse especially the larger history in the Old Testament. And so, for example, in the New Testament they talk about the epoch or era of the first Adam in Romans and the epoch or era of the second Adam in Romans. And so we're talking about big divides there. We can also talk about the patriarchal era, the promises made to the patriarchs, but then, also, the covenant made with Moses at Sinai. And so, the New Testament is a great way to begin to talk about or think about the different epochs in redemptive history. We even have in the New Testament the discussion of the time before the flood and that time after the flood. And so, if we take our cues from the New Testament, we at least have a place from which we can start, where we have a kind of inspired interpretation of redemptive history. You can also study the Old Testament itself and allow it to establish particular redemptive historical epochs based on its covenantal structure. And so, you can talk about that time before the Fall, and therefore, that time after the Fall, which divides all of redemptive history. You can talk next about that time before Noah, the flood, and that time after the flood which, in essence, subdivides the latter part of redemptive history post-Fall. You can talk about the patriarchal or the Abrahamic era — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the patriarchal era that led up to the Mosaic era. And then the Mosaic era ushers into, or leads up to, the Davidic era which is the highlight of that era. And you've got David and Solomon who become the kings. So that's the era of the kings, if you will, which leads to the era of, or the epoch of the exile. And then the waiting for the final epoch where Jesus comes his first and then second times. And so, there are ways to do it kind of at a presuppositional level where you begin in the New Testament and see what it says about the larger history in the Old Testament. But then if you're in the Old Testament by itself, it also has self-authenticating ways of discerning the epochs, basically by covenant, covenant renewal, and major covenant figures.

**Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.**

People have a lot of different opinions about how many major eras or epochs there are in biblical history, redemptive history. So there's a lot of debate on that. But it seems to me that we can at least recognize three or four. And it seems as if with each new era, God does something new, perhaps creative. Of course, Genesis 1 tells us that he created the world. So that began an era in human history, and there was a need for redemption pretty quickly because the first couple sinned against God and were expelled from the Garden. And then the rest of the biblical story is about how God reclaims humanity and creates the ideal that he had all along for humanity. We certainly had the beginning of a new era when God delivers Israel from Egypt, takes them to Sinai. In fact, there are places in the Old Testament where that is viewed as a new creative event — Isaiah 40 through 55. If you read through that section, you'll see a close association between Exodus and creation. And so there's a sense in which God created Israel when he brought them out of Egypt and gave them a constitution, as it were — the Law — at Sinai. And certainly when you come to the New Testament and you see that God establishes the church, something new happens there. The new covenant community is created with the outpouring of the Spirit. And Peter recognizes that this is the fulfillment in part or in whole of what Joel prophesied, where God would pour out his Spirit on his people. Christians will disagree about what the future holds, and is there going to be a new era? I am a dispensationalist, premillennialist, so I happen to believe that there will be an earthly kingdom. Others may not agree with that. But certainly something new and exciting is going to be happening in the future. And we'll probably disagree a little bit on that, but we can all look forward to it.

**Question 6:**

**What criteria do theologians use to divide Old Testament history into eras or epochs?**

**Historians can divide history into different sections based on any number of criteria. This is because they all look at history from different perspectives. Theologians do this as well. What criteria do theologians use to divide Old Testament history into eras or epochs?**

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

When thinking about Old Testament history, often times scholars will try to divide that history up into discrete blocks for discussion. There are a number of different ways to do it. First, I think it's important to understand that there is one history of God's people and God's kingdom from beginning to end. He's working on this unified plan. In the midst of that unified plan, there are distinct epochs in history when God works with his people, sometimes in ways very similar to what we would experience now in the Christian life, and sometimes in very different ways. And so, knowing what epochs fit into what categories can be helpful. So that's why we do this. In the New Testament, Peter refers to a division at the time of the flood, the world that then

was and the world that now is. And so, it's helpful to use the New Testament to divide the Old Testament into biblical epochs, I think. And so, we can talk about the world before the flood; then we can talk about the world after the flood. And so, that's a type of division that's an "event division." And so, when we think about other major events in the Bible that would be event-type division like the flood, we could think of, well, there's creation, then there's the Fall, and then there's the flood. Then we have the patriarchal era, and then the Mosaic era. And then the Mosaic era can be expanded into the time in which they occupied the land and then their exilic period. So, you can divide the Old Testament into those epochs based on major events. So, creation, Fall, and then, in some sense, the plan of redemption in the Old Testament which includes the patriarchal era, the Mosaic era, the age of occupation in the Land of Promise, and then their exile from it — those epochs. So you could do it by event. You could also talk about biblical epochs associated with the people. And that's another way to do it too. So, when you talk about the patriarchal era, you're really talking about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their family, or Noah and his family. You could also talk about Moses and that generation of people, and then Joshua, and then the generation of the judges. Those will correspond to many of the epochs that are event based. But one would be then the temple era or the Solomonic-Davidic era as well. So, what we're doing is we're grounding our division of the Old Testament into major periods of when God acts through his people. And so that's really the tension there, is do you place emphasis on the action of God or the person through whom God is working? And the answer is, yes, both. And what you'll notice is that when God works through a particular person in Israel's history, the event, the Bible and biblical revelation explodes as well. So, if you think really of the first big major redemptive act in the Old Testament — that's the big Red Sea event in Exodus — that's when we get the Bible exploding with exposition and revelation, and we get that big chunk of Scripture in the Mosaic era. Then in the next one, you have the Davidic era where the kingship and the monarchy are flourishing. And then you get the Judges, the Samuel, the Kings, all that material as well, when they're occupying the land. That's the next big event. So you've got people and events together. And then at the end you have their exile and then all of that material that is stemming from the exile, Ezra, Nehemiah, the exilic books and the exilic prophets. The prophets, as well, come because of the exile. So, sometimes people and events go together. Sometimes they overlap. And so, you have this word event, word pattern that goes throughout the Scriptures. And so, it's keeping those things in mind and just realizing that when you're studying the Bible, some people are going to emphasize the people as you move through the Old Testament. Others are going to emphasize the events. And in some reality, both of those are helpful because God's working through people and God's working in history, and you could stream those together. But at some level, you've got to keep it all together as well and realize that all of this Old Testament history is culminating in the person and the work of Jesus, so, who he was as a person and what he did in history. So, those two streams ultimately will climax in Christ. And if you can see them moving that way, then you're on the right track.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

Different theologians divide the Old Testament along different lines, into different eras and epochs, which raises the question of criteria. What criteria are they using? This much is clear. If there's going to be a criterion, it has to be something that the Bible itself presents as the structural device of God's revelation to us through time. And Reformed thinkers have consistently maintained that that structure is covenant. And so it's in terms of covenant and the particulars of each covenant administration through the Old Testament that we develop criteria for how we think about what's going on in each epoch of the Old Testament.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Those who read the Bible often divide them into different epochs or eras. So, often speaking covenantally of the covenant made with Adam, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, for example, helps us to understand how God dealt with his people in certain eras and times in the Bible. And understanding the context in which you're reading the text in those different epochs and eras helps you to understand it applied to the original audience and on to us. And, I suppose the most significant thing for us as readers of the Bible is to appreciate that we live in an age in which those epochs and eras have passed. And understanding the context in which the various slices of the biblical text are to be read and interpreted, according to age in which they occurred, gives us insight as to how it had been read by original audiences. And as with most of the reading of the Bible, we recognize that there's a sense in which we still live in the same world that they live in. We're creatures who are made by God perfectly but who fell into sin. Nevertheless, Christ has entered into our world and he has redeemed us, but that that work is not yet completed until he returns. And finding ourself positioned as it were, reading the Bible today helps us to understand how earlier readers of the biblical text positioned themselves in their time and epoch as well.

**Question 7:**

**How does God function as the protagonist and Satan as the antagonist in the storyline of Old Testament history?**

Like every good story, biblical history involves conflict. And this conflict most often takes the form of tension between the protagonist, or the main character, and the antagonist, his enemy. In Scripture, God is depicted as our protagonist and Satan is the antagonist. How does God function as the protagonist and Satan as the antagonist in the storyline of Old Testament history?

**Dr. Luis Orteza**

If you look at the history of redemption, writers would speak about the history of redemption as a drama. And God is the protagonist who tries to accomplish his purposes. And Satan is the antagonist in that he tries to oppose the fulfillment of God's purposes in redemptive history. And so, you see the conflict between the two.



A good example of that to start with is the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Here he receives the promise, or he receives the dream, that someday he would rise to power only to find out he would end up in prison. And at that moment, it looked like everything was lost. And yet, in time God showed him that God was sovereign, that God was in control. And the story gives us an example of how God in his sovereignty fulfills his purposes even though Satan sometimes would try to prevent it from happening.

**Dr. Andrew Davis**

First of all, I love to think of the Scripture as an unfolding story of redemptive history, and it's true. It's not a fable or myth, it's a true story. But it is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Jesus said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and the End." So there's a beginning to this story and an end to this story. God is the protagonist, the initiator, because he's the Creator. There was a time when there was nothing but God. And I believe that he thought out and planned out this story before the world began, before he said, "Let there be light." He was and is the initiator of everything, the Creator, the King, the Ruler. Satan is a created being. We understand him to be perhaps the most powerful created being, but there's an infinite gap between God the Creator and Satan as a created being. They're not in any way equal and opposites. Satan is opposite to God. He does oppose him, but he's a created being. And God uses Satan to accomplish his purposes. A very good example of that is in the crucifixion of Christ. I think about that, how in Caesarea Philippi, Satan in some way filled Peter to tempt Jesus not to go to the cross. Jesus said to him, "Get behind me Satan." When Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him concerning going to the cross. Jesus called him Satan. But then later in John's gospel, Satan entered into Judas to bring about Jesus' arrest and his betrayal. So what is Satan doing? He doesn't know what to do with Jesus. And so, I think in the end he just reverted to his nature. He's a murderer and he wanted to kill the Son of God, and in so doing destroyed himself. By killing Jesus, it says in Hebrews 2, Jesus was able, by dying, to destroy him who holds the power of death, that is Satan, and free us from Satan's dark kingdom. And so that's a beautiful thing how God figured all that out — God infinitely smarter than Satan, more powerful than Satan, moving around like a pawn on a chess board and Satan responding. Now Satan's vastly more powerful than we are, but we should understand how much more powerful God is. And there's nothing Satan can do to divert God's story, God's plan. It's going to go just as he planned to his own glory forever.

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

You could really look at the whole storyline of the Old Testament as God as the protagonist and Satan as the antagonist. This, of course, begins prior to the Fall when Satan tests, or tempts, Adam and Eve and they disobey God. They break covenant with him. But it's made into a very focused, ongoing axis of Old Testament history in Genesis 3:15 where the curse upon the serpent is that there would be a seed of the woman whose heel he will bruise, but that seed of the woman would also crush the serpent's head. And so, you see this really playing out in the remainder of the Old Testament. You see it prior to Abraham in that the people of God are these wandering

people who trust in God's protection. And yet there are those who use their power and authority in ways that are inimical or at enmity toward God's people. People like Cain as he persecuted Abel, or Lamech who bragged about killing a man for wounding him. And even the sons of God, these powerful earthly rulers who oppressed the daughters of men such that, in the end, God brings a flood upon the earth. Noah was mocked in his day as a righteous man. You see it in the juxtaposition of the builders of the tower of Babel who say, "We'll make ourselves a name by building a tower up to the heavens," and then immediately following that we have Abraham who is promised a name by God. Israel and Egypt continues this theme. One of the great symbols of Pharaoh and his power was the serpent. And in the plagues of Egypt — you see it especially in chapter 12, the final plague, the plague on the firstborn — God says, "I will execute judgment tonight on all the gods of Egypt." So through Moses and Aaron, God is showing himself more powerful than Pharaoh, the epitome of an idolatrous and arrogant and prideful emperor. You even see this in the wilderness as Israel looks back and thinks about the food they had and the graves that they could be buried in in Egypt. And God tells Moses in Numbers 21 to make a bronze serpent, to lift it up on a pole and the plague of snakes that Israel had been subject to would be abated. They would be healed by looking to that serpent on the pole. That serpent on the pole is really a symbol of Pharaoh and his broken power. He is the serpentine deity who has been spike impaled on this pole. And so, God is telling Israel, "You can't go back to Egypt; you mustn't desire to go back to Egypt because the serpentine god, Pharaoh, is a dead god; he's an impotent god." So, Jesus draws upon this in John 12 — that the lifting up of the Son of Man on the cross will be like the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. That God will fight ultimate war against Satan and his forces by going to the cross. Jesus will defeat death by diving into death. And so, as it would disempower Satan, as Jesus said there in John 12: "So will the ruler of this world be cast out." And so, by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus frees us, as Hebrews 2 says, from him who has the power of death and who has subjected us to the fear of death all our lives long. Because he was made like us in our humanity as well as in his deity, Jesus defeats Satan ultimately. The strongman is bound. As Jesus said in Luke 11, that if you cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God had come. The strongman has been plundered so that all who belong to Satan's household have been stolen away from him. God has done, as it were, a home invasion on Satan by kicking down his door and plundering what was once his. So the gospel, among all the things that it accomplishes, one of the principal ones is the overthrow and the ultimate defeat of Satan, which is a story that begins back in the Garden with the promise of God. That there would be a seed of the woman who would bruise and crush Satan's head.

### Question 8:

#### **How should we apply the Bible's depictions of divine and national warfare to our lives today?**

**The Old Testament has a number of occasions where it depicts divine and national warfare. And this theme is something the New Testament writers used to instruct their audiences. But what does this mean for modern audiences? How should we apply the Bible's depictions of divine and national warfare to our lives today?**

#### **Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

The theme of warfare is important in Scripture, but it's often controversial in our day. You have to very carefully think through how the Bible applies warfare imagery both in the Old Testament era and the New Testament era. As we think of the whole counsel of God — and as specifically how the New Testament authors look back on the Old Testament — and think through how the warfare now applies to us as believers, it does so in light of the fulfillment that has come in Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, under the old covenant, it's important to see that Israel is a theocracy. They're given a specific land, a specific role to play in the nations. As they go into the Promised Land, God commands them to engage in warfare, to execute God's judgment, to remove the nations from the land. That is for a specific purpose — to create a holy people, to allow for the coming of Messiah, to execute God's judgment upon sin. I mean, a whole variety of purposes that are given to us. As we come to fulfillment in the New Testament, the church isn't exactly the same as Israel. It doesn't function like a theocracy in exactly the same way. We don't have a certain geography and a piece of real estate that we are controlling and having geographical borders and this type of thing. We are a spiritual people. We're part of God's kingdom that is international. His kingdom has broken into this world in Jesus Christ. We are people of that kingdom, yet we don't engage in the warfare in exactly the same way that it is under the old covenant. Yet, the Old Testament does apply warfare imagery to us. It first applies warfare imagery in Christ. Christ is the one who is "true Israel." He is the one who takes Israel's role and fulfills that. He is the one, in his coming, that defeats the powers. He engages in warfare against Satan. You see that in his life and ministry. On the cross he defeats the power of Satan, sin, death — a number of ways that the warfare imagery is applied. It then comes over to us in and through to him. We are to engage against the principalities and powers with spiritual weaponry, not, you know, arms and this type of thing that you would, say, as tied to Israel of old. We are to put on the whole armor of God — Ephesians 6. We are to engage in warfare under the role of our king, our Lord Jesus Christ. Warfare imagery will be picked up when Christ comes again. He will execute judgment. We aren't to do that. He will do that for us. But we then live as his people in between the times waiting for that second coming. So, that as you think of warfare imagery from the Old Testament to us, it has to be very, very carefully applied. For the most part, it's Christologically defined. He is the one who takes up that war. He is the one that defeats our enemies. He, on his cross, wins victory, and we then live in light of that victory. We put Satan under our feet. We engage in spiritual warfare. We do not pick up the weapons of this world —

2 Corinthians 10 where Paul says we don't engage in that kind of warfare — but we fight against Satan and all of his sinful and evil deeds as we await the coming of the Lord Jesus who will finally, in judgment, put sin and death down, defeat Satan, as he has done. It will be consummated and we will then have the victory with him.

**Dr. William Edgar**

I think contemporary people are a bit skittish about the idea of a God who goes to war or justifies war. There is plenty of war on our planet, but we generally don't like it, especially if we follow Christ who told us to turn the other cheek and to be peacemakers. But of course, war is very much a part of bringing justice to a world that's already in chaos. And so, Christians reading the Bible have developed the idea that some wars are "just." They're "just" because they're fighting off aggression and they're fighting off injustice. This is the kind of warrior that God is. He goes to battle for his people, he rescues them from their enemies. In the Old Testament, much of this was physically real. Think of the Exodus, think of the angel of the Lord battling for the people of Israel. But as the people were disobedient and sent into exile, a higher level of warfare was introduced, if I can call it that, and that is a spiritual warfare. So Jesus comes, and he still is the warrior. And there are times when he acts like one. He threw over the moneychangers' tables in the temple. But until the end of time, he will be mostly leading us in the battle against sin, and the flesh, and the Devil, telling us to put on the whole armor of God, and leading his people in what really is a war against all the forces of evil. And as we've said, the book of the Revelation tells us that Jesus is this warrior, and he wins. The victory is his, and now we're waiting for that victory to unfold.

**Question 9:**

**How should Jesus' office of king influence the way we apply the Bible to modern life?**

**As the protagonist and final victor of the biblical narrative, Jesus now reigns as king. Because of this, Jesus has authority over our world and over our lives today. So, how should Jesus' office of king influence the way we apply the Bible to modern life?**

**Dr. Peter Kuzmič**

I think the most crucial question that we have to ask is, how do the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world intersect? Where and why do they collide? Where do they partner? How does the gospel of the kingdom relate to the conditions of humanity in the world in which we live? You know, we evangelical Christians claim to be the "Great Commission Christians." I hear the Great Commission called out all the time, and I tell my American friends, "Wait a moment, you are not really faithful to the Great Commission when you call the Great Commission Matthew 28 and you say, 'Go and make disciples of all nations.'" You know, "nations" again. I say, "That's not where the Great Commission begins." It doesn't begin with our going. It begins

with his being. And so, it really begins a verse earlier, where the risen Lord gathers his disciples and says, "All power," depending on the translation. I think New International Version says, "All authority." The Greek word "*exousia*" is not easy to translate. It could be translated "dominion," relating to the rule of the kingdom, kingdom of God. "All power," all *exousia*, "in heaven and on earth is given to me. Therefore," — I will translate — "as you go, make disciples of all nations." This is a very important linkage. Now, when Jesus says, "All power in heaven and on earth is given to me," for somebody out in the world who doesn't understand biblical language that sounds scary ... History's full of tyrants and dictators who claim to accumulate all power, and became very destructive, killing millions, if not hundreds of millions, of innocent people. Now, Jesus is the only one who can claim all dominion, all power, with legitimacy. And by the way, his power is not destructive because it is power and love. Power motivated by love. Power moderated by love. See, if you have love alone, you have a nice sentiment, but maybe you are helpless because you don't have power to change anything. If you have power alone without love you destroy, you kill, you hate. It's the divine genius that brings love and power together. "God so *loved* the world that he sent his Son." Now, Jesus, who is the incarnated of love, and who claims all power — and remember it's after his resurrection — that is central to his kingdom. Kingdom is Jesus's master-thought. In the first three gospels alone, 121 times you have the kingdom mentioned. We don't understand who Jesus was, why he came, what he taught, and what happened on the cross and what happened on the third day. We don't understand what he means when he says, "The kingdom of God is at hand." He is the only one that can legitimately claim all power because he is the only one that walked on this planet earth and never sinned, never lied, never deceived. He's also the only one who, after he was killed, dead, buried, came back. So, he's the risen Lord. It is the inauguration of a new era of human history. He's bringing hope to the nations. And so, the kingdom of God is at work in very powerful ways. And that's where world evangelization and discipling the nations then is based on this, what I call, "the great foundation." You don't have a great commission without the great foundation. And then he caps it with a great promise, "And I will be with you to the very end of the ages." So Jesus the Lord, Jesus the King, is the ruler who has all power. And so we go, we disciple, we teach, we proclaim his rule in his power.

### **Dr. Gideon Umukoro**

The kingship of Jesus is an issue that the American church is not really too familiar with, except the missionaries that have gone out overseas to countries where kings are still in power. The country I come from, Nigeria, is a democratic nation, but the kings also are there, playing vital roles alongside democracy. And not that it looks like, the kings have higher power than the governors who oversee the states, because if — take for example, if the governor of my state wants me in the government house, I can send his envoy back to him that "I'm busy; when I have the time, I will come." But when the king sends for me, I don't have any say. I don't have any excuse. I must be there right away. And even if I am indisposed, I will have to be put on a wheelchair or a stretcher and be brought before him. Because when he sends his envoy, the envoy comes with the scepter of the king and they put it in the front of your house. And

that's to show to you that the king needs you immediately, and you have to move with the envoy back to the palace. So that is how the kings reign and wield power in my country Nigeria. And when we see Christ as the king, as the Sovereign, from the point of how I just described the African king, then the kingdom we are praying for will come very soon. You see, most of us don't really understand the power of a king. The king owns everything, including you, your wife, and your children. The king has the right to accept you in his domain. He has the right to banish you out of his domain, and the governor has nothing to say about it, because the king's word is final. And I'm really glad that Jesus is the King Jesus. And if he actually is the king, then he owns every one of us. He has the right to summons us, and we don't have any excuse to give to him. He has a right to everything that we have worked and labored for on earth here because he's the king. If we accept him as the king, then when he says, "go," you go. When he says, "come," you come. When he says, "stay," you stay ... We lift up our hands in worship and say that we give all to Jesus. But because of our little or myopic understanding of who a king is, even when Jesus is summoning us, or is sending us, is asking us to give, we don't really understand his sovereign authority and power ... Jesus is King. And because of that, I own nothing on earth here, including myself, my wife, or my baby. We don't own anything. He is the owner of all. So that is how I see Jesus as King practically in my life.

**The Old Testament is divided into different epochs. And these divisions provide a solid foundation for applying biblical material to modern life. Epochal divisions help us account for the differences between today and the times when the authors and audiences of the Old Testament lived. If we keep this information in mind, we'll be in a better position to apply the Old Testament to our own situations. And we'll grow in our ability to live under the authority and reign of our victorious Savior, Jesus Christ.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
NINE

## MODERN APPLICATION & THE NEW COVENANT



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Fulfillment .....</b>	<b>2</b>
A. Old Testament	2
B. Intertestamental Period	4
C. New Testament	5
<b>III. Application.....</b>	<b>8</b>
A. Guidelines	9
1. Old Testament	10
2. New Testament	11
B. Example	13
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>17</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Nine

### Modern Application & the New Covenant

#### INTRODUCTION

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We all have experiences that we quickly forget, but some experiences impact us so much that they stick with us our whole lives. Perhaps, for you, it's when you first came to faith in Christ, your wedding day or the loss of a loved one. Whatever the case, when we go through these kinds of experiences, they change how we look at everything, forever. And the same is true for followers of Christ as we apply the Scriptures to our modern world. Although the Bible tells us about many things that God has done, the arrival of the new covenant in Christ is a pivotal event that changes the way we understand everything, including the application of Scripture to our lives today.

This is the ninth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Modern Application and the New Covenant." In this lesson, we'll explore how the new covenant in Christ should guide the ways we apply all of Scripture to our own day.

In our previous lesson, we learned how we must acknowledge epochal developments in the Old Testament as we apply the Bible to our lives. And we observed that one storyline underlies all of biblical history. The Bible teaches us that God rules from his heavenly throne in brilliant glory, and his goal from the beginning has been to extend his visible glory from heaven throughout the earth despite all who oppose him. As creatures made in his image, God ordained human beings to fill the earth and to rule over it in preparation for the ultimate display of his glory. And when God's brilliance shines everywhere, every creature will worship and praise him endlessly.

We also noted that the drama of this underlying biblical storyline developed in six major chapters, or epochs, that built on each other cumulatively: the covenant epochs of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and the new covenant in Christ. The cumulative nature of these epochal developments reminds us that while God's people must never return to serving God in the ways of the past, they must also never forget to apply the lessons of the past appropriately to their own day.

In this lesson, we'll explore modern application and the new covenant in two steps. First, we'll look at the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ. And second, we'll see how the new covenant should guide our application of Scripture today. Let's begin with the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ.

## FULFILLMENT

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We often imagine what particular experiences will be like before they actually happen — like, winning a competition or entering a new phase in life. But many times, we discover the experiences themselves are different from what we expected. Well, the same kind of thing was true for God’s people in biblical times. Prior to Christ’s coming, God revealed to his people many insights into what he would accomplish through Christ. But when the new covenant in Christ finally arrived, it wasn’t exactly what his people had imagined.

To see how this happened, we’ll look at three facets of new covenant fulfillment in Scripture. First, we’ll touch on outlooks that appear in the Old Testament. Second, we’ll describe perspectives that developed during the intertestamental period. And third, we’ll describe how the New Testament addresses the fulfillment of the new covenant. Let’s begin with the Old Testament outlooks on the new covenant.

### OLD TESTAMENT

Old Testament hopes for a new covenant rose out of words God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah as he ministered near the time of Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 B.C.

Despite the severe judgments that were coming against Judah through the Babylonian exile, in Jeremiah 31:31-34, God announced a grand hope for the future. Listen to what it says there:

**“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).**

This passage raised many wondrous hopes for God’s people. As we read in Jeremiah 31:31, God will make a new covenant with both the northern kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah. The new covenant will not fail because, as verse 33 explains, God will fulfill the ideal of putting his law “in their minds” and “on their hearts.” And as verse 34 also indicates, these blessings will never end because God will permanently “forgive” and “remember their sins no more.” When we consider these hopes for the new covenant age, it is hard to imagine anything greater.

At this point in our lesson, we want to see how the Old Testament dealt with the fulfillment of these new covenant hopes. To begin with, it’s evident that God initially offered to grant these blessings when he returned Israel from exile.

As we’ve just read, Jeremiah 31:31 simply begins with the vague expression “the days are coming,” but in the immediate context this temporal reference was rather precise. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is part of a larger segment of the book of Jeremiah often called the Book of Restoration that extends from Jeremiah 30:1–31:40. This section bears

this name because it rehearses several descriptions of the exile and the blessings that would follow after the exile. Listen to what it says in Jeremiah 30:3, near the beginning of the Book of Restoration:

**“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land” (Jeremiah 30:3).**

The expression “the days are coming” appears in this verse as it does at the beginning of the prophecy of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31. And in this verse, “the days are coming” is explicitly associated with the time when God will bring his people “back from captivity and restore them to the land.”

In this light, it’s clear that Jeremiah 31:31 initially associated a new covenant with Israel’s restoration to the Promised Land. From the Old Testament perspective, Israel’s restoration would take place at the culmination of history in “the latter days,” or in “the last days.” It would entail the establishment of a new covenant along with Israel’s return from exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple, the worldwide reign of the anointed Son of David, and the renewal of creation.

In Jeremiah 29:10-14, God also revealed to Jeremiah when to expect this age of a new covenant to take place. Listen to what the prophet said:

**This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place... Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you... I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you” (Jeremiah 29:10-14).**

Here God offered the hope that if Israel “will call on him and come and pray,” then God will “bring them back” to the Promised Land in seventy years. The same timetable is revealed in Jeremiah 25:12.

As a matter of fact, in 538 B.C. God led the Persian emperor Cyrus to command Israel to return to the Promised Land. So, it’s not surprising that in 2 Chronicles 36:20-22, the author of Chronicles closed his book by noting that Jeremiah’s seventy years of exile were fulfilled at this time.

But what of the many other blessings that were to come in the last days, the days of the new covenant? Sadly, those who returned to the Promised Land failed to serve God time and again. And as a result, the magnificent blessings of a new covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31 were postponed.

This is precisely what Daniel learned in Daniel 9:24 when God sent word to him about the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of 70 years:

**Seventy “sevens” are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place (Daniel 9:24).**

As this passage indicates, God decreed a postponement of the greater blessings of the last days, the days of the new covenant, for “seventy ‘sevens,’” seven times longer than Jeremiah’s original seventy years. At that time, the hopes of the new covenant would be fulfilled. Transgression would be finished, sin would end, atonement would be accomplished, righteousness would come, vision and prophecy would be sealed up, and the Most Holy Place would be anointed.

**When Daniel is praying about Jeremiah’s prophesy about the 70 years of exile, he’s praying, “The time is about up. Lord, what’s going on?” And the answer that’s given to him is that it’s not just 70 years, but it’s also 70 sevens of years, the land making up for its Sabbaths, for all the neglect that had taken place. Something that that suggests to us, in terms of interpreting Scripture, is that sometimes there is the dimension where God is doing *literally* what was promised, but there’s also the dimension where there are some other implications of it that are sometimes brought out prophetically later on. So, for example, in the book of Revelation, you often have Old Testament imagery that’s used in ways differently than it was in the Old Testament. Obviously Revelation isn’t talking about the same plagues that happened on Egypt, but we have the imagery of the plagues being used again in Revelation to make a comparison for how God is bringing judgment. So, we need to be open to that when we read Scripture, when we read how later writers are dealing with earlier writers. I mean, there was a sense in which there was the 70 years of exile, but there was also another sense that God had in mind that Daniel would never have known if it hadn’t been shown to him by the angel.**

**— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

We’ve seen that in the Old Testament, the full extent of the new covenant was postponed due to the people’s disobedience. Now let’s turn to the intertestamental period — the time between the Old and New Testaments — and the perspectives many in Israel developed regarding the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy, especially in the days just before Jesus’ earthly ministry.

## **INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD**

It was obvious to everyone in the first century that Jeremiah’s prediction of a new covenant had not yet been completely fulfilled. New Testament records and archeological discoveries indicate that different religious factions among the people of Israel had different perspectives, but there was widespread agreement on a number of basic issues.

Toward the end of the intertestamental period, the vast majority of rabbis spoke of the hope of the last days, or the new covenant epoch, in terms of two great ages of history.

In the first place, they referred to prior history and their current circumstances as “this age.” The obvious victory of evil over God’s people in the exile led the rabbis to characterize this age as a time of failure, sorrow and death.

In the second place, the rabbis also spoke of a second great age of history, the time of future glory, as “the age to come.” The age to come was also known as “the last days,” “the kingdom of God,” and as the age of a new covenant. The rabbis expected that when the age to come arrived, God’s purposes for history would be fulfilled. He would return his repentant, exiled people in large numbers, restore the throne of David, spread his reign throughout the earth, bring judgment against those who refused to submit to God and to the son of David, and spread the blessings of Abraham to the ends of the earth.

In addition to this, the vast majority of rabbis in Israel also taught that the transition from this age to the age to come would take place decisively with the appearance of the Messiah, the great son of David. The Messiah would bring about a grand turning point in world history, the transition from defeat to victory, from evil to righteousness, from death to eternal life, and from darkness to a world filled with the brilliant glory of God.

With this background of Old Testament and intertestamental outlooks in mind, let’s look at how the New Testament explained the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s hope of a new covenant.

## NEW TESTAMENT

We all know that in his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus held up the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Also, Paul called himself and his companions “ministers of a new covenant.” And the book of Hebrews refers to Jeremiah 31 and affirms that Christians live in the new covenant age. But when we compare what’s happening in our day with the description of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, we realize that we’re yet to see the new covenant promises in their fullness. The law of God isn’t perfectly written on our minds and in our hearts. People in church still need to be told to know the Lord. We’re still commanded to ask for the forgiveness of our sins. So, how can we be in the new covenant age when so many of Jeremiah’s expectations are yet to be fulfilled? The answer lies in the mystery God revealed in Christ, how he was going to unfold the fulfillment of the new covenant.

Different New Testament figures addressed these matters in different ways. For instance, Jesus, in a number of his parables, announced that the kingdom of God had begun with his earthly ministry, would gradually grow over time, and finally reach its culmination when he returned in glory.

The apostle Paul addressed these matters in places like Ephesians 3:3-5, by referring to the fact that the mystery regarding the last days had been kept hidden from people in the past, but was now being revealed in Christ.

Paul mentioned this mystery in a number of other places as well like Romans 11:25 and 16:25-26 and Colossians 1:26-27. In these and other passages, Paul referred to

different aspects of the Christian outlook on the last days in Christ as mysteries because they had been kept hidden from previous generations.

**In several places in Paul's letters he speaks about the gospel or various aspects of the gospel as being a mystery, a *mysterion* in Greek. And by mystery he doesn't mean some mysterious, cloudy thing that suddenly appeared on the scene or a puzzle that no one can solve. As one New Testament scholar described it, a mystery for Paul was something that God hid in plain view, something hidden in plain view in the Old Testament. And it's something now that, through clarifying revelation in the appearance of Christ, people can look back and say, "Oh look! Look at what is there." So it's not that Paul is presenting something that's not there, but he's saying, "Look at what we've missed, look at what is there" ... And in many ways, the truth about the coming Messiah and about the unity of Jew and Gentile together is right there in the Old Testament in the Psalms and in Isaiah, but the coming together of it ... the "look at what's here; look at how all these pieces fit together" awaited God's giving of his Spirit and the promises of the new covenant that Paul speaks about.**

**— Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

**When Paul was talking about the mystery being made known to him in Ephesians 3, he's talking about the gospel. The gospel is a mystery. That means it's hidden unless God takes explicit action to disclose it to us so that, of course, with respect to the gospel, it's a public mystery. It's a public secret, if you will. But it can only be unfolded to us through the proclamation of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, when Paul speaks of the mystery, as in the case in Ephesians 3, sometimes he's talking about the mystery of the body of Christ that is brought into reality through the proclamation of the gospel. And there in Ephesians 3 he's saying, the mystery is that Jew and Gentile love each other and are brought into organic unity together in a kingdom. It's amazing. So, he says the unsearchable riches of Christ are being proclaimed to these wild Gentiles. Of course, being a Gentile, I'm glad it came to Gentiles. But that's a mystery... He is the one that unites Jew and Gentile together by the blood of the cross and by the power of his Spirit.**

**— Dr. Sanders L. Willson**

The mysteries that God revealed to the apostles and prophets led to an outlook on the new covenant age that New Testament scholars often describe as "inaugurated eschatology" or "the now, but not yet." Whatever terminology we may choose, we can see that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament taught that in God's plan for the last



days, the fulfillment of the age of the new covenant was to take place in three main stages.

First, the inauguration of the new covenant age was initiated in Jesus' first coming and in the ministries of his apostles and prophets. This is why the New Testament speaks of the days of Jesus and his apostles as "the last days." In Hebrews 1:1-2 we read these words:

**In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Hebrews 1:1-2).**

Here, the author of Hebrews referred to the time of Jesus' earthly ministry and of his readers as "these last days." As this passage indicates, with Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom, the promised last days of the Old Testament, had come upon the world.

The New Testament emphasizes that this inaugural phase of the new covenant age included all that Jesus accomplished in his incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This special time also included the ministries of the apostles and prophets in their foundational work for the church. In Ephesians 2:19-20, Paul put it this way:

**God's household [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).**

Second, the continuation of the new covenant epoch extends throughout the entire period of church history. During this time, Christ spreads the church throughout the nations through the proclamation and transformative influence of the gospel.

This is why the New Testament writers, in places like 2 Timothy 3:1-5, designated the entire period of church history as the last days. Listen to what it says there:

**But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Timothy 3:1-5).**

The sins listed here for "the last days" were sins that were occurring in Paul's day, and that have continued to occur throughout history and into the present day.

Paul referred to the character of this same period as a mystery revealed in Christ in Ephesians 3:9-10:

**This mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God ... [is] that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known (Ephesians 3:9-10).**

In this light we are right to treat the entire period of church history as the new covenant age.

Third, the last days of the new covenant age will reach their consummation when Christ returns and fulfills God's ultimate purposes for all of history. This is why New Testament authors described the consummation of the kingdom at Christ's return as "the last days." In John 6:39, Jesus told his disciples:

**This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day (John 6:39).**

Here Jesus taught his disciples about his relationship to the Father. His reference to the "last day" points forward to that ultimate final day when he will return in glory, the dead will rise, and God will judge the world.

In Ephesians 1:9-10, Paul also described this time as a mystery that God revealed in Christ. In these verses, Paul described the consummation as:

**The mystery of [God's] will ... which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10).**

As the New Testament indicates, Jesus inaugurated the new covenant in his first coming, he continues to reveal the new covenant through the worldwide church today, and the full judgments and blessings of the new covenant age will come when Christ returns in glory as king over all.

Having explored the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ, we're now in a position to turn to the second main topic of our lesson: our modern application of Scripture based on the unfolding character of the new covenant epoch.

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## APPLICATION

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As we'll see in later lessons, there are many things to be said about the application of Scripture to people living in the new covenant age. Among these are countless cultural and personal considerations. But at this point, we want to see how the New Testament teaching about the three stages of the new covenant guides us in applying the Bible to our lives today. These aspects of application are rather general, but they provide us with indispensable perspectives on how we are to use the Scriptures in our lives today.

Everyone who's watched a play in a theater knows that where you sit affects your perspective on the performance. The same character and actions can look very different

from different angles. And the best way to take in the whole presentation is to see it more than once from different seats. In many ways, this is how Jesus and the New Testament authors taught the Christian church to apply the Scriptures in the new covenant age. By examining Scripture from different vantage points, we're more equipped to apply the Bible to our lives.

Imagine a faithful follower of Christ reading the Scriptures on a stage whose backdrop divides into three large panels. From one side of the audience, we see that the Christian reads the Bible against the backdrop of Christ's inauguration of the new covenant. From the middle of the audience we see that the Christian reads the Bible against the backdrop of Christ's continuation of the new covenant. And from the opposite side of the audience, we see him reading the Bible against the backdrop of Christ's consummation of the new covenant. In one way or another, followers of Christ are to apply the Scriptures to the modern world by studying the Bible with all three of these perspectives in mind.

In other words, when studying the Bible, believers need to relate every Scripture to what Christ has already accomplished in the inauguration of the new covenant and consider everything Christ accomplished for us in his earthly ministry. But we also have to view the teachings of Scripture in light of the continuation of the new covenant age and search for the significance of Scripture in our lives today. Additionally, it's important that we view the Scriptures through the lens of what Christ will accomplish in the consummation of our age and live in readiness for Christ's wondrous return in glory.

There are many ways we could explore these three perspectives on new covenant applications, but we'll touch on just two important points. First, we'll summarize some general guidelines for application in the new covenant age. And second, we'll offer an example of application that illustrates these strategies. Let's begin with some general guidelines.

## **GUIDELINES**

In an earlier lesson we defined the process of application as:

**Appropriately connecting the original meaning of a biblical document to contemporary audiences in ways that impact their concepts, behaviors and emotions.**

As this definition points out, every application of Scripture involves appropriately connecting original meaning to contemporary audiences.

First, we need to determine the original meaning of a biblical passage by identifying the ways biblical authors sought to impact the concepts, behaviors, and emotions of their original audiences. Then, we can apply this original meaning to contemporary audiences by determining how a biblical passage should impact the concepts, behaviors and emotions of people today. As we've seen in other lessons, it's important to keep epochal developments in mind when we apply the Scriptures because originally every passage of Scripture was written for people living in a different stage of

biblical faith than our own. So, at this point in our lesson, let's focus on the ways epochal developments connect the original audiences of Scripture with contemporary audiences living in the new covenant age.

To see what we have in mind, we'll look briefly in two directions. First, we'll make some general comments about new covenant applications of Old Testament passages. Then second, we'll do the same with New Testament passages. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

## Old Testament

As we have seen in a preceding lesson, the Old Testament refers to six major covenants in biblical history, but the writing of Old Testament books took place in only two of these covenant ages: the covenant epochs of Moses and David. Every Old Testament passage was designed to address the needs of God's people living either in the covenant epoch of Moses or during the covenant epoch of David. As such, Old Testament passages originally conveyed to God's people sets of concepts, behaviors and emotions that were appropriate for the theological developments of these two covenant epochs.

For this reason, it's necessary to build bridges of meaning from Old Testament passages to the new covenant epoch. As followers of Christ, we know that the only infallible guide in this process is the New Testament. So, it's essential to look for ways New Testament authors applied the Old Testament to all three stages of the new covenant. For instance, the New Testament gives us many examples of the ways Christ fulfilled Old Testament teachings in his first coming. It also draws attention to the ways Christ continues to fulfill Old Testament teachings during the continuation period. In addition, the New Testament points to the ways Christ will fulfill Old Testament teachings in the consummation of the new covenant.

**One of the most important biblical themes is the theme of the kingdom of God, and yet that particular phrase only occurs in the New Testament. Well, we see it everywhere in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms regarding this acclamation, "the Lord reigns." New Testament authors are taking up Old Testament themes in the light of Christ's coming, and so as the gospel evangelists summarize Jesus' teaching, they talk about the kingdom of God and Jesus himself as his words are recorded are talking about how the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the kingdom of God is at hand. And so, something that talks about Yahweh's reign over his people and over the nations is now embodied in terms of Christ the Messiah, the son of David, who has arrived on the stage in Israel... We see it in terms of both how Christ is ascended and he reigns on the throne in Acts 1, as he has ascended and the resurrection is preached and people have drawn to the risen and ascended Christ, but also there is still a future sense of the day of the Lord that Christ will come again. As Acts 1 tells us, he will return in the same way that he left, and there will still**

be that final vindication as the people of God are tested in the final deception and rebellion when Satan is released, but also when Christ comes and is victorious over all of Satan's schemes at the end.

— Dr. Greg Perry

One of the most fascinating things to see is the way the gospel has portrayed Jesus in light of Old Testament themes. We see this in a number of different places. One of the main places we see it is we see Jesus portrayed really in the place of Moses. He in some ways is a second Moses coming to lead a new second and greater exodus. A number of examples of that come to mind when we think about Jesus as the second Moses. One, of course, is the idea of him going right into the wilderness after his water experience. So, when he's baptized in the Jordan River, in one sense, this going through the water is just like the Israelites going through the Red Sea and from there immediately going into the desert. In the desert he experiences temptations just like the Israelites, but he is the faithful Son, whereas Israel was the disobedient son. In that desert experience, Jesus emerges as the triumphant leader of a new exodus whereby he comes and then delivers a new law on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 when Jesus is portrayed there as the new lawgiver... So time and time again you see this harmony and this unity between the Gospels and the Old Testament and that Jesus is finishing a story that was begun years ago.

— Dr. Michael J. Kruger

With this basic pattern for applying Old Testament passages in mind, let's turn to the application of New Testament passages to the new covenant age.

## **New Testament**

At first glance, it may appear that there's no need to consider epochal developments when Christians apply the New Testament because the New Testament was written in the epoch of the new covenant. But it's important to keep in mind that the entire New Testament was composed during the inaugural stage of the new covenant. Today, we no longer live in that stage. Rather, we live in the continuation of the new covenant age. So, we need to keep this epochal distinction in mind when we apply the New Testament to our lives.

New Testament books came from the hands of the foundational leaders of the church and were initially written for people living during the inauguration of the new covenant epoch. What these authors wrote has many implications for us as we live in the

continuation of the new covenant age. So, even though we live thousands of years after these works were written, they have unquestionable authority for us.

Consider just a few of the differences between our lives today and the times in which the New Testament was written. For instance, unlike today, appeals for guidance could be made directly to individual apostles and prophets who were living at that time. We see this in the book of Philemon. Moreover, widespread issues could be decided by the interactions of the church's foundational leaders, as in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. But in our day, we don't have these foundational authorities living among us. So, we have to rely on the New Testament's summations of their teachings to help guide us.

In addition to this, the New Testament contains many examples of miraculous and supernatural events. Jesus and his apostles and prophets were especially gifted to perform such feats to establish their authority. While this was true then, authority today is established only by the standard of the New Testament itself. If we forget this distinction, we'll often have false expectations for our day. To be sure, God continues to work miracles in the church during the continuation of the new covenant, but we should not be disappointed to discover that in this age such events do not occur with as much frequency as they did when Christ and the apostles lived on the earth.

Moreover, New Testament authors devoted themselves primarily to doctrinal and practical issues that were particularly important for the inauguration of the new covenant. For instance, hardly any issue received more attention in the New Testament than the expansion of God's kingdom from its Jewish roots to the Gentile world. Controversy after controversy addressed in the New Testament dealt with how followers of Christ were to observe or not observe Old Testament practices and additional Jewish traditions. While it's true that these teachings have implications for the church today, the Christian church has gone beyond many of these foundational controversies. As the gospel continues to spread throughout the world, we face different sorts of issues.

**I sometimes wish that I could go back to the apostolic age and witness the preaching ministry of the apostles and the miracles that they performed and everything that they introduced into the life of the church. And of course, so many of the experiences of the early church are very similar to the experiences we have in the world today. I mean, in many places in the world the church is persecuted community, and we're holding onto the same gospel that the first believers held onto. But there's also a sense in which that ministry of the apostles was unique in a unique period in church history, and we build on their foundation by reading the Scriptures that those apostles produced. But the office of the apostle is not a continuing office in the life of the church. That's a unique foundational ministry that they were given and now we build on their foundation in the church today.**

**— Dr. Philip Ryken**

For this reason, when we apply the New Testament to the modern world, it's crucial to understand that the original meaning is based firmly in the inauguration stage

of the new covenant era. With that original meaning in hand, we can then apply it to our own time by taking into account further developments within the new covenant age.

Having seen the general guidelines for application of the new covenant in both the Old and New Testaments, let's look at an example in Scripture that illustrates these principles. We'll use the Bible's emphasis on warfare as our example.

### EXAMPLE

Everyone familiar with the Bible knows that it gives a lot of attention to the theme of warfare against evil spirits and against the nations that follow them. Nearly every book in the Old Testament touches on this theme in one way or another. And the New Testament repeatedly indicates that the war against evil found in the Old Testament continues in the new covenant epoch.

**In the Old Testament, we often see God being portrayed as a warrior, as a warrior king, as kind of a military hero. I mean, our context may not seem to make a lot of sense, we don't fully understand it. But the reality of life in ancient Israel was warfare was common... Pharaoh was not going to let God's people go, so what God did was ... There were the plagues first of all, but then God basically ended up fighting for them by kind of drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. So yet another example. Then Moses and Miriam sing this song praising God: The chariot and rider ... the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. So God is being sung about as a warrior. And certainly we see that, as the nation of Israel moves into the land of the Canaanites, God is fighting on their behalf.**

— Dr. David T. Lamb

The prominence of this theme raises a crucial question. How are we to apply it to our lives today? Whether we read the Old Testament or the New Testament, if we want to gain a fuller picture of how this theme applies to our lives, we must view it in light of the three stages of the new covenant epoch in Christ.

In the first place, we should give attention to the inauguration of our age. The New Testament makes it clear that some aspects of the theme of war against evil in the world were fulfilled uniquely in Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus himself referred to what was happening in his ministry with his disciples as victory over evil.

For instance, in Luke 10:18-19, we read Jesus' reply when his disciples returned from having cast out demons.

**I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:18-19).**

Also, according to Colossians 2:15, Jesus defeated evil spiritual forces in his death on the cross:

**[Jesus] disarmed the powers and authorities, [and] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).**

In a similar way, in Ephesians 4:8, Paul referred to Christ's resurrection and ascension as his victory in war.

**When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8).**

In light of these and similar passages, whenever we come upon the theme of warfare against God's enemies in the Old or New Testaments, we should always keep in mind how Christ fulfilled his role in this war during the inauguration of the new covenant age. Apart from what Christ has already accomplished, there is no hope of final victory over the powers of sin and death.

**In his first coming Christ demonstrated the warfare, or fulfilled the warfare, or could be depicted as warfare, with Satan. And it started with Genesis 3:15 where God promised Adam and Eve at the very beginning in the Fall that there would be a Deliverer. And we see that then happening at the cross. Satan's head is crushed, Jesus' heel is bitten, smitten — whatever term you want to use — and then he is raised from the dead and has complete victory over Satan.**

— Dr. Howard Eyrich

**Many Christians think that Christ will not destroy evil until he comes back again at the end of times. But the fact is that Jesus Christ eliminated evil in his first coming. We can say that he eliminated evil in principle, meaning he defeated the Devil on the cross and laid the foundation for the final second coming. There is still evil in the world, and we still live in it, but it's an evil on the road to extinction. In the battle our Lord Jesus Christ fought, he "disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them," and he obtained a massive victory over the Devil's work through his death and resurrection.**

— Dr. Ghassan Khalaf, translation

In addition to the inauguration of our age, whenever we encounter the theme of warfare in Scripture, we must be ready to apply it to the continuation of the new covenant epoch.



Although Christ himself initiated the final defeat of evil in his first coming, the New Testament teaches that this war is still very much a part of the experience of every believer throughout the history of the church.

For example, in 2 Corinthians 10:4, Paul affirmed that the spread of the gospel was warfare against evil spirits. There he said:

**The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4).**

Paul referred to the warfare of the church in similar ways in Ephesians 6:12:

**For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).**

Notice that in both of these passages the war we wage as Christians is spiritual in nature. Just like Jesus did in the inauguration of our age, we don't make war with "flesh and blood." We make war against the "rulers" and "authorities," that is, "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." During the continuation of the kingdom of Christ, we are at war with Satan and other evil spirits at work in the world, rather than at war with people. In 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, Paul wrote these words:

**[God] has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).**

As God's people living during the continuation of the new covenant, we are not warriors toward our fellow human beings. Instead, we are "Christ's ambassadors" who seek to rescue human beings from the dominion of sin through the spread of the gospel of Christ. We further the defeat of Satan's kingdom by urging people to, "Be reconciled to God."

So, it's not surprising that in 2 Corinthians 2:14 Paul also described the gospel ministry as Christ's victory parade:

**Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14).**

Whether we are drawing examples of warfare from the Old Testament or from the New Testament, followers of Christ should always be ready to apply this theme in their daily ministry during the continuation of the new covenant.

**Christ fulfills warfare against evil through the church today in a variety of means, but the principal category for considering this is**

that Christ's kingdom is of a different order than we normally think of kingdoms. This was true in Jesus' day when those who misunderstood him to be establishing a political order, as much as it is today when, out of our national or ethnic or socioeconomic interests, we want to see Christ's war as not a war of the cross but a war of crown or sword. Paul gives us guidelines for this kind of spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6. We are to pray. We are to share the good news. We are to have faith. We are to practice righteousness and the principal means of the Word of God... Martin Luther, in fact, in his "A Mighty Fortress" spoke of that Word above all earthly powers. So, it's the Word of God which will prevail through God's servant son, Jesus Christ, as the fulfillment of Christ's spiritual warfare. So, what that means for us is we have to follow the pattern of Christ, a cross-shaped life. We imitate Christ as Philippians 2 says by having the same attitude in ourselves, so that the gospel is distinguished, and Christianity is distinguished from other religions, which see religion as primarily coercive. This is one of the principal contrasts between, say, Christianity and Islam. Islam cannot conceive of a non-coercive belief in God, and Christianity is fundamentally a religion of the cross, of self-divestiture, of giving our lives for the sake of others because Christ gave his life for us, so it's a call for sacrifice and for modeling the example of Christ so that others will willingly come to make him Lord.

— Rev. Mike Glodo

Not only does the New Testament associate the theme of war with the inauguration and continuation of our age, but with the consummation of the new covenant epoch.

Just as Christ himself performed warfare in his first coming, he will complete the war against evil when he returns in glory. At the second coming, the distinction he made between spiritual forces as the objects of his wrath and human beings as the objects of his mercy will fade. In Revelation 19:11-15, John described the battle to come this way:

**I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war... The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter" (Revelation 19:11-15).**

In many ways, this scene of Christ waging the final battle against evil is our hope for victory and eternal life in the new heavens and new earth. When the final defeat of sin and death have taken place, Christ will reign and invite all of his followers to reign with him in victory.

The topic of warfare in the Bible, perhaps especially in the Old Testament, and God's judgment and his wrath and how that's going to unfold and what it's going to look like in the end times is a big topic ... But in the New Testament we have two different ways in which this theme is developed. The first is with Jesus. He comes as a divine warrior to wage war on sin, but this time not on the sinner but on sin itself. He is, in some sense, the victim here. He becomes the one who receives the full wrath of God rather than the one who brings wrath. Now, sinners escape the wrath of God at the end by hiding themselves or being united to Christ as those who have experienced that judgment in Christ. So when Christ comes, he's going to come with his people, and he's going to come and wage war on those that have not repented or not united to him in faith. And so we get these pictures of warfare, in some sense, at the flood, with Israel and the Promised Land, even with Assyria and Babylon waging war on Israel, as pictures of this eschatological judgment. But they're all pictures of, really, what Christ has undergone for us as well. So there are two pictures: One, God's grace — that he has undergone that warfare and wrath and experienced its curse for us, but also there's God's justice. He's coming back and any of those who aren't united to him will experience that same judgment.

— Dr. Miles Van Pelt

We should always remember to interpret the theme of warfare found throughout Scripture in light of the great consummation of Christ's return as the conquering warrior.

The way in which the New Testament handles the theme of war is instructive for us as we apply the Scriptures to our own day. To be sure, we have to study every theme individually because the New Testament develops them in different ways. Yet, to apply any biblical theme more fully, we must see how it is viewed in the light of the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the new covenant age in Christ. No matter how we begin to explore any topic, whether we begin in the Old or in the New Testament, as followers of Christ we can apply these topics to our lives by discovering how they are fulfilled in all three stages of the new covenant epoch.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on modern application and the new covenant, we've looked at the ways in which the new covenant in Christ should affect our application of the Bible to the modern world. We've noticed how the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes for a new covenant can be seen in the inauguration, continuation and consummation of our epoch in Christ. And we've illustrated how the application of every theme of the Old and New

Testaments to modern life should accord with these same three stages of the new covenant.

The new covenant in Christ is no small matter. Rather, it's the culmination of God's purposes for all of history. And as such, the new covenant in Christ affects how we are to apply every portion of the Bible in our modern world. As followers of Christ, we must read the Scriptures in the light of the way God accomplishes his purposes in Christ. We look back to what Christ has already done, we look at what he's doing now, and we look forward to what he will accomplish when he returns. Only then will we rightly apply the Scriptures to our modern world as people of the new covenant.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
NINE

Modern Application &  
The New Covenant  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	How did New Testament authors interpret Old Testament themes in light of Christ's first and second comings?.....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	How did Christ fulfill the theme of warfare against evil in his first coming? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b>	How does Christ fulfill the theme of warfare against evil through the church today?.....	5
<b>Question 4:</b>	When he returns in glory, how will Christ fulfill the biblical theme of warfare against evil? .....	7
<b>Question 5:</b>	What did Paul mean in Ephesians chapter 3 when he spoke of "the mystery made known to me by revelation"? .....	8
<b>Question 6:</b>	How is living in the church today different from living in the days of Christ and his apostles?.....	10
<b>Question 7:</b>	How should believers account for developments in God's kingdom when we apply Scripture to our lives today? .....	12



# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Nine: Modern Application & The New Covenant

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Jimmy Agan  
Dr. David R. Bauer  
Dr. P. J. Buys  
Dr. Gary Cockerill  
Dr. Howard Eyrich

Rev. Michael J. Glodo  
Dr. Ghassan Khalaf  
Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington  
Dr. Robert L. Plummer  
Dr. Philip Ryken

Dr. Paul Sanders  
Dr. Stephen J. Wellum  
Dr. Sanders L. Willson

### Question 1:

**How did New Testament authors interpret Old Testament themes in light of Christ's first and second comings?**

Most New Testament authors grew up hearing the Old Testament taught in their synagogues. This teaching played an integral part in the culture of their day. But with the coming of Christ, much of the Old Testament instruction took on a whole new significance. How did New Testament authors interpret Old Testament themes in light of Christ's first and second comings?

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

When you look at the New Testament, it's full of quotations from the Old Testament. It's quite clear that we're to understand the New Testament and the Old Testament fitting together like pieces of a puzzle, giving us the entire revelation of God. And I would classify the ways that New Testament authors use the Old Testament under two main categories: one is propositional, and two is typological. So, propositional is looking at a specific Old Testament text and looking at it as drawing a specific line as to a fulfillment that happened at one time. For example, if you look at Isaiah 53, you get a depiction of the suffering servant who is wounded and pierced for our transgressions. You look at the way that's picked up, for example, in Matthew 8 or other New Testament texts, and the author sees that, I believe, as having a onetime fulfillment in Christ. But you also see the authors of the New Testament using the Old Testament typologically, seeing God's prior interventions in history, anticipating this one climactic intervention. And often times it's like there's several steps of that before the final intervention. An example of that would be in Matthew 2. In Matthew 2 it says, "Out of Egypt [God] called [his] son." Well, that quote is from Hosea 11, which uses the language that refers back to the exodus. And so we have this kind of multiple stages of God intervening in history to deliver and save his people when it looks like there was no hope. And that reaches its final climactic sort of episode when the Son comes, and it looks like it's all over, and he has to flee to Egypt because the

king's trying to kill him. But how much more finally in this climactic episode will God fulfill his promises and bring his Son back to the Promised Land.

**Dr. Jimmy Agan**

Authors of the New Testament looked at the Old Testament, picked out main themes that were taught there, and looked at them through the lens of the coming of Christ, and then also through the lens of Christ's return. And let me just sample a few of those themes and how they were treated in the New Testament. The first one — let's start at the beginning — of creation, the first major theme in the Old Testament. The New Testament writers looked at the theme of creation in light of Christ's first coming, seeing that Jesus had come to begin a "new creation" — Paul says that in 2 Corinthians 5 — and looked at Jesus himself as a new beginning for the human race. So, Paul would call Jesus a "second Adam" in Romans 5 ... showing us that in Christ a new creation has begun, a second beginning to the human race, a new chance for humanity to be redeemed from the Fall that came with the first Adam. But then, the New Testament writers also look at creation in the lens of Jesus' second coming... when new heavens and new earth — the portrayal of the Tree of Life that was in the Garden in Genesis that now grows on both sides of a river, and this river flows through this new kingdom that has spread to encompass the whole of this new heavens and new earth. So, re-creation now in Christ, re-creation of the whole created order at Christ's return. Another main theme would be the theme of kingdom, a huge theme in the Old Testament. If we looked at the Davidic king we'd find Psalm 2 featuring very prominently in Old Testament descriptions of David and a son of David who would reign over God's people. That psalm is directly applied to Jesus in the book of Acts, chapter 4, as Jesus is the ruler who will rule over the nations. Jesus in his first coming is the king who sits on David's throne. But Jesus in his second coming shares that rule and reign with all his people. In Revelation, we read of Jesus allowing us to sit on that throne with him and citing the same language from Psalm 2. So, kingdom permeates the whole Bible — Old Testament, Christ's first coming, and then you see that theme fulfilled as Jesus shares that reign with his people at his return.

**Dr. Gary Cockerill**

New Testament authors interpreted Old Testament themes in light of Christ's first and second coming, and when we understand what they're doing, it makes a lot of sense. The God who was at work in the Old Testament to deliver his people fulfills that deliverance through the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, Christ's coming is the new exodus, the new deliverance of the people of God. Christ is the new David, the new Moses, the new prophet. He fulfills everything that the prophets anticipated in the Old Testament. As David was to establish God's people in obedience, so he, as the Messiah, the new David, establishes God's people in obedience. As God in the exodus delivered his people from Pharaoh in Egypt, from bondage, brought them into covenant with himself so that they could serve and live for him, so in Christ's death and resurrection, he delivers us from the bondage of sin so that we can live in fellowship with God and reflect his character. So, what Christ has done was pictured and foreshadowed in the work of God within the Old Testament. And of course, it

foreshadows his second coming as well. In his second coming there will be the final victory over evil. God delivered them from evil. There was a victory over Pharaoh and those who had oppressed them in the Old Testament. That final victory over evil will be manifest. It's been won on the cross, but it will be manifest at Christ's second coming. And so, all that was anticipated by life in the Promised Land in the Old Testament, life in the presence of God — the fullness of the presence of God — all that will be fulfilled then in the new heaven and the new earth when Christ returns. All that Jerusalem symbolized as the place of God dwelling with his people and then living in fellowship with him will reach its greatest fulfillment at the return of Christ in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city. The Bible has always been... the point has been God restoring fellowship with his people. God lived among them in the covenant of the Old Testament as he dwelt in the tabernacle in the midst of the people of God, but sin prevented their close approach. So God came in the person of his only son, the Lord Jesus Christ in whom the presence of God fully dwelt to deliver us from that sin so that God now dwells within the people of God as the new temple, and we will dwell with him forever in the new heaven and the new earth. It's very interesting to me, if I had lived in Jesus' time, if I had touched a leper, the leper would make me unclean. But when Jesus touched the leper, he made him clean. And that's exactly what he did by taking on our humanity and redeeming us from sin so that we can live in the presence of God.

### **Question 2:**

#### **How did Christ fulfill the theme of warfare against evil in his first coming?**

**God as a divine warrior is a theme that runs through the whole of the Old Testament. And it shouldn't surprise us that, as God incarnate, Jesus fulfilled this theme during the inauguration of his earthly ministry. So, how did Christ fulfill the theme of warfare against evil in his first coming?**

#### **Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

One of the ways that Christ's work is described in the New Testament is that he wins victory over Satan and the powers ... It's an important theme that goes all the way back to that initial gospel promise in Genesis 3:15. As sin comes into the world, Adam and Eve fall under the temptation of Satan, you have that initial gospel promise that's developed through the Old Testament — that the head of the serpent will be crushed, that in the context of Genesis 3 sin and evil will be overturned, Satan will be defeated, and it will come through the seed of the woman. As you trace that out through the Old Testament and move to the New Testament, the New Testament says that in the first coming of the Lord Jesus, he comes to do that work. He comes in his life. Right from the very beginning, we see at the beginning of his ministry the temptation with Satan. He comes as the obedient Son who will not give in like Adam did. He will obey the Father's will throughout his life, even unto death on the cross. In his life and ministry we begin to see Satan put to flight. We see that in his

exorcising of the demonic, his healing of diseases. All of those diseases eventually are tied to sin and the Fall and all of the corruption that has taken place. And so we begin to see that foretaste of the coming of the kingdom, that which will be culminated on the cross. The cross is the key moment. You think of Colossians 2, which speaks of the powers being stripped. Or Hebrews 2, describing Christ's victory over death, by his death defeating Satan who holds the power of death. In the cross we see Satan's power defeated. We see it defeated, it's important to say, because sin is defeated. Sometimes people will pick up the victory theme and almost set it over against Christ as our substitute, the one who pays for our sin. But biblically, he — in paying for our sin, satisfying God's righteous requirements, meeting all of our need before God, also then in defeating sin — defeats death. "The wages of sin is death." So death is defeated, and then the power of the Evil One is broken over us. So that, in his coming, in his cross, in his resurrection — the resurrection is a great demonstration that death can no longer hold him, that Satan's power is gone — in that, he has now won the victory. It is a kind of, obviously a foretaste of the end ... Basically the war was done yet there was still more to take place. Well, Christ's cross has defeated Satan's power; it has now been broken. Yet, there's still the intervening period as his people come to salvation, as the gospel goes to the ends of the earth. He will come back, and he will bring to completion what he began in his first coming. That is the way the New Testament describes the victory of Christ over sin and death and the Devil himself.

### **Dr. Jimmy Agan**

There's a lot we could say about Jesus and his warfare against evil. I want to summarize that under three headings: Jesus conquered Satan, Jesus conquered sin, and Jesus conquered death. Let's start with talking about how Jesus in his first coming defeated Satan. One way he did that was in the wilderness temptation as he refused the temptations of the Devil. Another way he did that was in prayer. We may not always realize this, but Jesus prayed that Satan would be defeated. He says to Peter on the night of his arrest, "Satan has desired to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you." So Jesus, through head-on, one-on-one combat with the Devil in the wilderness, defeats those temptations. Then also, through petitioning his heavenly Father for his followers, like Peter, when their faith is frail, Jesus defeats the Devil. Jesus also defeats and conquers sin. We know that. We look at the cross and we see how Jesus satisfies God's wrath. He takes our penalty on himself. Sin has no more claim over us in its penalty, its condemnation. What we may not appreciate is that Jesus also defeats sin in its power. Its power to corrupt us is broken by the fact that Jesus pays the debt, and then he pours out on us his Holy Spirit. So, even as Jesus in his first coming has died on the cross and later poured out the Holy Spirit, in both ways, he's defeating sin in the lives of his people. Finally, we can't ignore the fact that, in the resurrection, Jesus conquers death. He conquers death, not only the physical aspects of death — he's going to give us new life; we will share in the resurrection glory that he has — but he also shares with us the comfort and the hope that we have now, that death may not beat us into submission and fear and cause us to waver in our trust of God and his promises because Jesus has defeated it. If I could add one note to the end of this discussion about Jesus conquering evil, it would be the

note of urgency. In Jesus' miracles you see a sense of urgency, especially when he performs a miracle on the Sabbath. In Luke 13 a synagogue ruler says, "Hey, couldn't you do this another day? I mean, any other day? If you'd just wait a few hours the sun will set, it won't be the Sabbath anymore." And Jesus says, "No. Is it not necessary that this woman be freed from Satan's bondage which has kept her for eighteen years?" So Jesus has a sense of urgency in defeating evil in all its forms on our behalf.

**Dr. Philip Ryken**

If you read through the story of the Old Testament people of God, time and time again they needed a warrior to defend them, and the greatest warrior of the people of God is God himself. And so, when you have the coming of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, he is the victor over the Devil and over all his works. And you see that in so many ways in the Gospels. You see it first of all just in the ministry that Jesus had of power over the demons who were opposing the work of the kingdom of God and the way that he was able to cast out those demons and put them in their place. Or perhaps most supremely, the fight that Jesus engaged with the Devil himself in the wilderness in resisting all of his temptations. But all of that was only a prelude to the cross itself. And the Scripture is very clear that the works of the Devil are put to death through the cross so that that is the place where Jesus Christ worked out his ultimate victory over the Evil One and all his works — the cross, of course, with the resurrection, which proved that the saving work of Jesus was accepted by the Father. And the Devil ultimately will be fully defeated, but the victory of Jesus Christ is already won through the cross and the empty tomb.

**Question 3:**

**How does Christ fulfill the theme of warfare against evil through the church today?**

**After his resurrection, Jesus intentionally set out to prepare the early disciples for the work he would do through them after he returned to the Father. He empowered them to continue the work he began, including his warfare against evil. But what about the modern church? How does Christ fulfill the theme of warfare against evil through the church today?**

**Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

The church has an important role in warfare in terms of the application of Christ's work. As we think of it, we just have to put a few pieces in place before we get to the point of how we actually do that. The first thing that must be said, and just the basic foundation, is that anything we talk about in terms of our engaging with warfare, sin and evil, Satan himself, is only because of what Christ has done. He comes as the one who wins the war. He's the one who defeats sin. He's the one who defeats death and the Evil One — now, by virtue of our relationship to him. So, as we are brought into faith union with him by the Spirit, we are transferred from the kingdom of the Evil

One to the kingdom of the Son, already in us. Warfare has been won by Christ, and the power of the Evil One, his rule and domain over us, has been defeated. So that, in becoming Christians, there already is an engagement with the Evil One in Christ, and all that he has done. Now, as we then live for him, as we then take the gospel to the nations, the gospel proclamation, as the Spirit of God takes what we say and applies it to people's lives, spiritual warfare is engaged so that, as people become believers, as the Spirit of God brings new life, as they are brought to faith union in Christ, sin and death is defeated in them. The Evil One's power over them is defeated. Habits that we have tied to our fallenness, lifestyles, ways of thinking, ways of living, that is defeated. There is ongoing growth in our Christian lives in terms of sanctification. All of that is seen as part of the defeat of sin and evil, and it's a warfare that goes on in our Christian lives. As we then take the gospel to the nations, we not only see people become believers, but we see, then, the effects of the church as we live our lives, pushing back the borders of evil and sin, having an impact as salt and light in the world, that, in some sense, tied to God's common grace as well as saving grace, particularly common grace, sin is restrained, and Satan's work is restrained. All of that comes through the work of the church, the preaching of the gospel, taking the gospel to the nations as we see men and women and boys and girls delivered from sin and death, coming to faith in Christ, lives changed, Satan's power broken. That is part of the ongoing ministry of the church through the preaching and teaching of the gospel.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf (translation)**

Jesus Christ recorded, with his first coming, a decisive victory over the Devil as he defeated him when he died on the cross and rose again from the dead. When he rose and sat at the right hand of God, it doesn't mean that he left the earth and that the Devil can do whatever he pleases. But Jesus left his body on earth. He is the head, and the church is his body. Jesus empowered his body with the power needed to finish and win the final victory on earth. Jesus supplied the church with power over demonic spirits, power to heal the sick, power to stop and face any of the deceits that the Devil uses to attack the church. Jesus knew that his body, the church, would suffer from the Devil's war and threats. Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Therefore, the church will continue its march against hell and will spread into every nation and country. If we go back two thousand years, we read that Jesus is the light of the world, and yet Christianity had not yet spread very wide geographically. It spread around Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey — to the countries that surrounded Palestine only. But the Bible said that Jesus was going to be the light of *the world*, the *whole* world. Did this actually happen? This was the question in the first century church because this was what was known of the world at that time. We come today and look at the church and how it has spread to *every* country, to *every* nation, *every* tribe, and *every* tongue. Among all of the nations, there are people that love and worship Jesus and live according to his teachings. So, when we see that the church has grown and spread throughout the world, this certainly doesn't say that Jesus failed or that the church is weak. Rather, it shows how quickly the church spread in spite of the persecution and the false teachings all around us. The church always advances; it spreads. Picture it! — from

Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. And now, indeed, it has spread to the five continents, to everywhere under the sun. And again we say, “Glory to the Lord Jesus Christ!”

#### **Question 4:**

**When he returns in glory, how will Christ fulfill the biblical theme of warfare against evil?**

**Christ’s second coming is something that all Christians eagerly wait for. At the consummation, all that’s been promised in Scripture will be fulfilled. And Christ will win the battle against evil, completing the theme of spiritual warfare. When he returns in glory, how will Christ fulfill the biblical theme of warfare against evil?**

#### **Dr. Howard Eyrich**

Christ will demonstrate that theme of warfare when he returns in glory. First of all, he comes in riding on a white horse, and that is in complete contrast to the triumphal entry when he came his first time. He came there riding on a donkey, but he comes here riding on a white horse. Riding on a white horse... that was the symbol of victory. And so, he comes riding on a white horse to completely take down the enemy. The Scripture says he is instrumental in Satan and death and all those on his side, so to speak, cast into the lake of fire. And then it depicts him as sitting on the throne, ruling, and all those who have trusted him and become part of his body now enter in with him in the rulership of the eternal state. That is victory... Jesus wins. He has won. He will win. The victory is ours because Christ is victorious.

#### **Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

When we think of our Lord’s work, we often think of it in terms of first coming and second coming. He, in his first coming, life, death, resurrection, has brought the kingdom to this world. He has brought the new covenant era. He has brought the full forgiveness of sins. He has defeated sin, defeated death, defeated the Evil One. All of that’s taken place in his first coming. Yet, there is a time gap between first coming and second coming. In his second coming, we often think of it as consummating what he’s already began, finishing, completing what has already started ... At his second coming, built upon his first, a victory is sure, but he will complete and bring to pass all that he has already done. So that you think of, say, of 1 Corinthians 15, there’s a kind of sequencing to history. Christ’s first coming is the first fruits — his resurrection. There’s then a period of time before he comes again. When he comes again, he will then put sin and death and the Devil completely under his feet so that evil will be destroyed. The books will be balanced. Final judgment will take place where, in a public way, sin and death is dealt with. Those who are not his will be cast in judgment for everlasting. Those who are his will enjoy the fruit and benefit of the new heavens and new earth, and then we will see everything brought to its end, everything brought to its consummation. But it’s built upon what he’s first done. We still look forward to the consummation of that, and as the church, we live between the



times, between the ages. We still experience suffering and trials and difficulties. Yet, the victory is sure. And we then say with the church of every age, “Come Lord Jesus.”

### **Question 5:**

**What did Paul mean in Ephesians chapter 3 when he spoke of "the mystery made known to me by revelation"?**

Jesus’ contemporaries had a fixed idea of how the kingdom of God was going to come and what it was going to look like. But Jesus’ teaching revealed that God’s plan was much different than they’d anticipated. Paul talked about this in Ephesians 3:3-10 when he said that “the mystery” had been revealed to him. But what did Paul mean in Ephesians chapter 3 when he spoke of “the mystery made known to me by revelation”?

#### **Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

Paul speaks of the mystery made known to him by revelation in Ephesians 3. Some traditions take that as meaning no one could have ever known this; it was something that was unanticipated, speaking particularly of the gospel going to the Gentiles. But that’s not exactly what Paul means here. He uses the term “mystery” in the sense to maybe describe, by way of analogy, the fruit that comes out on the branches of a tree. It was hidden before, but it wasn’t something that came out of nowhere. Because Paul in Ephesians is looking back to the Old Testament revelation, seeing that God had anticipated a temple, that this temple would bring the nations together, seeing that now that Christ has been raised and the foundation of the apostles and the prophets has been laid upon Christ the cornerstone, that God is building his whole creation into a temple for his habitation. So this mystery isn’t something that didn’t rise out of the Old Testament but is actually the natural fruition of the Old Testament or, we would say, redemptive history.

#### **Dr. Ghassan Khalaf (translation)**

When we read Ephesians, especially chapter 3, we see Paul talking about the hidden mystery in ancient times that was revealed to the prophets and apostles, including Paul himself. Paul said here that God’s thought was to bless the nations later on in his beloved Son Jesus Christ, to send Jesus as Abraham’s descendent, and through him, to reach all people and nations. This idea was present in the Old Testament, but it was not as evident. For example, God said to Abraham, “Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.” And there are verses that say, for instance, “Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.” And Paul mentioned several verses that talk about God’s love for all nations. He did this in places like Romans 15. But it was “mysterious” for the Jews because they didn’t put together the verses that taught of God’s love for all nations and the rest of the people. So, they kept his love as a secret for themselves and said, “We are the chosen people, and God doesn’t wish to save any of the other people.” In Ephesians 3, Paul said essentially that what was



hidden and unclear in the past, God had now made clear. Because when Christ called Paul, he said to him, “I will send you to the nations to be my witness before the rulers and kings of nations and my people Israel.” Paul revealed God’s love to all people. We see this in Ephesians as well as in Colossians. And his message was similar to John 3:16 where John said, “For God so loved the world” — meaning God loves all — “that he gave his one and only Son.” So, what once was “unclear,” now caused an intellectual disturbance between the Jews because they didn’t like the Gentiles and didn’t want them to be saved. But Paul came and revealed that God’s purpose was to reach all nations and people through his Son. This is the significance of what the apostle Paul said. The Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body — that is, the church — and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus — that is, in having the Holy Spirit. And this is what happened at Cornelius’ house when the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles — on Cornelius and his family who were not Jews. Here, Christ’s body was completed, and Jews and Gentiles in the church became partners in the inheritance, the body, the Holy Spirit and the promise. Here we can say, “Hallelujah.”

### **Dr. P. J. Buys**

When the apostle Paul speaks of this mystery, he usually refers to God’s ultimate plan of salvation that has to be proclaimed to all the nations of the world. And in the light of his Jewish background before his conversion, he knew and understood nothing of that, and he was strongly against it and against the Christians and persecuted them. And then the Lord opened his mind and he saw God’s great plan of salvation for all the nations of the world. And that changed his old worldview and his old lifestyle and old attitude to people of other tribes and nations.

### **Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

The book of Ephesians is such a wonderful letter that we have of the apostle Paul. It’s a letter that captures so much of God’s plan right across redemptive history and the fulfillment that has come in Jesus Christ. Particularly in Ephesians 3, he speaks of the mystery that has been revealed. He already picks up that theme of mystery in Ephesians 1:9, 10 where he says that in Christ all things have been summed up. “Mystery,” in Paul, has a very, very specific meaning and definition. Often in a contemporary culture we think of mystery in terms of mystery novels and something’s mysterious. But for Paul, it’s really a revelation term. Mystery is that which was hidden in ages past, part of God’s eternal plan, that as history unfolds it becomes disclosed; it becomes known. And of course, in Ephesians 3, what he is speaking of in terms of “that which was hidden in God’s eternal plan which is disclosed” is the relationship of the Jew and Gentile into the church. As you go back into the Old Testament era, we begin with Adam and see the universal effects of God’s plan. God has made us image bearers. He has tied us to creation. In light of sin and the Fall, there is a separation of those who are God’s and those who are not. And in the Abrahamic covenant, especially, you see the redemptive purposes, where through Abraham and his seed, he is going to be the means by which salvation will come to the world, and it will bring a blessing to all nations. So “the nations” picks up that universal focus of God’s purposes, but through a man, a nation, ultimately

through the Lord Jesus Christ. As you walk through the Old Testament, there is many, many Abrahamic passages that are picked up. That Israel as people, who are a means by which the Savior will come, will also incorporate the Gentiles, that in God's purposes, Jew and Gentile will be brought together in Christ in one new man, the church. And that's what Paul is speaking of in Ephesians 3, so that in Christ now, in this place in redemptive history, we see more clearly God's eternal plan. We see that in him, Jew and Gentile, which were separated under the old covenant, have now been brought together. Both have been reconciled to God. Both have been reconciled to each other. The old covenant which divided Jew and Gentile has now been brought to fulfillment so that in the church we now are an international community from every tribe, nation, people, and tongue. The mystery of God, the revelation of God is now disclosed in this place in redemptive history by bringing this one new man together. So, as Paul develops this in the book of Ephesians, he sees that in the church you see a kind of microcosm of God's incredible plan of grace. In Ephesians 3:10, for instance, he says that the church is a kind of school to the principalities and powers, the angels, as they see in us as Jew-Gentile are brought together, as reconciliation takes place, they see God's plan of salvation at work. So they see the manifold wisdom and the power of God displayed. So, the mystery theme is a glorious revelation theme, a revelation of salvation that's come in Christ, that then... comes as a benefit to us as his people brought together as Jew and Gentile into one new man.

### **Question 6:**

#### **How is living in the church today different from living in the days of Christ and his apostles?**

**There are many reasons to think that the church today is similar to the church of the first believers. After all, we worship the same God, are redeemed by the same Christ, and are filled with the same Spirit. And yet, we shouldn't underestimate the difference two thousand years can make. How is living in the church today different from living in the days of Christ and his apostles?**

#### **Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

It's an interesting question to ask ourselves, "What is it like for us today as Christians, after Pentecost, living in the church?" How are our lives different? And how do we interpret the Bible differently than, maybe, Peter and the other disciples following Jesus physically before his death and resurrection? It's an interesting question, and it's not one that has a very simple answer, though I think we can say a few important things. On the one hand, I really want to emphasize the continuity. That is, that I think it's a common mistake for people to write off the pre-death and resurrection time period — that is the time period reflected in the Gospels — as if it's a totally different way of relating to God. I think that would be a mistake, even as it would be to write off all of the Old Testament and David's experience. Yes, something significant did happen at Pentecost with the giving of the Spirit, but it's not as if David or Peter or Moses didn't know God personally or didn't have the Holy

Spirit and didn't have faith and relate to God in the same way. So, in the first instance, I want to really emphasize the continuity that does exist between us and people that were following Jesus physically during his earthly life. At the same time, that difference of Pentecost means a couple of things. One, it does mean, to be a Christian means that one is filled and sealed with the Holy Spirit. There is no other way. To be part of the new covenant means that the Spirit indwells you and gives us direct access to God through Jesus' completed work. And although there's a mystery there and to what David's experience was and what Moses' experience was, we know that the New Testament emphasizes some significant discontinuity. So there is this dwelling and filling of the Spirit. And one of the obvious ways is... we don't have to go to a temple. We don't have to go to certain places and do certain rituals. God's presence is given to us now through the Spirit sent by the Father and the Son. So that's significant as well. Another thing I'd want to emphasize of the discontinuity is even of a different sort, and that is something that I know I've wrestled with, and many people have as well. When you think about the urgency that existed for Peter and James and John, who were following Jesus, and the sense that they had to physically leave everything behind to be a follower of Jesus, that's a pretty significant difference between their time period and ours. And, in fact, you see that even somewhat developed in the New Testament era. That is, that while some people are called to leave everything and follow Jesus and become what we now say are missionaries — we think of people like the apostle Paul and of course those original disciples, Peter, James and John and others until their deaths — most Christians, it seems very clearly, even in the first century after Pentecost, lived normal lives — working jobs, staying in one town or city, the town they grew up in, getting married, having children, and seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus — without having to leave everything and follow, as Jesus' original twelve disciples did. So, I think it's important to recognize that. That some of the ideas that we might get from Paul, and even from the Gospels, about the necessity of actually uprooting oneself to be a follower of Jesus, don't necessarily apply in a physical sense to most believers who are called to be faithful right where they are.

**Dr. Sanders L. Willson**

You know, interpreting the Bible today is different than interpreting the Bible in the age of the apostles because we have 2,000 years of history. And everybody who interprets the Bible does it from a particular sociological location. We've all been trained in given ways. So, today we're all beneficiaries of the early church, of the medieval church, of the Reformation, of the revival periods. Every nation has its own history, and we have more experience in applying Christian doctrine now than even the apostle Paul would have had. We've seen it over 2,000 years. So we take the advantages of all that history and apply it to the application of truth to our people today.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf (translation)**

When we compare the early church 2,000 years ago and the church today, we can see that many things are the same because man is still the same and Christ is still dealing with the same issues in humans. But we see that circumstances have changed. And

the church back then had to face certain circumstances, and the church today has to face different circumstances. For example, the framework for life in the early church was always persecution. The church was pursued. The Jews wanted to oppose it. And when it spread in the Roman Empire, the Roman authorities wanted to persecute the Christians. And all New Testament writings were full of comforting promises because of that persecution. So, we find lots of encouragement to believers living in distress and torment. The promises in the New Testament are multiplied to strengthen the faith of those who were suffering from persecution. Christians lived in caves and worshiped in homes. When they worshiped, they couldn't do it loudly. They sang their hymns and prayers softly so their neighbors wouldn't hear them because they were persecuted all the time. They didn't worship in places designated for worship as it is today. Today we have churches that have benches, pulpits, impressive lights and large spaces. These things were not available in those days ... There is the possibility of openness and worship in specific places. But we also see something similar to what was going on in the early church, even more so in some countries, especially the Arabic countries, where some still worship in hidden places. They are careful that no one tells on them. And here we find heroism in the Christian life. We find persistence and perseverance despite difficult trials. In fact, even today, the Christian church provides more martyrs than any other religion, if you read the news bulletins issued by the United Nations. Therefore, the Christian faith is a heroic faith because it has always lived through pain and confrontation, and yet still lifts up the name of Christ on high and perseveres out of loyalty to him.

### **Question 7:**

**How should believers account for developments in God's kingdom when we apply Scripture to our lives today?**

**As God's kingdom moves forward through history it grows and develops exactly the way God intends. And this has always been true. Because of this, the way God manifests his kingdom on earth today isn't entirely the way he did it in the past. So, what does this mean for modern Christians? How should believers account for developments in God's kingdom when we apply Scripture to our lives today?**

#### **Dr. David R. Bauer**

The question of the ability to apply passages in the Bible that refer to situations or to issues that no longer exist in our own time is, of course, a very important one, because the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, come out of a quite different cultural background. And one of the implications of a truly historic religion, as the Judeo-Christian faith is, is that it's historically specific. And we are, of course, historically specific people as well. And sometimes our historical specificity doesn't match the historical specificity to which the biblical writers address themselves. There are some passages of Scripture manifestly — you have this in the Old Testament frequently, in the New Testament also to some extent — which cannot really be taken up and directly applied in our own time. Passages, for example, in

Deuteronomy that refer to the Edomites and how... God's people Israel were to relate to the Edomites. Or laws of patrimony as it relates to Levitical priests, for example, are not easily directly applicable to our own situation. There are people who have said and do say... that there is no passage of Scripture that cannot be preached. And in spite of what I just said with regard to the inability to apply directly many passages of Scripture, I'm inclined to agree with that. Because although you may not be able to apply directly the surface meaning of passages, if you interpret them in depth and ask not only, "What do the words in this biblical passage mean? What's the surface meaning, the surface sense, of this passage?" but probe beneath the surface and ask, "Why was this said? Why was this commanded?" And even the implications of the surface meaning of the text — "If this is what was said, what was argued, what was commanded to these people at this time, what does that imply with regard to God and our relationship to God?" When you get to this business of the reason or the rationale behind biblical statements and the implications of them, almost always it's possible to apply the passage in those ways and at those levels of understanding.

**Dr. Paul Sanders**

Our understanding of history is so clear and so much linked to our theology. And so, if we're looking at history from a reformed perspective, for example, we look at it as the action of God's sovereignty and the reflection of his glory in history. And so, we use that as a grid for which we analyze, not simply the events that are taking place, but what God is trying to do through all of this. It's basically, in a word, trying to make sense of what God has done in the past, even in the period of the Middle Ages when so many people, evangelicals in particular, would think that somehow God might have been on vacation. If we try to see how that whole period of history, Western church history for example, fits into God's wider purposes, then we have a wider view of what God is doing and we have a wider view of our place in this tapestry of history which goes from eternity to eternity.

**When we look to apply the Scriptures to our lives, it's important to recognize how God's kingdom has been developing and unfolding since Old Testament times. Looking at the theme of spiritual warfare, we can see that in the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of God's kingdom, Christ has been working, is working, and will work to overcome his enemies. This helps us see what joys we have to look forward to when Christ returns.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
TEN

BIBLICAL CULTURE &  
MODERN APPLICATION



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Foundations .....</b>	<b>2</b>
A. Importance	2
B. Opposing Ideals	4
C. Variety	6
<b>III. Developments.....</b>	<b>8</b>
A. Importance	8
B. Opposing Ideals	9
C. Variety	11
<b>IV. Application.....</b>	<b>12</b>
A. Importance	13
B. Opposing Ideals	14
C. Variety	16
<b>V. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>18</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Ten

### Biblical Culture & Modern Application

#### INTRODUCTION

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At one time or another, everyone teaching the Bible has heard someone ask, “Isn’t this part of the Bible just cultural?” What they usually mean is that some portions of Scripture are so embedded in the ancient cultures of biblical times that they can’t possibly apply to us today. So, Christians often spend a lot of time trying to distinguish between “cultural” biblical passages and passages that apply to modern life.

In this lesson, we’re going to propose a different outlook. Rather than treating parts of Scripture as either cultural or applicable, we’ll see that every portion of the Bible is both cultural and applicable. The entire Bible reflects the ancient cultural context, but it still is God’s Word to be applied in one way or another to everyone, no matter who we are, or where or when we live.

This is the tenth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we’ve entitled it “Biblical Culture and Modern Application.” In this lesson, we’ll see how the cultural dimensions of Scripture should affect our application of the Bible to the modern world.

As we’ve said in earlier lessons, whenever we apply biblical passages in our day, we must take into account the epochal, cultural and personal distance between the original audiences of Scripture and modern audiences. Although these three considerations can’t be entirely separated from each other, we’re going to focus especially on the cultural issues that come into play as we move from the original meaning of Scripture to modern application.

There are many ways to define culture. But following outlooks that typically appear in modern sociology and anthropology, we’ll define culture as:

**The intersecting patterns of concepts, behaviors and emotions that characterize a community**

As this definition suggests, cultures involve a spectrum of intersecting patterns such as language, the arts, worship, technology, interpersonal relations and social authority. And these intersecting patterns consist of shared concepts, behaviors and emotions — what we believe, do and feel. So, when we speak of cultures, we have in mind how these features characterize a community — whether it be a family, an ethnic group, a social organization, a religious association, a nation, or even the entire human race.

This lesson will focus on three dimensions of biblical culture and modern application: first, we’ll examine the biblical foundations of culture found in the early chapters of the Bible. Second, we’ll trace a number of biblical developments of culture

that took place in the Old and New Testaments. And third, we'll see how these cultural aspects of the Bible should affect our modern application of Scripture. Let's look first at the biblical foundations of culture.

## FOUNDATIONS

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As we consider the biblical foundations of culture, we'll begin by exploring Genesis 1–11. First, we'll see how these chapters establish the importance of culture. Second, we'll focus on how they introduce two opposing cultural ideals. And third, we'll notice how the opening chapters of Scripture set the stage for cultural variety among God's faithful servants. Let's begin with the importance of culture.

### IMPORTANCE

The first eleven chapters of Genesis cover the whole history of the world from creation to the days of Abraham. They're particularly important to our study because they lay out God's ideal patterns for the world and human culture. In this way, they guide our reading not only of the rest of Genesis, but also of the rest of Scripture.

The foundations of culture first appear in Genesis 1:28, a passage often called the “cultural mandate.” Here, God told humanity:

**Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Genesis 1:28).**

To understand and apply the significance of the cultural mandate, we need to remember something we've seen in earlier lessons. God's final goal for history has always been to fill the world with his visible glory so that every creature will worship him forever. And after God established the initial order of creation, the cultural mandate indicated that humanity's responsibility was to develop the creation further in preparation for the final display of God's glory.

**God gave humanity the cultural mandate in the most simple terms so that the world, the creation would be filled with his glory. We see a picture of creation as being something like the construction of a house, sort of like an ancient temple. And when a temple is built, the god who commissioned its building inhabits it. And so, the biblical view of creation is that the whole earth was made to be a dwelling place for God, to be a holy sanctuary. But instead of a statue representing God — a statue of a bird or a lion or something like that being placed in that temple — God placed man and woman as his image bearers. And in giving the cultural mandate, God was in effect saying, “Go multiply**

my image, fill the earth, and then bring it under dominion, exercise authority over it like it a priest.” And so, the cultural mandate was so that God's image bearers would go exercise God's lordship over the created world so that the earth would be a dwelling place for the God who made it, just like his heavenly throne room, glimpses of which we see in places like Isaiah 6, the earth was to be the same. And so it's not a new thing for, for instance, the Old Testament to tell us that the earth will be full of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, because that was God's original design for it.

— Rev. Mike Glodo

Right there at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1, before the Fall, God gives a very important mandate or set of instructions — really, a worldview we'd almost say — to Adam and Eve, and that is to take the beauty of the Garden and the order and the excellence of it and to spread that throughout the world. And the story of the Bible is very much about the Fall and the failure to do so, and then the restarting of that very mandate through the second Adam and his bride, the church, Jesus Christ. And so that cultural mandate, that creational mandate, that original ordinance from Genesis 1, is really at the core of the Bible's message, and, I would suggest, is really very much what redemption is about. One scholar has called redemption “creation regained.” And I think that's a beautiful image. It's a beautiful comprehensive understanding of what the Bible is about. I've often described the message of the Bible as God restoring his reign, or his kingdom, from heaven to earth, from creation to new creation. And that traffics in these two poles, these two axes, of God bringing the heavenly realities to become fully, full-born earthly realities, and also give the temporal sense of God working from creation to the end-goal of new creation. And at the heart of that is the idea that God is spreading his beauty, his excellence, or to use more biblical language, “his glory” throughout all the earth. And that is the calling of all humans as individuals as well as redeemed humanity in God's church.

— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

We can see this in Genesis 1:26, where God said, “Let us make man in our image.” In the ancient world, kings of nations were called images of god, in part because their royal task was to determine the will of their gods and build their cultures accordingly. In this light, the early chapters of Genesis make it clear that all human beings were created to perform this kind of royal cultural service to further God's will on earth.

In addition, Genesis 2 explains that every cultural development in accordance with God's will is a sacred priestly service to God. In verse 15 we learn that God put

Adam and Eve in his sacred garden “to work it and take care of it.” This expression is an unusual combination of two Hebrew verbs: *avad*, usually translated “to work” or “to labor,” and *shamar*, normally translated “to take care of” or “to protect.” Moses used these terms together only one other time — in Numbers 3:8 when he described the service of Levitical priests before God’s glorious presence in the Tabernacle.

So, in effect, the opening chapters of Genesis establish the foundational biblical perspective that culture is not some minor dimension of our existence. Rather, it is our royal and priestly service to God. God has ordained for us to fill, develop, order, beautify, and sanctify the earth in preparation for the final display of his visible glory.

**I think to understand why God gave man the cultural mandate, it’s important to remember that man was uniquely created in his own image. So there’s a structural component to the divine image — we just are in God’s image. But then there’s also the functional component, that we show and display the glory of God in the particular way that’s just right for us being human by the way that we carry out and reflect his glory through the work that we do. And so when we think about the cultural mandate, we have sort of a work to fill the earth and to subdue it, to make the world like Eden, like the Garden, and so on, but also to fill it, to populate it. And so the idea is that we are to carry out the cultural mandate to spread the glory of God displayed uniquely in his divine image in human form to the ends of the earth for his own glory.**

— Dr. Bruce Baugus

Now that we’ve seen the biblical foundations of the importance of culture, we should take up a second issue: the biblical foundations of two opposing cultural ideals pursued by human beings throughout history.

## OPPOSING IDEALS

When we travel to different parts of the world, we’re right to remind ourselves that there’s a lot of room for people to do things in different ways. We don’t all need to drive on the same side of the street, speak the same language, or wear the same kinds of clothes. Still, the opening chapters of Genesis make it clear that culture is never morally neutral. On the contrary, in one way or another every development of every culture either displeases or pleases God as it reflects one of two opposing cultural ideals.

Biblical authors were well aware that human beings developed culture in many ways. But from their point of view, all cultures fell into one of two basic categories: cultural patterns that served God and cultural patterns that opposed him.

As we’ll see later, these cultural distinctions become very important when we apply the Bible today. But for now, let’s consider how this division was first established in the earliest chapters of the Bible.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve failed their test of loyalty to God by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. After this, God revealed that their fall into sin would lead human beings to follow two distinct cultural paths. Listen to the way God described these two cultural pursuits in Genesis 3:15 when he said to the Serpent:

**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).**

In brief, “the woman” mentioned here is Eve, the first woman God created, and the Serpent is Satan.

This passage establishes the division that’s characterized human culture throughout history. The woman’s offspring have sought to serve God faithfully. And the Serpent’s offspring have sought to oppose him. And this division will continue to characterize human culture until Christ, the great offspring of Eve, returns to complete his final victory over Satan.

These two paths immediately appear in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Near the end of chapter 4, we see how Cain and his descendants lived as the offspring of the Serpent. They formed highly sophisticated cultures, but with the intention of resisting the will of God and exchanging their natural ancestry for the Evil One as their spiritual father.

But in Genesis 5 we find a record of Seth’s descendants who developed culture as the offspring of the woman. They formed families and tribes. They developed religious practices and language. They weren’t perfect, but they did their best to establish cultural patterns that served and glorified God. From this point forward, the Scriptures continue to distinguish these two opposing cultural ideals.

Now, we have to be careful here. To interpret and apply Scripture, we also have to see that there were many similarities between these two paths of human culture. Genesis 4 and 5 indicate that Cain and Abel both sought to subdue nature. They both developed societies and religious practices. And, as the genealogies of Seth and Cain demonstrate, both lines married and had children.

How was it possible for people following such different cultural ideals to develop such similar expressions of culture? From the rest of Scripture we learn that these similarities appeared for two reasons.

On the one side, God’s common grace, his non-saving mercy toward humanity, restrains Satan and the sinful propensities of those who follow him. And as a result, even the most diabolical cultures in the world have exhibited a degree of conformity to God’s will. On the other side, sin continues to corrupt those who pursue the ways of God. So, even the holiest cultures in the world have failed to adhere perfectly to God’s will.

From the time of Cain and Abel until our own day, there have always been both differences and similarities between the cultural efforts of God’s faithful servants and of those who rebel against him. And as we seek to apply any passage of Scripture today, it’s important to keep in mind these cultural distinctions.

Having explored the biblical foundations of the importance of culture, and the establishment of two opposing cultural ideals, we can now turn to a third factor: God’s approval of cultural variety in the opening chapters of Scripture.

## VARIETY

The first chapters of Genesis deal primarily with a few individual human beings. So, there are no examples of communities displaying cultural variety in this part of the Bible. Even so, God set the stage for cultural variety in the first chapters of Genesis in the ways he revealed his will to individual people in early human history.

There are many ways to describe the foundations of cultural variety, but for the sake of time we'll consider how cultural variety developed through "special revelation" and what we commonly call "general revelation."

"Special revelation" is the term traditional theologians use to signify God's disclosures of himself and his will to a select number of people through dreams, visions, prophets, the Scriptures, and other similar means. For example, in the early chapters of Genesis, God verbally revealed himself to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah.

On the other hand, "general revelation" refers to God's disclosures of himself and his will in all of creation, both in people — human personalities, physical and spiritual abilities, and other qualities — and in circumstances — in the external, observable world. We see this in passages like Psalm 19 and Romans 1:18-20.

God's use of special and general revelation helps us understand how God set the stage for cultural variety among his people.

We see this in the way God's faithful people obeyed the same special revelation in different ways, even at the same time, because they were different people facing different circumstances. For instance, Adam and Eve received the special revelation of the cultural mandate in Genesis 1:28. But Adam and Eve had different talents, personalities, physical abilities and the like. They also dealt with different personal circumstances. To whatever degree these varieties appeared between them, Adam and Eve had to apply the special revelation of the cultural mandate to their lives in different ways at the same time.

In addition, humanity often applied the same special revelation in a variety of ways over time because of ongoing changes in the people and circumstances involved. As just one example, when God first gave the cultural mandate, sin hadn't entered the world. But after Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they and their circumstances changed, and as a result, the way they obeyed the cultural mandate also changed. In fact, special revelation in Genesis 3 revealed how pain and futility would complicate the fulfillment of the cultural mandate as time and humanity progressed.

We can see that the same kinds of variety appear again and again as God added one special revelation after another over time. To one degree or another, every new special revelation modified the requirements of earlier special revelations. So, every time God gave new special revelations, his faithful people had to respond by changing how they served him both at the same time and over time.

From the very beginning, special and general revelations led to all kinds of variety in the ways early human beings were to serve God. And as we'll see later in this lesson, this initial variety laid the foundations of cultural variety for communities of God's faithful people throughout biblical history and even today.

The cultural mandate in Genesis requires us to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, and take dominion over it. That's going to lead to cultural variety. And the question can arise, is that really part of God's design? Does God intend for there to be diversity among different cultures? And I would say that the teaching of Scripture is, yes, absolutely. This is an outworking of what God calls us to begin to do... He created us in an environment that is just shot through with his desire for diversity: There's not just dry land, there's also sea. There's not just sun, there's also other kinds of stars. There are not just birds, there are animals of all types. And there's not just one kind of being human, there is male and female. So as we extend the image of that God who has created in this way throughout all of his creation, surely we ought to mirror that kind of variety, and that's going to show up in different cultural practices and things. See, I think the other thing we'd say there is that God calls us to fill the whole earth with his glory, and as we do that, we're going to run into things like variety of climate, variety of terrain. You can't very well build an igloo at the equator, and grass huts won't work in Alaska. So, as we fill the whole earth and take dominion over the whole earth, there is naturally going to be this kind of variety that we see reflected when Revelation says that in the company of the redeemed will be people from every tribe and language and tongue and nation. That is not a departure from God's intention from the beginning. That's actually the fulfillment of what God commanded in Genesis 1.

— Dr. Jimmy Agan

I think part of the beauty of God's working in the world is he's not working only in one culture but in and through many cultures. And I think we have a lot of affirmation of that in the Bible. The proclamation of the gospel is for all nations, that is, all the ethnicities, all the people groups of the world. And when you get to the end of Revelation, the Scripture talks about the kings of the earth bringing their glory into the kingdom of God; all of these treasures of different cultures and the unique strengths and gifts that we see worked out in various cultures of the world, these are all things that God uses in a redemptive way that are part of his purposes for humanity. And that's one of the reasons I think it's so important for us to have relationships across cultures in the body of Christ so that we can benefit from the full riches of God's work through the different cultures of the world.

— Dr. Philip Ryken



To explore biblical culture and its relationship to modern application, we need to keep not only the biblical foundations of culture in mind, but also the biblical developments of culture throughout the Old and New Testaments.

## DEVELOPMENTS

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There are many ways to summarize the biblical developments of culture in the Bible, but for our purposes, we'll look at these cultural developments through the same lens that we used to examine the foundations of culture. We'll look first at the importance of culture as biblical history developed. Then, we'll see how the two opposing cultural ideals developed in the Bible. Finally, we'll examine how cultural variety developed in the Scriptures. Let's begin with the importance of culture.

### IMPORTANCE

Culture is important in both the Old and New Testaments, but the importance of culture in the Old Testament appears most clearly in the amount of attention the early Scriptures give to Israel as a nation.

The book of Genesis describes cultural developments before Israel became a nation, but the entire Pentateuch — the first five books of the Bible — was written during the epoch of Moses' covenant of Law, after Israel had left Egypt and been gathered as a nation at Mount Sinai. For this reason, these books focus a lot of attention on God's commands and instructions for Israel's national life.

The rest of the Old Testament, from Joshua to Malachi, was written during the epoch of David's royal covenant, after Israel had already become a fully developed nation. These books address the spectrum of God's revelations that directed Israel's culture during its rise to imperial glory, the ups and downs of the divided kingdom, the exile, and the brief period of restoration at the end of the Old Testament.

Although the Old Testament describes many cultural developments that took place in Israel, the greatest cultural development in Scripture occurred in the transition from the Old Testament to the epoch of the new covenant in Christ. Instead of focusing on the national culture of Israel, the New Testament draws attention to the developments of cultural patterns in the Christian church.

To understand how this dramatic shift occurred, we need to remember that most Jews in first-century Palestine looked forward to the arrival of the new covenant age. As we learned in an earlier lesson, during the intertestamental period Jewish rabbis referred to all of history prior to the Messiah's arrival as "this age." And they taught that when the Messiah appeared, he would bring in "the age to come." They believed that in the age to come, the Messiah would appear, lead his people in battle against the evil nations of the world, and rapidly establish his people in his glorious, worldwide kingdom, dramatically and decisively altering the culture of Israel.

But Jesus and his apostles made it clear that his rule would unfold in three stages: the inauguration of his kingdom in his first coming, the continuation of his kingdom throughout church history, and the consummation of his kingdom at his second coming. This three-stage outlook led to a whole new understanding of the ways God expected the culture of his people to develop during the new covenant period.

It's very easy to lose sight of the importance of culture in the New Testament unless we keep in mind the final goal of Christ's kingdom as described in passages like Revelation 11:15:

**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15).**

In this passage, we see that Christ will one day destroy the "kingdom of the world" with its many rebellious cultures. But he will not simply destroy these evil cultures. He will also transform the world into a worldwide culture that can be described as the "kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" where "he will reign for ever and ever."

So, rather than being a marginal element of the New Testament, culture is so important that every portion of this part of Scripture in some way deals with how Christ brings about the fulfillment of God's purposes for human culture.

Some passages focus on the ways Jesus set in motion the final stage of the cultural mandate by his life, death, resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Spirit. Other portions of the New Testament focus on guiding the church as it helps transform the world through the gospel during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. And still other passages draw attention to the consummation when Christ will return to fulfill God's purposes for humanity and establish a culture in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Now that we've explored biblical developments in culture by looking at the importance of culture in the development of biblical history, we can turn to the development of the two opposing cultural ideals found throughout the Bible.

## OPPOSING IDEALS

The establishment of the two cultural ideals in Genesis 3 led Old Testament authors to associate the offspring of the Serpent with Gentile nations and the offspring of Eve with Israel.

Gentile nations developed their cultures in service to false gods and opposed the God of Israel. They set up shrines and temples to these false gods and sometimes even sacrificed their own children. God made it very clear that his people were to have nothing to do with these practices.

Israel, on the other hand, embraced the righteous laws God gave through Moses, and attempted to live in ways that glorified the one true God. They observed the Sabbath, avoided idolatry, and relied on God's guidance and protection instead of on human wisdom and strength.

Of course, this didn't mean that Gentiles couldn't be adopted into the nation of Israel by pledging their loyalty to God, or that Israelites couldn't become so corrupt that they became the enemies of God. But to the extent that each followed their customary ideals, Israel developed its culture in service to God, and Gentile nations developed their cultures in service to false gods.

Now, at the same time, the Old Testament and archeology also indicate that Israelite and Gentile cultures were similar in many ways. Some of these similarities resulted from Israelites following the sinful paths of their neighbors. But other similarities resulted from God's common grace restraining the sinful propensities of Gentiles, so that aspects of their cultures were at least superficially true to God's will. These cultural divisions continued throughout the Old Testament.

When we turn to the New Testament, the two opposing cultural ideals appear again, but with different associations.

Israel's long unfaithfulness, which began in the Old Testament, had left only a remnant of faithful Jews by the time of Christ's incarnation. And in the New Testament, Gentiles could now receive full adoption as God's people alongside this remnant. So, rather than dividing between the Jews and Gentile nations, New Testament authors associated followers of Christ with the seed of the woman and unbelievers with the seed of the Serpent, whether they were Jews or Gentiles.

This is why Jesus spoke of Satan as the father of the Pharisees in John 8:44. This also explains why, in Romans 16:20, Paul alluded to Genesis 3:15 when he assured the Christians in Rome that God would crush Satan under their feet.

**The relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations is an interesting question... And if you look in Genesis 18 and elsewhere, God makes a promise to Abraham that he would bless Abraham and bless his descendants. And if we think of Scripture as a multi-act drama, you have the first act where God makes the promise to Abraham, and he preserves the nation of Israel, keeping it from the corrupt influences of the surrounding nations; they fail, but he disciplines them. He protects the nation until the Messiah comes. The Messiah comes and announces salvation for Israel. If you look in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says in Matthew 15, "I came for the lost sheep of Israel." This Canaanite woman is beseeching him for her daughter. And it's troubling sometimes. People say, "well, why isn't he immediately healing her daughter?" And Jesus is in some ways saying, "This is act two." Right? "I've come to announce salvation for the lost sheep of Israel." But then you get to the end of the gospel, Matthew 28, and we have what begins act three, the act that we're in, where the gospel goes forth to all nations, to Jews and to Gentiles alike. Now, in Romans 1 it's interesting, even in act three, Paul maintains this distinction. He speaks about "to the Jew first, then to the Gentile." He feels an obligation to his countrymen, to those who have the promises of Abraham: I have an obligation to announce to them first. So he goes to the synagogue and declares the promises given to our forefather are true. But when he's kicked out of the**

**synagogue or when they'll no longer listen to him, he immediately goes to the Gentiles. Because, as he describes in Ephesians 2, through Christ's death on the cross, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down... there's a beautiful unity we have now as Jew and Gentile together as adopted sons and daughters of God.**

**— Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

The New Testament often warns believers not to be conformed to this world because the church and world follow opposing ideals. But at the same time, New Testament authors acknowledged that the line between the church and the world was not absolute. As culture developed in the Bible, early Christians often endorsed customs and philosophical outlooks that unbelievers followed. And as we learned earlier, some of these similarities resulted from the influence of sin on Christ's followers, and other similarities stemmed from the positive effects of common grace on the world.

In our focus on biblical cultural developments we've seen the importance of culture in the Old and New Testaments, and how opposing cultural ideals developed throughout biblical history. Let's now turn to our third topic: the development of cultural variety in the Scriptures.

## **VARIETY**

When we explore the Old Testament, it's obvious that it contains many laws and instructions that were designed to solidify Israel's national culture. But this didn't mean that God expected all Israelite cultures to be exactly the same. In fact, as different communities within Israel faithfully applied God's special and general revelations, a variety of cultural patterns emerged.

Many of these variations occurred simultaneously. Levitical priests applied God's laws in certain ways in their communities, while at the same time kings and other political leaders applied God's laws differently. One family applied God's laws in ways appropriate for its members, while other families applied God's laws in ways that were appropriate for their members.

Beyond this, even more variations occurred as God gave more and more special revelations to Israel over time. God ordered certain cultural patterns for his people as they marched through the wilderness and different patterns during the conquest of Canaan. God ordained changes when he established kingship in Israel and also when he commanded Solomon to build the Temple in Jerusalem. Other variations in the culture of Israel took place during the exile and after the exile.

**Some aspects of Israel's cultural life did not change very much throughout their history. They were a patriarchal culture from beginning to end. The husband was the major figure in the family. Not the only figure by any means. I'm reminded of Proverbs, which says that you much honor your father and not curse your mother. But**

**nevertheless, the culture was largely patriarchal from beginning to end. On the other hand, their state life changed rather dramatically from loose clans and then more tightly organized tribal structure, finally to nation status, and then the nation being destroyed and them being simply a culture within a larger world empire and trying to understand, who are we then as the people of God? So, that political situation changed for them pretty dramatically over that period of time.**

**— Dr. John Oswalt**

When we turn to the New Testament we find variety again. Old Testament cultural patterns were still applicable, but they had to be seen in the light of the fact that God's people were no longer a single nation. The people of God were now the church, a community called to live within many different national cultures. So, as you might expect, in the new covenant epoch God led his faithful people to develop even greater cultural variety.

Differences in people and circumstances led Christian communities to apply biblical teachings in different ways from one another. For instance, Jewish and Gentile believers observed distinctive cultural practices based on their own circumstances. And Christian churches located in different regions had to consider their own people and circumstances as they applied the Bible. And various family groups faithfully followed God's words in diverse ways.

But it's important to remember that new covenant special revelation didn't take place all at once. For nearly a century, God disclosed his will for the church through Christ and through Christ's apostles and prophets. So, the culture of the church in the New Testament also varied over time. For instance, the practice of circumcision changed dramatically when the apostles and elders met in Jerusalem in Acts 15. And every time a New Testament book was written and received, various Christian churches went through changes. For these and many other reasons, there was a great deal of cultural variety among Christian communities in New Testament times.

Now that we've looked at biblical culture and modern application by investigating the biblical foundations of culture and the way biblical developments affected culture in the Bible, let's turn to our third main topic. What do all of these considerations have to say about our modern application of Scripture?

## **APPLICATION**

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In our day, many evangelicals think of faith primarily as a private, individual matter. Now to be sure, the Scriptures have much to say about our personal walk with God. But many of us stress this aspect of the Bible to the point that we have very little interest in the implications of Scripture for modern culture. But as we'll see, the

Scriptures emphasize the cultural dimensions of our faith so much that we must devote ourselves to applying the Scriptures to culture today.

We'll consider the modern application of what the Bible teaches about culture in the same way that we looked at the foundations and developments of culture in Scripture. First, we'll explore the importance of culture when we apply Scripture. Next, we'll see how the two opposing cultural ideals should affect the application of Scripture today. And finally, we'll see how modern application must take into account the cultural variety that God has ordained for our times. Let's begin with the importance of culture in modern application.

### IMPORTANCE

Many portions of Scripture help us understand why it's important to apply the Bible to modern culture. But one of the easier ways to see this is to consider how Christ called his followers to influence every culture in the world by teaching the full range of what he'd commanded.

Listen to the way Jesus put it in Matthew 28:19-20, the familiar passage that Christians often call the Great Commission or the "gospel mandate." In this passage, Jesus told his disciples:

**Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).**

This passage summarizes the mission of Christ's followers until he returns in glory. But to appreciate how it relates to our modern cultural endeavors, it helps to see how this gospel mandate echoes the cultural mandate given to the human race in the beginning of Genesis. In the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, God told humanity to "be fruitful and increase in number."

Similarly, in Matthew 28:19, Christ called his followers to increase in number when he said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Much like Adam and Eve were to fill the world with images of God, Christians are also to multiply God's redeemed images. And we do this in part by leading people to saving faith in Christ.

But Jesus' gospel mandate didn't stop with just increasing the number of God's faithful servants. According to Matthew 28:20, our mission also entails "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Just as Adam and Eve were called to obey God by filling the earth and subduing it, Christians are to teach all nations to obey God by following his commands, and that includes instruction on nearly every facet of culture.

We can look at it this way: Adam and Eve were to obey God and build culture by subduing the earth, and we are to obey God and build culture by discipling the nations.

It should be evident from Matthew 28 that Jesus expected his followers to have an impact on every culture by baptizing believers and teaching his commandments to all nations. His teachings addressed very public cultural issues like poverty, finances, health,

marriage, justice, ethnicity, politics and even paying taxes. This is why we find New Testament books touching a broad range of cultural issues.

Along these same lines, in Matthew 5:13-14, Christ boldly described his disciples as:

**The salt of the earth ... [and] ... the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-14).**

As history has shown time and again, when followers of Jesus faithfully devote themselves to teaching all that Christ commanded to every nation, we have the potential of positively influencing every facet of every culture in the entire world. And for this reason, our modern application of the Bible must address the full range of human culture.

**In Matthew 5, Jesus tells his disciples that they are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And to a modern reader, this is kind of a mysterious statement... You think about, to the ancient hearers, what does that language convey, especially rooted in the culture in the Scripture? And salt was something that preserved things from going rotten, so salt was added to meat or fish to keep it from rotting, to preserve it, and it was something that added flavor. And you think about Christians. Their influence in the world is to be a presence for righteousness in many ways under the instrument of God, preserving the culture or flavoring the culture with the presence of God's truth. And light pictures that as well. Light throughout Scripture is seen as an image of revelation, as revealing. And Christians are to be in the world revealing who God is, broadcasting, illumining a dark world with the truth and the righteousness of who God is.**

— Dr. Robert L. Plummer

In our study of modern application and biblical culture, we've seen the importance of culture for Christ's followers today. Now let's look at our second topic. How should the existence of the two opposing cultural ideals impact our modern application of the Bible?

## **OPPOSING IDEALS**

When Christ came to earth, he inaugurated the final stage of his great victory over Satan. But this victory will be completed only when Christ returns in glory at the consummation of all things. In the meantime, during the continuation of his kingdom, the human race continues to be divided between the offspring of the Serpent, the unbelieving world that pursues the cultural ideal of rebellion against God, and the offspring of Eve, followers of Christ that pursue the cultural ideal of service to God.



But, as it was in biblical times, the line between God's people and the world is not absolute. Until Christ returns, his people on earth will continue to struggle with the remaining influence of sin. We are free from sin's tyranny, but not free from its influence. At the same time, God's common grace still restrains the world so that even unbelievers often live in ways that, to some degree, conform to the will of God. And this is especially true of nations where the gospel has had great influence.

As followers of Christ, it's our responsibility to follow cultural paths that are true to God's will and to avoid those that are not. Sometimes the paths we pursue should be very different from the world. Biblical authors repeatedly warned their original audiences against falling into idolatry, sexual immorality, selfishness, pride, injustice and a host of other cultural evils. Wherever we see these kinds of evils in our own day, we are to turn away from them.

But other times, biblical authors encouraged their original audiences to recognize the influence of common grace on different aspects of social relationships, technology, art, music, architecture, law, and politics. Every time we find that the Scriptures approve of the ways unbelievers lived, we should search for similar effects of God's common grace on the cultures of the world today. As long as we remain true to the teachings of Scripture, we should freely endorse the blessings of common grace in science, art, politics and other facets of life.

We may find it difficult at times to discern how cultural patterns in Scripture apply to our day. But in general terms, we must take account of the ways God directed various dimensions of culture throughout the Bible. When we compare all that the Scriptures reveal about different dimensions of culture, we find at least four ways in which God directed cultural patterns. He permanently approved some patterns, such as marriage and work. Other patterns he only temporarily endorsed, such as the arrangement of the tribes of Israel during their march from Egypt to Canaan. At times, in his patience with sinners, God temporarily tolerated some cultural activities of his people, such as polygamy and slavery, even though he disapproved of them. And of course, throughout Scripture, we see many cultural patterns that received God's permanent disapproval, such as injustice and idolatry.

In other words, to apply a cultural pattern we find in the Bible to our lives today, we should look for God's evaluation in the passage itself. Then, we should search out relevant moral standards from other biblical passages and determine the motivations and goals behind the biblical cultural elements we see. In these ways, we can discern how cultural patterns in biblical passages represent the two opposing cultural ideals of service to God or rebellion against him. And as we do this, we'll be enabled to apply appropriate patterns of culture in the Bible to our modern world.

Having looked at modern application in the light of the importance of culture and at the opposing cultural ideals in the world today, we can now turn to a third consideration. How should we deal with cultural variety as we apply Scripture in our day?



## VARIETY

When we visit different believers in various parts of the world, it's obvious that our languages, styles of dress, our diets, music, and many other cultural patterns can be very different. Why is this true? If we all seek to follow the standards of Scripture, then why have the patterns of our cultures gone in so many different directions? Well, needless to say, some of our differences exist because all of us fail to live in ways that are true to Scripture. But apart from our failures, there are many legitimate reasons for expecting cultural diversity among God's people throughout the world.

As we've seen, with the inauguration of the new covenant age, God's people were no longer a single nation. And over the last two thousand years, as the gospel has spread further and further around the world, God's faithful people have faced the challenge of living for Christ in increasingly diverse cultures. This challenge raises a crucial question. How much cultural variety should we allow? What limits should we set?

There are many places in Scripture that address this question, but one of the best places to explore this issue is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. In this passage, Paul told the Corinthian church:

**Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).**

In this passage, Paul described how his commitment to fulfilling the gospel mandate led him to embrace a wide range of cultural concepts, behaviors and emotions. As he summarized it in verse 22, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

As one who travelled here and there, Paul had to exercise an extraordinary amount of cultural flexibility. In verse 20 he said that he "became like one under the law" when he was in Jewish communities. And in verse 21, he said that he "became like one not having the law" when he was in Gentile communities.

But notice how Paul drew limits on the cultural variety he was willing to embrace. In verse 20 he said, "I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law)." In other words, Paul followed the cultural patterns of Jewish communities, but he wasn't bound by the law as the religious leaders of his day understood it. Most of the Pharisees and religious leaders in Paul's time only used the law to flaunt their own self-righteousness. But, as Jesus indicated in Matthew 23, this behavior led to condemnation and death. Here, Paul explained that he embraced the culture without embracing cultural standards that ultimately would only bring him under God's judgment.

Similarly, in verse 21 he said, “I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law).” Paul shared in the cultural concepts, behaviors and emotions of Gentile communities, but only to the extent that he did not violate the law of God as Christ had interpreted it for his new covenant people.

In much the same way, to fulfill the gospel mandate today, faithful followers of Christ must be prepared to apply the Scriptures differently whenever they encounter people and circumstances from other cultural backgrounds. Local congregations, Christian businesses, schools, hospitals, and even friendships will be different from each other. And of course, as time passes, these communities will change as the people and circumstances involved change as well.

But this doesn’t mean that we’re free to shape the cultures of our communities any way we wish. On the contrary, like the apostle Paul, followers of Christ today must be firmly committed to staying within the parameters of Scripture. This commitment to remaining true to the Scriptures as we apply them in different ways to our communities is one of the most complex aspects of modern application.

**As God reveals himself to us, he does so in space and time. That’s part of the glory of his revelation and his plan of redemption. As we work from Old Testament era to New Testament era, obviously we interact with various cultures, people in different periods of time. There’s all kinds of cultural variety that we see that’s tied to certain places in history, certain places in terms of cultures and backgrounds. How do we know which variety applies to us, how it should be lived out? Well, I think first of all we have to evaluate variety in terms of the standard of certain moral demands. Certain cultural variety needs to be rejected because it is inconsistent with how God has made us — what his moral standards are, and those practices — even though they may reflect ... cultural variety may reflect idolatry, may reflect a rejection of God and his standards.**

**— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

Throughout biblical history, every community of God’s faithful people maintained certain cultural patterns. But other cultural patterns changed over time. One way to determine how closely we should imitate any pattern of culture we find in the Bible is to pay attention to whether or not a particular cultural feature remained the same throughout Scripture or changed to accommodate different eras, people or circumstances. If cultural patterns changed in Scripture, we should expect them to be changeable in our time as well. But if facets of culture remained the same throughout biblical history, we must consider them standards for us today.

For example, family structures and living situations have changed over the last 2,000 years, but Scripture consistently instructs children to obey their parents. This is still true for us today. And although legal systems varied from culture to culture and era to era, Scripture never altered the fact that God’s people are expected to be honest witnesses when called to testify. Political systems, clothing, music, food preferences, and many

other facets of culture changed throughout biblical history, but the directive to honor and serve God in our families, work places, and communities has remained consistent.

As followers of Christ, we should be careful to distinguish these continuities and discontinuities every time we apply a cultural pattern in Scripture to our own day.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've explored several important dimensions of biblical culture and modern application. We've seen the biblical foundations of culture in the early chapters of the Bible. We've looked at biblical developments that took place in culture in both the Old and New Testaments. And we've explored how the aspects of culture in the Bible should affect our modern application of Scripture.

The Bible itself makes it clear that faithful followers of Christ must apply the teachings of Scripture not simply to themselves as individuals, but to the cultural dimensions of their lives as well. Even during the epoch of the new covenant, we are still images of God and we've been called to build human culture in ways that please God. This mandate will continue in effect until Christ returns. So, we must learn how the Scriptures apply to every dimension of modern culture.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
TEN

Biblical Culture &  
Modern Application  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	Why did God give humanity the cultural mandate? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	How did humanity's fall into sin affect our ability to think rightly?.....	2
<b>Question 3:</b>	In what ways did God's laws direct the culture of ancient Israel? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b>	How did the coming of Christ affect the relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations?.....	6
<b>Question 5:</b>	How can we know the difference between cultural practices merely described in the Bible and practices that we're required to follow today? .....	8
<b>Question 6:</b>	How should Christians respond to Paul's statements about head coverings in 1 Corinthians chapter 11?.....	10
<b>Question 7:</b>	What does it mean for Christians to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world? .....	11
<b>Question 8:</b>	How do Christians approve of the differences between cultures today but still maintain faith in the absolute authority of Scripture?.....	12

# **He Gave Us Scripture:**

## **Foundations of Interpretation**

### **Lesson Ten: Biblical Culture & Modern Application**

#### **Faculty Forum**

With

Dr. Jimmy Agan  
Dr. Steve Blakemore

Dr. Darrell L. Bock

Dr. P. J. Buys

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

Dr. Dan Doriani

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Dr. Craig S. Keener

Dr. Daniel L. Kim

Dr. Michael J. Kruger

Dr. Luis Orteza

Dr. John Oswalt

Dr. Greg Perry

Dr. Philip Ryken

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

#### **Question 1:**

#### **Why did God give humanity the cultural mandate?**

The foundations of culture can be seen in the Bible as early as Genesis 1:28. In this verse, God blessed Adam and Eve and directed them to rule over all creation. Some theologians have referred to this command as the "cultural mandate." But, why did God give humanity the cultural mandate?

##### **Dr. P. J. Buys**

Originally in Paradise, God gave man the mandate to rule over the earth and to represent him in the way they rule and use creation to give glory to his name. Now, men were corrupted by sin, but that mandate was never taken away. So, when people are saved and receive a new value system, to really give glory to God, they actually take up this mandate with new vigor and new strength. And according to their gifts and talents, every human being then wants to give glory to God in their daily task, to make clear that they really belong to him and that he is coming to restore everything again.

##### **Dr. Greg Perry**

Many people think that missions really begins with Abraham and the call to be a blessing to all the nations. But actually, the mission of God in relation to humanity and the earth begins in the Garden, and God tells Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue the entire earth. And so, here we have the sense that God makes a garden, he puts humanity in that garden, and then he says something really incredible. He says that humanity has the mission of expanding the borders of that garden to show forth the image and the reign of God throughout the entire world by how we keep and cultivate the earth, and how we share its resources and how we grow as communities, and how we show forth the goodness of God and what it means that God made things very good. It's really interesting that in the New Testament the apostle Paul kind of combines together the Great Commission and the cultural



mandate. We see this in the passages like Ephesians 4 where he's talking about the growth of the church, and how the church is growing up in Christ, and that that growth of the church is expanding and filling out all things in every way. And he says that as we take off the old self and put on the new self. That we're growing up in the image and likeness of God, being created for holiness, being created as image bearers. And so, in his work in discipleship, or making disciples, Paul goes back to the creational mandate, to that original mission that we're growing up to become a mature humanity in Christ.

### **Dr. Philip Ryken**

When God created the world and the people that he made in his image, the whole future of humanity was open to the possibilities, and God gave a command that we would be fruitful and establish families and communities, and that we would exercise a loving dominion of the creation. And that would lead to culture and music and the arts and cities and civilizations. All of these possibilities were given with creation itself. And I suppose you'd have to ask God why this was his plan for humanity. But God has been working through the human race in all kinds of ways that lead to his glory. And our lives are so greatly enriched by the possibilities of creation that were given in the very beginning and now are brought under the lordship of Jesus Christ. And it brings so much joy to life to have the experiences of family, of community, of enjoying the rich bounty of creation. All of these things return to the glory of God.

## **Question 2:**

### **How did humanity's fall into sin affect our ability to think rightly?**

**Genesis 3 records the temptation of Adam and Eve along with humanity's fall into sin. This fall has had a lasting impact on humanity in a number of ways. It's affected the way we act and the way we feel. And it's also affected the way we think. How did humanity's fall into sin affect our ability to think rightly?**

### **Dr. Steve Blakemore**

When we have the doctrine of the Fall in Christian theology, the doctrine of the Fall has implications for how we understand how human reason, or human thinking would work ... Our capacity for thought was meant to seek God as its ultimate goal. The human heart was meant to desire God as its ultimate goal. And the human will was meant to choose God and God's way as its ultimate purpose. What does sin do? Sin takes and turns my life toward me, where I become my ultimate desire. I become my ultimate goal. My will becomes the ultimate purpose for my life. Sin, therefore, twists my thinking, because even my reason becomes self-serving. Even my desires become self-serving. Our capacity to think, therefore, is only really freed — our capacity to think truly and rightly is only fully engaged — when, by the grace of God, he turns me outward, which is the doctrine of the new birth and the recreation of our lives in Christ. My heart is turned toward God, therefore my mind can seek and yearn for God, and my will can be willing to yield to God. Sin twists me inward. Grace pulls

me outward. And when grace pulls me outward, the truth of God's revelation becomes more and more and more apparent to me. That it is absolutely true because the vestiges of sin that would keep me trapped in my own self-reference are increasingly broken off my life so that I can more and more think God's thoughts as they are revealed to me in Scripture, and desire God's will as it is revealed to me in Scripture, and surrender my life to the lordship of Jesus and the purposes of God the Father.

**Dr. Glen G. Scorgie**

I think many times our ability to understand and think clearly is impaired by physical maladies that are a consequence of the Fall — dementia. There are characterological deficiencies like laziness and sloth that affect our ability to think clearly. And in a host of ways, we live a world of the false self, of posturing and denial where we are too terrified by the truth to embrace it with candor. And it's only when we experience grace from God, the unconditional embrace of our Creator through Christ that we can be honest about ourselves and even know clearly who we are, as well as the truth on other things. So we are caught enmeshed in a pervasive defacing of the image of God that it touches even the life of our minds. And so, we dare not stray too far from the revealed word, which is constantly providing recalibrating moments and tune-ups on the intellectual disposition that we bring to life.

**Dr. Thomas J. Nettles**

Human beings are very complex. We are emotion. We're rationality. We are bodies. And we haven't really discerned yet how much our shape and the color of eyes and our hair and how much our height, all of this, how this affects our own emotions, our self-perceptions and how that feeds into our rationality and the affections. We're whole persons and so we cannot, sort of, separate out one part of us from the other. That's what makes every person unique because everything about us feeds into the way we communicate and the way we perceive and the way we think. And when God gives us the Bible, when he gives us revelation, he does it with all of that in mind ... And so, the operation of truth is something that is always funneled through the whole person. This is tremendously important for understanding how the Fall affected the way we interpret Scripture and how we respond to divine revelation, and how it is that we can or cannot understand it. Sometimes the way it affects the mind is called the "noetic" effects of sin. But when we talk about the noetic effects of sin, in my view, I don't think that that means that there is some sort of peculiar genetic fault that has come in that has caused the rationality, by itself, simply to function in a faulty way. I do believe in the noetic effects of sin, but I think that it's related to the way sin has impacted the whole person. When Paul is talking about the relationship between the revelation and rationality in Romans 1, he indicates that, from a purely rational standpoint, everyone has a knowledge of God. They know his eternal power and godhead, even when you get to the decline of that degradation. He talks about those who knowing, that those who do such things deserve punishment, nevertheless, they do them and have delight in those who do them. So, the problem is not purely rational. It's not purely an inability to perceive revelation and to draw the right conclusions of it, if all that was involved was the rationality. But that is simply not the way it is. Much more important is this whole idea that many Christian theologians

have called "affections." It is on the basis of affections that we make our choices, and on the basis of affections that we actually determine what we will believe is true and what is not true, because that is so powerful — the fact that we have become wrapped in upon ourselves, or curved in upon ourselves. So we judge everything in light of the way it affects how people view *us*, what *our* affections are, what *our* pleasure is. And we will easily dismiss the clearest truths. Not because they're unclear. Not because the rationality by itself would not draw that conclusion, but because if there is a way out of not drawing a conclusion that makes moral demands of us, then the unregenerate person will draw that conclusion rather than the conclusion that is clearly demanded by the evidence ... And so Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2, he talks about the things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned. And the person who is unspiritual cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned, and he does not understand them. Now, what Paul is arguing there is that there is a bias that the unspiritual man has against the truths of divine revelation, and that bias is so powerful that he represses that which should be clear to his rationality in favor of himself and his pleasure. So that's what I believe the noetic effects of the Fall have been — this reality of the wholeness of our person and how fallenness makes our affections dominate our rationality so that we refuse to see the things that we should see, and that from God's standpoint have been clearly revealed.

### Question 3:

#### **In what ways did God's laws direct the culture of ancient Israel?**

**The instructions found in the Old Testament laws guided the nation of Israel as God's chosen people and conformed Israel's culture to God's righteous standards. But sometimes these laws looked a lot like other ancient Near Eastern laws. And sometimes, God's laws contained unexpected adaptations. In what ways did God's laws direct the culture of ancient Israel?**

#### **Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.**

When we look at the Old Testament, we see that God often accommodated his revelation to the culture around Israel in which they lived. When you look at the Old Testament law you will sometimes see great similarity between it and Mesopotamian laws, Hittite laws, other law codes from throughout the ancient Near Eastern world. So it's apparent that God did contextualize his self-revelation and his demands. He met the people where they were and he formulated laws that were very similar to what they knew from the culture; although, I think in many cases the Law given by God is more enlightened when you look at some of the details. It's more enlightened than what is in the culture. It's almost as if God is taking them where they're at, and he's trying to push them forward toward his ideal. But at other times, God breaks into that culture, and rather than contextualizing or accommodating what they're doing, he confronts what they're doing and outlaws it for Israel. For example, idolatry. The typical people in the ancient Near East is very happy to worship various gods — cover all the bases. But Yahweh comes to his people and says, no. "You will have no

other gods before me." It will be exclusive worship. There is no room for syncretism — the merging of the worship as the one deity with another. And there's no room for polytheism. God will sometimes confront certain practices and outlaw them if they have these pagan, idolatrous associations. A really good example can be found in Deuteronomy 14:1 where the Lord says:

You are children of the Lord your God; do not cut yourselves [nor make] your forehead bald for the sake of the dead (Deuteronomy 14:1, NET).

In the ancient Near East there was a practice — we see it in 1 Kings 18 — where the prophets of Baal are cutting themselves. The reason they're doing that is because there is a drought in the land, and in their theology, the god Baal, the storm god, the fertility god, has died. And they're trying to resurrect him through this practice of cutting themselves. And so, people in this culture, when someone died, they would sometimes cut themselves as an act of mourning and sorrow. And the Lord says to Israel, we're not going to do that because of its pagan associations. That's going too far. So, sometimes the Lord would accommodate the culture; try to move it forward toward his ideal. Other times he would confront the culture and say, no, we're not going to operate that way.

### **Dr. Daniel L. Kim**

In the Old Testament we see that the cultures have various aspects of it that are faithful to God's covenant laws and expectations. But there are also some elements that perhaps are not always faithful or always according to God's standards. So, perhaps I could think of three different examples. The first one that comes to mind is the notion of the firstborn and the blessings that the firstborn gets. Sometimes God intentionally chooses the second child, not necessarily to ask Israel or the people of the ancient Near East to conform to Scripture, but perhaps to shake them up, to do something unexpected that their culture has long held as true. And this is true long before Abraham was even called. There's a second issue, perhaps the issue of having a second or third wife. In the ancient Near East, that was a very common practice, and we see that still very much practiced in the biblical culture, especially in the Old Testament times. And oftentimes we'll see God making specific laws to make sure that all wives are treated according to the way they ought to be. So, perhaps the second wife is the favored wife, and the husband has a son through the first wife. God gives explicit laws saying that it's that first son who gets the double inheritance and not the child of the second, more-favored wife. The third thing that comes to my mind is the notion that we see of the biblical culture in which, oftentimes, the inheritance policy. For example, we know that the ancient Near East and the biblical culture in the Hebrew Bible, in the Old Testament, has always favored and long favored males. So if you had a son, the son would automatically inherit the property in the next generation. But, for example, the case of the daughters of Zelophehad is an intriguing one, because Moses, when he was giving the Law was giving the general case, and the daughters came up to him and approached him and said, "But we are all daughters. We have no brothers to inherit the land. Can the Lord perhaps come up with a different way to do this?" And the Lord indeed agrees with them and says that

if there are no sons, no male heirs, the daughters are permitted to inherit. And so, there are certain adjustments that God makes to the ancient Near Eastern culture and to the Hebrew Bible. Are there elements of the Hebrew Bible or elements of the Old Testament culture that God desires and wants to see changed? Perhaps there might be some. But it's not very obvious to the people that are listening. For example, today we might find it very offensive that the women have to labor long and hard all day just to cook meals. And yet, God does not seem to take that as a negative — in fact, encourages his people to be very, very hospitable whenever visitors come, which requires the wife to be even more engaged in labor in the kitchen area to cook and to do that. So, perhaps, I'm not so sure there are any specific elements of the Old Testament culture that God corrects. Now, I would go back to Genesis 2 and God's statement that a man and a woman shall leave their families — respective families — and join and become one. And we see that reiteration when it comes to the leaders of the church in the New Testament as men who are of one wife.

**Dr. John Oswalt**

God revealed himself in the context of human life. But he did not merely adopt everything that might be typical of a given culture. One of the things that we see when we compare the Old Testament laws to the laws of the neighbors, for instance, is that there are sometimes subtle, sometimes more significant differences. We find, for instance, the biblical laws are constantly put on the basis of, "Do this because I am the Lord. I have entered into a relationship with you." So, you honor your father and your mother, not just because it's a good idea, but because it's an expression of your relationship to your heavenly Father, and it's worked out in that regard. So, this means that the laws typically are more humane than they are in the other cultures where it is simply the king saying, "If you don't do this I'll kill you, and that's that." The law is simply on the basis of a king's personal demand; whereas, in the Bible, the law is on the basis of this covenant relationship with the saving God. So you also will find laws which not only are more humane in the way in which they are applied, you will also find more gradation in the laws so that there are differing punishments for different sins that are on a different level, and that is the relationship to God.

**Question 4:**

**How did the coming of Christ affect the relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations?**

The coming of Christ changed a lot of things for both the nation of Israel and the nations around them. For Israel, the long-awaited Messiah had come. And for the nations, they could now take part in God's eternal kingdom. But, how did the coming of Christ affect the relationship between Israel and the Gentile nations?

**Dr. Jimmy Agan**

We want to say that Israel and the nations are on equal footing before the Lord, and the coming of Christ has revealed that. Jews and Gentiles alike are equally in need of

a Savior. Jews and Gentiles alike must come to God through the work of Jesus and through faith in him. There is no distinction there — equality. Second, we want to say unity. The Scripture makes it clear that, in Christ, Jew and Gentiles are one. Galatians 3:28 states that explicitly. So, there's no preferential treatment within God's people for those who are ethnically Jewish or those who are not. There is no advantage that Gentiles have over Jews in terms of being closer to God or somehow better able to benefit from the work of Christ. We are one in the body. And here we have to say that the church hasn't always lived this out well. There have been times when the church has neglected to evangelize Jews and folks with that kind of ethnic background. And there have been times when Gentile nations have persecuted the Jewish people. The Scripture teaches that that ought not to be the case. Equality, unity should rule the day, and certainly nothing like some of the anti-Semitism that we've sadly seen. But finally, we want to say gratitude. There should be gratitude on the part of Gentiles toward the Jewish nation. We should notice that this is the people through whom God brought us the promises of Scripture, the people through whom God brought us the physical lineage of the Messiah. We should be grateful to God for his people Israel. And when we open the Old Testament we ought to be thinking — as Gentiles, even — we're looking at our family photo album. These are our ancestors. These are our people. We are now a part of that family — and a sense of gratitude for that part of our heritage. At the same time, Jewish people ought to be grateful any time they see somebody worshiping the God of Scripture, the only true God. Jewish believers ought to give thanks that Gentiles are now with them worshiping this one true God as he's revealed himself, not only in Scripture, but now ultimately in the coming of his Son.

**Dr. Luis Orteza**

Well, I want to read this passage from Ephesians 2, where Paul writes:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments [and] ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16, ESV).

This passage addressed the relationship between Jews and Gentile. And Christ, as it were, became the bridge between Jews and Gentiles so that the hostility that Paul addresses here has been erased. There is now one new man, and that man is Christ Jesus. So that, part of what this means is that there's now no two peoples of God. There's just one people of God. And so that a Jewish man would need to come to Christ to become part of God's people in our context today. So, there's now a sense of unity because of Christ. The race is no longer separated between the Jew and a Gentile. In Christ there is now one people of God, both Jews and Gentiles. And for that matter, all the races of the world are one in Christ.

**Rev. Thad James, Jr.**

The coming of Christ was a crucial factor to bring the Jewish nation and the Gentile nation together. When we think about how the Jews thought about themselves, and even their rejection of Christ was not seeing him in the light that they thought the Messiah was to come as a warrior and not coming as the peaceable Christ that he was. And if you remember that Jesus said that, you are to wait in Jerusalem and wait upon the Holy Spirit. So, the promise that he gave to them at Pentecost was a culmination of what he had said before, and even what God said in the Old Testament. So, Christ was that linking factor, when he said to wait and the Holy Spirit will come upon you. So, that outpouring of the Holy Spirit, when Jews and Gentiles and people from fifteen different parts of the country, fifteen different ethnic groups, came together and hearing their own language, hearing things — the proclamation of the gospel in their own language — that could only be the work of God, the work of the Holy Spirit. And again, it was the culmination of Christ's promise to wait and tarry on the Holy Spirit. So, here we have Christ who is now bringing together two dramatically different cultures. The Jews looked upon the Gentiles as dogs — as less, as uncircumcised dogs, in fact. So, they didn't have any trust belief in the Gentiles. But now at Pentecost, again under the authority of Christ, we see these two nations coming together. The Jews needed this sign and wonder to see that the same thing was happening to Gentiles that was happening to them for them to be able to accept them, again, into this new nation that God was building.

**Question 5:**

**How can we know the difference between cultural practices merely described in the Bible and practices that we're required to follow today?**

As we read through both the Old and New Testaments, we find numerous descriptions of cultural practices. But biblical authors didn't always state which practices we should follow and which practices we should avoid. So, how can we know the difference between cultural practices merely described in the Bible and practices that we're required to follow today?

**Dr. Daniel L. Kim**

Sometimes I've wondered whether I ought to do what we see in Scripture... For example, if I wash my wife's feet, she would say, thank you. But it does not necessarily imply that I am being humble before her as her servant leader. And yet, in Jesus's time, when he washed the disciples' feet, it spoke volumes. Peter repeatedly denied and did not want Jesus to do that because of how humbling a position that was. And so perhaps one way to look at whether a biblical practice is more culturally based than it is something to be followed, we could always ask ourselves, "In our context today" — in my context today — "what would something like that mean?" So, I would suggest perhaps that we ought to look at some of the things that go on in the Bible not as a literal, "Here's what I need to do." "David played the harp so I have to play the harp. That's God's instrument!" ... Rather than doing something like that,

we should perhaps ask ourselves what exactly is going on in that culture that helps us to understand a principle, a biblical principle? So going back to the example of the foot washing... We have to be willing to do things that will humble us and clearly communicate to our disciples, to those whom we love, that we care for them enough that we would be willing to humble ourselves. And then, to bring it into our context and say, "In my context, how does somebody demonstrate humility?" and to be able to ask that question. I'm from a Korean-American background. My parents are first-generation Koreans. And in the Korean context, one of the ways in which we demonstrate humility is not to be served but to serve. So, for example, a pastor in the Korean church would be the first in line to get a meal. But perhaps the odd thing, or the surprising, or the dis-equilibrating thing that a pastor could do would be, rather than to be the first in line, to actually be the one serving the meal to the people who are going by. That, in my opinion, would truly shake and dis-equilibrate the people who are listening and watching what's going on and would demonstrate that the pastor is willing to serve and willing to be humble and to do things that most people would prefer not to do. And so, that would be one of the ways in which we can begin to ask ourselves whether something that is going in Scripture is prescriptive or descriptive. And when we see things that are very different from our cultural context, that's when it's a clue for us to recognize and acknowledge and say, it's not necessarily that very specific act, but what it represents. What is the biblical, theological principle behind it? And to be able to ask the question in our context, "how do we represent this?" How do we represent humility? How do we represent servanthood? How do we represent lordship? How do we represent being faithful? How do we represent mercy? How do we represent compassion? How do we reconcile?

**Dr. Darrell L. Bock**

Well, actually, the question of sorting out when cultural practices are simply described and when they are commanded or directed to us is a difficult question. And that's why some of these examples often get discussed between people, with people putting a particular practice on one side or the other of that divide ... But basically I think the difference is, is that in those texts where we're being commanded certain things, and the rationale for that command is somewhat timeless, or something that said, "all the churches do," or something like that. Then we're pushing in the direction of, at least, a practice that, if we don't exactly replicate, is something we should follow in kind. Perhaps a good example of this is the exhortation to greet one another with a holy kiss, which was a very cultural way of greeting someone. The cultural equivalent we have of doing that is a handshake, or maybe a hug, or something like that. So, I wouldn't be strictly legalistic in this kind of an idea, but I would say that the kind of affection that these acts represent are something that we're supposed to show to one another to help affirm our community with one another. That's really what's going on with that kind of an example. In other cases, it might be that there are certain cultural features that are unique to the particular situation that tell us, "Well, maybe this passage doesn't have a universal application." Sometimes a clue to that is to go to another passage where the situation is very similar but the practice differs, which tells you that there is some flexibility in terms of what's going on ... So, when



we pay attention to cultural practices, we have to pay attention to the genre, the type of material that it is, to determine whether or not this is a kind of command. An illustration that appears in a parable, for example, is likely not commanded to be something that's followed. It's a part of the story that's being told so the parable has life and can make its point. So, we have to distinguish between the kind of literature that we're in sometimes to determine whether or not something is merely an example to tell a story as opposed to being an example to follow. But as I said, sometimes these will be debated, and people will discuss... the different classes, because sometimes it isn't really clear which category something belongs in.

### **Question 6:**

#### **How should Christians respond to Paul's statements about head coverings in 1 Corinthians chapter 11?**

**Many cultural practices mentioned in the Bible seem foreign to Christians who come from today's Western cultures. One of those practices was the use of head coverings for women in public. With so much cultural distance between Western Christians today and the cultures of the New Testament, how should Christians respond to Paul's statements about head coverings in 1 Corinthians chapter 11?**

#### **Dr. Craig S. Keener**

In the Eastern Mediterranean world, married women — although exceptions were sometimes made for the elite — but married women were expected to wear head coverings that would cover at least all of their hair to protect against being seductive, or considered seductive, to men. It was alright if they weren't married, but if they were married they were supposed to cover their hair. This introduced a conflict into the Corinthian church because you had different values. You have some elite women who belong to the families where the churches are meeting, and then you have other women who were coming in. And if some women didn't have their heads covered, other women could interpret that as seductive. So, you have ostentation from the upper class women. You have seduction, or at least the thought that it might be seductive, among others. And then you have class conflict. Now today, women going out with naked hair is not necessarily considered seductive in most societies in the world. But we can still learn from the principles that Paul applies in this situation. We should be modest. Whether male or female, we shouldn't be trying to seduce people. We shouldn't be ostentatious. And we also should reduce class conflict. So, I think the biggest principle in the passage, though, is modesty, avoiding dressing in a way that people would consider seductive.

### **Question 7:**

## **What does it mean for Christians to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?**

Jesus' teaching often contains metaphors that are associated with the culture of his time. Sometimes this makes his instruction more difficult for us to understand today. For example, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus directed his disciples to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." But what does it mean for Christians to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world?

### **Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

When Jesus describes Christians, he often uses parabolic language, meaning he describes them in light of things around us. One of the most famous times Jesus does this is when he describes Christians as "salt" — salt of the world — and also the light of world. Now, often Christians misinterpret those passages in light of the way we think about salt and light today. Most of us use salt to season our food to make it taste better. But in the ancient world, that's not really what salt was designed to do. Salt was a preservative in the ancient world. It protected food, kept it from going rotten, kept it from going bad, and allowed it to have value over an extended period of time. And Jesus is making the same point with the light of the world. In our day and age where light is abundant and you can flip on a switch anytime to have light, it's not that significant. But in that day and time, light would have been something that would have been very critical in the ancient world, to keep the path clear, to keep the house lit, to point the way. And so, when he calls Christians "light of the world" and "salt of the earth," there's a sense in which Christians preserve the world by their presence and also, in one sense, enlighten the world by truth. Jesus is calling Christians, in one sense, to be a preservative in society, to make sure that it stays consistent with God's principles. And we see that all around us. When Christians are around, it does restrain sin. It does keep the world from going as bad as it possibly could. Likewise, to say that Christians are the light of the world is to say that we speak truth into it. We give them enlightenment, show them the right path, the right way, so they don't stumble and fall. And so Christians, in one sense, are a preservative in culture and a speaker into culture. And that's what it means to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

### **Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus Christ — and throughout the entire New Testament — calls us to be salt and light. Those two pictures, those images, are important. I mean, salt in the first century was so crucial in the preservation of food. They didn't have all the refrigeration system that we have today. So that picture of salt is, you know, something that would be well known. And of course, as it comes over to us, what's Jesus saying to us as his people? Well, we are to be those who are preservatives. We are to be those who, as we live for his glory, as we take the gospel to the nations, we are to be those who show God's way to the world. All people are made as image bearers. But in the Fall, they do not live out the very purpose of their existence. And part of being salt is to be those who demonstrate, by God's grace and

by the redemptive work of Christ, what it means to be an image bearer — what it means to be a child of God, but what it means to be, in terms of our very creation, showing those outside of him what we were created to be in the first place as restored in Christ. The imagery of light, as well, picks this up, because sin is often pictured as darkness — walking in the dark, walking contrary to God's ways. Well, when the lights get turned on, we then can see clearly how we are to live and what God's demands are. And we shine that on darkness, where we expose what they are doing in light of God's Word, as well as show a way of light. Think of light imagery from the Old Testament. It's "a light to our path." It opens up a way which shows, you know, the way to go. And we are to be those kind of role models. We are to be those kind of examples as we follow Christ. We are to show non-Christians, as image bearers, what it means to truly be created in God's image, what it means to be redeemed, and by God's grace for them to come to know the Lord Jesus Christ themselves and to follow him as God intended for them to be.

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells Christians that we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This idea of the followers of Jesus as light has an Old Testament root. I think one good place to look is Deuteronomy 4. There were two things that were going to make Israel's reputation among the nations. And their reputation among the nations would make God famous. One is God's works. The nations would say, "What God is so near to this people as this God is?" because he'd freed them from slavery and brought them through the wilderness and given them the Promised Land and then, the Law of God. "What nation is like this nation that has a Law like this?" So, God's Law was to exhibit the ethical, the righteousness of God as Israel lived it out. And so, to be a light on a hill, to be the City of God, to exhibit God's glory would mean to live together in community in a way that showed the difference within God's people in contrast to the way the nations lived. And so, while we can think individually about being salt of the earth and light of the world — and certainly that's appropriate — we have to think first of all, or principally, in a communal way or in a societal way. How do we live together as the new society? Because the Sermon on the Mount is about ethical behaviors, how we're to live together. And it's not just an individualistic thing — as someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer has reminded us — but rather, as we live together we exhibit what this city is supposed to look like when God rules and reigns in righteousness. There's mercy, there's justice, there's generosity, there's loving-kindness toward one another because Christ is our king.

**Question 8:**

**How do Christians approve of the differences between cultures today but still maintain faith in the absolute authority of Scripture?**

Evangelical Christians wholeheartedly believe in the absolute authority of Scripture as God's Word. At the same time, it's clear that God has allowed a diversity of

**human cultures to flourish on earth. But it's not always easy to know how to accept cultural diversity while also acknowledging biblical authority. So, how do Christians approve of the differences between cultures today but still maintain faith in the absolute authority of Scripture?**

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

The Bible was communicated within different cultures, and it's intended to communicate into every culture. And so God creates culture, and every culture has truth in it and has error in it. And so, our job is to take the Scriptures and interpret the Scriptures in light of our cultural influences, weeding out those influences that are counter-biblical and celebrating the ones that do align with Scripture. And so, culture can be celebrated and appreciated, but it can't be the determinative, interpretative rule that we go by. Culture needs to be critiqued by Scripture.

**Dr. Daniel L. Kim**

Missionaries oftentimes go overseas and immediately get confronted with a culture in which they do things differently than themselves. And sometimes it's very tempting for the missionary to conclude that that culture is being sinful by doing things a certain way ... Is it truly being sinful? Or are they simply representing it in a different way that is perhaps equally right before the eyes of God? And so, of course, there are sinful things that are going on in all cultures, including our own. So, we have to first acknowledge that. Not every culture is going to be faithful in every aspect of how we do things. But for the most part, I would say that just because a culture does things differently than ours, it does not necessarily mean that they are being unfaithful to God and to his laws. So, perhaps, I would encourage us to ask ourselves this question: Why are they doing that? What does it represent in their culture to do it that way? And if the question comes back to a biblical principle that they are in some way violating, then yes, it might be more accurate to say that they are being sinful and that that's a practice in that culture that should not be continued. I'm thinking of some of the witchcraft that goes on in the African culture. It is no different than the witchcraft that we see in the ancient Near East. And that is clearly a violation of God's word because they're not being faithful and honoring God and keeping him as their most important and kingly person that he is. But I want to not necessarily encourage people to go look with a vigilante attitude saying, "That's bad in this culture; that's sinful, and that's sinful," simply because they do things differently. And so, I want to just encourage people not to jump to conclusions but first get to know that culture. Get to know why they do things that way. One of the most often-experienced actions here in America from international students is that they say that the view of time is so different here. People call before they tell people... Let's say there's a meeting going on and they're late. They'll call and say, "I'm sorry I'm running late;" whereas, in most other cultures, that's not even an issue. Being late to something is accepted. It's an accepted part of life, and time is treated differently. And so, I want to just encourage us, don't think that some... just because they do things differently that it is in some way a violation. But it requires us just to get to know the culture, get to know how they do things.

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

Well, it's important for us to recognize, as a culture, cultures differ and that people come to the Bible with different expectations and habits while yet saying the Bible has authority over all those. There are a couple ways to do that. One is simply to acknowledge that each culture is different from that of the Bible. So, for example, there are many ways in which cultures diverge from biblical sexual ethics. Some cultures practice polygamy. And if you want to address biblical ethics, you have to simply acknowledge that there are polygamist cultures and try to understand how it works, how it functions, before you simply try to address it, eradicate it, change it. Other cultures, maybe, are tolerant of homosexuality. The Bible certainly does not seem to approve of homosexual behavior in any way. But you're not going to make any progress if you deny that your culture is tolerant of something. You have to have a dialog with people in order to proceed. So, in that sense, you have to accept cultural differences. There's another sense, and that is that there are different ways of getting things done so that, let's suppose we're reading Ephesians 5 and it says, "the husband is the head of the wife." That's a command, but each culture may have its own ways of expressing that ... In some cultures a wife shows that she submits to her husband by walking a couple of paces behind. That would make no sense whatsoever in other cultures. In other cultures, maybe she would hold his arm, and that would be a sign. In other cultures, it's more subtle. So, for example, a husband could lead his wife financially, in the West by saying, "This is the amount of money we have; use it wisely," and then they talk it over, but there aren't really commands given. The way in which a husband leads is, in this case, subtle and quite different from another culture. Nonetheless, the principle would hold. And we should find ways to express the leadership of the home by a husband in a way that's culturally sensitive and genuine.

**The Bible is a book that spoke to biblical cultures thousands of years ago. And it continues to speak to us today. Its message is both timeless and timely. Rather than being an outdated historical book, the Bible is the authoritative Word of God that remains relevant for all cultures in all ages. So, as we seek to understand the Bible's message for particular cultures throughout history, we'll grow to understand how Scripture resonates in our own culture as well.**

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
ELEVEN

MODERN APPLICATION  
FOR INDIVIDUALS



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# Contents

<b>I. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Variety.....</b>	<b>2</b>
A. Biblical Instructions	2
1. Old Testament	3
2. New Testament	5
B. People and Circumstances	8
1. Higher Instructions	8
2. Lower Instructions	9
<b>III. Wisdom.....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. Leaders	12
1. Old Testament	12
2. New Testament	13
B. Community	15
1. Old Testament	15
2. New Testament	16
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>19</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Eleven

### Modern Application for Individuals

#### INTRODUCTION

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The story is told about a young pastor who stood in the doorway of his church and greeted everyone as they left. Now, most of his congregants smiled politely and went on their way. But the last one in line was an older man who always said what was on his mind.

“Young man,” he complained. “I have a serious problem with your sermon.”

“What’s that?” the pastor asked.

“I need to know what God’s Word says about my life, but you never said anything that applied to me.”

Well, at one time or another, most of us have heard sermons that fail to address the personal needs we face. And we all need the encouragement, the practical guidance and the correction that the Bible has to offer us. So, as much as we may like to stick with generalities or theoretical matters, we simply must learn how to apply the Scriptures in practical ways to our own lives and to the lives of others.

This is the eleventh lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we’ve entitled it “Modern Application for Individuals.” In this lesson, we’ll see how we should apply Scripture to others and to ourselves as individual people.

As we’ve seen in other lessons, anytime we apply the Bible to our day we must take into account three types of distance that exist between the original audiences of Scripture and modern audiences: epochal, cultural, and personal distances.

On a large scale, we must explore theological developments that took place as biblical history moved from one great epoch to another. On a slightly smaller scale, we need to account for the similarities and differences between God’s design for cultures in biblical times and his design for modern cultures. And within these frameworks, we must also consider the personal similarities and differences between Scripture’s original audiences and modern audiences. In this lesson, we’ll look primarily at this last dimension of modern application as we consider how the Scriptures should impact the concepts, behaviors and emotions of individuals today.

**God intends for his Word to influence everything in our lives, from the way we view films and listen to songs, and the dates we go on. The way we view sunsets and sin are all intended to be influenced by the way God has revealed himself to us. And that needs to have an effect on our minds, our hearts, our actions. The Bible is supposed to saturate our lives and give us the kind of biblical discernment where we think God’s thoughts after him every minute of every day. That**

**eventually needs to become intuitive and instinctive, but the Bible is intended to have an impact in our lives in a very holistic way.**

**— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

There are many ways to approach modern application for individuals, but in this lesson, we'll deal with two main issues. First, we'll see that God has ordained variety in our individual application of the Scriptures. And second, we'll explore how God has provided ways for us to gain wisdom in our application of the Bible, for ourselves and others. Let's look at each of these topics, beginning with the variety in individual application.

## VARIETY

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At one time or another, most of us have read an instruction manual for operating some kind of machine or electronic equipment. Now, operating manuals usually describe every detail of simple processes so that every person will do exactly the same thing: "Do this. Do this. Do this," and everything will work like it's supposed to. But can you imagine someone writing a detailed operating manual on topics like farming, raising a family or running a business? Of course not. These tasks are too complex to be described step-by-step. And different people must do them in different ways as they face various circumstances.

At times we may wish that the Bible was like an operating manual that spells out specific steps for every person to follow. It certainly would make individual application of God's Word much easier. But everyone familiar with the Bible knows that it doesn't do this. Instead, the Bible deals with some of the most complex issues imaginable — far too complex for step-by-step directions. And more than this, the Bible was designed to be used by many different people in many different circumstances. For these reasons, the Scriptures were written to be applied to individual people in a variety of ways. To understand the variety in individual application, we'll note first the variety within biblical instructions themselves. And second, we'll see why these different instructions must be applied in various ways to different people and circumstances. Consider first the variety of biblical instructions.

## BIBLICAL INSTRUCTIONS

As we suggested a moment ago, unlike step-by-step manuals, books on farming, family, business, and the like usually offer their readers multiple instructions ranging from the broad to the specific. Typically, these kinds of books identify a few universal principles that everyone should observe under all circumstances. They also offer some general guidelines that apply to most circumstances. Beyond this, they frequently provide an assortment of instructions for dealing with rather specific situations that may arise

from time to time. Lastly, these kinds of books often include case studies that illustrate examples of success and failure.

In many ways, the Scriptures reflect the same range of instructional variety. They provide some universal principles for everyone to follow at all times, general guidelines for many people in many circumstances, specific instructions for particular people and situations, and examples of people who succeeded or failed in observing the instructions of Scripture.

It will help to look at this range of biblical instructions in two ways. First, we'll see how these types of instructions appear in the Old Testament, and then we'll consider how this range of instructions also appears in the New Testament. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

## Old Testament

As unrealistic as it is, modern readers often have the impression that God expected every Israelite to memorize all the laws and teachings of the Bible from Genesis to Malachi and then to be ready to put these instructions into effect in a moment's notice. But the list of regulations in the Old Testament was far too long for anyone to remember them all, much less obey them all. And to deal with this challenge, Rabbis in Israel tried to discern the priorities of Old Testament instructions. Which commands did everyone need to keep in mind in every situation? Which instructions needed to be implemented in many but not all areas of life? Which commands were so specific that they only had to be recalled occasionally? Some Rabbis argued this way and others that way. But they all knew that it was necessary to establish priorities. In Matthew 22:36, attempts to prioritize Old Testament teachings led an expert in the Law to ask Jesus this question:

**Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? (Matthew 22:36).**

Jesus replied in verses 37-40:

**“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).**

In this well-known scene, Jesus gave his followers his authoritative outlook on all the commandments of the Bible. He identified the command to “Love the Lord your God” from Deuteronomy 6:5 as the law of the highest order. And without being asked, he immediately added the second greatest commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself” from Leviticus 19:18. From his point of view, these two commandments had priority over every other biblical instruction.

Of course, God himself and humanity as the image of God are very important in the Bible. But it helps to remember that Jesus put these two commandments together because they share a common focus. They both speak of love. Above all, we are to love God and love our neighbor. So, it's no wonder that Jesus gave these commandments priority over all others. They deal with the deepest issues of the heart — the attitudes, commitments, motivations and goals that God expects of his people. In effect, from Jesus' point of view, love for God and love for neighbor are universal principles in the Old Testament, commandments that every person is to observe no matter what happens.

**Jesus was asked by a lawyer, “Which is the greatest commandment in the Bible?” and he answered — and it’s a very important answer — “The first and greatest commandment is this: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” And then he said, “And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” So, clearly these are two vital commands. He didn’t make them equal. First and foremost, we must love God. Our first loyalty goes to God. He is our Creator, our Redeemer. He is our shield and our very great reward. Everything focuses on God. And so, we must love God with all of our heart, and that’s the top priority every day. But Jesus didn’t leave it there. He didn’t ask, “What are the top two commandments?” The lawyer asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” But Jesus definitely gave that second commandment, and that is to love your neighbor as yourself. And so the two are connected and related. We cannot love God without loving people who are created in the image of God, and especially those that have been redeemed, adopted into the family of God.**

**— Dr. Andrew Davis**

These two commandments were so important to Jesus that he added, “All the Law and the Prophets” — a way of referring to the entire Old Testament — “hang on these two commandments.” Now, we have to be careful here because many interpreters have taken this to mean that Jesus' followers should discount or disregard all instructions of the Old Testament except love for God and neighbor. But just the opposite is true.

Not only did Jesus identify the two greatest commandments in Matthew 22, but in Matthew 5:19, he also taught his followers to observe what he called the “least” of the commands. Listen to what he said there:

**Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19).**

This verse and other passages make it clear that Jesus' followers were to observe all of the commandments, from the least to the greatest.

In addition to this, in Matthew 23:23 Jesus also acknowledged a range of instructions between the greatest and the least when he rebuked the Pharisees:

**You hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices ... But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former (Matthew 23:23).**

Notice that Jesus referred to “justice, mercy and faithfulness” as “the more important matters of the law,” and he contrasted them with the lesser issues of giving “a tenth of your spices.” Once again, he indicated that his followers were to observe all Old Testament commands, but that they had to keep the right priorities in mind.

It helps to visualize Jesus’ outlook on God’s instructions in the Old Testament in the form of a mobile. At the top of the mobile you would have the universal principles, the two greatest commandments: “Love the Lord your God” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We’re told that “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two.”

Beneath these hang additional principles that indicate how the greatest commandments are to be observed. These include the many general guidelines found in the Old Testament like the Ten Commandments and principles like justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Beneath these broad principles hang the “least of these commandments.” These are the relatively specific instructions in the Old Testament that indicate how different people in certain circumstances are to observe the higher commands. For instance, the instructions for worship in Leviticus, the directives of the Psalms, and many instructions found in wisdom books such as Job and Proverbs and prophetic books like Isaiah and Ezekiel.

At the bottom of the mobile, are numerous historical examples that appear most often in Old Testament narratives and in the Psalms and wisdom books as well. These passages focus on the ways particular men and women either obeyed or disobeyed the commands of God in their specific circumstances.

This hierarchical arrangement helps us understand many facets of how Jesus wanted his disciples to deal with the full range of instructions that appear in the Old Testament.

With this Old Testament background in mind, let’s consider the variety of biblical instructions in the New Testament.

## **New Testament**

It’s easy for everyone to see that the New Testament is much shorter than the Old Testament, but this doesn’t mean that New Testament authors reduced the number of instructions for God’s people. In fact, the list of teachings for the early church was actually longer than the list for ancient Israel. New Testament writers didn’t replace the Old Testament. Rather, they added to the Old Testament. Now, the addition of more

instructions in the New Testament raises an important question. Why did New Testament authors add their own instructions to the teachings of the Old Testament?

As we saw in an earlier lesson, New Testament authors didn't want Christ's followers to forget any Old Testament instructions, but they also didn't want them to live as if they were in Old Testament times. So, to keep their audiences from slipping into the ways of the past, they taught the early church how to apply the Old Testament instructions in the new covenant age.

New Testament authors acknowledged Old Testament instructions, but with the understanding that when Jesus first came, he brought the inauguration of God's messianic kingdom. They also realized that Old Testament instructions should be seen through the Holy Spirit's work as he spread God's kingdom in the continuation of the new covenant age. And they viewed the Old Testament in terms of what Christ would do when he returned in glory at the final consummation of the messianic kingdom.

Throughout it all, New Testament authors emphasized that followers of Christ must maintain the priorities that Jesus established.

In the first place, the universal principles of love for God and love for neighbor continued to be the greatest commandments, as we see in passages like Luke 10:27, 1 Corinthians 13:13 and 1 John 4:21. No matter what happens, New Testament believers are to give their hearts to loving God and loving their neighbors.

In the second place, New Testament authors also called attention to the Ten Commandments and other general guidelines in the Old Testament in passages like Matthew 19:18 and Romans 13:8-10.

In the third place, New Testament authors gave specific instructions for specific people and situations as we read in 1 Corinthians 14 and 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

And in the fourth place, we see numerous concrete historical examples of people who obeyed and disobeyed the commands of God in the Gospels and the book of Acts and in a variety of other passages.

As we've seen, the subject matter of Scripture is so complex, and there are so many different instructions for God's people in the Bible, that we can't possibly keep every instruction in the forefront of our minds. But the New Testament helps us see how we should manage these various commands.

On the one hand, we need to maintain the priorities that Jesus taught his disciples to observe. If we don't, we can become lost in the details of Scripture, much like the Pharisees did in Jesus' day. Specific instructions are important as we deal with certain issues, but much more of our attention should be given to weightier matters — above all to loving God and neighbor. Every moment of every day we must be motivated and directed by these two greatest commandments.

Second, despite these priorities, we need to remember that, in one way or another, every biblical instruction is relevant for every follower of Christ. As we encounter different kinds of choices, we should draw not only from Scripture's universal principles, but also from the many general guidelines, specific detailed instructions and concrete examples we find in the Bible as we seek to serve God faithfully.

**In the covenant, when God is teaching his people his nature and character, he gives three kinds of laws. There are moral laws, which are simply stated as absolutes, and they are for all time. There are**

civil laws in which eternal principles are put into time-conditioned settings. I always like to use the law of the goring ox precisely because I don't have any oxen. I like laws that don't apply to me. The principle there is, if you know the ox is mean and don't pen him up, and he kills your neighbor, you're a murder. On the other hand, if you've never had any cause to question that ox's docile temperament, and you don't pen him up, and one day he goes berserk and kills your neighbor, you're not responsible. I don't have oxen; I do have a car. If I know the brakes are bad and don't do something about it, and I kill you, I'm a murderer as far as the Bible is concerned. So what's the principle? The principle is knowledge is responsibility. So, in the civil laws, I have to extract the principle and apply it to my own life. The third kind of law is ceremonial, and basically this applies to forms of worship, and God is using these as object lessons to teach eternal truth. So, for instance, he says, don't eat pig because it will make you unclean. Well, pig doesn't make us unclean. Jesus makes that very clear. It's not what goes into your mouth that makes you unclean. It's what comes out of your unclean heart. So, the question is not, "Do you eat pig meat or not?" The question is, have you allowed Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to work on your unclean heart? So, no, I do not obey the ceremonial laws. They are object lessons. Once you learn the lesson, you don't need the objects anymore.

— Dr. John Oswalt

When you look at the commandments that are found in Scripture, you begin to realize that there is a multitude of commands that are given for various reasons... If you take the Jerusalem Council found in Acts 15, when the question came up, "What should the Gentiles do in relationship to the commandments of the Mosaic covenant?" the leaders of the church of Israel were quite clear. They said, "We will not lay this burden on them that we ourselves have not even kept, but we do say this, stay away..." and then they give a list of things — worship of idols, sexual immorality, or eating meat that's been sacrificed to idols, or drinking blood. All of those have to do with some kind of core conviction that goes to the very heart of what God requires of us morally. So, even in Scripture we see a way of treating the commandments of God differently because in Israel's covenant you have one kind of command, but all of those commandments of the covenant do not go to the central moral concern about our lives that God really wants to have. And finally, Jesus himself when approached with the question, what are the two greatest commandments, even Jesus says, if you want to sum up everything, it comes down to this, "love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, mind and strength,



**and the second is like unto it, love your neighbor as you love yourself.”**

**— Dr. Steve Blakemore**

Having seen how variety in individual application of Scripture is related to the diversity of biblical instructions, let's turn to a second factor that leads to variety in application: the different people and circumstances involved. We'll begin by reviewing something we saw in a preceding lesson.

## **PEOPLE AND CIRCUMSTANCES**

As you'll recall, God has always led his people toward cultural variety by revealing his will through Scripture and through general revelation — his disclosures of himself and his will in people and circumstances. In this way, God ordained some measure of cultural diversity for his people.

In many respects, the same kind of thing is true for our individual lives. God reveals his will through the many diverse instructions contained in Scripture, but to apply these instructions to others and ourselves, we must take into account God's general revelation in a variety of people and circumstances.

We can see how variations among people and circumstances affect individual application by returning to Jesus' hierarchy of instructions. For the sake of simplicity, we'll divide our four categories of instructions into “higher” or more general biblical instructions, and “lower” or more specific biblical instructions. Let's start with the higher biblical instructions.

### **Higher Instructions**

The Bible's higher instructions include both universal principles and general guidelines. As we've seen, these types of instructions have priority over others because they apply more broadly. But even so, they must still be applied in different ways in the light of God's general revelation.

On the one side, to apply the higher biblical principles, we must assess the characteristics of the person involved. We have to account for things like the individual's spiritual condition, social status, abilities, age and gender. Knowing these and other characteristics helps us discern how the higher principles of Scripture should impact the concepts, behaviors and emotions of the individual in view.

Imagine that I walk into a room and ask a group of friends a couple of questions. First, I ask, “Do you believe that all of us should do the right thing?” Well, naturally all of them will reply, “Of course.” But then I follow up with a second question, “Okay then, what are each of you going to do when you leave this room today?” Now, we wouldn't be surprised at all to find that each person was going to do the right thing, but in different ways. “I'm going home to take care of my children” one person might say. Or, “I'm

going to the store to buy some food.” In fact, we would be shocked if they all planned to do the right thing in precisely the same way. And it isn’t hard to understand why. General instructions like, “Do the right thing” have to be applied to different people and circumstances in a variety of ways.

We’ve already noted that the universal principle “Love your neighbor as yourself” in Leviticus 19:18 is an instruction that applies to every person in every circumstance. But we also know that God doesn’t expect all people to observe this command in exactly the same way. An adult may show love in one way, while a young child will show love in another way. A wealthy person and a poor person might demonstrate love for others in different ways as well. Each person’s abilities, weaknesses, experiences, spiritual condition and the like affect how the universal principle of love for neighbor should be applied.

On the other side, “Love your neighbor” also applies in a variety of ways to different circumstances. Even the very same person might love his or her neighbor in different ways at different times. Each person faces different obstacles, challenges and opportunities. And these circumstances require each of us to apply biblical principles in ways that may not be appropriate for people in other circumstances. For instance, love for neighbor is different in times of war and peace, in times of plenty and scarcity, in times of sickness and health. The higher principles of Scripture must be applied in various ways according to our circumstances.

Having seen how variety in people and circumstances requires us to apply the higher biblical instructions in different ways, let’s turn to the lower elements in Jesus’ hierarchy of instructions in Scripture.

## Lower Instructions

For our purposes, the “lower” instructions include the Bible’s specific, detailed instructions and the concrete historical examples that help us apply Scripture to ourselves and others. Just as with the higher instructions, the lower instructions are applied differently depending on the variety of people and circumstances involved.

For example, imagine a specific instruction like, “build a safe house for your family.” A person in a cold climate will build a house differently than a person in a warm climate. A home in an area subject to hurricanes will require different structural elements than a home in an area subject to earthquakes. The higher principle here is that a person must keep his or her family safe. The specific instruction is to build a house to fulfill this higher principle. And anyone building a house will benefit from examples of similar houses in similar circumstances. But no two people will act on the specific instruction in exactly the same way.

Something like this takes place every time we apply a relatively specific biblical teaching to our individual lives today. First, we take into account the higher instructions, as well as other closely related specific instructions that orient us toward the teaching in view. Second, we identify the people and circumstances originally impacted by the specific instruction. And third, we compare our own lives with the original audience of the specific teaching to discern how we should apply it to ourselves.

**One of the particular characteristics of the Bible is that it's written to specific people in specific places at specific times. This really is the only holy book that does this. The other holy books of the world tend to be just sort of prescriptions, statements about what people should or shouldn't do. But God in his goodness has given us context. He's given us a way of understanding how do these kinds of things work out in life. But that means that we've got to always be saying, "Now what's the principle that's being taught in this contextual situation? And how does that principle apply in my new contextual situation?"**

— Dr. John Oswalt

To illustrate what we have in mind, consider how we should apply Exodus 21:23-25 to individuals today. In these verses we read that judges in Israel were to render verdicts in this way:

**If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise (Exodus 21:23-25).**

But now listen to Matthew 5:38-39, where Jesus taught his followers to apply this law to their personal lives in his Sermon on the Mount.

**You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matthew 5:38-39).**

It's important to realize that Jesus didn't disagree with the Old Testament teaching for judges and legal systems. Like all of us, Jesus knew that love for God and neighbor in a court required just verdicts. The problem Jesus faced was that the Pharisees had taken this regulation for judges as justification for taking revenge in personal interactions. But when we compare this instruction with the higher principles in Scripture and with other "lower" instructions, we can understand what Jesus taught his disciples here. In effect, Jesus implicitly called on his followers to compare themselves with the original audience of Exodus 21. Every person should endorse justice and fairness for legal systems. And when we have roles that resemble those of a judge, we should apply Exodus 21 more like a judge in court. But we are never to act like judges in our personal relationships. Our ordinary, personal interactions are not to be governed by justice alone, but as much as possible by mercy and kindness.

As just one other example, in Matthew 19:21 Jesus gave this instruction to the rich young ruler:

**Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven (Matthew 19:21).**

The larger context of this verse makes it clear that Jesus gave this lower instruction because the rich young ruler loved his money so much that he had violated the higher principles of love for God and neighbor. And he'd made love for money his highest priority.

People sometimes wonder if this passage requires every rich person in the modern world to sell their possessions and give them to the poor. But we must take into account the higher principles of Scripture regarding personal property and wealth. We must also compare this lower, more specific teaching to other teachings that Jesus and New Testament writers gave regarding possessions. So, how do we decide what wealthy people should do with their money? The answer lies in comparing individuals and their circumstances today with the rich young ruler. The more we resemble him, the more our modern application should resemble what he was to do in his day.

So far in this lesson on modern application for individuals we've seen how, to one degree or another, modern individuals must apply the Scriptures in different ways because of the variety in individual application. This leads us to our second main topic: our need for wisdom in application.

## WISDOM

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In many parts of the world, Christians can pick up a Bible and read it just about any time they want. And as wonderful as this is, it's also led many of us to be highly selective in the ways that we apply the Scriptures to our personal lives. We affirm in theory that all Scripture is God-breathed. But rather than dealing with the Bible's manifold instructions for different people in various circumstances, we simply cull through the Scriptures privately and look for something that easily applies to our lives. This widespread practice is understandable because many times the Bible is very complicated. But in reality, the Bible was not written to be handled in this way. Rather, God ordained that the Scriptures should be read as his people interact with each other. With the help of others, we can gain the wisdom we need to apply even difficult portions of the Bible to our lives.

As we'll see, even though the Holy Spirit can give us extraordinary insights into the application of Scripture, God has clearly ordained that, in general, we're to gain wisdom in application by interacting with others.

Ancient Israelites and the early church had no printing presses, no publishing houses, no means for the mass distribution of Scripture like we have today. And even if the Scriptures had reached the hands of most people, they wouldn't have been able to read them. So, God expected individuals to learn how to apply the Scriptures by interacting with each other in community.

We'll explore two ways that wisdom in individual application develops through interactions with others. First, we'll look at the vital role of God's appointed leaders as the primary recipients of Scripture. Second, we'll explore the necessity of community in the dissemination, or spread, of Scripture among God's people. Let's look first at the crucial role of leaders in individual application.

## LEADERS

Although evangelicals generally think of the Bible as a book designed for individual believers, a number of indicators suggest that biblical authors wrote with a very different outlook. Instead of writing directly to all people in Israel and in the early church, Scripture's authors wrote first to the leaders of God's people who were ordained to explain and disseminate the teachings of Scripture.

We'll look first at how the Bible primarily addressed leaders in the Old Testament and then also how this occurred in the New Testament. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

### Old Testament

In the Old Testament, normally only people like priests, Levites, prophets, sages, judges, kings, and other nobles could read and study the Scriptures firsthand. Because of this, Old Testament authors primarily addressed the leaders of Israel. We can see evidence of this in at least three ways.

In the first place, there are a number of explicit references to Israel's leaders as the primary recipients of Old Testament books.

To mention just a few examples, passages like Deuteronomy 31:9 and 2 Kings 22:8-10 indicate that the Law of Moses was kept under the care of Levitical priests. And many of the instructions in the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 21:1–23:9 were called “judgments” — *mishpatim* in Hebrew — because they were written as case laws for judges to apply in their courts. And in passages like Proverbs 1:1 and 25:1, superscriptions giving introductory information show us that the proverbs were collected by high-ranking wise men and royal figures for use in the royal court of Judah. These and many other references indicate that Old Testament books were written first with the leaders of Israel in mind.

In the second place, the contents of Old Testament books also show that they were written primarily for Israel's leaders.

Many Old Testament books spend a lot of time on subjects that had little direct relevance for the daily lives of most Israelites. For example, the lengthy instructions regarding the building of the temple in 1 Kings 6 pertained only indirectly to the life of an average shepherd, farmer or craftsman in Israel. In much the same way, the reflections in Ecclesiastes on the futility of pursuing riches, pleasure, fame and the like were far from the challenges facing the vast majority of Israelite men and women. Rather than giving instructions that spoke directly to the needs and challenges facing every individual in Israel, much of the content of Old Testament books was more directly pertinent to the needs and challenges facing Israel's leaders.

In the third place, the complexities of Old Testament books also reveal that they were primarily designed for leaders in Israel who were gifted, experienced and wise.

To be sure, many portions of the Old Testament were simple enough even for children to understand. But anyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that the complexities of many Old Testament books challenge even the most expert readers. As just one example, prophetic books like Isaiah and Jeremiah are so intricately constructed that an average Israelite would have found them bewildering. On the whole, it's apparent that Old Testament books were not written to instruct every individual in Israel directly, but primarily to instruct the leaders of the nation.

In many respects, just as the leaders of Israel were the first audience of Old Testament authors, writers of the New Testament also designed their books for leaders in the church, like apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, elders, deacons and other leading figures.

## New Testament

In the first place, some New Testament books make explicit references to leaders of churches as their primary recipients.

For instance, 1 and 2 Timothy were addressed to Timothy, Paul's "son in the faith." And the book of Titus was addressed to Paul's protégé, Titus. Both of these men became influential leaders in the early church.

**There are three of Paul's letters which are known as the Pastoral Epistles, because they were written to pastors in the first century, to Timothy and to Titus. So, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and then the book of Titus ... So, if Paul is away from Ephesus in particular, he's going to be very anxious about the person who's been left in charge of the church in Ephesus. Who's that? Young Timothy. So he writes 1 Timothy to encourage him, to give him strength for this vital task. And he also writes to Titus, who's his other "number two," if you like, and he's a more reliable character in some ways than Timothy, a bit stronger, but he still needs to be given encouragement for his task, and his task at that moment is to be sorting out some of the Christian believers and their problems on the island of Crete. Hence, the writing to Titus. So I see these two letters being written by Paul on his travels to his two key supporters, Timothy and Titus, as he's traveling down through Illyricum, and down into Greece.**

— Dr. Peter Walker

In the second place, the contents of New Testament books also point to church leaders as the first recipients.

When we consider New Testament books in their historical settings, it isn't difficult to see that they often concentrate on matters that were unfamiliar to most first century believers. As just one example, many New Testament books were written to largely Gentile congregations, to people who had little knowledge of the Old Testament.

Still, New Testament authors referred to Old Testament texts hundreds of times, and often with little explanation. It's highly likely that New Testament writers expected knowledgeable leaders to be able to understand these and other instructions that were unfamiliar to many early Christians.

In the third place, the complexities of New Testament instructions also indicate that their primary recipients were educated and wise leaders.

Although much of the New Testament could have been understood easily, many portions were very difficult for early Christians to grasp. Even the apostle Peter famously remarked in 2 Peter 3:16 that "[Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand." Time and again, New Testament authors wrote with such theological sophistication that their letters were simply beyond the reach of most ordinary believers. And for this reason, gifted leaders of the church were responsible for teaching and explaining the Scriptures to those who couldn't read and understand them for themselves.

Knowing that the leaders of God's people were the primary recipients of biblical books has many implications for modern Christians. Church history has demonstrated the abuses of Scripture that arise when individual believers are too dependent on their leaders. But we must also be careful not to go to the other extreme and assume that we don't need Christian leaders.

Much like God ordained leaders to deal with unfamiliar content and complexities of the Scriptures in biblical times, modern followers of Christ need experienced leaders, blessed by the Holy Spirit with knowledge and wisdom, for the same reasons.

In fact, even the Bibles in our hands — including the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts some of us read — come to us through leading scholars, expert leaders in fields like textual criticism, collating, editing and publishing of ancient texts. And more than this, the modern translations of Scripture that most Christians use today result from the work of leading experts in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and in the art of translation. Although private study of Scripture is valuable in many ways, there's no substitute for identifying trustworthy leaders and benefitting from the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given them as we seek to apply the Scriptures to our lives today.

**The leader must really set the example in all things: in love, in righteousness, in prayer, and of course in teaching and in doctrine. He must be an example in growth... For this reason, the apostle Paul focused on Timothy and advised him not to be intimidated in his life by anyone because he was young. Yet he told him to be an example to others. This is very important in the life of a leader.**

— Rev. Youssef Ourahmane, translation

We should all take to heart the exhortation in Hebrews 13:17:

**Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you (Hebrews 13:17).**



Having seen that developing wisdom in application includes interacting with God's ordained leaders, let's turn to our second issue: the necessity of community in the spread and application of biblical teaching.

## COMMUNITY

Ordinary individuals in Israel and the early church didn't have direct access to the Scriptures. So, how did they ever apply the Scriptures to their lives? In brief, biblical authors wrote with the expectation that leaders would disseminate, or spread, the Scriptures so that God's people would apply them together in community.

We'll see the importance of community in the personal application of Scripture by looking at how the Scriptures were shared by the community of God's people in the Old Testament. And then we'll explore how they were disseminated in the New Testament. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

### Old Testament

When it comes to the Old Testament, we know that many narratives, laws, proverbs, psalms, prophetic speeches and the like were spread orally before they were collected in biblical books. But in this lesson, we're more interested in how the written records of these teachings spread beyond the leaders who first read them.

There are many clues that help us grasp how the contents of Old Testament books were distributed within the larger community of Israel. For example, in Deuteronomy 31:9-29, Moses first gave God's Law to the Levitical priests. Moses then instructed the Levitical priests to read the Law during the Feast of Tabernacles so that men, women and children could hear and learn the Law. In addition, God also commanded Moses to put the blessings and curses of the Law into a song so that people could sing it as a constant witness of God's will for them.

Beyond this, passages like Deuteronomy 17:8-13 indicate that Levites and judges in Israel's courts applied the Law of God to the people and instructed the general population about the Law's implications. And 1 Kings 3:16-28 demonstrates a similar practice in the royal court. 2 Kings 23:1-3 indicates that in times of covenant renewal the king read Scripture aloud to the people and directed the implementation of the Law. Ezra 10:16 shows that tribal elders applied God's Word to the lives of those they served. Parents were commanded to teach their children the regulations of Passover in Exodus 12:27. In fact, Moses' instructions in Deuteronomy 6:6-9 show that the Law was to be taught to children at every opportunity.

And of course, as the instructions of Scripture reached the general population of Israel, the members of the community encouraged each other to follow what they knew about the teachings of Scripture.

The Old Testament also emphasizes that people were to put the Word of God in their hearts. For this reason, many portions of the Old Testament appear to be designed for memorization. Short narratives, the Ten Commandments, the Psalms and Proverbs, as



well as many prophetic speeches, songs and parables were memorized by the community of Israel. In this way, faithful individuals were able to put God's instructions in their hearts by meditating on and rejoicing in his Word. As just one example listen to the words of Psalm 119:11-16:

**I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, O Lord; teach me your decrees... I rejoice in following your statutes ... I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word (Psalm 119:11-16).**

In this passage, the psalmist explained what it meant to hide God's word in his heart. He "rejoice[d] in following [God's] statutes." He "meditate[d] on [God's] precepts" and "delight[ed] in [God's] decrees" as he sought to apply them to his personal life.

**The totality of the human person is affected by sin. And so that's why I think in Psalm 119, as we have a model for the way to approach Scripture, we have so many times over and over again, the psalmist prays, "Open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your word... Turn my heart away from worthless and vain things." The Scripture gives us a model for seeking God to turn our hearts and minds away from sinful things, aware that we can distort Scripture to make it, try to make it say what we want and to justify our behavior... So we see our sin affects our relationship with the Lord, and God calls us to forgive others, to treat others with the grace that he gives to us.**

**— Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

Now that we've considered how crucial the community of God's people was to spreading the Scriptures in the Old Testament, let's look at similar practices observed in the New Testament church.

## **New Testament**

To a large extent, the early church community patterned the way it received the Scriptures after the practices of first century synagogues. Church leaders were responsible to read and explain the Scriptures so that God's Word would spread throughout the community. We can see this pattern in the familiar story of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth in Luke 4:14-29. In these verses, Luke reported that Jesus attended a gathering at the synagogue. The leaders of the synagogue handed him a scroll, and Jesus dutifully stood and read from the portion of Isaiah that they had given him. Then, after handing the scroll back to the attendant, Jesus sat down and explained how the words he had read applied to the congregation.

A number of New Testament passages indicate that early Christian churches imitated this pattern of synagogue teaching. As just one example, listen to Paul's instructions in Colossians 4:16:

**After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).**

Here we see that Paul expected his letter to be read to the congregation at Colosse and “also read in the church — or congregation — of the Laodiceans.” As this passage shows, New Testament authors wrote with the expectation that church leaders would read and explain their books in the gatherings of the church.

Rather than passing Bibles out to every person and sending them home to study on their own, early Christians learned and applied Scripture primarily in community, through public readings and explanations of Scripture under the supervision of their leaders. And family members, friends and neighbors helped each other apply these teachings as they spread among God's people.

Much like in the Old Testament, this community interaction equipped believers in the early church for the practice of personal meditation. Early Christians memorized New Testament teachings and meditated on their significance for their personal lives. This is one reason why the New Testament contains Jesus' parables and other easily memorized teachings like the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 and the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6. It helps us understand why a number of passages appear to have been early Christian hymns like Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20. It also explains why Paul's words in 2 Timothy 2:11-13 seem to have been well known in the church.

In 2 Timothy 2:7, the apostle Paul referred directly to the practice of meditation and seeking scriptural insights from God. Listen to what he wrote there:

**Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this (2 Timothy 2:7).**

Paul called for Timothy to “reflect on” what he'd written. And Paul expected “the Lord [to] give [Timothy] insight into all this.” Through meditation, the Lord would teach Timothy the significance of Paul's inspired words so that Timothy could apply them to his personal life.

As we've seen, the ways that ancient Israelites and early Christians applied the Scriptures to their personal lives was very different from the common practices of our day. Leaders in Israel and the early church first received the Scriptures and then disseminated portions of them to the broader community of God's people. And in the context of interacting with others, individuals were to recite and to meditate on the Scriptures they knew with the expectation that God would lead them in the application to their personal lives. So, what implications do these practices have for us today? What do they say about the ways we should apply the Scriptures to our personal lives?

At least three implications come to mind for those who hope to gain the wisdom necessary for applying Scripture to their individual lives.

In the first place, modern followers of Christ need to learn how much we need leaders gifted by the Spirit to bring the teachings of Scripture to us. We saw that the Bible's original audiences needed their leaders to help them with unfamiliar and complex teachings. If this was true for people living in the days of the Bible, it certainly is true for us today. We may hold Bibles in our hands, but we still need wise and experienced leaders to help us as we try to apply the Scriptures to our lives.

In the second place, modern followers of Christ need to reaffirm the importance of interacting with the larger Christian community, the body of Christ, as we seek to apply the Scriptures. In this sense, the old adage holds true. "Two sets of eyes are better than one." In fact, three, four, five ... a thousand sets of eyes are better than one. The simple fact is this: At one time or another, every follower of Christ has thought a particular application was perfectly appropriate, only to discover through interactions with others that it was not. When we remember that the body of Christ is the temple of his Spirit, we realize that one of the wisest things modern Christians can do is interact with other faithful Christians as they apply the Scriptures to their personal lives.

In 2 Peter 3:16, the apostle Peter is talking about Paul's letters. He says about Paul:

**He writes the same way in all his letters speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16).**

**One of things I like about that verse is it reminds us that some things in the Scripture are hard to understand. Not that they're impossible to understand, but some are difficult, and that it is possible to distort the Scripture, to put your cast on it in such a way that you're not faithful to the inspired meaning. And that's a good reminder to us, isn't it, that we need the body of Christ, because throughout the New Testament, the both implicit and explicit expectations that we would gather together with other believers. Many passages speak of the different spiritual gifts that God gives to his body — in 1 Corinthians 12–14, Romans 14, Ephesians 4. One of the gifts that God gives to the body of Christ, according to Ephesians 4, are pastors and teachers. That's not to deny that all Christians have the Holy Spirit and are called to read and understand the Scriptures, but some people are specifically gifted in explaining the Scriptures and in helping us see what's there.**

**— Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

In the third place, modern followers of Christ also need to find wisdom in application by renewing the practice of individual, prayerful meditation on Scripture. Even though interacting with leaders and with the larger body of Christ is important,

every Christian will give an account for what he or she has done. So, in the end, individual application, as Paul put it to Timothy, must never be reduced to something we do apart from seeking for the Lord to “give [us] insight.” Through prayerful meditation, the Spirit of God will grant us insight and heartfelt conviction that we’re applying the Scriptures in ways that please him.

**Reading is the exposure to Scripture, and that’s the starting place; you have to do that. But meditation is the absorption of Scripture. And it’s the absorption of Scripture that leads to the transformation of life that we hope for from our daily time in the Word of God. And helps us to experience God. It’s through meditation that we taste and see that the Lord is good. Information on the page becomes experience devotionally at that moment with the Lord and brings about transformation of life. And my experience is most Christians, even the most devoted daily Bible readers, don’t meditate... Don’t just read the Bible; meditate on Scripture.**

— Dr. Donald S. Whitney

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on modern application for individuals we’ve looked at two facets of applying the Scriptures to ourselves and others as individuals. We noted that variety in personal application of Scripture must account for the variety of biblical instructions and the variety of the people and circumstances involved. And we also explored how wisdom in biblical application relies on interaction with God’s ordained leaders and with the community of God’s people to help us as we prayerfully meditate on Scripture in the presence of God.

The Bible is a wonderful gift from God, our only unquestionable rule of faith and life. No other standard is adequate to guide our individual concepts, behaviors and emotions in God’s service. The Scriptures are filled with the variety of instructions that we need as we deal with the varieties of life. And God has also provided us with the way of wisdom that we need to deal with this variety in Scripture by calling us to learn and to apply the Scriptures in community with each other. If we keep these perspectives in mind, we’ll be better equipped to apply the Scriptures to our individual service to God every day of our lives.

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# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON  
ELEVEN

Modern Application for  
Individuals  
Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1:</b>	Are the Bible's commands to love God and neighbor interconnected? .....	1
<b>Question 2:</b>	Are there some laws or commands in the Bible that we shouldn't obey? .....	3
<b>Question 3:</b>	Why do believers today primarily focus on Scripture's behavioral applications? .....	4
<b>Question 4:</b>	Are the corporate aspects of our Christian lives equally as important as the individual aspects? .....	5
<b>Question 5:</b>	How important is it for us to be "doers" of the word and not only "hearers"? .....	7
<b>Question 6:</b>	How does the Holy Spirit help us apply Scripture to our lives? .....	9
<b>Question 7:</b>	How can we avoid emotionalism when we emphasize the emotional aspects of Scripture? .....	10
<b>Question 8:</b>	How can we know when to follow the examples of individuals described in the Bible? .....	11
<b>Question 9:</b>	How can we develop the skills we need to interpret the Bible responsibly? .....	14
<b>Question 10:</b>	How can pastors apply the Scriptures to the variety of individuals in their churches? .....	15



# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Eleven: Modern Application for Individuals

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Jimmy Agan  
Dr. Bruce Baugus  
Dr. P. J. Buys  
Dr. Peter Chow  
Dr. Gary Cockerill  
Dr. Andrew Davis  
Dr. Dan Doriani

Dr. Craig S. Keener  
Dr. Ghassan Khalaf  
Dr. Michael J. Kruger  
Dr. John Oswalt  
Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington  
Dr. Greg Perry  
Dr. Robert L. Plummer

Dr. Philip Ryken  
Dr. Mark L. Strauss  
Dr. Miles Van Pelt  
Dr. Simon Vibert  
Dr. Brian J. Vickers

### Question 1:

#### **Are the Bible's commands to love God and neighbor interconnected?**

On several occasions, Jesus entertained questions regarding the greatest commandment in the Law. His response was simple. But instead of giving just one command, he gave two: love God and love your neighbor. So, why did he answer this way? Are the Bible's commands to love God and neighbor interconnected?

#### **Dr. John Oswalt**

When Jesus was asked to summarize the Old Testament Law, he said it is to love God — with your whole heart, mind, being — and your neighbor as yourself. When he said that, he is speaking of two sides of the coin of the Old Testament Law, which was in the context of a covenant. God was saying to his people, "I want you to be in this committed relationship with me, and you will demonstrate this relationship by your attitude toward me." When we think of the Ten Commandments, for instance, the first four commandments are related to God: You must not recognize any other gods. You must not make any images. You must not use the name of God in an empty way. You must dedicate one-seventh of your time to him. But then the other six are all in relationship to other people. This is a dramatic kind of statement. This is a commitment to God. Commitment to God has to do with religious stuff: prayers, offerings, that kind of thing. What does how I treat other people have to do with my relationship to God? It's because of who this God is. This God values people. This God values relationships. And that means that over and over again throughout the Old Testament, the prophets would say to the people, "You don't love God." And they would say, "Well, yes we do. We're doing all this religious stuff." They would say, "No, you don't, because you're treating other people as objects for your own strength, for your own position, for your own power. If you really loved God, you would show that by the way you treated other people, because that's how God is." And so, on the other hand, I can't say, "Well, I treat people really, really well, so obviously it doesn't

matter how I relate to God." Well, yes it does, because ultimately I may well be saying, "Well, I treat other people very, very well, so that means I'm good enough." And that can never be true. Ultimately, it is our relationship to God of faith, of trust, of belief, that makes a difference. But that has to be demonstrated in how I treat other people.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

In Luke 10 we see Jesus put together the two great commandments, to love God and to love neighbor. He says that the second one is *like* the first one. Some New Testament commentators think that's a real innovation, but actually, if we look back in Deuteronomy 10 and 11, we see that Moses had those things put together as well. And if we read the Prophets well, we can see that the prophets' critique of Israelite society also put those things together. But there's something about the character of who God is, in that, God is not partial. He does not show favoritism. And because God doesn't show favoritism, we are to love the stranger. We are to love our neighbor in the same way that God loved Israel when they were strangers in Egypt. So, the law of God puts these commands together. And we see in the prophets' critique that the critique of idolatry — of worshiping other gods — and the critique of social injustice — in mistreating the workers and mistreating the poor — were actually interconnected in the prophet's mind, part of the same fabric of who God is and what it means to be created in God's image, and how you're to treat image bearers. And so, Jesus, like the prophets and like Moses, keeps these things closely tied together when he tells us the story of the Good Samaritan. It's because of who God is that we are to love our neighbors.

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

The Bible's commands to love God and neighbor are closely intertwined. And, in fact, Jesus brings this out in Matthew 22 and Mark 12. It was a common technique among ancient Jewish interpreters where they would connect texts that had a common key word or a common key phrase. And you have this in the very key command, "You shall love the Lord your God." It comes right after what Jewish people consider the cornerstone of their faith, the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and might." In Hebrew, *we-'a-hav-ta*, "you shall love." And then you have this command in Leviticus 19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And they both begin with *we-'a-hav-ta*, so Jesus naturally puts them together in a way that is his hearers couldn't object to. And actually, in the context, we can see that even further in Leviticus 19 where, "Love your neighbor as yourself," it also talks in the context about love the stranger, the alien who is in the land, which I think Jesus implicitly appeals to when he tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and somebody says, "Well, who's my neighbor? Whom do I have to love?" And he shows that that includes the Samaritan. Well, the very context in Leviticus 19 would have shown the same thing.

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

We know that when Jesus was asked a very important question, "What is the greatest commandment?" that he gave a very important answer. And his answer wasn't

unique. In fact, it was entirely orthodox, and it was the right answer. He said that one must love God with one's heart, soul, mind and strength — in other words, one's whole person. It's not enough to love God only with intellectually or only by doing good things without actually caring, for example — all the ways that we could break up that unity of person. We need to be whole people and loving God wholly, even though we do it imperfectly, certainly. But Jesus didn't stop there. He said that, without being asked, that the second greatest commandment is like it. It's related to it. It's organically connected, and that is to love one's neighbor, love other people even as you naturally love and care for yourself. And so, I want to suggest that... there's not only a hierarchical relationship. It's not that you have one and you have then the other, loving God and loving others. That, in fact, there is an organic relationship between them because they both involve the whole person. They both involve a way of being in the world, or what we might say in ancient language terms, a "virtue"... a character habit of other-centeredness from a place of health and belief and trust in God. So, we love God and we love others because we are, by the grace of God and by his work of the Spirit, being transformed into a different kind of person. In fact, one of the things the Bible makes really clear is that, not only is there a hierarchical relationship, but there is this organic relationship, because the way that we really know that we love God is by how we treat other people. That's the pretty shocking message of the epistle we call 1 John, is that, at many points in that letter, he makes it very clear that if one says they love God but don't love others, that shows that they are deceived or deceiving others, because the main manifestation of loving God is not doing a bunch of pious things. The main manifestation of loving God is actually loving others. And if you go back to Jesus, you'll see he teaches just the same thing both in his teaching and ultimately in his own example.

### **Question 2:**

**Are there some laws or commands in the Bible that we shouldn't obey?**

**We know that both the Old and New Testaments are part of the same overarching story of redemption in Christ. But sometimes, even devoted Christians debate the relevance of the Old Testament for the current age. This is particularly the case when it comes to the Old Testament laws and commands. Are there some laws or commands in the Bible that we shouldn't obey?**

#### **Dr. Mark L. Strauss**

The question of whether the New Testament is obligated to keep the Old Testament law is heavily debated in the evangelical world, in the conservative Christian church today. Some would argue that we keep facets of the Old Testament law, such as the moral laws, but we don't keep the ceremonial laws or the social laws, the civil laws related to Israel's history. Others say, and I think I would agree with this, is, the whole Old Testament law is fulfilled in Christ. He accomplished its purpose. He fulfilled it, if you will. But we are still obligated to keep God's ultimate law. In other words, God's nature, God's character is reflected in the New Testament law. And so, the New

Testament repeats many of the Old Testament commandments. Why? Because those commandments are reflections of God's nature, of God's character. But now, the law that is God's ultimate law is written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit, rather than on tablets of stone as in the old covenant. So, the law is fulfilled in Christ. The Old Testament law, the law given to Israel, is fulfilled in Christ, yet we obey and follow the law of Christ which reflects God's absolute and perfect character, which of course is unchanging.

**Dr. John Oswalt**

One of the questions that people often ask is whether the New Testament church is required to keep the Old Testament law. And the answer is an unequivocal, yes, and, no. No, in the sense that those specific prescriptions that are found in the Old Testament Torah are, in fact, removed for us. We are not required to circumcise our boys. We are not required to go to the temple three times a year. We are not required... And you can go down the list. In fact, this was the discussion of the council in Jerusalem that's recorded in Acts 15. However, what is the intent of the Old Testament Torah? And I like to use the Hebrew word "Torah" instead of "law" because of what has happened to the word "law" in English. In English, "law" has come to be a negative term. It limits us. It shuts us in. It blocks our freedom. But Torah means "instructions" — the "instruction manual." Yes, it limits your freedom but it also enables you to use this machine as it was designed. In the sense that the Torah reveals to us the character and nature of God and the character and nature which we are expected to share. In that sense, yes, the Torah still applies. And I think you see this in Paul's letters. Paul can say to his readers, "No, you are free. You do not have to do all those things. And since you're free, of course, you're not going to steal, you're not going to lie, you're not going to covet, you're not going to commit adultery." So that, is it necessary for Christians to keep the Torah for our salvation? Absolutely not. But as those who have been freely saved, are we expected to share and exhibit the life of God? Yes. And to the degree the Torah reveals the life of God to us, yes, in that sense it is still incumbent on the New Testament church.

**Question 3:**

**Why do believers today primarily focus on Scripture's behavioral applications?**

**When we interpret a biblical text and begin to apply it to our lives, we should always consider the ways the text will influence our concepts, behaviors and emotions. But often, we put the most attention on our behaviors. Why do believers today primarily focus on Scripture's behavioral applications?**

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

Christian teachers and leaders so often focus on behavior instead of looking at the factors behind behavior that can allow the behavior to occur in the first place. I suppose we focus on behavioral matters because we feel like we're being practical

and concrete. But of course, the question is, what enables you to do what the teacher says? For example, we know the Bible says we should store up treasures in heaven. Of course, if we don't believe there's a God, or our faith is so weak as to be irrelevant, we're not going to do that. And so, you have to ask, "Do you believe in God enough? Do you believe that there is a heaven? Do you believe it's worth storing up treasures with God instead of seeking them right here, right now for yourself?" So, capacity of belief precedes the ability to obey. It would be almost like looking at somebody with many commands. You tell them to do the right thing. "You need to respect your leaders." Well, as someone once said to me, "The problem is, I *don't* respect my leaders. How can I respect leaders I don't respect?" Well, the problem is, there is something wrong in your heart. It's almost like telling somebody who is drowning — you're looking at them from a giant boat in the sea and they're drowning; you see they're drowning — and you say, "Hey Buddy, what you need to do down there is swim. If you swim you won't drown." Well, yes. But the problem is he can't swim. A good Christian teacher must address what the Bible calls the heart or the mind, which is the capacity, and drives the capacity, to obey. Otherwise, obedience is impossible ... So a pastor has to always begin, a leader always has to always begin by addressing the heart. Do you want to obey? Do you want to follow God? If there's no desire, you can give all the good concrete advice that you want. It won't lead to anything.

#### **Question 4:**

**Are the corporate aspects of our Christian lives equally as important as the individual aspects?**

**In both the Old and New Testaments, there are times when the Scriptures emphasize individual faith, and other times when the focus is on the community of believers. Some Christians today place a higher priority on the personal aspects of Scripture. But, are they right? Or, are the corporate aspects of our Christian lives equally as important as the individual aspects?**

#### **Dr. Philip Ryken**

Part of the beauty of the biblical teaching about the Christian life is that there is an equally strong emphasis on our personal response to the gospel and on our corporate response to the gospel. So I certainly, as an individual follower of Christ, need to obey the commands that God has for me and believe the promises that God has given me. But so much of the Bible is written, not in the singular, but in the plural. I think even of the Lord's Prayer. That's not a personal prayer. It's a corporate prayer for the whole community of God's people to share in together. And so, many of the commands and promises in the New Testament that are based in the gospel are given to the whole church. And so, I think it's important as we're reading the Bible, as we're trying to live out biblical principles, and also as we're teaching the Bible to others, to keep in mind both the personal response and the community response that the Bible holds in equal balance.

**Dr. P. J. Buys**

One of the main themes of the whole Bible to explain our relationship to God is the theme of the covenant. But the covenant is, on the one hand, a collective relationship ... God started it with Abraham and his children and the coming generations. It's not just something individual. In the same time, there is the element of individual commitment. I would say, if you look at the old concept of the covenant through the whole Bible, you will see four aspects to it. First of all, it is a legal relationship. Secondly, it is a collective relationship between God and his people, also called his family. And then thirdly, it is a personal relationship. All the promises of the covenant will only become yours when you come to the point of real personal commitment. But the moment you commit yourself personally to the Lord, you also commit yourself to his people. And you also realize that the promise is now for me and my family and my children and even the next generations — wonderful promises in that. And then fourthly, it has got a missional goal that many people do not often see. So, I think people go astray in many directions. Sometimes they don't see the communal aspect of the covenant, and then they are not serious about the church, and they are not serious about fellowship and relationships, and then they actually violate the covenant. On the other hand, sometimes people are so committed with the communal aspect that people never come to a real personal commitment. There are dangers on both sides.

**Dr. Bruce Baugus**

One of the great challenges I think that we face, especially perhaps in the West — although it's been exported to the rest of the world — is the extreme, almost, individualism that has entered into Western culture. That has permeated and affected the church. And we see this in evangelicalism as sort of a cultural phenomenon. And one of the evidences of this is the devaluation of the visible church and the ordinary means of grace that God has appointed for the church to benefit from and to use. You know, even in biblical interpretation... the Scriptures were given to the church, and the interpretation and reading of Scripture is to be a churchly task. And the sacraments were given to the church, and we exist together in a family in the church. And it's the church. To the church belongs the mission of God and so on. And when we see the effects of Western individualism on evangelicalism, what we see is a loss of appreciation for the church, and the visible church in particular, I mean. And with that, we see a kind of disintegration, almost, of the churchly aspect of the mission and the purpose of God in the world. And we are suffering the consequences of that to this day.

**Dr. Andrews Davis**

It's very important for us to see the balance in the Bible between the individual aspect of our walk with the Christ and the corporate or community aspect of our being a member of the body of Christ. Each one of us will stand alone and give an account of him or herself to God and we'll be alone in that account. No one can help us at that point. We will face Christ and tell him everything we did in the body, whether good or bad. And that's very individualistic. Each of us must enter through the narrow gate ourselves. We must be born again. We can't come in on the coattails of a godly father

or mother or friend. Each of us individually must repent and believe. And we all have to have our individual walks with Christ. We have our own good works to do, which God prepares in advance for us to walk in, and those are individualized by our spiritual gifts and by our providential circumstances. Those are things that are individual to each person. And no one can do our good works for us but ourselves. And we have to have our own walk with Christ, our own daily quiet times. We have to feed on Christ ourselves. We can't feed on someone else's faith. We have to have our own faith. That's the individual side. But the corporate side is very pronounced as well. We're members of the body of Christ. We are a part of a family of God. When we sin, others suffer. When we do well, use our spiritual gifts, others are blessed. And so, it's very important for us to see us in the corporate setting. And I think it's possible for some aspects of Christ's church around the world to focus too much on the individual side and forget how much of a family we are and how much we are to strive toward that unity in Christ that will be perfect in heaven. Actually, in John 17 he prays that we may be one so that the watching world can know that the Lord, that God, sent him. And so, I think it's important for us to keep a good balance between individualism, which is important, and that corporate life, which is also vital, important.

### **Question 5:**

**How important is it for us to be "doers" of the word and not only "hearers"?**

**On a number of occasions, biblical authors reminded their readers of the importance of applying Scripture. One of the more popular passages comes in the first chapter of James when James says that believers should, "not merely listen to the word," but "Do what it says." How important is it for us to be "doers" of the word and not only "hearers"?**

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

According to the Scriptures, if we claim to know someone, know God, know something about his Word, but we don't act upon it, then... we don't really *know* it. Our knowledge is belied by our practice. We think James 2 really speaks to this where there were people that James is writing to who apparently claimed to have genuine faith in God and know God and yet did not do what he commanded. And he said a faith like that is a demonic faith. The demons even know that there is one God, and they shudder at that. James says, "What good does that do?" Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, says we can have knowledge, we can have all of these things, but if we don't have love, if we don't have our faith practiced through loving our neighbor and through loving God, then we're just a gong or a clanging symbol. So, really, a faith without love is no faith at all. It's a false faith. True faith evidences itself through good deeds and through practices of love.

**Dr. Jimmy Agan**

It's absolutely essential when we interpret the Bible that we put what we learn into practice. In other words, interpretation and application go together. You haven't done the one well if you haven't done the other. There are two ways in which I think that's important. One is that we show that we haven't rightly understood Scripture if we aren't applying what it teaches us. A great text to show that is Luke 7 as Jesus tells a little parable to Simon the Pharisee. Simon understands the point of the story — "Which one would love the money-lender more? The one who's forgiven more or less?" Simon gets the right answer, "Oh, the person who was forgiven the greater debt." But what Simon doesn't do is apply that parable to his own life. He doesn't see that that should change the way he views God, God's forgiveness of his sin, his own sin, and the sin of this sinful woman who's entered his home. So, Simon is not rightly interpreting the parable because he's not rightly applying it. Another way that we see the relationship between interpretation and application is that applying the Bible can actually help us understand it better. A good illustration of that would be Philippians 4 as Paul talks about prayer, and he says that peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ from anxiety as we hand our concerns over to God in prayer. You really won't understand what Paul is talking about there unless you try it out. And when you do try it, you begin to understand, "Oh, that's what he meant. This is what he was saying." A similar thing may be with Psalm 23. Why is that psalm so comforting to people who are struggling with death or grieving someone who has passed away? Once you sense that in application, once you sense that comfort as you yourself are grieving, you read that psalm in a better light. So, we don't understand rightly if we don't apply, and sometimes applying can actually help us understand better as well.

**Dr. Ghassan Khalaf (translation)**

It's very important for us, if we know and study the Bible well, to apply what we study in our daily lives ... This is because Christ desires, through the Bible, to show his life, his virtues in us, and his love for people through our love for them. For this reason, as interpreters of God's Word, we're required to live it. This is also required from those who hear our interpretation — that is, the ordinary believers in the church. When they hear these facts, they should adopt and live them to illuminate the light of Christ. And this is what we need to do as interpreters of the Bible. There is a beautiful and common saying that says, our life is a "*version*" of the Word of God, and from time to time we must issue a revised version of it. For example, just as the Bible is revised from time to time, if we are to remain alive and understood by people, we must issue a revised version of our spiritual lives to keep ourselves holy, rise spiritually, and cleanse our lives from impurities. We always issue a revised version in order to remain in full purity, because, as Paul says, we are God's message, "known and read by everybody." So we have to have a practical application of God's Word in our lives and remain a light *to* the world, just as Jesus is the light *of* the world.



## Question 6:

### How does the Holy Spirit help us apply Scripture to our lives?

**Left to our own understanding and skill, we'll never be able to apply the Scriptures faithfully to our lives. But the Bible tells us we can depend on the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us. How does the Holy Spirit help us apply Scripture to our lives?**

#### **Dr. Michael J. Kruger**

One of the great gifts God has given the church is the Holy Spirit to work in our lives as we hear the Word of God. The Word of God's power isn't just in hearing sounds. The power of the Word of God is hearing its word in conjunction with the Spirit applying it to our lives. And this is what's beautiful about the Christian life, is the Holy Spirit is there to take God's word and press it into our lives in different ways. And that happens in a number of different fashions. One way that happens is by the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin. When we hear the Word preached or we hear the Word taught, what the Holy Spirit does is presses into our lives in the areas that we aren't obeying God in ... And so, what makes the Word of God powerful in that sense is the Holy Spirit applying it to our hearts. Another way this happens is the Holy Spirit can apply the Word in that it encourages us and reminds us of particular things throughout the day that would help us live faithfully to Christ. And so, if we have the Word in our minds, the Holy Spirit can take that Word and bring it up, recall it in our daily lives so that at the particular moments we need it, it's there ... Because it's attended by the Holy Spirit, it's living. And if it's living, it's always working in our lives to convict of sin, to encourage, to motivate us to live lives more faithful to God.

#### **Dr. Gary Cockerill**

It's very important when we're interpreting Scripture to remember that the Holy Spirit is the inspirer of Scripture. Now, that doesn't mean we don't study it, study the language and the literary form and all that; we certainly do. God has incarnated himself in human life. The Holy Spirit inspired the Word of God in human language, in human literary form. So, it's very important for us to study it like we would study other books in a sense, realizing, though, that it all fits together looking at the whole of Scripture. But the Bible is also unique in that it is the only book in the world that when I read it, the author is present with me. And so, the author is not just somebody who is dead in the past or somebody I don't know, but the author is present with me. So, as I study it, I am relying on God and asking God through the Holy Spirit to help me ... So, I diligently study it by looking at the words and the context and the larger context and how it fits together in all of those things. But at the same time, I'm relying on the Holy Spirit who is standing there beside me, so to speak, and there to apply that word to my heart to speak, to help me grasp it. In my own study of Scripture, I've had this experience many times where I did all kinds of academic work, I'd worked on this text trying to understand what it meant, and then I just laid it before the Lord and said, "Okay, Lord, I've done all this work, but there's something here I haven't gotten. I'm waiting for you to give it to me." And then it would come. And so, it's

very important to depend on the Holy Spirit, the inspirer of Scripture, as we seek to interpret Scripture.

### **Question 7:**

#### **How can we avoid emotionalism when we emphasize the emotional aspects of Scripture?**

**When we seek to apply any text of Scripture, we know that the Bible speaks to us on many levels. Some passages deal primarily with concepts, others focus on behaviors, and still others stir our emotions. But when we come to a text that affects us emotionally, we must be careful to avoid taking those emotions too far. How can we avoid emotionalism when we emphasize the emotional aspects of Scripture?**

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

I think it's important to remember that God created the totality of the person, not just their mind but created humans as emotive beings and as thinking beings and as acting beings. So, when Jesus tells us we're to love the Lord God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, it's with the totality of the person. And I think that one of the ways to avoid an extreme in one area is to seek to love God in all dimensions of the human person. So, in other words, if someone is very emotional in their love of God, crying and ecstatic, this person needs to be rooted in deep-thinking of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 14, God tells us through Paul, Paul tells us, that God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace, and that where God's Spirit reigns, there's an order in the worship of the church. And so, where that is lacking, I think that reflects where the community is not living in accord with God's revelation. They need to be instructed. They need to learn. There needs to be intellectual learning and growth that then results in a balanced expression: joy, emotion, passion, but not out of control behavior.

#### **Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

There is no doubt that when we encounter the Bible as God's people and his Word that there's an emotional component to that. We are overcome by God's grace to us. We are overcome by God's goodness to us. We are overcome by the power that he exhibits in life. And so, there is an emotional component too, I think, in any Christian's life in terms of life in the church, life in God's Word, life with God's people. But how do you avoid emotionalism? Well, I think of emotionalism being kind of the opposite of intellectualism. So, you know, the Bible is just not about information, though it has information. But the Bible is just not about emotional response as well. I mean, our emotions must be rooted in the intellectual realities of the text. And so, I think when we talk about emotionalism, what I think I'm understanding in our culture is that people tend to want to be overly emotional about something in their lives or that they perceive is in a text without really understanding the text in its original context first. And so, being well grounded in the intellectual realities of Scripture, or just, say, the fundamental truths of Scripture, will produce

proper emotions, or what we might call proper Christian affections. And so, emotions good, intellect good, obeying God's Word good as the fruit of our intellectual apprehension of his Word and our emotional experience of it. And I think if we keep intellectualism and emotionalism as two extremes that can be avoided, because if you have the intellect without emotion, you really don't fully understand Scripture. Right? Because it has an emotional component to it. You can't read the book of the Psalms and the psalmist's cries to God and say there's no emotional component to Scripture. Right? But you can't read Paul and say there's no intellectual component to Scripture. There realities are wedded together. And we can maybe take a lesson from Paul who, when he's finished with his intellectual writings, frequently they'll end in doxology. That's the emotional component. So, let your intellectual capacities in Scripture to understand God's Word, drive towards doxology and the emotional expression of God's greatness and glory in his Word. And then, in that way, you can connect how you feel with God's revelation. So, you can feel, you can have your affections schooled, or trained by God's Word, avoiding emotionalism without the grounding or intellectualism, without the proper response in faith. So, I think that's one of the ways to avoid emotionalism is to keep it balanced with God's Word and let Scripture school your affections.

### **Question 8:**

#### **How can we know when to follow the examples of individuals described in the Bible?**

**When we read the Bible, it doesn't take long to see that many biblical characters lived flawed lives, even though God was directing them. And this can cause confusion as we look to those stories and passages for inspiration in how to live today. So, how can we know when to follow the examples of individuals described in the Bible?**

#### **Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think when we read the Bible and we read about characters and events in the Bible, the Bible will present those often as characteristics that we should carefully listen to and understand their circumstances and understand what they were going through for a positive example for us. But also, there's also plenty examples of negative characteristics that we're supposed to reject and avoid their behavior. This is how the writer of the Hebrews, for instance, deals with a large part of the history of Israel, as a warning against believers not to turn away. And, you know, Paul says that the Old Testament was written for our instruction. I'm just giving a couple of examples. And I think when we come to the Bible we have to remember that all the characters we're dealing with are sinners. If you're tracking along the Old Testament history, for instance, you never reach a point where you think, "Ah, this is the guy who's going to do it; he's going to bring everything to fulfillment." Right? You're always pointing forward. So, take an example like David where you can see both positive and negative aspects of his character. And he's presented clearly in the Bible that way.

God calls David a man after his own heart, but David's horrible sins are never hidden, always on display... It says that he basically followed God except in that issue with Uriah the Hittite. So, even in the kind of national memory of Israel, the greatest of the Old Testament kings is remembered as somebody who was a sinner and who fell into sin. And so, I think that we're given these characters to carefully read about and study, see ourselves in them, so that we both read them sympathetically and not just sort of brush them off, but see ourselves, I think, even in the failures that we see in Scripture, but also pointed in the way of righteousness and faithfulness to God through examples of faith as people withstood. Like, let's say, the prophet Jeremiah as he withstood persecution, or Isaiah who continued prophesying even though he's being threatened. Or Paul. Paul puts himself forward as an example, and he's the first one who recognizes his own sin. But he says, "Follow me insofar as I follow Jesus." And we can see Paul's life as a record of faithfulness to God that we can, and I think should, emulate insofar as God gives us the strength to do so.

**Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

When we approach the Scriptures, I think sometimes it can be real tempting to think, well, these heroes of the faith are always to be an example for us. But clearly that is not the case. I remember when one of my young daughters decided to read through the Bible and was reading through Genesis. She came out shocked and troubled one night to discover that Noah had gotten drunk and was naked in his tent. And it gave an opportunity to instruct and say, well, the Bible, when it describes what people do, it's not always normative. It's not always something we're supposed to copy. Even people like Noah who, at points, are presented as examples, example of righteousness in his day, it doesn't mean that every activity that he did is praiseworthy or something that we should copy. Now, when you come to a narrative text where we have all of these different characters, it can be very challenging to decide which of their activities are praiseworthy and which are not. And to do that you often have to look at the entire text and look at the clues that the author has given you throughout the entire narrative as to whether he approves or disapproves, as the inspired writer of that text, of what that person is doing. So, he doesn't step out of every single story and say, "Oh, by the way, this was good," or "This was bad." An example of this in the book of Judges. If you read Judges 11, Jephthah is depicted as apparently sacrificing his daughter, a human sacrifice. At that point, the author doesn't step out and say, "Oh, and this is really a horrible thing that Jephthah did." He just goes on with the narrative. But if you look at the book of Judges, through the arrangement of the cycles of rebellion and through the narrator's comments that everyone was doing what they thought in their own eyes was right, we become aware that the whole book of Judges is a story of what's wrong in Israel. And so, when we encounter these horrific stories, that then the author doesn't make a comment immediately there, then we understand that he's disapproving of them, and he doesn't have to step out of each individual story and say that. The authors of the New Testament, as well, looking back on the Old Testament, give us a grid to understand and interpret which characters we should understand responded to God in a praiseworthy way in which specific incidences.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Within the New Testament in particular, the writers will refer to Old Testament characters who are held up as positive examples. So, take for example, David. David is held up as being a great example of a king who was a man after God's heart and who faithfully led the people of God. But, of course, when you read the Old Testament narrative, you note that David is actually a flawed character. There are many things in which we are intended to emulate him in his worship of God and in his leadership of the people. There are also many things we're not intended to emulate in terms of his immoral behavior and the fact that he was a flawed human being. Similarly with Solomon. Solomon, in many respects, was a great king because, finally, the nations around came to worship. But in fact, rather than him teaching them about the true God, they compromised him and he fell away. So, when we actually read the detail of the text, we see that the Bible is not inherently commending *everything* about the character, but actually the things that they point to, the things that we should follow. So, David's wholehearted worship that he expresses in his Psalms is something that we should follow. The way David pointed to King Jesus is something that we should also follow. But that doesn't mean that we should then copy every bit and every detail of their life.

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

One of the primary functions of the Bible, especially the narratives or story portions of the Bible — which makes it most of the Bible — is, in fact, to provide us with models to emulate or to avoid. The virtues or character traits of godly people are given to us in Scripture so that we might learn to follow them, even as the apostle Paul says, "Imitate me," he says to his young disciple, "as I imitate Jesus." Or, there are plenty of examples of people in the Scripture whose viceful ways of living, whose sinful ways of living are models for us to not follow that. The danger is always in reading Scripture only for that reason, not without first seeing that the Scriptures teach us about God first and foremost. Martin Luther gave a great example of this in a little essay he wrote a long time ago about how the Scriptures provide us in Christ both gift and example, that we must first read the Scriptures — and particular he's talking about the Gospels — but when we first read the Scriptures, seeing that God is a gift to us in Christ, that he's giving us the gift of justification and grace. And once we've gotten that gift clear, then we can see that Jesus and his disciples provide a model to follow. But you've got to get them in that order. If you look at Jesus and the other disciples as only a model without first having the gift of grace and justification, then it would be mere moralism. But once we do understand and are born again and have the Spirit-given gift of righteousness and new life, then the Bible is full of great models for us to follow.

**Question 9:**  
**How can we develop the skills we need to interpret the Bible responsibly?**

**Any area of expertise requires a number of skills in order to perform its tasks properly. And the same is true for biblical interpretation. For most of us, interpreting the Bible doesn't come naturally. It often requires hard work and discipline. How can we develop the skills we need to interpret the Bible responsibly?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Every reader of the Bible needs to develop the skills in order to go about reading the biblical text. And the analogy I like to use is of filling the old toolbox with the various tools you might need in order to go about reading the text. So they include things like: some understanding of original languages, if you're able to do so; some understanding of basic grammatical structure of sentences and paragraphs and words; some basic etymology of the meaning of words and, so doing, word studies of biblical passages is helpful; and a whole sort of plethora of different tools that you want to put in your toolbox that make us good readers. And reading the Bible at one level is just like reading any ancient text. It requires us to understand a bit of the history, to understand how the text would have been written and understood by original hearers. That's not the totality of the task, but it's essential that those basic tools are in place in order that you can make your very first step at reading a biblical text.

**Dr. Brian J. Vickers**

I think the way we develop skills to understand biblical passages, we have to come at it in more than one way. The most basic thing we can do, and the thing that really everybody has access to apart from even going to seminary or learning methods, the first and most important step — and it's also the last step and still the most important step — is to know the Bible as well as we possibly can. One of the great legacies of the Reformation is that the Bible is its own interpreter. And so even if we learn various methods and steps and certain questions to ask of the Bible, unless we have an intimate knowledge of the Bible itself from Genesis to Revelation, even the best methodologies will be of limited use for us. So, the good news is this: to become really good interpreters of the Bible, what you need most, and what will do the most good, is to have a Bible that you read. It might sound self-explanatory or something nobody needs to point out, but I can't stress that enough. Now having said that, we can follow and learn particular methods for learning how to interpret different parts of the Bible, and that's what we need to do. So the next step is we learn to read different parts of the Bible. So that we learn that we read an epistle from Paul differently, in a way, than we do, say, Psalms. It's similar to the way that if, in the course of the day, I might read a newspaper and a technical manual and a letter or an email and something else, and I won't read all those the same way even though they're all words. So, I'll learn, and I have learned over time, how to read those different things, and I don't confuse them. And so we can learn through — I mean, there's lots of good resources available that will teach us how to read different parts of the Bible — and

then we can learn Bible study methods from asking the important questions like, what does this say about God? What does this say about us? What is God saying through this text that I need to be doing in terms of behaviors or change behaviors? So, you're just thinking, or in praise and worship to him, any number of things. We just ask these basic questions and remember the Bible is speaking to us. It's not just about us. It's also speaking to us from God. It's about God and his word to us. So, there are lots of ways we can approach interpreting the Bible, and the first and best way is to read the Bible.

### **Question 10:**

#### **How can pastors apply the Scriptures to the variety of individuals in their churches?**

**One of the roles of a pastor is to help the people in his congregation see the relevance of Scripture in their lives today. And yet, there are as many different needs and applications in a single congregation as there are people. How can pastors apply the Scriptures to the variety of individuals in their churches?**

#### **Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

All throughout the world the Scriptures are being read and preached from, to all different cultures and languages and places. And throughout history this has been the case as well. And so, it seems like it would be difficult to apply the Bible to all these different people. But what is universal about every hearer of the Bible is that every hearer is a person who needs to discover the freedom of the grace of God, because every person needs freedom from guilt and shame and the power of sin. And that bondage that we're all in, to our sinfulness, is what unites us all across all of humanity in time and space. And so, every passage of Scripture is applicable to every believer, because in it we see the gospel of God's grace working out his plan of salvation to free us from this guilt and shame and the power of sin. And so, pastors, and anyone teaching, or anyone just reading the Bible on their own, has a direct connection to the meaning of every passage of Scripture, because in it, the gospel of God shows forth into our most basic, universal human need.

#### **Dr. Robert L. Plummer**

One of the things that I struggle to do when I preach in my local church as a pastor is to... really bring out those implications for the single mom or for the guy who's out of work, or for the teenager who's zoning out. And how do I really help them to hear what the Scripture is saying to them in their particular life situation? And one of the best ways that I've found to help do that is to really know my congregation, to spend time with them so that whether it's speaking to them during the week or after the service, spending time with them, being involved in counseling, that you're aware of the struggles that people have and of their hopes and their dreams and their fears and that you're conscious of those when you're preparing a sermon. One of the things I love to do is when I run — I like to run for exercise — and I think about the text I'm



preaching on, and thoughts come to my mind about people in the church and struggles and the desires they have. And the more time I have to meditate on it and think about, the more I feel that I can bring that home to them. Another pastor at the church, he told me he uses a grid. Whenever he preaches, he always thinks about how does this truth speak to three different kinds of people? How does this speak to the skeptic in the church, someone who's coming there who's kind of doubtful about what you're saying or questioning it? How does this speak to the person who's struggling and maybe who says, "I hear what you're saying, and I'm failing at that, and I feel, how can God accept me?" And then, how does it speak to the Pharisee? How does it speak to the person who thinks they have it all together and what you're saying they mastered a long time ago?

**Dr. Peter Chow (translation)**

Everyone is different. Those who are too introverted need to learn that it's not that scary to do personal evangelism. Those whose witnessing style is too aggressive must be told to be gentler. People are very different, and you must teach different things according to different personalities. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul teaches about marriage. He speaks of some people having the gift of being single. And so, he says that they should be like him. It's better for them to be single because then they can serve the Lord with undivided attention. For another group of people, the majority of people, in order to avoid temptation, it's better to be married. There's another group of people, the remainder, who have unbelieving partners. They also need specific teaching on how to live. If the unbelieving partner is willing to stay with you, then do not separate, because that way you can bring that unbelieving partner to the Lord and can take care of the children besides. Also, if the unbelieving partner insists on leaving, and there is no peace in the home, 1 Corinthians 7:15 says to let them leave, and the believer is no longer bound by the marriage. It's a passive divorce when the other party insists on leaving. We can see from this that Paul had different teachings for different situations. This is also true if you look at the big picture of the entire Bible. So, we must make the remedy fit the problem. If someone lives in a society that is very hostile to Christ, he should imitate Joseph or Daniel. If the church is not persecuted very fiercely, he can refer to Paul in the time of Acts. If the persecution is very, very severe, he should refer to Revelation. In different circumstances the Bible has different teachings, so we have to find the right solution for the problem.

**Sound biblical interpretation should always lead to responsible application. If we're to grow in our ability to interpret and apply Scripture, we need to develop the skills. But we must never neglect the role of the Holy Spirit who guides us in both of these processes. And we can rest assured that he will bring us to the truth as we interpret and apply his Word in our lives today.**

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