

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
ONE

WHY STUDY NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY?



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Lesson One

Why Study New Testament Theology?

INTRODUCTION

If you've ever seriously studied a work of art, a piece of literature, a play or a movie, then you know that there can be a big difference between enjoying it casually and analyzing it carefully. Detailed analysis can be a very consuming task, much different from just doing it when we want and how we want. But at the end of the day, you and I know that few things can replace the rich knowledge that comes from a meticulous analysis of a subject or piece.

In many ways, this is the kind of experience followers of Christ often have when it comes to the New Testament. We know the joy of reading these Scriptures here and there, now and then. But the insights we get from carefully studying the New Testament and its theology can really be a source of great fulfillment.

This is the first lesson in our series *Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament*. In this series we'll follow a very traditional definition of theology and speak of New Testament theology as everything that the New Testament teaches about God himself and other topics in relation to God. We've entitled this first lesson "Why Study New Testament Theology?" In this lesson, we want to see why it's important to go beyond a casual familiarity with the New Testament and devote ourselves to the careful, in-depth study of New Testament theology.

In 2 Timothy 2:15, the apostle Paul referred to the fact that understanding New Testament theology often requires hard work. Listen to what Paul told Timothy:

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

Of course, many dimensions of New Testament theology are quite simple. But Paul made it clear that understanding Scripture is not always easy. Timothy was to be "a worker ... who correctly handles the word of truth." The Greek term translated "worker" is "*ergates*," a term that often referred to physical laborers. Paul's metaphor indicated that grasping the theology of the New Testament often requires hard labor. But if studying New Testament theology is so difficult, why should we do it?

It's really interesting that Paul, in his letter to Timothy, just in the space of a few words, says both that the Scriptures were given by the Spirit of God — they are "God-breathed" — but then just a few sentences later Paul says to Timothy, study, work hard to show yourself approved as a workman of God, studying and rightly handling the Scriptures. The Scriptures really reflect a covenantal relationship with God, God's gracious initiative to communicate with

us but also our responsibility, our response to his Word. And because he has given his Word in language that we can understand — he's accommodated himself to speak through human authors in using genre and language and forms that were familiar to the people and places of the time — we need to work hard in terms of learning that language, in terms of learning how genre works, how historical narrative works differently from poetry or differently from personal correspondence, because these different forms are used in the Scriptures. And just in terms of reading the Bible contextually, understanding how New Testament authors make use of the Old Testament in different ways that were common to the time in terms of how prior texts were used in a particular situation. So, Paul tells Timothy both, that the Scriptures are God-inspired from the Holy Spirit, but also that Timothy — and we, like Timothy — should work hard and should study to show ourselves approved and rightly handling the Scriptures.

— Dr. Greg Perry

We'll explore why we should study New Testament theology in two ways. First, we'll examine the importance of understanding the New Testament's inspiration and authority. And second, we'll consider the challenge of dealing with the continuities and discontinuities between the days of the New Testament and our day. Let's look more closely at both of these issues, beginning with the New Testament's inspiration and authority.

INSPIRATION & AUTHORITY

To investigate the inspiration and authority of the New Testament, we'll focus on the Bible's affirmations that the New Testament is both inspired and authoritative. And then, we'll offer a few clarifications for what we mean by "inspiration" and "authority." Let's begin with the biblical affirmations of these crucial Christian beliefs.

AFFIRMATIONS

When followers of Christ reflect on the inspiration and authority of the New Testament, they almost always appeal to 2 Timothy 3:16 where the apostle Paul wrote:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Here we find that Paul touched on the inspiration of the Scriptures when he said that "all Scripture is God-breathed," or as the Greek word "*theopneustos*" may be translated, "exhaled by God." He also referred to the authority of Scripture when he said that the Scriptures are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." This is an important passage for understanding what followers of Christ believe about the New Testament. But now listen to 2 Timothy 3:15 where Paul told Timothy:

From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15).

Strictly speaking, "the Holy Scriptures" that Paul had in mind here, and that Timothy had known "from infancy," were not the New Testament, but the Old Testament. So, why then do followers of Christ appeal to Paul's words about the Old Testament when they refer to the New Testament as being inspired and authoritative?

We'll look at three biblical affirmations that help us understand that the New Testament is inspired and authoritative. First, we'll explore Jesus' calling of twelve disciples. Second, we'll consider the foundational role of the apostles and prophets. And third, we'll affirm the inspiration and authority of the New Testament books themselves. Let's look first at how Jesus' calling of twelve disciples affirms the inspiration and authority of the New Testament.

Twelve Disciples

As Jesus began establishing a new remnant of God's people to fulfill God's purposes in Israel, he called out a special group of twelve disciples. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus set these twelve disciples apart from the others who followed him. And this distinction made them, with the exception of Judas, the ones whom he later sent into the world as his authoritative apostles.

In John 16:13 we read these words from Jesus to his twelve disciples:

When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come (John 16:13).

This passage indicates that there was much Jesus' disciples had to learn. So, "the Spirit of truth" would come and "guide [them] into all truth" about "what [was] yet to come." We see here that Jesus ordained his select disciples to teach the rest of his followers through the Holy Spirit. This and similar passages confirm our belief in the inspiration of the New Testament.

Now, the apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, was not one of the original twelve. But the Bible is clear that Paul was an authoritative apostle, and he met the requirements equal to those established for the twelve in Acts 1:21-22. This is one reason why Luke reported Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus three

times: first in Acts 9:1-19, then in 22:6-11, and once more in 26:9-18. And Galatians 1:11-2:10 conveys that Paul spent three years with Christ in the desert of Arabia. This same passage also reports that the apostles in Jerusalem confirmed Paul's apostolic authority. As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15:8-9, after Jesus had appeared to more than 500 believers:

[Jesus] appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God (1 Corinthians 15:8-9).

As an apostle, Paul called himself "one abnormally born" and "the least of the apostles." He was the only authoritative apostle who had not been with Jesus during his earthly ministry. But Paul was a witness to the resurrection of Jesus and approved as such by the original apostles in Jerusalem.

With the affirmations related to Jesus' calling of his twelve disciples in mind, we should also mention the inspiration and foundational authority of Christ's first century apostles and prophets.

Apostles and Prophets

Listen to the way Paul, in Ephesians 3:4-5, referred to the fact that not only he but all of Christ's apostles and prophets were the recipients of God's special revelation:

My insight into the mystery of Christ ... has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets (Ephesians 3:4-5).

Here Paul referred to distinctively Christian teachings that had been kept secret, or a "mystery," until they were "revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets." It's not surprising, then, that in Ephesians 2:20-21 Paul also referred to the first century apostles and prophets in this way:

[The church was] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:20-21).

As this passage tells us, God is building the church into "a holy temple in the Lord," and Christ Jesus is "the chief cornerstone." But notice also that Paul identified "the apostles and prophets" as part of "the foundation" of the church. This indicates that God established the church of Christ on the authoritative teachings of the apostles and prophets. And as we saw in our earlier verse, the apostolic and prophetic teachings were authoritative because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

In addition to the Bible's affirmations of Jesus' twelve disciples and the foundational authority of Christ's apostles and prophets, we should also note that the apostles themselves considered the New Testament books equal to the Old Testament

Scriptures. This point of view appears in a number of places in the New Testament, but we'll look at just two examples.

New Testament Books

To begin, in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul wrote:

For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages" (1 Timothy 5:18).

This verse may seem odd to us at first, but it's important for our discussion because Paul began with, "For the Scripture says." He then quoted two different passages. The first quotation, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," is a reference to Deuteronomy 25:4 in the Old Testament. But the second quotation, "The worker deserves his wages," is from Luke 10:7 in the New Testament. This correlation between Old and New Testament authority shows that the apostle Paul considered the writings of Christ's apostles and prophets equal to the Old Testament Scriptures.

We see something similar in 2 Peter 3:15-16 where the apostle Peter stated:

Paul ... wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him... His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16).

In this passage, Peter acknowledged that Paul wrote "with the wisdom that God gave him." In other words, Paul's books bore the authority of God himself. But notice also how Peter pointed out that opponents of the Christian faith distorted Paul's letters "as they [did] the other Scriptures." In the larger context of Peter's epistles, the "other Scriptures" are the Scriptures of the Old Testament. So, we see here that Peter also treated the New Testament writings as having the same inspiration and authority as the Old Testament.

The Bible affirms the New Testament as God's inspired and authoritative word for his church. Jesus himself promised that the Spirit would teach his apostles. And he established his apostles and prophets as the foundational authorities of his church. In addition, just as God's people received the Old Testament Scriptures as the inspired and authoritative Word of God, the church was called to receive the writings of Christ's apostles and prophets as inspired and authoritative.

Having seen how our belief in the inspiration and authority of the New Testament is supported by numerous affirmations in the Bible, we should now offer some clarifications for what we mean by these terms.

CLARIFICATIONS

Christians often misunderstand the terms "inspiration" and "authority" when it comes to the New Testament. So, as important as it is to affirm that these concepts are true, we also need to be sure that we understand them correctly.

We'll look at clarifications for these two characteristics of the New Testament separately. First, we'll clarify what we mean by the inspiration of the New Testament, and then we'll consider the New Testament's authority. Let's first examine the New Testament's inspiration.

Inspiration

Throughout history, people claiming to be followers of Christ have had different understandings of what it means to say that the New Testament was inspired or "breathed out" by God. It helps to think of these points of view as falling along a continuum or spectrum.

On one extreme, some theologians hold a romantic view of inspiration. They believe that the Holy Spirit inspired biblical writers in the same way that secular poets or musicians might be moved to write. As a result, they think the New Testament consists only of the personal reflections and opinions of its human authors. They admit that these writers may have been wise, and may have had access to information that can be helpful to us. But they deny that the New Testament is a fully reliable record of what God wants us to believe, feel, and do.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, other theologians believe in what can be called mechanical inspiration. According to this outlook, biblical writers were relatively passive as they wrote Scripture. The Holy Spirit essentially dictated the Bible, and human writers passively recorded what he said. This view affirms the truth and authority of the New Testament, but denies that its human writers were an important part of the writing process.

Finally, most evangelical Christians believe in what has been called organic inspiration. This description indicates that it's impossible to separate the work of God's Spirit and the work of the human authors of Scripture. 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 guided their writing. So, the words of Scripture are also very much the words of its human authors. This third view best reflects Scripture's own testimony about the nature of inspiration.

Now, by “organic inspiration” what we really mean is that Scripture hasn’t been dropped from heaven into our laps or that the writers were some kind of automatons... But men wrote as the Holy Spirit carried them along. And what we mean by that is that, although it is God's message, it is through the medium of actual people in real situations and real circumstances. Now, people may feel a little

nervous about that. Maybe they want more of a direct connection between God and man. But the reality is, knowing that is much more helpful for us, because when I read Scripture, I know it's God's message. And there's dual nature to it. It's God's message but it's a human being who understands my experience, who is going through something similar to me with their personality coming to the text. And so, in reality, what we have is an inspired word that understands fully the human experience. It's not dictated. It's not some message that has no connection to the struggles of the human experience. And so, when we mean "organic inspiration," that's what we mean, that it came through actual personalities, in real situations. And so when they write, they're writing the message of God but with the knowledge and experience and passion of life lived.

— Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

For example, listen again to what the apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:15-16:

Paul ... wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him... His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16).

As we mentioned earlier, Peter acknowledged that God's Spirit inspired Paul's letters. But notice how Peter also indicated that this inspiration was organic. When Peter wrote, "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand," he acknowledged Paul's background, personality and writing style. This statement reflected Paul's high rabbinical education. And Paul's theological sophistication challenged Peter who was himself a relatively uneducated fisherman from Galilee.

Peter's outlooks provide us with an example we should follow as we approach the theology of the New Testament. We must always keep in mind that the Bible's theological outlooks are God-breathed. They are true and reliable because they come from God himself. Yet, it's also important for us to put forth the effort required to learn about the human authors and their intentions as we explore the theology of the New Testament.

In fact, one of the most significant implications of organic inspiration is what it means to our study of New Testament theology. If we rely on a purely romantic or mechanical view of inspiration, we'll either disregard the authority of the text or ignore the author's contribution. But organic inspiration forces us to explore the theology of the New Testament on at least three levels.

The main and most obvious level is that of the text itself. These explicit assertions can teach us a great deal about New Testament theology.

On a level beneath the text, we have to be ready to explore the many implicit, or unwritten, theological presuppositions of New Testament authors. We have to study the authors' backgrounds and theological beliefs. And we should do our best to discover how their backgrounds and beliefs influenced what they wrote.

On a third level, above the text, we also need to reflect on the authors' implicit purposes. In other words, what did biblical authors intend for their audiences? At times, New Testament authors were rather specific in the kinds of impacts they hoped to have on their audiences. But more often than not, they expected their audiences to infer the implications of their texts.

Now, as you can imagine, keeping the explicit assertions, theological presuppositions and the implicit purposes in view as we explore the New Testament is not always easy. It often requires a great deal of careful study. But the nature of organic inspiration makes it necessary for us to explore all three levels of New Testament theology.

We've just seen some clarifications for the organic inspiration of the New Testament. Now let's clarify what is meant by the authority of the New Testament Scriptures and how we should respond to that authority today.

Authority

All Evangelicals rightly believe that the New Testament has authority over our lives. But we need to be careful to understand the nature of this authority. Sadly, many well-meaning Christians fail to keep in mind that the New Testament was not written directly to them. To put it another way, the New Testament was written for us, but not directly to us. We all know that the New Testament was written thousands of years ago and given to other people living in those days. But this fact often has little impact on the ways we acknowledge the New Testament's authority. All of this is to say something very important about the authority of the New Testament: New Testament theology has full, but indirect authority over the lives of Christ's followers today. And this fact means that we must always be ready to learn as much as possible about what New Testament texts meant for their original audiences.

When followers of Christ first begin to read the New Testament they're usually drawn to its relatively basic teachings. They read things like, "Jesus is Lord," "Repent and believe the gospel," "Love one another," and a host of other essential teachings. They don't have to consider much about the historical circumstances, personalities and purposes of New Testament authors. For all practical purposes, they can treat these basic teachings as if they're simply timeless truths. And they seldom deal much with the implications of submitting to the authority of the New Testament. But as we learn more about New Testament theology, it becomes more and more evident that we have to look carefully at the original settings of New Testament texts in order to acknowledge their authority properly today. We have to learn about the authors' backgrounds, circumstances, and intentions. Only then can we submit appropriately to the New Testament's authority over our lives.

One of the questions that comes up is, how can we consider the New Testament, which was written to other people, authoritative for us? Now, first of all, it's authoritative in the sense that it has the right or power to compel assent. And the link between the original recipients of the canonical writings and ourselves are two, the links are two.

First of all, the author, the divine author of this text is the same yesterday, today and forever. He's the one with whom we too must deal. And secondly, as followers of Jesus Christ, we belong to the covenant people of God, and those things that were said specifically to some of our members centuries ago were meant to include us as well because we belong with them in the embrace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

— Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Perhaps an analogy will help to clarify what we have in mind. Parents who have more than one child know very well how they exercise full, but often indirect, authority over their children. Imagine a parent who scolds his or her son for misbehavior and says to him, "Go sit down and think about what you've done." Of course, his sister is happy to keep playing. After all, the parent wasn't speaking to her. But if the sister disobeys the parent a few moments later, the parent may very well say, "Didn't you see what just happened to your brother?" In situations like this, parents expect all of their children to learn from the way they dealt with one child. This indirect authority teaches all of the children how they should behave, even if they weren't the initial recipients of the discipline.

This is what we mean when we say that organic inspiration leads to the full but indirect authority of the New Testament for modern followers of Christ. New Testament texts spoke directly with full authority to the original audiences. And we must remember that they also speak with full authority today. For faithful followers of Christ, it's never a question of if we are to submit to a teaching of the New Testament. It's only a question of how we are to submit to its authority. So, to determine how we should respond to this authority, we must be ready to look back to the original purpose and circumstances of when a particular text was written.

One of the questions students often ask about God's Word is, how can a message given to people 2,000 years ago be applicable to us? How can this be God's word to us or for us? And I think there's the key right there, is, though these texts are not God's word to us, they are ultimately God's word for us. And the one thing that every book in the Bible, every genre, every situation has in common is that every book in the Bible reveals the nature of God, who God is. It reveals who we are in relationship to him. And it reveals God's purpose for us in the world, how we're to respond to him and how to respond to one another. So, ultimately, what we learn in Scripture is we learn the heart of God. We learn the nature and purpose of God. And we can learn that even if it's written to different people in different contexts, even if the direct commands given to them don't apply to us directly, we still learn about God's nature, about God's purpose, about who we are and how we ought to live in relationship to God. So, ultimately, I would say the Bible teaches us the heart of God and the purpose of

God, and so it then guides us into how to live in relationship to him and in relationship to one another.

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

For example, in Matthew 19:21, Jesus gave this specific instruction to a rich young ruler:

If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me (Matthew 19:21).

How are we to apply this passage to our lives? Are all of us, in every circumstance, to "sell [our] possessions and give to the poor"? The only way we can answer this question responsibly is to grasp who this rich young ruler was and why Jesus addressed him in this way.

This man's title and interaction with Jesus would suggest that he was of Jewish background and had a good deal of financial influence in his community. It also appears that he cared deeply about upholding Jewish customs. Earlier in the chapter he asked Jesus, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Obey the commandments." The young man proudly declared that he had done this. So, Jesus addressed what seemed to be the man's chief concern, mainly wealth and influence. Scripture repeatedly shows us that owning possessions is not, in and of itself, evil. Nor does it prevent us from true discipleship under Christ. However, as Jesus' followers, our hearts should always be prepared to forsake our own desires in order to serve God.

Another example of this occurs in Acts 5:1-11 where Ananias and Sapphira pretend to give all their money to the church, but secretly keep some for themselves. The sin wasn't that they did not give all they had — they weren't asked to — but rather that they lied about their generosity to receive popular approval.

Jesus' response to the rich young ruler to sell his possessions didn't deal specifically with money, but rather with the man's concern for what he must sacrifice. Jesus cut to the heart of the matter by addressing the one thing this man was unwilling to forsake, his wealth.

This example helps us understand that if we are to submit to the authority of Scripture, we need to consider the context and original purpose of a passage. Only then will we be able to assess how we are to observe what Jesus has commanded.

The New Testament, as the Old Testament, is not a philosophy; it doesn't consist of philosophical formulation, formulated in a manner that perhaps could be transported across cultures very easily. The New Testament is specific; it is historical. The reason for that is pretty obvious. God revealed himself both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, and when God reveals himself, he reveals himself to specific people. He doesn't reveal himself in generalities that then, at the end of the day, would probably not be relevant for anyone because they would be so general. So, God revealed himself to Abraham,

Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, to Isaiah, to Jeremiah and then, through Jesus, to the disciples, to Peter, to Paul. And so, we have specific people in specific circumstances. And this is so by necessity. God is the Creator and creation exists in time and space, and so when God reveals himself, he does need to reveal himself in time and space.

— Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel

So far in our lesson on "Why study New Testament Theology?" we've seen that the New Testament's inspiration and authority require us to learn as much as we can about the ancient historical setting of a New Testament book. Now we're ready to address the continuities and discontinuities between our day and the days of the New Testament.

CONTINUITIES & DISCONTINUITIES

Imagine that you picked up a book written 500 years ago. The language would be at least somewhat different from what you speak today. The concepts would be explained in ways that may seem a bit odd. The customs and traditions mentioned in the book would appear old fashioned. But at the same time, if you work at it, you might see how that book relates to your life today. Even a book written a long time ago wouldn't be entirely different from the world in which you live. It wouldn't be so foreign that you couldn't make some sense of it. It may take some effort, but eventually you could grasp much of what this ancient book says.

This is what we face when we deal with the New Testament. It was written nearly 2,000 years ago. And for this reason, its language, concepts, customs and traditions are different from what we experience in our modern world. But at the same time, if we give ourselves to the study of these matters we can see that the New Testament still connects to our world in many ways.

The fact that the Bible was written 2,000 years ago is relevant and important because it was written in a culture at a particular time. But the fact that it's God's Word is what makes it relevant to us today, because God chose to speak by his grace and his mercy to us. And Hebrews tells us that the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword. And actually, that word is like as a little tiny surgical knife. And so, God's Word cuts us open and it stands above us as our authority, dictating and making demands of us, and making commands of what we should obey, and even telling us that we should love it, not just to obey it, but to actually love it and to memorize it. And so it's important to us now because it's God's word.

— Dr. Jason Oakes

To see how careful study can help us with the continuities and discontinuities between ourselves and the New Testament, we'll focus on three main considerations: epochal considerations, cultural considerations and personal considerations. These three subjects are interrelated, but it's still helpful to deal with them individually. Let's look first at some important epochal considerations.

EPOCHAL

When we speak of an epoch of biblical history we have in mind a period of time established by divine revelation that distinguishes it from other periods of time. Of course, there are many ways to divide history, and no period of time is completely distinct from what comes before and after it. Yet, we most often divide biblical history into the New Testament age and the ages of the Old Testament. We identify the New Testament period as the time of the new covenant. This epoch began with the first advent of Christ and will continue until his return. The new covenant age is unique in that it's messianic. It's the time when Jesus, the great Son of David, reigns on God's behalf.

To understand why epochal considerations make studying New Testament theology necessary, we'll look at the epochal continuities that unify the new covenant age. And then, we'll deal with the epochal discontinuities that exist. Let's look first at the continuities.

Continuities

There are many epochal continuities between our day and the days of the New Testament. One of the best ways to see these connections is to realize that Christians today serve the same God that Christ's followers did in the first century. Traditional systematic theologians often point out how the Scriptures teach that God is immutable, or unchangeable. They focus on his unalterable attributes, his eternal plan and his covenant oaths in passages like Numbers 23:19, Isaiah 46:10, and James 1:17. And because we serve the same immutable God, we should expect there to be many similarities in what God expected from his people in the New Testament and what he expects from us today. Listen to Hebrews 13:7-8:

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:7-8).

Here the author of Hebrews insisted that his audience, "consider the outcome of their leaders' way of life and imitate their faith." He supported this exhortation by reminding them of the immutability of God when he said, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." His audience could be confident that if they imitated the faith of their leaders from the past, they would see similar outcomes in their own day because Jesus is immutable.

Just like the original audiences of the New Testament, we live after Christ's death has made the final atonement for sin. We've been raised with Christ in his resurrection, just like first century believers. We live in the age when God's Spirit is poured out far beyond what had occurred in the Old Testament. We're part of the same body of Christ with the same mission of spreading everything Jesus taught to the ends of the earth. Despite the historical distance that separates us from the days of the New Testament, the immutable Creator has established these kinds of epochal continuities so that we can apply the New Testament to our day.

Now, that we've looked at some epochal considerations and the continuities that exist between our day and New Testament times, let's view some discontinuities within the new covenant epoch that require us to devote ourselves to careful study of New Testament theology.

Discontinuities

To be sure, the epochal discontinuities between New Testament days and our day are not as substantial as the epochal discontinuities between the Old Testament and our day. Yet, there are some significant differences that we must keep in mind whenever we study the New Testament.

In Ephesians 2:20, the apostle Paul referred to one of the most substantial epochal discontinuities when he said:

[The church was] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

Here, Paul made a distinction between the church's foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself, and the church throughout history.

As we said earlier in this lesson, for nearly 2,000 years the church has recognized the foundational authority that Christ and his apostles and prophets have over us. But we must also realize that they are no longer physically present with us. This reality creates a number of discontinuities between New Testament times and our lives today.

First, the New Testament contains many examples of authenticating miracles performed by Jesus and his apostles and prophets. The ability to perform such miracles set Jesus and his apostles apart as authorities and foundational leaders of the church. God continues to work supernaturally in the church today, but we don't look for miracles as a way of discerning the authority of new church leaders. Instead, authority in the church today is established by the standard of the New Testament. And for this reason, we must be sure to study very carefully how this standard applies to our day.

Second, in New Testament times it was possible to make direct appeals to Jesus' apostles and prophets. Christians could appeal to the apostles and prophets for guidance and answers to questions. We see this, for example, in the ways Paul responded to the appeals of Christ's followers in books like 1 and 2 Corinthians and Philemon. Moreover, in New Testament days, church-wide 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 lean on our study of the New Testament and consider how it applies in our day.

Third, as we study New Testament theology we often have to face the fact that New Testament authors had theological emphases that were particularly important for the foundational period of the church, but that may not concern us today.

The New Testament was written during the time when God's people were transitioning between Old and New Testament faith. For this reason, many of the issues addressed in the New Testament deal with how followers of Christ were to relate to Old Testament practices and Jewish traditions. Did Christian men need to be circumcised? Did they have to observe Jewish dietary laws? How were Christians to understand the continuation of animal sacrifices at the temple after Christ's final atonement? How were Jewish ceremonies and festivals to be incorporated into the life of the church? Of course, many of these foundational theological issues were settled long ago. And once the foundational period of the new covenant ended, the Christian church moved on to other challenges.

When we read the New Testament, it can be difficult to overcome the epochal discontinuities. But, if we want to apply the New Testament's answers to these ancient theological controversies today, we often must work hard and study these texts very carefully.

When one reads the Bible, one has to always put it in its original context. When we do that, sometimes we don't realize some of the issues that they're struggling with because they're so unlike the issues that we wrestle with today. So, for example, in the Old Testament, all of the covenantal issues that are tied to Israel — living under the old covenant, and then as you have the coming of Christ, the fulfillment of that — are main theological issues that the church has to wrestle with. What's the relationship of old covenant demands? How is it brought to fulfillment in the church? What's the relationship between Jew and Gentile? And even in saying it like that, we don't often think in those kind of categories so that we have to do a good job first of going back to the Scripture, understanding it on its own terms, in its own context, in its own presentation, understanding how the covenants work, how they're brought to fulfillment in Christ, and then begin to think through how does this now apply to us.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Having looked at the continuities and discontinuities within epochal considerations, we should now explore a few cultural considerations.

CULTURAL

When we speak of culture, we have in mind the patterns of human communities that develop out of shared concepts, behaviors and emotions. Culture is expressed in

things like art, fashion, technology, political structures, and other conventions of daily human interaction. And when we deal with New Testament theology, we have to give attention to these cultural dimensions of life in both the first century and in our own day.

Whenever we pay attention to cultural considerations, we have to look at both cultural continuities and also discontinuities. At times, this is not an easy task. So, we have to be ready to devote ourselves to careful reflection. Let's see how this is true first with cultural continuities.

Continuities

We all know that every culture is different, and those differences grow larger with temporal and geographical distance. But as much as we recognize these differences, every human culture exists in the same world. This fact creates many cultural continuities even across time and geography. Every culture on earth is shaped by the nature of human beings and the physical, natural environment. And in so far as these factors are similar, the patterns of culture are similar as well. As Ecclesiastes 1:9 puts it:

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

In this light, it shouldn't surprise us that when we look beneath superficial differences, we find many similar features of culture between our times and New Testament times. We still wear clothes, enjoy art, have families, establish governments, and punish crimes, much like people did in New Testament times. For this reason, it's often very easy to see similarities between cultures in the first century and our own day.

Take for instance, the scene in John 4:6-7 that introduces Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman.

It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (John 4:6-7).

Many of us have heard explanations of the cultural dimensions of this scene. Jesus met and talked with a Samaritan woman, even though Jews in Jesus' day considered Samaritans "unclean" and refused to associate with them.

Now, as modern readers we don't have feelings one way or the other about Samaritans. And we don't even think about whether or not people are ceremonially clean. But still, it isn't difficult to see significant parallels between this biblical scene and social prejudices in our own day. Unfortunately, people today are not very different from people in the first century in this regard. And because we live in the same world as people in the days of the New Testament, we're often able to draw parallels to our modern cultural experiences with ease, despite the differences.

While it's important to realize that cultural considerations include cultural continuities between ourselves and the New Testament, we must also be aware of the impact of cultural discontinuities on our understanding of New Testament theology.

Discontinuities

Our understanding of Scripture is that it is the Word of God, and the ultimate author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit. We oftentimes will speak about Scripture in those exalted terms, and so the question sometimes arises, well, why do we need anything beyond the Scriptures? Why do we need to study the culture and the backgrounds and the languages? If we have the Scriptures themselves and they are the Word of God, are they not sufficient? We understand that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author, but the Holy Spirit also worked through human authors and gave us the Scriptures in historical context. We don't have Scripture before us that is just a list of propositional truths. We don't have Scripture that is a legal codebook that just has law upon law, do's and don'ts in a list. We don't have Scripture that is just wisdom sayings — one maxim, one aphorism, one proverb one after the other — and we somehow compile truth from that. Although those elements are in the Scriptures, the Scriptures are a revelation of God, a revelation of God and God's acts in history. We sometimes summarize our understanding of Scripture by saying it is the word of God in the words of human authors given in history. And it's that "in history" part that is so important to us. If we don't understand the cultural context in which the Scriptures were written, if we don't understand the language, the Scriptures can be easily misconstrued.

— Dr. Edward M. Keazirian

In reality, many of the cultural outlooks in our day and in New Testament times are vastly different. And we have to work very hard to overcome the obstacles they present to interpreting and applying New Testament theology.

One of the most obvious examples of this kind of cultural discontinuity is the language that was used to write the New Testament. Relatively few followers of Christ today can read the New Testament in its original Greek.

Beyond this, we have to consider first century literary conventions and the influence of the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament used by New Testament authors. We must also overcome our ignorance of the political, economic and broader social practices of the day. Only as we devote ourselves to these tasks will we be able to deal with the many cultural discontinuities between the New Testament and our day.

There's a wonderful saying in London. It's called, "Mind the gap." You hear that when you step off the underground subway and onto the platform, and there's a gap in between, and there's this warning that's constantly given: "Mind the gap. Mind the gap." And that is an important idea to consider of why the importance of understanding

the cultural context of the New Testament, when we're interpreting and teaching and preaching the New Testament, is that we need to "mind the gap." There's a gap between then and now. There's a gap in the language that was used. There's a gap in how the social identities were created. There's a gap in how kinship was understood. There's a gap in almost every aspect of life 2,000 years ago and life today. And if we don't mind the gap, we will inevitably fill the gap with our own culture, with our own understanding of things. Instead of listening to the text to see how the text now applies to our life, we actually do the reverse. We make our life the manner for understanding the text. We speak into the text instead of the text speaking to us. And so we will miss some things... If we believe that the original message was inspired, then we want to endeavor to mind the gap so we can listen to the Word of God, not so that we can impose our own social consideration.

— Dr. Mark A. Jennings

With the continuities and discontinuities of these epochal considerations and cultural considerations in mind, let's look at why personal considerations also require us to study New Testament theology carefully.

PERSONAL

We all know from common experience that people aren't exactly the same. Even people who live in the same culture are different. Often, when we meet people from distant places or read about people from the past, we realize that the psychological, emotional, and spiritual differences can be enormous. We all have different experiences, strengths, fears, talents, spiritual propensities; the list of differences among people is very long. So, when we study New Testament theology we must give due attention to the similarities and differences between people in our day and in the days of the New Testament.

We'll look at personal considerations along the same lines as our previous discussions. First, what are the personal continuities between modern and New Testament people? And second, what are the discontinuities between them? Let's start with the continuities.

Continuities

From a biblical perspective, there are enough similarities among people for us to be confident that we can learn and apply New Testament theology as we ought. In effect, the Scriptures teach that all human beings in New Testament times and today are the same kinds of people. The authors, audiences and other human figures in the New

Testament were the image of God, just like we are today. They were rational and reasoned, like us. They reacted with joy and sadness, much like we do today. And like us, they were fallen images of God who needed redemption in Christ. They struggled with sin, and endured pain and hardship in this fallen world. And those who believed in Christ in New Testament days experienced the grace of God's forgiveness and the blessing of the Holy Spirit in their personal lives, just as we do today. Because of these and many other personal continuities, when we read the New Testament we are often able to connect easily with the people of that time.

For example, in Romans 9:2-4, Paul expressed his deep feelings for his fellow Jews in this way:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel (Romans 9:2-4).

These verses reveal Paul's very personal, emotional experience. And human personality has not changed so much from Paul's day to our own that we cannot empathize with his feelings. Personal continuities like these often make it relatively easy for us to grasp what New Testament authors, audiences and characters experienced. And we can apply their experiences to our own day.

At the same time, while personal considerations in the New Testament contain a number of personal continuities, there are also many personal discontinuities that make it difficult for us to understand and apply New Testament theology.

Discontinuities

The New Testament often addresses particular kinds of people that are so different from what we know today that we sometimes struggle to draw the proper connections. Personal, emotional tendencies, even issues like age and gender can present obstacles that must be overcome through careful study.

God cares about people in all of our different kinds of settings, all of our different kinds of backgrounds. We can see that by how many different kinds of backgrounds and how many different cultures, actually, were addressed throughout the Bible, in different parts of the Bible. And in the same way, once we understand how God was speaking to those people in their settings, we can learn from them as examples, and we're going to have to reapply those in our own different settings today. God gave it in concrete ways for particular settings, and he expects it to be applied in concrete ways and particular settings. But it's important that we get the right principles that are there in the text so we can reapply them in the right ways.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

For example, in Ephesians 6:5, 9, Paul instructed two particular kinds of people. He said:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ... And masters, treat your slaves in the same way (Ephesians 6:5, 9).

When most of us read these words, we gain a superficial awareness of what Paul said to the slaves and masters in the church at Ephesus. But our awareness of the struggles these brothers and sisters in Christ faced is severely limited because the vast majority of us have never been slaves or masters.

These were very different kinds of people than we are today. And for this reason, we should work vigorously to learn what these people experienced in the first century in places like Ephesus. Only then can we begin to draw the appropriate parallels for our own day and understand Paul's theological perspectives offered in this passage.

Anytime we try to understand how to apply the New Testament, the key word that has to come out all the time is "context." As much as we might like to have the application of Scripture be very cut and dried, almost wooden, that wasn't the case even in New Testament times. I've always been fascinated by the fact that Paul in one case says, "Yes, Timothy, you must be circumcised for the sake of the gospel." And in another case he says to another one of his companions, "No, you must not be circumcised, for the sake of the gospel." So, the same act was right or wrong depending on the cultural setting, if you will. In one case it was, "Timothy, you must be circumcised so we can reach the Jews." That's for the sake of the gospel. In the other setting it was, I believe it was Titus, "You must not be circumcised because the people who want you to be circumcised think that's what's required for salvation, and that would be opposed to the gospel." So, we need to really understand what our current cultural situation is and how the biblical principles apply to that. And that means we need to really understand the culture as much as we understand Scripture.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

The healthy and the sick, the disabled, the strong, the weak, the rich, the poor, young and old, fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers in the days of the New Testament had to embrace New Testament theology in ways that were appropriate for who they were in their day. To one degree or another, these and similar personal factors will always affect how we apply New Testament theology to our day as well. And these personal considerations press us all to study the New Testament with diligence.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored why followers of Christ should study New Testament theology. We've looked at the New Testament's inspiration and authority and seen that we should give ourselves to study because the New Testament is breathed out by God. We also considered how the epochal, cultural and personal continuities and discontinuities between New Testament times and ours require us to devote ourselves to understanding and applying New Testament theology.

The New Testament is the kind of book that deserves much more than a casual glance. As God's Word for his church, we must be ready to do whatever it takes to understand it as well as we possibly can. We'll focus on several important ways to pursue this goal in the lessons that follow. And as we do, we'll see many of the benefits that come from careful reflection on this part of the Bible. And we'll see, time and again, why we should give ourselves to the study New Testament theology.

Dr. Simon Vibert (Host) is Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall of the University of Oxford where he also serves as Director of the School of Preaching. Dr. Vibert received his Th.M. from Glasgow University, his D.Min. from Reformed Theological Seminary, and his Postgraduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education from the University of Oxford. He is a Trustee of Latimer Trust, a member of the Church of England Evangelical Council, and served as Chairman of the Fellowship of Word and Spirit. Dr. Vibert also served for 8 years as Vicar of St. Luke's Church Wimbledon Park. He has produced numerous books and theological articles, including *Excellence in Preaching: Learning from the Best* (IVP, 2011); *Stress: The Path to Peace* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2014); and *Lives Jesus Changed* (Christian Focus Publications, 2010).

Dr. Mark A. Jennings is Instructor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Edward M. Keazirian is Assistant Professor of Greek and Director of the Greek Language Program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Craig S. Keener is the F.M. and Ada Thompson Chair of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary

Dr. Dan Lacich is a pastor at Northland, A Church Distributed in Orlando, FL.

Dr. Jason Oakes is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Talbot School of Theology.

Dr. Greg Perry is Associate Professor of New Testament and Director of City Ministry Initiative at Covenant Theological Seminary

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver is Senior Pastor of Christ Community Church in Laguna Hills, California.

Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel is the Mary F. Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary, San Diego.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss is Professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary, San Diego.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
ONE

Why Study New
Testament Theology?
Faculty Forum



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Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

Lesson One: Why Study New Testament Theology?

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Constantine Campbell
Dr. Joel C. Hunter
Dr. Gordon Isaac
Dr. Craig S. Keener
Dr. Dan Lacich
Dr. Richard Lints

Dr. Fredrick Long
Dr. Sean McDonough
Dr. Jason Oakes
Dr. Alvin Padilla
Rev. Ric Rodeheaver
Dr. Eckhard Schnabel

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie
Dr. James D. Smith III
Dr. Aida Besancon Spencer
Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. Daniel B. Wallace
Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

Question 1:

Why is it important to study the New Testament?

Dr. Constantine Campbell

Believers in Christ should study the New Testament because it represents the authoritative witness to Christ. While Christ was anticipated through the Old Testament — and that they are the Scriptures that the apostles used to preach about Christ and who Christ was — now that we are without the apostles' preaching in person, we have it written for us in the text of the New Testament. So, these are the eyewitnesses, these are the people who knew Jesus, these are the people who listened to his teaching, these are the people who witnessed his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven. So, the New Testament represents the authoritative apostolic teaching from these witnesses of Christ's life and work, and therefore, it is essential that Christians today study the New Testament.

Dr. Dan Lacich

The study of the New Testament is crucial for believers in Jesus Christ. If we don't study the New Testament, we have no idea how to follow Jesus. There was a very popular phrase recently where people would ask in a situation, "What would Jesus do?" It's a great question, but in order to answer it, we have to be able answer the question, what did Jesus do? And the only way we know that is by the New Testament, you know, the Gospels and the rest of it, that tells us, this is who Jesus was and is, and this is what he did, and then we can figure out, how do we now apply that to our lives? And if we don't get that from the New Testament, then all we're doing is coming up with our own opinions and ideas in the moment, and it may or may not have anything to do with what Jesus would actually want us to do.

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

Paul says in Romans 1:16 that "it's the power of God unto salvation." I mean, in the New Testament we have the message of salvation. To study that is to know how one might be saved. At the end of the day, that's the question that matters: How can I be saved? In the book of Acts, the Roman centurion asks that important question, and Paul responds,

“Repent and believe in the gospel.” Well, where is that contained in? That’s contained in the New Testament. If we only study the Old, we’ll hear all the promises that are given, but it’s when we study the New where you see those promises are kept.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Well, I think it is very important for believers in Jesus Christ to study the New Testament. And the reason the New Testament should be a focus is that first of all, it’s our primary source document, historically speaking, of information about him. It’s the mother lode. And secondly, it has the uniqueness of being completely reliable, and that combination makes it imperative. But I also think it’s very important that we should study the New Testament record. Truth is given to its slaves, and something of great consequence like this deserves our very best, and so we should make no apology for the call to study and to correctly handle the word of truth.

Dr. Aida Besancon Spencer

I find it so important to study the New Testament that I guess I’ve dedicated my life to it, because I enjoy it, and no matter how much I learn I always find I’m learning more. And what the value of the New Testament, there are so many authorities now out and all around us, whether it’s people, whether it’s on television or some other source, how do you know what’s right? And what the Bible claims, and it’s God’s revelation to us, and so that, therefore, when we study it, we can learn and get a perspective, a different perspective in what we can do. So, the New Testament, then, becomes our authority as we try to guide our lives by God’s teaching.

Dr. Richard Lints

It’s important that we grasp the breadth of the New Testament in thinking about Jesus in the present moment because... Christ is the design of all creation. That is to say, there’s something about Jesus from the very beginning that tells us God’s design or purposes for everything that is. Christ is also the design or the goal for everything that is redeemed from the Fall. So, in the sense that we learn about Jesus, we learn about ourselves and God’s designs for our place in history. Thinking about the New Testament then, in that regard, is to think about the ways in which Jesus’ earthly ministry, from the birth to the resurrection, frame our understanding of the purposes or the designs of our lives.

Dr. Eckhard Schnabel

The church is doing something somewhat odd. We come together every Sunday not just to meet other people but to study texts... That was already the case with the Jewish people in antiquity as they were meeting in synagogues to study Scripture. And so, that is, therefore, the question: “Why should the church study these texts that we call the New Testament?” And of course the church has the Old Testament as well... And so, the first answer is an answer that has been given for a very long time. We study the text written by the evangelists and the apostles because they convey God’s revelation. God revealed himself to the people of Israel, and there the prophets wrote the texts that were authoritative for Israel. And in the New Testament we have the texts that the apostles wrote as they were inspired by God to write the word of God. One key factor, also, is that in the New Testament we read about Jesus. And those who wrote the books of the New

Testament, they were eyewitnesses or very close to eyewitnesses. They lived within the first generation of followers of Jesus, and so they give us the authoritative interpretation of the life, death, resurrection and significance of Jesus.

Question 2:

What authority did God give New Testament apostles and prophets?

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

When Jesus ascended, prior to that he gave authority to his apostles. And that authority was parallel to the authority of the prophets in the Old Testament. And in some, they were given the authority and the divinely granted competency to correctly interpret the full meaning and implications of the person and the work of Jesus Christ. And for that reason, the church itself now stands on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Jesus Christ the chief cornerstone.

Dr. Gordon Isaac

The prophets and the apostles are important for the testimony of Scripture. Whether the prophets in looking forward to Jesus Christ, or the apostles of the New Testament looking in the immediate time period of Jesus Christ, both witness to Jesus Christ. The authority of all Scripture, the authority of everything we have to say in the Christian church focuses upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, who became flesh and for our sake and for our salvation came to us. So both, from the Old Testament looking forward, New Testament looking back on the event of Christ, the focus of all of Scripture is Jesus Christ.

Dr. Sean McDonough

When we think about the authority given to apostles and prophets, it's probably helpful to distinguish the two from each other, even though, in actual practice, the words could kind of bleed over into each other. Nonetheless, the apostles, often at least, and probably regularly, are these specially-authorized, designated representatives of God. The quintessential text here would be in Revelation where their names are actually on the New Jerusalem along with the twelve patriarchs. It shows what high esteem they were held in. And so, they are really laying the foundation — to get back to the architectural metaphor — for the entire church in their proclamation, their witness to Jesus, and their authorization or writing of most of the New Testament. When we turn to prophets, the term has a little bit of a broader connotation. And Paul in 1 Corinthians points out that the spirit of prophets are subject to prophets. So, there's all sorts of prophesying going on, and that itself needs some unpacking. It probably refers, in my estimation, to any authoritative instruction of the people of God in the Spirit of God. But Paul is clear that you can't just speak ex cathedra, as it were, out of your own authority, and have no one challenge you. There is a dynamism in the Spirit working in the early community where prophets are subject to other prophets.

Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation

God, in his love for humanity, wants to give his message about his commandments and demands to those who want to follow him and obey him. But God is completely different

from us. How does God communicate his message to mankind? In the Old Testament, he does it through prophets, and in the New Testament, through apostles and prophets. Let me explain how. In the Old Testament, the prophets were men and women that the Lord would choose, put his Spirit in, and talk to, and they would communicate the message of God to humanity, pointing out how humanity was deviating from God's commandments. So, prophets would warn people how they failed and would call them to return to the Lord. The apostles in the New Testament are those whom the Lord chose to found his church. When Jesus was here on earth, he chose 12 people who were with him constantly. We call these 12, "the twelve apostles," but as we know, one of them strayed, and the apostles chose another one in Acts 1. But these 12, the twelve apostles, were the first ones in charge of communicating the word of God once and for all, to communicate what is written in the New Testament. But we also find that there were other people called apostles, who were not among them, for example, the apostle Paul. The Lord chose these people in the same way that he chose the Old Testament prophets to communicate the message of God. So, my conclusion is that the apostles and prophets were those who were chosen by God to communicate the message of God to the people, be this through prophecy, as in the case of Isaiah, Jeremiah, etcetera, or as the apostles Peter, John, James, Paul, and so on... men called to communicate the message. So the main way in which God used both the apostles and the prophets was to communicate God's word to God's people.

Dr. Eckhard Schnabel

One can obviously compare the New Testament authors and the apostles with the prophets of the Old Testament. The word "prophet" means that people speak for God... And so, the authority of the prophets was absolute in the sense that authentic prophets conveyed what God wanted them to convey. And if a prophet was ascertained as a bona fide, authentic prophet, then their authority was divine authority. We find a prophetic self-consciousness in Paul, in the apostle Paul. With the gospel authors, that's a little bit more difficult to say. And this is why I think we need to differentiate a little bit more when we come to the New Testament in terms of the authority of the apostles. The basic group of the apostles were the twelve, the twelve followers of Jesus, minus Judas Iscariot who denied Jesus, plus Matthias who was added as a twelfth apostle. Luke, in the book of Acts, calls the twelve "the apostles." And so, their authority derives from the fact that they lived with Jesus, they were with Jesus for three years; they witnessed his resurrection state; they met Jesus after the resurrection. So, their authority is the authority as eyewitnesses. They could describe and interpret, to some extent, the life and the significance of Jesus. Then, when we come to the apostle Paul, also to Jude or to James, there we have God calling them — especially with Paul this is very obvious — God calling Paul to be his witness. And so, the authority of the apostles in a more general sense in the New Testament, including all of those who wrote the New Testament books, is the authority of people who were either eyewitnesses or who were very close to eyewitnesses who therefore could interpret the life, death, resurrection and significance of Jesus for believers. We also should not forget that, perhaps with the exception of James and Jude, all the authors of the New Testament were missionaries, so they were founders of churches, and founders of churches also do have authority. At the same time, of course, we see that in the early churches there was a lot of discussion going on. It was

not that Peter, Paul or John would say things, and then everyone nodded their heads and they just accepted what they said. So, there needs to be... and so, there was argumentation. There needs to be conviction promoted both in the New Testament era and today again. In the church there's neither Jew nor Gentile, neither free nor slave, neither rich nor poor, neither male or female. Everyone had something to contribute. And that can lead to very lively discussions. And so, authority in the church at the end of the day, and the authority of the New Testament, is the authority of God, who himself will make sure that his authority is acknowledged by those who truly want to hear his word and follow him.

Question 3:

How was the canon of the New Testament formed?

Dr. Gordon Isaac

The first century of the Christian church's experience with the canon was really quite fluid. The churches used various documents, gospels, epistles, in order to lead worship, in order to understand their God. But remember, in the first century it was really quite difficult, it was a great deal of effort to copy out one book. So, we can't imagine that the churches had a full set of what we might now call the New Testament. So, for over a hundred years there was a lot of fluidity. Different books were used, and the church simply set on those that really helped them in their worship practices. So, the question wasn't forced until the Gnostics came along late first century into the second century. And the Gnostics, like Valentinus and Marcion, in looking at Christian Scriptures determined that the God of the Old Testament, the God who created heaven and earth could not be the one true God, because the one true God was high above matter and wouldn't have anything to do with it. And then in turning to the New Testament, Marcion determined that many of the texts surrounding the Jewish people should be excised from Scripture, so he set out a list of Scriptures which had a purged form of the book of Luke and then the Pauline letters. Well, Christians looked on this and thought this unacceptable. And indeed it was Irenaeus, I believe, who said, "You Gnostics, you're using these Scriptures, but these are not your books, and you're reading them wrongly." So, the Christian church set out, began to sort through their documents, and made a list. And the first list we have comes in the late portion of the second century. It's called the *Muratorian Fragment*, the *Muratorian Canon*, and it lists most of the books of the New Testament and adds one or two that we don't use now — it mentions the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, which some are not allowing to be read in their churches. But basically, the church says, "These are our books, and this is how we read them" — the attitude that, the "rule of faith." So, the Apostles' Creed with its Trinitarian form basically becomes the critical interpretive theory by which the church reads its Scriptures. So, against the Gnostics they said, "These are the true Scriptures, and this is the way we read them, according to the creeds." So, canon and creed always went together in the early church to understand the God who reveals himself in the written text.

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace

When we think about the apostles and their associates writing the New Testament, we also have to wrestle with what happened after they wrote these letters and these gospels. Well, they began to get collected at the end of the first century, and there was apparently a collection of Paul's letters — we don't know how many of them were in there — when Peter wrote 2 Peter, and he said, "just like Paul has written in all his letters." And so, there was by this time already a collection of all the letters that Peter knew about, of Paul. Most likely, all of Paul's letters were collected by the end of the first century, and by that time the Gospels also had names attached to them that had a very solid tradition to them. And beginning in the second century, more and more manuscripts, or more and more books of the New Testament began to get collected. The form of the ancient book was always a scroll or a roll until the second half of the first century A.D., and that's when the codex form was invented. Codex is words bound on one side with pages that are cut and you can flip it, you know, our modern book form basically. But Christians were, perhaps not the ones to invent the codex, but they were certainly the ones to really popularize it. Through the first five centuries A.D., 80% of all Christian books were written on a codex, and only 20% of all non-Christian books were written on a codex. Now, that actually has an impact on the canon. That is, there are some scholars who say that the codex was invented by Christians because you can include a much larger book; you can have much more material in it. The average size roll or even the largest size roll could have, perhaps, the book of Acts in it or the Gospel of Luke, and that was it. It could be 35 feet, and both Luke and Acts would have been written out to about 28 feet. You couldn't have more than one of those. And so you can't have all four gospels on a roll, but you could have all of them in a codex. And so the codex form became popular very early on among Christians, and that's when they could start thinking about, well here's Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all lined up. By the second century we had codex forms that had all four gospels in them, most likely. Well, how did the early church begin to think about, well, what books are part of the New Testament and what are not? They, at least, had these forms where they're getting these collections, and they began to wrestle with these things. There were essentially three tests that the ancient church used to recognize which books God had inspired, which books would be considered Scripture. The first is called the "test of apostolicity." That is, was this book written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle? And it's a test that you might also call the "test of antiquity." In the *Muratorian Canon*, which is the first orthodox canon list of ancient books, it talks about a number of books and says, "These are books that should be read in the churches." But then it talks about the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and it says, "This is a popular book, it's orthodox, many people have read it, but it should not be read in the services as an authoritative book because it was written," as he says, "in our time." And, in other words, it's a second century document and, therefore, it does not meet this criterion of antiquity or apostolicity. These books didn't have to be written by apostles but someone who is somehow associated with an apostle was very important. And this is a test that the ancient church applied across the board... So, that first question of apostolicity rules out books like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas, and Peter and Mary, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Acts of John, and the Acts of Paul — all sorts of books — and 3 Corinthians and Laodiceans. There's all these ancient books that never made it into the canon for the very simple reason that they were not first century documents. And so

that test is kind of the granddaddy of all the tests that first and foremost was the one that the church applied. The second test was the issue of orthodoxy. Did this book conform to the rest of what was considered to be orthodox? Well, if you don't have any books in the canon of the New Testament to begin with, how do you know what's orthodox? Well they had this by the traditions of the church fathers that had been passed down, the hymns and the creeds that had been sung in the churches, and these things were well known; the Apostles' Creed, which was very early on, the *Didache* with its creeds, and creeds that we see embedded in the New Testament like in Philippians 2, what's called the *Carmen Christi*, or the "Hymn to Christ"; or 1 Timothy 3:16 which is this early creed or hymn about who Christ was and what he accomplished on earth. Those kinds of things were passed on, and the words of Jesus were always considered to be orthodox, and the church wrestled with that. So you have these two tests: apostolicity, written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle, and orthodoxy, was it orthodox? And they started comparing it with other things, Old Testament, hymns, creeds of the early church, and then the words of Jesus, and you'd start getting a growing collection of what was considered orthodox. The third test is "catholicity." This doesn't mean, was it accepted by the Roman Catholic Church, but it has to do with, was it accepted by the churches, all the churches? And that's what "catholic" really means. It doesn't mean the religious group known as Roman Catholics, that branch of Christendom that's different from Protestants and the Orthodox. But was it accepted by the churches? And some books, as I said, struggled to get accepted. Others were accepted early on. All of Paul's letters, all four gospels, the book of Acts, 1 Peter and probably 1 John were accepted immediately, as far as we can tell, at the very beginning of the second century... So the church used three criteria to wrestle with what books do we consider to be Scripture, and I would say these are the three criteria they used to recognize what the Holy Spirit had inspired rather than to determine what is canonical, because the church never had authority to do that. They were subject to the Holy Spirit's leading. They are the tests of: Apostolicity, that is, was it written by an apostle or an associate? Orthodoxy, does it conform to what we know about orthodoxy? And finally, catholicity.

Dr. Jason Oakes

The books that came to be the canon of Scripture were written at separate times by many different authors... Typically, people say that it wasn't until almost 400 years after that the canon was actually formed at these different councils and had different lists show up. And so, sometimes you'll hear a skeptic say, well, the early church Christians had no Bible until the Synod of Hippo, or of these other places almost 400 years A.D. And actually, what we can see historically, and just almost using common sense, is that the early Christians had those books much, much earlier than then... So, essentially what happened was the letters were written and dispersed and gospels were written and dispersed, and when churches would take these in, the Holy Spirit would convince them that this was, in fact, the Word of God. And one of the first things they'd want to do is make a copy and send it to another church and another set of brothers... And so, actually, it's not a mysterious. It's an organic process, not mysterious, because the books that became adopted became adopted by the church and organically came out, and then only later became codified as what was already being used. It wasn't the other way around,

which was typically taught or typically presented. It was codified and then enforced down to the churches. It actually became a list based upon what churches were already using.

Dr. James D. Smith III

What we know as the canon of the New Testament was identified in the early church really in three ways. One of them was the criteria of what was apostolic and authoritative at its foundation. I think, secondly, we understand from lists like the *Muratorian Canon*, which is second century, some of the books that were regarded as being worthy of being listed, as approved and sustained reading in the churches. And the third is through scriptural quotations. In the writings of the early Christians, we have an idea which of the earliest writings were seen as authoritative. So, we have into the late second century a good sense, by and large, of the contours of which of the *Kainé Diatheké*, the New Testament, new covenant books, were being approved. It's really hard to tell when the first compilations of those books came together because, as we know, periodically in an age of persecution there were books that were burned by the Romans, Christian books, and no doubt some of those were Scriptures. The word "traitor" — or *traditor* — literally means someone who hands over the holy books during a time of persecution in exchange for their lives. So, we don't know, prior to the earliest full manuscript of the New Testament, the *Codex Sinaiticus*, how early these compilations were taking shape. But we do have that codex, that bound book from the fourth century, and also we have the quote from Athanasius in 367, in his 39th Festal Letter which quotes exactly, no more, no less, the books of the New Testament that we have. For me personally, as a scholar and as a believer, it's a comfort that the canon wasn't settled in some smoke-filled room by a collection of people, but rather, gradually, the witness of the church, the discernments of the church was a work through the Holy Spirit to identify those that were uniquely authoritative and Spirit-inspired.

Question 4:

What is organic inspiration?

Dr. Jason Oakes

The Bible doesn't say a whole lot about how it was inspired, but where it does speak, it actually speaks pretty clearly. Particularly in 2 Peter, starting in verse 21:

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21, ESV).

And so what that passage tells us is, it's not the case that God just dropped down the writings just as he wanted it. It's also not the case that humans just spoke from their own will; they just wanted to say something, "I've got to get this off my chest," or something like that. But that there was a dual authorship, a process of God wanting to reveal himself to humans, but wanting to use human authors in that process. And this particular passage tells us, not just merely that God used men, but he carried them along by the Holy Spirit, that God spoke, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. And so what we have here is this mysterious kind of dual authorship, that God's Word is

exactly what God wants it to be down to the very words themselves — verbal plenary inspiration — while at the same time, the personality of the writers, of the human authors, is found in the text as well.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

People describe the inspiration of Scripture using various adjectives to differentiate their interpretation of inspiration from others. Sometimes you'll hear a term like "organic inspiration" or "dictation." I think that the Scriptures themselves lead us to the conclusion that the inspirational work of the Holy Spirit is best represented by the organic or plenary inspiration theory that is espoused by most Evangelicals. This theory affirms simultaneously the superintendency of Holy Spirit over the entire composition of the text, and at the same time, validates the full humanity and authorial activities of those God chose to use as his instruments.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

By "organic inspiration" theologians mean, it's a way of describing how God communicates to us. The Bible, we believe, is God's inspired Word, his message to us through human instruments. By organic inspiration, they mean that human authors spoke with their own words, with their own vocabulary, with their own personality, addressing context-specific situations. For example, Paul hears of concerns... the church in Philippi, so he thinks about these. He responds in his humanity; he responds using his words, his language, his personality, his understanding of the situation. Yet, God is working through that. The Holy Spirit is inspiring him, guiding him, giving him the words to say even though they're coming through his mind, his personality, his own language. So, it's organic in that sense. Scripture is fully human and fully divine in coming through the human authors, but it is God's Word communicated.

Question 5:

How can the New Testament be considered authoritative for us when it was not written directly to us?

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

I can understand how people get a little confused when they think about, how can Scripture be authoritative over my life when it was written two thousand years ago and not even written for me? Well, when you think about it, at first I can understand the confusion. But we live and traffic in this every day. As a matter of fact, when I'm driving down the road, there are many things that are authoritative over me even though they weren't written for me. The stop sign, for example. Now, the legislation did not write that to me, but it's certainly written for me... So another example would be if I'm on a sports team. Now every sports team has a playbook. Now, that playbook certainly is authoritative over me even though it wasn't written to me. So, we have these things all the time. Now, what the difference with Scripture is, unlike a playbook, unlike traffic laws, is that Scripture is directly authoritative to me. It's not mediated from somebody who comes up with the idea and somebody who puts up the sign, or some coach who comes up with the idea and writes it in the playbook. That's derived authority, whereas

Scripture is directly authoritative over me. And we have these dynamics in our lives all the time. So, even though it wasn't written to me, it was certainly written for me.

Dr. Dan Lacich

A lot of people wonder how the New Testament can be authoritative for us today when it wasn't written directly to us. There's really two parts of an answer to that. The first is, just the fact that it is God's word, it's authoritative no matter when it was written and who it was written to. You know, that just remains true through all time. But we don't have to stop at kind of a wooden doctrinal position there. There's also the fact that even though it was not written to us, it was also written for us. God knew what we would be facing today and how what they faced 2,000 years ago would apply to us today. So, it is for us even though it wasn't written to us.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

So, one interesting thing about Scripture is that it has dual authorship; it's written by human beings and by God. And human beings, I mean, the human authors of Scripture clearly did not think that people 2,000 years later after them would be reading what they had written. I mean, I think they surprisingly have, sometimes, a very wide audience in view. So, increasingly gospel scholars are open to the view that the Gospels are written, not just for one isolated community but for all Christians. The apostle Paul anticipates that his letter to the Colossians won't just be read by the Colossians but by the church at Laodicea, and vice versa. He anticipates that their letter, to the Laodiceans, will be read by the Colossians. So, it's true that the human authors are writing to a particular human audience, sometimes quite a broad one, but probably not to, they're not anticipating that their writings will be read two thousand years later. However, Scripture is not written just by human beings. At the very same time it's written by God himself. And so, because God is writing Scripture, it is authoritative over us because God is still present, God is our authority. I love what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10. So, in 1 Corinthians 10 he's reflecting on the history of Israel and the fact that this history is written down in the Old Testament Scriptures, and he says to the Corinthians, to largely former pagans, to Gentiles, "These things happened and they were written down for our instruction." So, Scripture is authoritative over people, even though, you know, in the first instance those people were not in view, but God had them in view. God is sovereign over the recording of Scripture, and in his mind he can intend, even though it's written to a different audience initially, he can intend it to be addressed to us.

Question 6:

How does the fact that New Testament authors addressed specific circumstances affect our modern application?

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

The fact that the New Testament addresses very particular historical circumstances or particular audiences sometimes makes it hard for us to sense its authority over us. And I think that's because, you know, we look at certain writings in the New Testament, say the book of Revelation. It's written to people in Asia Minor, first century citizens of Asia

Minor, who are really struggling with the question of, do I participate in the trade guilds? Do I go to the local imperial temple and burn incense to the emperor? And those are not problems we deal with, you know. The book of Galatians is written to address a situation where it's in question whether Gentiles need to be circumcised or not, and that's not a pressing issue for us. And so, we might be tempted to think this book just has nothing to do with us, this letter has nothing to do with us. How does it have any authority, any binding authority over us? So, it does create that sense of cultural distance, I think. It creates a sense of disconnect that makes it hard for us to know, does it have authority over us?

Dr. Joel C. Hunter

The Scriptures, especially the New Testament, address specific circumstances that we need to understand in order to interpret — this is called "hermeneutics" — in order to interpret accurately how those might apply to our day, or at least approximate ways in which they could apply to our day. Let's just take the epistles for an example... Each one of them is written in a way to address a current problem in that church. And, the church at Galatia, for example, they were having trouble going back to their old legalistic ways, and so he writes this wonderful epistle, this letter to them saying, "Don't, you know, starting off in the Spirit? Seriously? You're going to go back to the flesh?" And if you understand that that is not trying to encapsulate the whole gospel story, that is a specific address or a specific communication about a particular struggle, two things happen. First of all, you can identify with that particular struggle, and you can say, "You know, I have some trouble with that in my own life, and so, therefore, I need that word for my own life, and I'm glad I wasn't the first person to struggle with my own legalism and perfectionism," and so on and so forth. But the second thing, that it dawns on you as you're reading this is that God really does care, and there are church fathers and church scholars and others who can help us address particular problems that arise in our congregations or in our personal lives. That is kind of on-demand theology, as it were... And the more you go back and you see what the original circumstances were, you can not only see how those are slightly resembling your own, but you can also be pretty free to say, "You know, what I'm going through, God wants to help also." And so, there are some principles here that I can apply to my life; even though they don't exactly match what was happening back then, still, God is interested in what I'm going through.

Dr. Aida Besancon Spencer

What I find significant is the New Testament is not like a philosophy book, or it's not like a glossary. But what we have, because God is a God of history, what we have presented to us are historical documents, whether they're letters, whether they're narratives, whether they're accounts of what happened. So, we have to first understand the situation in which it occurred, like for example, a letter, and then once we understand who the readers were, when it was written, what the purpose was, then, as it were, we're going to make an analogy for today — what would be a similar situation... You want to find the right basis for what you're going to say today.

Question 7:**How can a book that was written 2000 years ago still have any relevance for our lives today?****Dr. Constantine Campbell**

It's good for us to remember that the New Testament is nearly 2,000 years old, and we need to understand it as being a collection of ancient doctrines written in the context of an ancient culture to people whose lives and worlds were very different from our own. However, we need to remember that the New Testament is written for us as God's people, and because the New Testament is the authoritative witness to Christ and it encodes for us the apostolic preaching about Christ, it's just as relevant for us today as it was for the original readers. Sure, we need to understand that there are certain elements of it that apply more directly to the original readers than to us, but the overall message, and the way in which the Holy Spirit speaks through that message, is equally relevant for us living in between Christ's resurrection and ascension and his return.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Sometimes people ask how we can find relevance in a book that's 2,000 and more years old for much of it. And I think part of the answer is that you can't have a book, you can't really have anything in this world, that doesn't have a historical, concrete context, a concrete setting where it happened. We're dealing with real people in real history, and that should make it more real to us, if we can understand their setting enough to get into their hearts, to get into their minds, to see why they acted the way they acted. People are people. Human nature hasn't really changed even though the culture has changed. So, getting a feel for the cultural background can actually help us to feel what was happening in its own cultural setting and therefore apply it all the more relevantly to our concrete settings today.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

So, we read the biblical documents, and they address a very different cultural context and historical realities than what we are used to, and we might feel like, are these things relevant to us? And it's so interesting what the writer of Hebrews does when he's quoting the Old Testament, he quotes Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3, and he's quoting these words that were written to a very different cultural context hundreds of years before he was writing the book of Hebrews. And he says, as he sets up this quotation of Psalm 95, "As the Holy Spirit says." So, he doesn't say, "As this ancient author who's disconnected from me and my reality wrote" — past tense. He says, "As the Holy Spirit" — so, he's interpreting the words of the Old Testament to be the words of God himself, the Holy Spirit — "As the Holy Spirit says" — present tense. In other words, the Old Testament is alive. It is relevant because it is the word of God to the people of God.

Dr. Gordon Isaac

The text of Scripture is important for us. It's a book like no other. There's lots of good literature in the world that goes back centuries, but over the years, over the centuries, people have read the Scriptures and have seen in them something special. I like the way Luther puts it when he says, "You should know that the Holy Scriptures consist of a book

which teaches us about eternal life. It turns other wisdom of books into foolishness.” So, it’s a book like no other. The text of Scripture is confirmed in our own minds by means of the Holy Spirit and sealed in our hearts.

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

Scripture was written 2,000 years ago, how does that have any authority? How is that even relevant to where I live now? It was written in the Middle East 2,000 years ago, I live here in America in the twenty-first century. Well, that goes back to this dual dynamic that Scripture has so beautifully, that you have these overriding kingdom principles, kingdom values that God mandates, and you’ve got this cultural understanding where we live. Now, on the one hand, we can make the mistake of misunderstanding the kingdom values of God for our culture and try to make our culture be the driving sieve. On the other hand, the other mistake is to ignore that there’s any kingdom values... And just in the same way that the command not to murder was 2,000 — well, it was given much before 2,000 years ago — just because its 2,000 years have passed, doesn’t make that command any less relevant. And so that’s where the job of a pastor, a student, a theologian, anyone’s job is to carefully parse out what are those things in the culture that are culturally driven and culturally derived and can remain in the culture, and what are those things that really, I call them kingdom values, the kingdom principles that Scripture’s trying to teach to us, and can we see clearly through them both.

Question 8:

What were some of the main theological questions that faced the New Testament’s original audiences?

Dr. Constantine Campbell

Some of the questions for the original Christians, the first Christians, are: Who is the Christ? And if he is this man Jesus from Nazareth, what does that mean for God's kingdom? And what does it mean for the relationship between Jews and Gentiles? So, in particular, Jesus was crucified. How do we understand that in relation to Old Testament prophecy, that the King, the anointed Messiah of Israel would rule forever? How could you rule forever if he’s dead? And so, the resurrection becomes the answer to that question. God raised the Messiah from the dead and declared him with power to be the Son of God through his resurrection. And so, Psalm 2 and the other prophecies about the Messiah reigning forever are fulfilled through Jesus' resurrection to life, never to die again, and his ascension to the right hand of God from which place he pours out the Spirit and rules over God's kingdom in that position. So, that’s one of the key questions, and I think most of the other questions that the original Christians would have had about Jesus follow on from that.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

You know, there are certain theological questions that the original audience of the New Testament was concerned to answer, and those questions included these chief among them: Who really is this Jesus Christ? And secondly, what’s he done of particular significance? And then stepping back, what is God's plan for history? Fourthly, how

might I fit into the larger plan of meaning and purpose? And finally, what resources are available to me to navigate that challenge successfully? Those were timeless questions, and they are questions, the answers to which give meaning and purpose to lives today in a purposeless time in history.

Dr. Dan Lacich

What's interesting about looking at the main theological issues in the New Testament and what that audience, original audience was concerned about, they're the same questions we have today. It hasn't changed all that much. They were concerned with, who is Jesus? What is this whole relationship between being man and God, how do we understand that? They were concerned with salvation. Who has salvation? How do you get saved? What are the rules, if you will, for following Christ and having a relationship with God? And it was also, there was also a concern with, how do we, as followers of Christ, live in a multicultural setting? How do we engage people who have different worldviews, have different ethical positions, people that you meet in the marketplace, people that live next door to you, people in your own families? So, how does a Christian live in the world but not be of the world? So, those are things that were critical to the New Testament audience, and they haven't changed very much today.

Dr. Fredrick Long

The New Testament writers envision a variety of audiences as they're writing. There are Jewish audiences, but there are Gentile or non-Jewish audiences, and many of these come from different cultural backgrounds: Greek, Roman, Syrian. And so, the audiences of the New Testament are very diverse, but there's a common phenomenon that's taking place in the ancient Mediterranean world, and that is a proliferation of gods and deities. And all over the empire, people are seeing images, temples, shrines, reliefs, statues, coins, which are making claims to what God is, or who God is. And so, when the early Christian writers are addressing these young Christians, they're trying to address them in terms of theological formation, trying to give them an accurate understanding of God, a true understanding of who God is and what God is like, in contrast to the surrounding environment which was full of gods and deities. And so, this is why we'll see in Paul's writings, for example, repeated references to God. I was just looking at 1 Corinthians, and the beginning, if you just look at the opening couple of verses of 1 Corinthians, you will see Jesus Christ affirmed as Lord four, five or six times within a span of two or three verses. It's really quite amazing. The reason why Paul is doing that is because he has to repopulate their mind with a true conception of the one true God as opposed to a plethora, pantheon of gods and deities. And so, he does that by repeatedly making reference to God as Father and to Jesus Christ his Son as Lord throughout his letters. It's almost like people have a folder with "deity" on it, and it's full of gods and goddesses, and Paul has to have them dump out that folder, maybe scratch out the title and say, "This is what God is like." And he repeatedly populates that folder with information. And this is part of their formation as believers. If they're going to follow Christ, if they're going to follow God, they need to understand God properly. And particularly, what has been given Paul and the early Christians, what Jesus was, was a king, was a political ruler. And in the ancient world, the right to rule was a divine privilege that the king, the emperor, the local king, whoever, the pharaoh, that they were appointed their right to rule by God. And so, Paul

also wants them to understand that Christ is a ruler, that he's their political king... In the ancient world, politics and religion were merged in a dramatic, integral way, and this actually had implications for ethics, because the king, the emperor is supposed to be a model of virtue. Augustus, for example, considered himself, wanted to be called "first citizen" because he was to be followed. He was like the other citizens, but then preeminent in terms of his virtue and his example. And so, what God has given to us, what the prophets were anticipating and what he's given to us is a ruler, a political ruler, a king who models for us how to live in this world, who shows true piety, true devotion, a true ethic in this world, how to live in this world. And Paul, for example, understood this. The early New Testament writers understood this. And in their presentation of Jesus, they will present him as a king, as a ruler. And we also see Jesus aware of this dynamic himself, and, for example, in Mark's gospel, he contrasts his rule with that of the Gentile kings who like to lord it over people, and he says, "You disciples need to follow my example and become a servant, and the greatest among you is going to be the last of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many." This is Mark 10:45. It's a radical statement in light of the ancient world of politics and religion. And so, Paul, the New Testament writers, wanted the early Christians to have a clear picture of who God is and a clear picture of who God has set in a position of rule so that we can follow his example and come under his lordship, and that is Jesus Christ the Lord.

Question 9:

Why is it helpful to study the cultural context of the writers and original audiences of the New Testament?

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

I think there are many reasons why it's really helpful for us to understand the basic background, the cultural background, historical background of the New Testament audiences. For one reason, we can learn more about why certain things appear in the New Testament and why other things don't appear. So, for example, why is it that Jesus speaks relatively little about sexual ethics, sexual morality, and the apostle Paul does all the time, it seems, in many of his letters? It's helpful to know that Jesus is ministering in a very Jewish context, and so it's really understood, basic sexual morality is understood in that context, and he feels, I think, doesn't feel the need to address it all that much; whereas, the apostle Paul is ministering in a Greco-Roman context where immorality is rampant, you know, prostitution is all over the place, and so it's very important for him to address that. So, just knowing a little bit about the basic historical background, cultural background, helps us to understand why certain things are there in the text and why other things aren't. One of my favorite examples of the importance of historical cultural backgrounds comes in John 8 where Jesus stands up in the temple and says, "I am the light of the world." And we know from the Gospel of John that he's speaking there at the Feast of Tabernacles, which is a celebration of the exodus, God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. And we learn from later Jewish sources, the Mishnah, that incorporate earlier sources, that during the Feast of Tabernacles, there in the temple there's these giant candelabras, these giant candlesticks that are casting light over all of

Jerusalem... So, Jesus stands in front of these four candelabras, these giant pillars of light that are representing the presence of God. They're in the temple; this is a feast that's celebrating God in the exodus leading his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness. Jesus stands in front of this giant flaming fire representing the presence of God and says, "I am the light of the world," which really is a divine claim. He says, "I am" — you can hear the echo of God saying "I am who I am" — and he's saying, "I am the light. I am the divine light. I am God." So, backgrounds, cultural contexts, historical contexts can really tell us more about who Jesus is.

Dr. Richard Lints

It's important to think about the context of the authors that wrote the New Testament because God designed those words in those contexts to make sense. And so, if we take seriously that God is both outside of our experience but also creates the context in which our experience is played out, language — God as a speaking God — God uses the language in the context in which it's familiar. So, it's important for us to understand the cultural context of the first century, to understand the cultural debates, to understand the terms, the lingo, the jargon that might have been current, to understand those ways in which the authors in the New Testament would ordinarily have spoken. Now, having said that, we must recognize that the message, that this great message of the gospel, is not bounded by its original cultural context or our present cultural context, that it, in some sense, is transcultural. That is to say, it speaks into the idolatries of the first century as it speaks into and against the idolatries of the twenty-first century. And so, taking culture seriously is not to limit the message but to understand the communication of the message in the culture and across the cultures.

Dr. Sean McDonough

It's critical to study the cultural context of the original authors of Scripture. The obvious reason for that, of course, is that apart from that context — language, customs, etc. — you really don't know what on earth is being said in the Bible you claim to uphold. But it cuts even deeper theologically, I think. If we don't affirm the situated-ness of these texts, we're really denying that God is at work in history, and we're acting as if he has this timeless philosophy that he randomly drops into human heads, rather than being dynamically involved in working his purposes out in the world. And for that reason, if we don't understand the particularities of how he worked his word out in a given context then, we're going to be hopeless at discerning how to apply that in the cultural particularities that are obtained in our own time as well.

Question 10:

Why should different kinds of modern people apply the same New Testament passages differently?

Dr. James D. Smith III

I think one of the most wonderful things about God's Word is that it can be applied to so many different situations. The Scriptures themselves say it is fruitful, or profitable, for doctrine and for reproof and correction and instruction. And so, the versatility, the

applicability of God's Word across cultures, I think, is marvelous. But one of my favorite expressions of that, actually, doesn't even have to scan different cultures. It just looks at one's own life and the various situations we face. The cartoonist Charles Schultz, who was a strong Christian person, in his book *You Don't Look 35, Charlie Brown!*, mentioned looking at his marked-up Bible — he had all these passages that had been marked, arrows, and underlinings and so forth — said he couldn't even remember all the reasons they were marked, but God knew. God was there to apply his Word to that moment. He said it told him something not only about the power of the Word, but also about his own life. So, no mystery that people in various cultures will find an array of different ways to connect the truth and the grace of the Scriptures with the situations that they face. That's part of the joy, as Lamin Sanneh says, the Bible was meant to be translated. And early Christians saw that, translated not only linguistically but also translated to fit all the different situations of life.

Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation

I'm sure that many of us have heard the same biblical passage being preached in several places, and have noticed differences in the way the passage is explained and presented, especially in the context of Hispanics in America. Those of us who have lived in America and in the Hispanic world, and we speak English and Spanish, know that these cultures are a little different. For example, if you hear a sermon from a passage, like Hebrews 6... and we are in a Hispanic context, the preaching would be a little more lively, because our culture is a little more lively. And the preaching doesn't put a great emphasis on logic. In an Anglo-Saxon context, the preaching is done in a more logical way in order to reach a conclusion, but above all, the emphasis is on theology. Now, I'm aware that one of the dangers, or problems, of the Hispanic church is that people go in and out of the church. They stay for two or three months, go back to the world, and then return to the church. The author of Hebrews constantly warned that once we cut off our relationship with Christ, we could not return. One has to be a little careful not to tell people that they cannot return to the church, so as not to eliminate the reconciliation when they do return. You want the person back, so you have to explain this message to them carefully. But I do emphasize what the author is saying to the Hebrews, that totally rejecting Jesus brings a form of curse from which the person cannot return. In the American context, where English is spoken, I believe that the emphasis is placed on the assurance of salvation, which our reformed church explains. And that can generate complacency... Notice the difference in the Latin context? In this context, I emphasize that they should not leave, but they have a chance to return. But in the English-speaking context, due to the complacency that produces a vain kind of life, I say, "No, living in that way risks denying Jesus and being rejected forever without the chance to return to him and be saved."

Dr. Constantine Campbell is Associate Professor of New Testament Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL.

Dr. Joel C. Hunter is Senior Pastor at Northland, A Church Distributed in Orlando, Florida.

Dr. Gordon Isaac is Berkshire Associate Professor of Advent Christian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Craig S. Keener is the F.M. and Ada Thompson Chair of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Dan Lacich is Pastor of Northland, A Church Distributed in Longwood, FL.

Dr. Richard Lints is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Fredrick Long is Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Sean McDonough is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Jason Oakes is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies (Christian Thought) at Talbot School of Theology.

Dr. Alvin Padilla is Dean of Hispanic Ministries and Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver (Ph.D. candidate) is Administrative Elder and Lead Pastor at Grace Evangelical Free Church in Orange County, California.

Dr. Eckhard Schnabel is the Mary F. Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California.

Dr. James D. Smith III is Associate Professor of Church History at Bethel Seminary, San Diego Campus, as well as an adjunct professor of religion at the University of San Diego

Dr. Aida Besancon Spencer is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Mark Strauss taught at Biola University, Christian Heritage College, and Talbot School of Theology before joining the Bethel Seminary faculty in 1993.

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace is Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer is Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
TWO

THE KINGDOM OF GOD



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Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

Lesson Two

The Kingdom of God

INTRODUCTION

Anytime you read a complicated story it's easy to become lost in its many details. But one way to avoid this problem is to identify the more important parts of the story and then refer to them over and over. By keeping the main elements in mind, we can see how the details fit together. In many ways, the same kind of thing is true when it comes to understanding the theology of the New Testament. When we start digging into these Scriptures, we discover so many details that it's easy to lose our bearings. So, we need to be careful to identify the main ideas in the New Testament and refer to them over and over.

This is the second lesson in our series, *Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament*, and we've entitled it "The Kingdom of God." In this lesson, we'll point out one of the most prominent teachings of the New Testament: the kingdom of God.

As we'll see, the theme of the kingdom of God is so important in the New Testament that, properly understood, New Testament theology *is* kingdom theology. In other words, everything New Testament authors wrote was, to some extent, devoted to explaining and furthering the kingdom of God.

We'll explore the prominence of the kingdom of God in New Testament theology from two perspectives. First, we'll look at what New Testament authors called the good news, or gospel, of the kingdom. And second, we'll point out how the coming of the kingdom influenced everything they wrote. These two topics will help us see that the doctrine of the kingdom of God upholds every dimension of the New Testament. Let's begin with the good news of the kingdom.

GOOD NEWS

Everyone familiar with the New Testament knows that its theology is very complex. But if there's one New Testament teaching that everyone should try to understand and apply to life, it would have to be the gospel. In fact, many of us would agree that if we don't understand the good news of Christ, then our ability to understand any facet of New Testament theology is severely limited. But this raises a serious question. Why is the gospel, or "good news," so crucial in New Testament theology? Why is it obviously more than just one of many doctrines found in the New Testament? As we're about to see, the gospel is so important in New Testament theology because of its connection with the broader teaching on the kingdom of God. And this doctrine of good news about the kingdom of God shapes every dimension of New Testament theology.

We'll look at the good news of the kingdom in three steps. First, we'll consider the meaning of the good news. Second, we'll explore the basic concept of the kingdom of God. And third, we'll trace the developing significance of this theme in biblical history. Let's begin with the meaning of the good news of God's kingdom.

MEANING

The gospel of the kingdom is a way of speaking about the good news declared for us of the King, the Lord. In particular, as we think about the New Testament declarations about Jesus, this is the announcement that "the king has come." But not only "the king has come," but that the lordship, the kingship of Jesus has been declared, declared on the basis that his death and his resurrection have confirmed his kingship. So, there's a sense in which the good news is a declaration of something that *has happened* already. It has implications for how we live. But the good news is that Jesus has come; he has defeated death rather mysteriously by dying... There is a sense, therefore, God declares to us this good news as already having occurred. There are, however, promises still to be fulfilled in that good news will have implications for eternity.

— Dr. Richard Lints

In Luke 4:43, Jesus summarized the purpose of his ministry in this way:

I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

Although the words “good news” only appear once in Luke 4:43, the concept of the good news is actually indicated twice in this verse. The phrase “good news” comes from the Greek noun *euangelion*, a term that occurs some 76 times in the New Testament. The etymology of *euangelion* indicates that it means something like a “good announcement,” or a “good message.”

But notice that in this verse Jesus also said he “must proclaim the good news.” The Greek verb translated, “proclaim” is *euangelizo*. This term comes from the same family of Greek terms as *euangelion*, and means “to proclaim or to announce good news.” It appears some 54 times in the New Testament. The frequency of these terms points to how important this concept was for New Testament authors.

Many Evangelicals today think of the good news, or gospel, as an explanation of the steps an individual must take to find salvation in Christ. But this wasn't the idea that Jesus had in mind. As much as we should be ready to share how to become followers of Christ, the good news in the Scriptures is about something much more significant. As we'll see, rather than referring to the salvation of any individual or group of people, the *gospel* is the good news of victory for the kingdom of God.

To make sense of this, we need to realize that the authors of the New Testament drew the expression, “proclaim the good news” from the Septuagint, the Greek

translation of the Old Testament. The Septuagint uses the same verb we mentioned earlier, *euangelizo*, some 20 times. This word translated the Hebrew verb *basar*, meaning “to bring or announce *good news*.” But, passages like 1 Samuel 31:9 and 2 Samuel 18:19 indicate that when these words were used in reference to kings and kingdoms, they signified the good news of *victory in battle*. This observation is important because the “good news” in the New Testament is so often associated with victory for God’s kingdom. In effect, in Luke 4:43, when Jesus said:

I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

We may actually translate this statement along these lines:

I must proclaim the good news of [victory for] the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).

When the New Testament speaks of the good news of victory for God’s kingdom, it refers to a very special kind of victory, as we’ll see later in this lesson. So, even though it may seem odd at first, we should acknowledge that the basic concept of the good news or gospel in the New Testament is the good news of “[victory for]” the kingdom of God.

Having seen that the good news of the kingdom means the good news of victory for the kingdom of God, we’re now ready to explore the basic concept of the kingdom of God itself.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The kingdom of God is specifically associated with the gospel at least seven times in the New Testament. We see the expression “the good news of the kingdom,” with only slight variations, in Matthew 4:23; 9:35; and 24:14; in Luke 4:43; 8:1; and 16:16; and in Acts 8:12. This frequency points to the importance of connecting the gospel — or the message of victory — with God’s kingdom. But to understand this, we must first understand what Jesus and his followers meant when they spoke of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is God’s rule over God’s people in God’s place. We see that right at the start of the Bible in Genesis 1 and 2 where God’s people, Adam and Eve, are in a relationship with God, God is the ruler, and they are in God’s place in the Garden of Eden. Then, through sin, that’s messed up, but God reconstitutes his kingdom, first through Abraham and then Abraham’s descendants, and then finally through Moses after the exodus with the nation of Israel. This is God’s rule over God’s people Israel and ultimately in God’s place, the land of Canaan. But then we see that trajectory fulfilled even more fully with the coming of Christ, and we see that God rules through Christ as his king, his appointed king. And God’s people consist of Jews and Gentiles, people from all nations and all tribes and languages, but God’s place is the New Jerusalem, our heavenly home,

rather than a geographical location... So, in the New Testament we see that the kingdom of God exists now through the reign of Christ over his people from every tribe, nation and language, scattered throughout the world and not located in one particular place, geographical place, but located in heaven, our spiritual home. But then, the New Testament gives us a glimpse, too, of what the kingdom of God will be like when Jesus returns, and while that kingdom now is somewhat hidden in this world, it will be seen clearly when Christ returns; every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and God will reign perfectly through his king, Christ, over his people who know him and call him Father in a heavenly New Jerusalem.

— Dr. Constantine R. Campbell

Scripture refers to the kingdom of God in two primary ways. On the one side, it often speaks of God's kingdom in terms of God's unwavering sovereignty or his unchanging rule over all of creation. It also refers to his unfolding kingdom and the way God has revealed his kingship throughout human history. Let's look first at his unwavering sovereignty.

Unwavering Sovereignty

Passages like 1 Chronicles 29:11 and 1 Timothy 6:15 speak of the entire creation as God's kingdom because God always has ruled and always will rule over all that he has made. We need to keep in mind that the Scriptures speak of God's sovereignty as taking place on two levels: both in heaven and on earth.

In regard to heaven, Scripture speaks of God's kingship in places like 1 Kings 8:27. In this verse, Solomon made it clear that "the heavens, even the highest heaven," is a created place that "cannot contain [God]." But God still condescends and reveals himself before his creatures there.

Passages like Isaiah 6:1; 2 Chronicles 18:18; Job 1:6; Psalm 82:1; and Daniel 7:9-10; as well as New Testament passages like Luke 22:30; and Revelation 4-6 indicate that heaven is God's palace above the visible world where all kinds of activities take place. As God is enthroned in heaven, he receives reports, hears prayers, deliberates, makes plans, and issues royal decrees. He directs spiritual creatures to do his bidding on earth. On occasion, he even gives specially chosen human beings access to his palace through visions, and commissions them to his service. In his heavenly court he declares guilt and innocence, and sentences spiritual creatures, individual human beings, and nations according to his justice and mercy. But God's heavenly actions don't just direct his kingdom in heaven. He is also sovereign in the lower realms of his creation — on the earth.

Although the Scriptures speak of the kingdom of God as God's unwavering sovereignty in both heaven and earth, when Jesus and New Testament authors referred to the kingdom of God on earth, they had in mind what we've called God's unfolding

kingdom. And it's in this earthly realm that we can see how God reveals his kingdom throughout human history.

Unfolding Kingdom

Now, as we've just said, God has always been in full control of his creation and always will be. But the unfolding kingdom of God refers to a particular way that God reveals, displays, or demonstrates his sovereignty over creation throughout history. So, while Scripture confirms how God revealed his kingship in heaven, biblical authors give most of their attention to explaining how God unfolded his kingship on earth.

In the beginning, God visibly displayed his kingship in the Garden of Eden. He put the first human beings in that sacred garden and commissioned them to extend his visible kingdom throughout the world. They were to fill and subdue the earth as royal and priestly images of God. But Satan led Adam and Eve into a major setback for the kingdom. In response, God cursed his creation and made humanity's task more difficult. He divided humanity into two rival factions: those who served God and those who continued to join Satan's rebellion against God.

This rivalry took many forms throughout biblical history and led to many challenges for God's kingdom. But the Scriptures indicate time and again that in the end God will have victory over all who have opposed him. His image will succeed in filling and having dominion over the earth, and the wonders of God's kingdom will be revealed everywhere. And at that time, God's victory over all rebellion will be so great that every creature will acknowledge him as the King of creation. As the apostle Paul described in Philippians 2:10-11:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

This glorious vision of the goal of history is the victory that Jesus and his followers announced as, "the good news of the kingdom of God."

Now that we've sketched the basic concept of the good news of the kingdom by looking at both the good news and the kingdom of God, we should turn to the developing significance of this proclamation of victory for God's kingdom.

DEVELOPING SIGNIFICANCE

The good news of victory for the kingdom is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of New Testament theology that it appears explicitly or implicitly everywhere in the New Testament. By the time the New Testament was written, the hope of victory for God's kingdom had developed so much significance that it permeated every dimension of New Testament theology.

There are many ways we could trace the developing significance of the kingdom of God in New Testament theology, but for our purposes we'll look at just two aspects. First we'll consider Israel's failures leading up to the days of the New Testament. And second, we'll investigate Israel's hopes for the kingdom prior to Christ's arrival. Let's think first about Israel's failures.

Israel's Failures

After sin brought creation and the human race under a curse, God chose Abraham and his descendants to fulfill the kingdom commission he had first given to Adam and Eve. God promised to multiply the family of Abraham. And he gave Abraham's descendants the Promised Land as the starting point for spreading God's blessings throughout the world. In the days of Moses and Joshua, God furthered the Israelites' privileges and responsibilities by giving them victory over the Canaanites and over the satanic spirits the Canaanites served. Later on, David, Solomon and a few other kings of Israel and Judah had significant successes in extending God's kingdom to other nations. In fact, at the height of Solomon's reign, Israel was one of the world's most glorious empires.

Despite these privileges, every generation of Abraham's descendants failed God in one way or another. But God showed patience and enabled them to move forward despite their sins. Sadly, once God's people became their own kingdom, with a royal dynasty and a temple in the capital city, Israel's failures became so flagrant that God turned in judgment against them. He called for the evil empires of Assyria and Babylon to conquer Israel in war. These severe defeats finally removed the house of David, decimated the temple, destroyed Jerusalem and sent most Israelites into exile. The Promised Land was left in ruins. And at the end of the Old Testament, the accomplishments of God's kingdom seemed to have all but disappeared. By the time of the New Testament, God's kingdom in Israel had suffered under the tyranny of Gentile nations and the false satanic gods they served for more than 500 years.

Unfortunately, modern Christians are so far removed from these experiences that most of us are unaware of how much the defeat of God's kingdom in the Old Testament impacted on the theology of the New Testament. But, Israel's subjection to Gentile nations weighed heavily on the minds of Jews in the first century, including Jesus' followers. First century Jews wondered, was the exile the end of God's visible kingdom? Was there any hopeful good news for the kingdom of God? This climate led New Testament authors to insist that the kingdom of God had not ended. All was not lost. Jesus of Nazareth had proclaimed the good news that the exile would end. And God's victorious kingdom would be established throughout the world in Christ, in spite of Israel's failures.

Now that we've seen the developing significance of the kingdom through Israel's failures, we're ready to look at Israel's hopes for God's kingdom after the exile.

Israel's Hopes

In the Old Testament, God spoke through his prophets to warn Israel of their impending defeat and exile because of their unfaithfulness. But, in his mercy, he also inspired the prophets to call those in exile to repent in hopes of a great victory. These prophecies were complex, but in general terms, Israel hoped for the time when God would defeat his enemies and deliver his people into the blessings of his glorious, worldwide kingdom.

We can see these hopes many places in Old Testament prophecy, but for the sake of time, we'll consider just two verses from a well-known prophecy in Isaiah 52. First, in Isaiah 52:7 we read:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

This verse is important for us because it explicitly mentions the good news of victory for God's kingdom. It also closely parallels Isaiah 40:9 where Isaiah made a similar statement. The larger contexts of these two passages indicate that the "good news" refers to the unprecedented victory of God's kingdom following the end of Israel's exile. These hopeful predictions permeated the theological reflections of the vast majority of Jews in the first century. And not surprisingly, they also permeate the theology of the New Testament.

The Old Testament narrative as a whole is dominated by the theme of exile. It goes back to the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, and that's just recapitulated in Israel's own history. And so, this sort of depressing turn of events, which looms so large in the Old Testament narrative, naturally calls forth a desire for some hope beyond exile. So, we have plenty of near-term prophecies, particularly in Isaiah, that God will restore his people, but when you tie that back into the creation narrative, you realize that mere restoration to land is never going to be enough to undo the primal damage done in the beginning, or shortly after the beginning... And so, it's quite natural to find in the Old Testament prophets a yearning for near-term deliverance for Israel perhaps at the hand of a particularly gifted king, but also ultimate deliverance from some ultimate kingly representative of God's people.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

A closer look at Isaiah 52:7 highlights four features related to Israel's hopes for the victory of God's kingdom.

First, Isaiah said that messengers would “bring good news” and “bring good tidings” to Zion. Both of these phrases translate the Hebrew verb *basar*, which the Septuagint translates with *euangelizo*. As we saw earlier, this same terminology is used in the New Testament for the good news of victory for God’s kingdom in Christ.

Second, we see Isaiah 52:7 quoted in Romans 10:15. Here, Paul indicated that Christian preaching fulfilled Isaiah’s prediction of messengers announcing good news at the end of Israel’s exile.

Third, Isaiah predicted that the good news would be a proclamation of “peace” and “salvation.” In Ephesians 6:15, Paul referred to the Christian “gospel of peace” and in Ephesians 1:13 he mentioned “the gospel of your salvation.”

And fourth, the last line of this verse summarizes the good news when it declares, “Your God reigns!” This message forms the basis of the gospel that Jesus and the New Testament authors repeatedly referred to as “the good news of the kingdom” — or reign — “of God.”

Now that we’ve seen how Isaiah prophesied about the coming of Israel’s hopes in Isaiah 52:7, let’s look at verse 10 of the same chapter. Here, Isaiah predicted the two sides of victory that Israel longed to see. First, he anticipated the defeat of God’s enemies.

The defeat of God’s enemies appears explicitly in the first half of Isaiah 52:10 where Isaiah said:

The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations (Isaiah 52:10).

Here we see that God will “lay bare his holy arm,” meaning his arm of strength in war to defeat his enemies.

Of course, everyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that God defeated enemies many times. So, what made this prediction about God’s victory so special? In this verse, Isaiah predicted that God would defeat his enemies “in the sight of all the nations.” In other words, Isaiah predicted that after Israel’s exile, God will *completely* defeat all of his enemies *everywhere*. He will disempower them, remove them from the earth, and send them to eternal judgment.

Second, the last half of Isaiah 52:10 tells us that God’s victory will also result in the deliverance of God’s people into the blessings of his kingdom. Listen to this part of Isaiah 52:10:

All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:10).

We know that God delivered his people repeatedly in the Old Testament. But in the deliverance that Isaiah predicted here, “*all the ends of the earth*” will see it. Just as the defeat of God’s enemies will be universal, his deliverance will be worldwide and final. In the end, God will deliver his people into his kingdom of joy, love, righteousness, peace, prosperity, and endless delight in his glorious presence.

We'll look more closely at these two aspects of God's victory later in our lesson, but as these verses illustrate, the prophecies of the coming kingdom are seen throughout the Old Testament.

Unfortunately, for over 2,000 years, traditional Christian theology has obscured the prominence of the kingdom in the New Testament. At different times in the history of the church, Christians have rightly emphasized a variety of theological outlooks in response to various issues. But we must always remind ourselves that when the New Testament was written, the defeat of God's kingdom weighed heavily on Jesus' followers. Nothing was more important to them than their belief that God's kingdom would rise to unprecedented victory in Jesus. And for this reason, New Testament theology is cast within the framework of the good news of the kingdom of God.

So far in this lesson on the kingdom of God, we've introduced the prominent theme of the good news of the kingdom in New Testament theology. Now, we should turn to our second main topic: how the coming of the kingdom shaped the theology of the New Testament.

COMING

We've all had times when we believed that certain things were about to happen. But when the time came, what actually occurred was very different from what we'd imagined. In many ways this was true for the authors of the New Testament. The vast majority of Jews living in the first century had firm expectations of how the victory of God's kingdom was going to come. But the early followers of Jesus gradually learned that it was not coming as they had imagined. So, in a variety of ways, New Testament theology was devoted to explaining how the victory of the kingdom was actually going to arrive.

To understand how the coming of the kingdom influenced New Testament theology, we'll touch first on the expectations for the arrival of God's kingdom. Then we'll look at New Testament outlooks on what we'll call the threefold victory of the kingdom. Let's consider first the expectations for the coming kingdom.

EXPECTATIONS

In the first century A.D., all Jews with even a small measure of commitment to their ancestors' faith longed for the victorious kingdom of God to come. They all hoped that God would defeat their enemies and deliver his people into the blessings of his kingdom. This was true for Jesus' followers as well. But there were some striking differences as to how and when they expected God's victorious kingdom to come.

On the one side, when rabbis and other leaders in Israel taught about the coming of the final victory of God's kingdom, they referred to familiar Old Testament terminology like "the last days" and "the day of the Lord." But they also spoke of two great ages of history. Rabbis often referred to the present age of sin, suffering and death

as “this age” — *olam hazeh* in Hebrew — and of the future age of righteousness, love, joy, and peace that would follow the exile as “the age to come” — *olam haba’* in Hebrew.

They taught that “this age” reached its low point in the curse of Israel’s exile from the Promised Land. Of course, God was sovereign over this age, and from time to time he revealed, or demonstrated, his kingship in remarkable ways. But by the first century A.D., God’s people had been oppressed and kept from the blessings of God’s kingdom for hundreds of years. The widespread expectation was that in “the age to come,” the enemies of God would be completely defeated and eliminated from the earth. And the people of God would be delivered forever into the immeasurable blessings of God’s worldwide kingdom.

In biblical literature and also in discussion about the Bible, we sometimes find or encounter the terms “this age” and “the age to come.” What is meant by these terms is the following: “This age” is the age, the period, the era, in which human beings live, the age since the Fall. It is life in a fallen world. “The age to come,” as expected by the Old Testament prophets, was a time where God would reconstitute paradise in some sense; there would be a new heavens and a new earth, and the human heart of stone would be removed, and we all would perfectly follow and do the will of God. There would be no violence among human beings; there would be no violence even in the animal kingdom.

— Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel

In the first century, different Jewish sects had different outlooks on what had to happen before history would transition from “this age” to “the age to come.” But most parties agreed that the transition from this age of defeat to the age of God’s victorious kingdom would occur through a catastrophic war. They believed the Messiah, the heir of David’s throne, would lead the angels of heaven and God’s faithful people to victory over God’s human and spiritual enemies.

The belief that God would defeat not only human enemies, but also spiritual enemies was supported throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. For instance, in Exodus 12:12 God spoke of defeating not only the Egyptians, but the gods of the Egyptians as well. In 1 Samuel 5:1-12 God made war with the Philistines, and also defeated their false god, Dagon. This is why Isaiah 21:9 coupled the defeat of Babylon with the destruction of Babylon’s gods.

Old Testament passages like Haggai 2:6-9; Zechariah 9–12 and Ezekiel 38–39 were interpreted in Jewish apocalyptic literature as prophecies about the great cosmic war in which the Messiah would lead the armies of God in victory over the nations and the evil spirits who ruled over them. In this way, the Messiah would defeat all of God’s enemies and would deliver all of God’s people into his glorious, worldwide kingdom.

On the other side, as widespread as these Jewish outlooks were, Jesus’ followers began to anticipate the arrival of victory for God’s kingdom differently. Like the majority of their contemporaries, New Testament authors believed that history divided into two

great ages. And they agreed that the Messiah would defeat God's human and spiritual enemies and deliver God's redeemed people from "this age" into the blessings of "the age to come." But Jesus' followers came to believe that the transition from this age to the age to come would happen in ways that were contrary to what most Jews in their day believed.

In the first place, unlike most Jews, New Testament authors believed that *Jesus* was the promised Messiah, the chosen son of David, who would bring the final worldwide victory for God's kingdom. And this commitment to Jesus as the Messiah deeply shaped everything they wrote in the New Testament.

We can see this devotion to Jesus' messianic kingship in the royal titles that the New Testament gives him. For example, the New Testament refers to Jesus with the royal title "Christ" some 529 times. The Greek word *Christos* translates the Old Testament Hebrew term *Meshiach* from which we derive our term Messiah. Originally, these terms meant simply, "anointed one." In Old Testament times, prophets, priests and kings were specially anointed offices in Israel. But by the time of the New Testament, "the Anointed One," or "the Messiah," was almost synonymous with the great King of David's house that would bring about the transition to the age to come.

A second royal title attributed to Jesus in the New Testament is "Son of God." This expression, or some variation of it like "the Son" or "the Son of the Most High," appears some 118 times in the New Testament. This terminology indicated that Jesus was the rightful King of Israel. Listen to John 1:49 where Nathanael said to Jesus:

You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel (John 1:49).

And as Peter put it in Matthew 16:16 when he confessed his faith in Jesus:

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16).

This expression was similar to a third royal designation for Jesus: "son of David." We see this in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke at least 20 times in reference to Jesus as the rightful, God-ordained heir of David's throne.

For example, in Luke 1:32-33, the angel Gabriel said to Mary at the Annunciation:

[Jesus] will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end (Luke 1:32-33).

Here Gabriel spoke of Jesus with the royal title "Son of the Most High." He then explained that Jesus will sit on "the throne of his father David." Luke recorded that Jesus "will reign ... forever [and] his kingdom will never end." As the Son of the Most High, Jesus is the one who will bring about the final, never-ending victory of the kingdom of God.

All of these passages point to a crucial teaching in New Testament theology: Jesus is the Messiah who will bring the kingdom of God to the earth in all of its fullness.

In the second place, Jesus' early followers believed that he would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come in ways that they and others had not expected.

Listen to the way Jesus revealed this change of expectations for God's kingdom in Matthew 13:31-32:

He told [the crowd] ... "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32).

In this parable, Jesus taught that God's victorious kingdom would begin as something small, "like a mustard seed," grow for a period of time, and *then* reach its final culmination.

Modern theologians often call Jesus' outlook on the coming of God's messianic kingdom "inaugurated eschatology." This phrase refers to the idea that the work of the Messiah has already been manifested on earth, but the *final* victory is still to come. They also speak of it as the "already, but not yet." In other words, the victory of God's kingdom has come *already*, but *not yet* in its fullness. This outlook on the victory of God's coming kingdom offers countless insights into the theology of the New Testament.

One of the biggest questions related to the kingdom of God when Jesus announces the kingdom of God is, is it a present reality? Has it come in his words and deeds, or is it still a future entity? Well, scholars talk about the "inaugurated kingdom of God." The "inaugurated" means that it is both present and future. Jesus announces the kingdom. The kingdom is arriving through his words and deeds, especially through his death on the cross and his resurrection. So, the kingdom is inaugurated, but it's not yet consummated. When it's fully consummated, it will fully come to earth, we'll receive our glorified bodies, we'll enter into an eternal relationship with God. So, we live in the present day between the times, between the inauguration of the kingdom, its consummation. We still live in these bodies; we still live in this fallen world, yet the kingdom has come because Christ is reigning at the right hand of the Father. He's also reigning in our hearts. And so the kingdom has come, it's "already," but it is still future. It is "not yet" as well.

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

On the whole, it helps to think of the New Testament outlook on the coming of God's kingdom as a threefold victory. First, in the inauguration, God initiated the victory of the kingdom through Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, and through the foundational ministries of his first century apostles and prophets. After this, in the continuation, Jesus advanced the victory of God's kingdom from his throne in heaven. And Jesus will continue to further the kingdom throughout the history of the church. And

finally, Jesus will bring the consummation of the kingdom when he returns in glory. This is the final victory of God's kingdom when all evil will be destroyed and God's glorious kingdom will extend everywhere in the world.

As New Testament authors devoted themselves to explaining different sorts of theological matters, they did so in large part in terms of these three stages of Jesus' messianic work.

As we've seen, the coming of the kingdom changed the expectations of Jesus' followers in the first century. Now, let's look at the vital place the threefold victory of God's kingdom held in New Testament theology.

THREEFOLD VICTORY

The fact that the victory of God's kingdom comes in the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Jesus' messianic work raised all kinds of questions in the early church. What had Jesus already accomplished? What would he accomplish in church history? What would he do at his return? These kinds of questions were so important in the first century that they deeply shaped the theology of the New Testament. New Testament authors drew upon the fact that the defeat of God's enemies and the deliverance of God's people had begun in Christ's first advent. These events would continue throughout church history, and would finally reach completion in Christ's second victorious coming.

Time will only allow us to point to some of the ways this threefold victory shaped New Testament theology, but it will help to look in two directions. First, we'll note how the New Testament explains the defeat of God's enemies in the three stages of the kingdom. Then, we'll examine New Testament teachings on the deliverance of God's people in all three stages as well. Let's look first at the defeat of God's enemies.

Defeat

Unbelieving Jews held that the Messiah would defeat both human and spiritual enemies of God. New Testament authors believed this as well. But they also understood that Jesus would do this in ways that were appropriate for each stage of his kingdom.

New Testament theology emphasizes that Jesus' strategy was twofold in the inauguration of the kingdom. On one side, he inflicted the judgment of God on God's spiritual enemies. Throughout his ministry, Jesus disempowered evil spirits by casting them out of their positions of power. But on the other side, he extended the mercy of God to God's human enemies. To be sure, Christ's mercy toward people led to many blessings for them, but it also furthered the defeat of evil spirits by robbing them of their human servants.

In Matthew 12:28-29, Jesus himself explained this strategy when he said:

If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you... how can anyone enter a strong man's house and

carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house (Matthew 12:28-29).

Jesus came and bound up demons, or “tie[d] up the strong man,” in order to “rob his house.” In other words, Jesus drove demons out and freed those who were under the demons’ control.

We can also see this twofold strategy in places like John 12:31-32 where Jesus said:

Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:31-32).

Once again, in the inauguration of the kingdom, Jesus directly attacked evil spirits, or “the prince of this world,” Satan. He drove him out and disempowered him. But along with this aggression against Satan, Jesus offered salvation to humanity.

Sometimes people wonder, how can this view of *Christus Victor*, the victorious Christ, be consistent or related to the idea of Christ as the one who died for our sins, a substitutionary atonement? ... In John’s gospel, the third time Jesus speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up as the serpent was lifted in the wilderness — it’s in John 12 — he connects that lifting up specifically with the statement, “now will the ruler of this world be cast down.” So, Jesus takes the place of the cursed serpent, he goes to death to destroy death from within. So, his first act as *Christus Victor* is to destroy death from within by being lifted up on the cross.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The defeat of God’s spiritual enemies was so important to Christ’s inaugural work that in passages like Hebrews 2:14-15, New Testament authors wrote about Christ’s atoning death on the cross in terms of this same twofold strategy. They made it clear that, through his death, Jesus broke the power Satan had over human beings. And by making atonement for the sins of humanity, Jesus set people free who had been slaves to sin and death.

These ideas appear clearly in Colossians 2:15 where the apostle Paul wrote:

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

Demonic powers and authorities lost their positions of prominence when Jesus set his people free from the dominion of sin by dying on the cross.

In this light, it should be no surprise that in Ephesians 4:8, the resurrection and ascension of Christ is described as a plundering of Satan’s human servants:

When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people (Ephesians 4:8).

As this passage indicates, when men and women come to faith in Christ, it's as if Christ takes them as plunder from the kingdom of Satan.

This strategy for the defeat of God's spiritual opponents also appears in the inaugural work of Christ's apostles in the book of Acts. Following Jesus' example, the apostles repeatedly cast out demons as they preached the gospel in Gentile nations and dispossessed Satan of many human servants.

Not surprisingly, when we consider the continuation of Christ's kingdom throughout church history, we find that followers of Christ are to pursue the strategy that Jesus used in the inauguration. Rather than gaining victory over God's *human* enemies, we should focus our attention on the evil spirits who oppose the ways of God.

Although many modern Christians fail to realize it, New Testament kingdom theology frequently reminds us that the church of Jesus is not at war with people, but with Satan and other evil spirits. And it's our responsibility to contend with these spiritual enemies of God.

This is why, in passages like Ephesians 6:11-12, the New Testament interprets our difficulties and struggles as conflicts with evil spirits. Here we read:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 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 6:11-12).

Much of the time modern Christians think of the struggles of their lives as conflict with mere human beings. But here we see that the conflict facing the church is actually with "the devil," "rulers," "authorities," "the powers of this dark world" and "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." And by putting on the full armor of God we are able to disempower these spiritual beings that oppose the kingdom of God.

This passage is not unusual in its emphasis on spiritual warfare as a dimension of Christ's kingdom throughout Christian history. The constant conflict we experience with Satan and other evil spirits can also be found in a number of other passages like Ephesians 4:27; 1 Timothy 3:7; 2 Timothy 2:26; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8; 1 John 3:8; and Jude 9. But at the same time, as we read in 2 Corinthians 5:20, we must also extend the mercy of God to his human enemies.

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 5:20).

Following Paul's example, as "Christ's ambassadors," representatives of God's kingdom, we continue to defeat God's *spiritual* enemies by seeking reconciliation between God and his *human* enemies.

New Testament theology also associates the defeat of God's enemies with the consummation of Christ's kingdom. It's important to note, however, that a dramatic change occurs in Jesus' strategy at the consummation. When Christ returns, he will no longer extend mercy to God's human enemies. Instead, Christ will lead in battle against God's spiritual *and* human enemies to bring about their utter defeat, their elimination from the earth, and their eternal judgment.

Listen to the way Revelation 19:13-15 describes the defeat of God's human enemies at the consummation:

His name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him ... Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations (Revelation 19:13-15).

In a similar way, Revelation 20:10 depicts Christ's glorious return as the time of final judgment against evil spirits and Satan:

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever (Revelation 20:10).

Of course, we've only briefly summarized these matters. But we can see from these examples that New Testament authors felt it was necessary to clarify this facet of the kingdom's victory time and again. They stressed the priority of aggression against evil spirits and emphasized kindness toward God's human enemies during both the inauguration and continuation of the kingdom. But they also pointed out that, in the end, when Christ returns, both human and spiritual enemies will come under the eternal judgment of God. These emphases confirm that the defeat of God's enemies is a crucial feature of New Testament kingdom theology.

The kingdom has started, it is here, but it is still wending its way, forging its way until the consummation. So, in what ways, then, the question asks, is Jesus already victorious over his enemies? Well, first of all, the most crucial victory is in the cross itself so that he defeats Satan... In that sense, the crucial battle has been fought and won. And that's why, for example, in Revelation 12, the saints respond to the accuser of the brethren, they overcome him by the blood of the Lamb. They overcome Satan — described metaphorically in Revelation 12 — they overcome him by the blood of the Lamb. And, so, that battle has already been won. But, like Hitler toward the end of World War II, when he could see that the war was over, he didn't quit. He was filled with fury because he knew his time was short. That's what is said of Satan. So, Satan is more virulent now, and every time the gospel advances, more people are converted, righteousness is established in individual lives, in the local church, in any sort of subculture, that is already an ongoing defeat of Satan and

of all those who love darkness. And the ultimate trajectory toward the ultimate victory is when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, and he will reign forever...

The point is that the trajectory has been set in place so that, as Philippians 2 puts it, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, and the fundamental victory has been won. That's still got to be worked out in some respects. It's being worked out in the lives of many who do joyfully, by the power of the Spirit, bend the knee. But everyone will bend the knee on the last day.

— Dr. D. A. Carson

Now that we've seen how the threefold victory of God's kingdom includes the defeat of God's enemies, we should point out how the deliverance of God's people also plays a major role in New Testament theology.

Deliverance

If there's one facet of the inauguration of the kingdom that stands out to most readers, it's the deliverance of God's people into the blessings of the kingdom. For instance, one of the main reasons the Gospels focus so much attention on Jesus' miracles is because these miracles represented the blessings of the kingdom that Jesus brought to earth. Jesus' miracles were temporary foretastes of kingdom blessings that God's people would enjoy forever in the age to come. Beyond this, Jesus' attention to social justice for the poor, the needy, and those who suffered at the hands of others also represented important blessings of the kingdom.

The miracles and social justice of Jesus and his apostles and prophets were extraordinary blessings. But the greatest blessing in the inauguration of God's kingdom was the gift of eternal salvation that Christ gave to all who believed in him.

This is why in Colossians 1:13-14 Paul described receiving salvation in Christ as deliverance from one kingdom to another.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13-14).

The theme of deliverance into kingdom blessings also helps us understand why the New Testament emphasizes the Holy Spirit's work so much. By the end of the apostolic ministry, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Christ's followers was the one blessing of the world to come that was granted to every believer. As we read in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22:

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

This passage closely parallels Ephesians 1:14. Both passages indicate that the Holy Spirit is Christ's "seal of ownership on us." He is "a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." In other words, the Holy Spirit, the power of God in our lives today, is the first installment of the grand inheritance that followers of Christ will receive when Christ returns in glory.

The New Testament also addresses the deliverance of God's people during the continuation of Christ's kingdom. In the ongoing life of the church, New Testament authors encouraged Christ's followers to remember how God had delivered them *already* into the blessings of his kingdom. New Testament theology emphasizes that, not only has God saved us from judgment for our sins, but God also continues to grant the gift of the Holy Spirit to his church. For example, listen to 1 Corinthians 4:20:

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power (1 Corinthians 4:20).

Here, as in many other places, the "power" Paul had in mind was the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God is the wondrous reality of God's blessings for his people that we experience day after day. He sanctifies us, produces his fruit in our lives, fills us with joy, and strengthens us with his power against our enemies. Despite the fact that many branches of Christ's church today de-emphasize the Holy Spirit's role in believers' lives, he is our greatest blessing during the continuation of Christ's kingdom.

New Testament theology also encourages followers of Christ who live during the continuation of his kingdom, to keep their hopes fixed on even greater blessings in the kingdom to come.

Hebrews 12:28 calls for followers of Christ to remain faithful in light of the blessings of the kingdom still ahead:

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28).

And in James 2:5 we read:

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? (James 2:5).

James called on the church to stop showing favoritism to the rich because it is not the wealthy who receive the kingdom. Rather, those who are "rich in faith" and "those who love him" will "inherit the kingdom he promised."

Jesus delivered his people into kingdom blessings when he inaugurated the kingdom. And his kingdom blessings have continued in the life of the church throughout history. But Scripture teaches that the complete deliverance of God's people into the blessings of God's kingdom won't be accomplished until the final consummation of the

kingdom. In the consummation, God's people will fully experience all the promised blessings of the kingdom. As we read in 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).

When Christ returns, the kingdom of the world will be completely replaced with the victorious kingdom of God.

And listen to Revelation 5:9-10 where the heavenly creatures sing in praise of Christ:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9-10).

In the consummation, God's people will be delivered to become "a kingdom [of] priests," and "they will reign on the earth."

When we think about Jesus coming again and winning his final victory, we don't want to think simply in terms of Jesus overwhelming his enemies by what the French would call *force majeure*, just raw exercise of power. In Revelation it talks about the sword coming out of Jesus' mouth, and that is surely the sword of the Word, the sword of justice, that final judgment is as much about exposure as anything else. And likewise for the saints, particularly in the New Testament context, vindication is one of the chief themes. They've gone on believing in Jesus and gone on turning the other cheek and loving your enemies and doing all these other things while the world says this is complete foolishness. So, at the judgment, all things are made clear, all things become transparent; the truth will out, and that will be good news for the saints and bad news for the wicked whose wickedness consists precisely in resisting Jesus and his message.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

As we can see, New Testament authors drew attention to the defeat of God's enemies and the deliverance of his people into kingdom blessings at every stage of Jesus' messianic work. While these elements may seem disconnected at first, they are joined together and emphasized in New Testament theology because they represent a crucial theme: the arrival of victory for the kingdom of God in Christ.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've looked at the importance of the kingdom of God in New Testament theology. Rather than being a minor or marginal teaching of the New Testament, God's kingdom shapes the very heart of what New Testament authors taught. We've explored how this was true with the good news of the kingdom. And we've also seen how New Testament theology focused on the coming of the kingdom in the inauguration, continuation and consummation of Christ's kingdom.

As we've seen, it's no exaggeration to say that New Testament faith is all about the kingdom of God. New Testament theology stresses the good news of victory for the kingdom of God and how this victory has come, is coming, and will come in the three stages of Christ's kingdom. These basic kingdom concepts represent some of the most important themes of the New Testament. Keeping them in mind will greatly enhance our understanding of New Testament theology. And we'll find new significance in the teachings of the New Testament. Without question, the theme of the kingdom of God in Christ undergirds every facet of New Testament theology.

Dr. Simon Vibert (Host) is Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall of the University of Oxford where he also serves as Director of the School of Preaching. Dr. Vibert received his Th.M. from Glasgow University, his D.Min. from Reformed Theological Seminary, and his Postgraduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education from the University of Oxford. He is a Trustee of Latimer Trust, a member of the Church of England Evangelical Council, and served as Chairman of the Fellowship of Word and Spirit. Dr. Vibert also served for 8 years as Vicar of St. Luke's Church Wimbledon Park. He has produced numerous books and theological articles, including *Excellence in Preaching: Learning from the Best* (IVP, 2011); *Stress: The Path to Peace* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2014); and *Lives Jesus Changed* (Christian Focus Publications, 2010).

Dr. Constantine R. Campbell is Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Dr. D.A. Carson is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Co-founder of The Gospel Coalition.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

Dr. Richard Lints is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Sean McDonough is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel is the Mary F. Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss is Professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary, San Diego.

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
TWO

The Kingdom of God
Faculty Forum



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Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

Lesson Two: The Kingdom of God

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Constantine Campbell
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. Joel C. Hunter
Dr. Gordon Isaac
Dr. Mark A. Jennings
Dr. Carol Kaminski
Dr. Craig S. Keener

Dr. Dan Lacich
Dr. Richard Lints
Dr. Sean McDonough
Dr. Alvin Padilla
Dr. Tom Petter
Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel
Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Dr. James D. Smith III
Dr. Aida Besancon Spencer
Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. Stephen E. Witmer
Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Question 1:

What is the gospel of the kingdom?

Dr. Craig S. Keener

When we speak of the gospel of the kingdom, or the good news of God's reign, it helps us to think about what early believers — for whom the Bible was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament — would have thought of. In Isaiah 52, God announces that he's going to restore his people, and he says that, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who bring glad tidings, saying to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" And it's said to be good news of peace. So, it's good news of God's peace. It's good news of God's reign. It's good news that God is saving his people, that God is acting on behalf of his people to bring in righteousness and justice in the world. And there is a consummation that we look forward to with that. But we understand that a bit differently than many of Jesus' contemporaries did because we also know that the kingdom comes in two stages. Because the King who is yet to come and consummate his kingdom has already come, the Messiah has already come. The first fruits of the resurrection that we anticipate in the future, the first fruits have already happened. So, because Jesus has already come, the kingdom is "already, not yet," and we already have a foretaste of God's activity in the world. In fact, the signs and the wonders that Jesus was doing, there's coming a day when there's going to be no more sorrow. There's going to be no more pain. God's going to heal everything. But, already, when Jesus came the first time, he gave us a sample of that, a foretaste as he was healing people and doing his marvelous works. They were a foretaste of something that we'll experience more fully in the kingdom in its fullness.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

We hear from time to time the biblical phrase "the gospel of the kingdom." For starters, we should remember that the word "gospel" means "good news." And so, this is an invitation, really, to reflect on why the announcement of the kingdom is, in fact, good news. And, number one, it's good news because it's real. And second, it is guaranteed in its fulfillment. So, there's a concrete anchor for looking forward to it, leaning into it,

feeling the anticipation of it. But what makes the kingdom good news is the intrinsic quality of it. It manages power in ways that are so dramatically opposed to rulerships and organizations with which we are familiar that it's been rightly called "the upside-down kingdom." And another thing that, if we go back all the way to Calvin, he once said, "You need to understand about the kingdom of God that it's not an ego trip" — I'm paraphrasing, of course — "but he rules more for our sakes than his own." And the whole idea of "kingdom," if we're caught in prejudices of it being egocentric for the ruler or dominating and coercive, we miss the point that the king rules for our sake, creating safe space for human flourishing. For this and many other reasons, it is indeed a gospel, a "good news of the kingdom."

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

It's universally recognized that Jesus' essential message was, "The kingdom of God is at hand." And Mark tells us, in Mark 1:14, 15, that Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. And that word "good news" or "gospel" comes right out of Isaiah. Isaiah predicted that one day there would be the announcement that God's salvation had arrived. So, it is, the good news is ultimately related to the kingdom of God, and the kingdom of God is related to God's sovereign authority and rule and dominion. The kingdom of God has multiple meanings. It can mean God's overall sovereign rule over all of creation, or it can refer to his specific rule over the world when God reestablishes his reign, the consummation of his kingdom. Since human beings are in rebellion against God, have rejected God's authority, God promised in the Old Testament — we were just talking about Isaiah — in Isaiah's prophecies, to one day reestablish his relationship with his people, to reconcile them to himself, to reestablish his authority and dominion and kingdom. And so, the promise of the kingdom is the promise that God is going to reestablish his dominion and authority. The good news is the announcement that the time has arrived, that God's kingdom is at hand.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

What does it mean when we say the gospel of the kingdom? "Gospel" literally means "good news." It's a proclamation of something that's happened. It's a gospel of the kingdom, and the kingdom referred to is the kingdom of God. It's the long-expected reign of God that would bring his presence among his people, judgment upon the wicked, salvation for the righteous. But it's principally an announcement of the state of affairs that God's reign has become. As Isaiah the prophet said, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news."

Question 2:**What is the kingdom of God?****Dr. Dan Lacich**

When we try to understand the kingdom of God, it's a tough concept for a lot of people today, for modern folks, if you will, because very few of us have ever lived in a kingdom. It's especially difficult if you are in a country that once had a king and you got rid of the king, because that has negative connotations. We don't want kings. When we do think

about “kingdom,” oftentimes it’s geographic. We think of the boundaries, the national boundaries that a king would oversee. And that, on one level, helps us understand the kingdom of God, but it really doesn’t get to the heart of it all. At the root of a kingdom is the relationship between a king and his subjects. And wherever those subjects are living in allegiance to the king, well, the king’s rule extends to that place. So, when we think about the kingdom of God, it is everywhere that Christ followers are, because they have an allegiance to the king, they are living under the authority of the king, and so they extend that influence of their king into the world every day. In one sense, it is geographic in that the entire creation comes under God’s rule. But when we look at the New Testament and its relationship to us as believers, it’s really about our relationship to Christ our King, our obedience to him. The old word would have been “fealty,” that we have this relationship where we honor and respect and obey the king and, therefore, the king reigns and rules in our lives and where we are.

Dr. Aida Besancon Spencer

The kingdom of God is such a major theme in the Gospels. Right now I’m teaching the gospel of Luke, and Jesus proclaimed it, and his disciples proclaimed it; John the Baptist proclaimed it; Paul proclaimed it. So, I always think of, how do you enter it? And to enter it you have two basic thoughts. One is, you have to repent, and the other, you have to take on the kingdom of God. So, you have to repent, you have to turn your life around; you have to consider that what you have been, in light of who God is, is wanting. And then the second part is taking on the kingdom of God, or it can be the dominion of God, or the reign of God, following what God wants in your life. So, we have examples of what Jesus did, how he preached it, and how all the different people that he reached toward in order to encourage them to become pleasing to God in their lives.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

The kingdom of God refers not in the first instance to a place but rather to God’s reign, to his dynamic rule over his people. So, in the Old Testament it is realized that God is the king. God is known as King. He reigns over all the earth. And yet, at the very same time, even though God was king, God’s people knew he wasn’t fully exercising his reign, so the righteous suffered and the wicked seemed to be prospering. And so there’s this hope that grew up in the prophets that in the last days God would fully assert his reign, he would bring his kingdom, and at that time he would vindicate his people and he would judge his enemies. So, the kingdom of God is really where God asserts his kingship, his authority, his reign.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

The language of kingdom may seem a little archaic today and maybe even odd to people who have turned their backs on human monarchies. But the reign of God, the kingdom of God, is a marvelous vision of a sphere in which God’s will, God’s prescriptive will, is now normative, and not only practiced in the outward dynamics of that society and culture but is owned in the hearts and minds of, and will of all its constituent members. This kingdom of God is one characterized by *shalom* and blessedness and righteousness and peace and joy. It is the fulfillment of all our deepest longings in human relationships and in life together.

Question 3:**How did hope for the coming kingdom of God develop through the Old Testament prophets?****Dr. Constantine Campbell**

The Old Testament prophets give us a picture of the kingdom of God, on the one hand, by looking at the kingdom of God as it exists in their own time in the nation of Israel. And it's flawed, but we see the promises of God fulfilled in certain ways, but also the judgment of God in exile and so on. And we see a hope projected for the future where the same pattern of the kingdom, where "God will rule over his people in his place" is projected in such a way that God's people will be no longer under threat from other nations, will be universal, in fact, throughout the world, and the rule of God would be uncompromised and no longer under competition with kings of Assyria or Babylon or anywhere else. So, the Old Testament prophets take the shape of the kingdom of God, as they experience it and as Israel has experienced it in their own history, and project a future to a time when God will bring it about in perfection.

Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation

When we read the prophets of the Old Testament, we realize that the people of Israel had strayed from their call to be a light for other nations. In the book of Amos, we realize that the people had fallen greatly. Most of Amos' book is a series of complaints, lamentations and condemnations to the people because they had strayed so far that they had forgotten about their relationship with God and had oppressed people poorer than themselves. But at the end of his book, Amos renewed the hope that the Lord would fulfill his promise in his coming kingdom, a land where justice would survive no matter what. All of the prophets, whether it was Isaiah, Jeremiah or Micah, placed an emphasis on the idea that the people had failed, and were unable to live the life that the Lord demanded from those who were called his sons and daughters. Amos renewed the hope that the Lord himself would bring the kingdom of God. The prophet Jeremiah emphasized that the old covenant had failed because the law was not in the hearts of the people. But in 31:33 of the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah emphasizes that in the last days the Lord himself will put his word, his covenant, in our hearts and then the kingdom of God will be within us. We have the hope that the kingdom of God is a reality and that, as his children, we live the reality of the kingdom of God right now. Of course, the future will be far more glorious than the present.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

The concept of the kingdom of God is actually not used very often in the Old Testament, which is quite interesting. To understand the kingdom of God, though, you do have to think about, what does kingship mean? Where does it begin? And then, from understanding kingship, and Davidic kingship in particular, that then leads to a concept of the kingdom of God. So, Davidic kingship, way back in the book of Genesis 17, God promises Abraham that kings will come forth from you. And then, in Genesis 49:10, it talks about Judah in particular, which is the fourth born son of Jacob, that Judah is going

to be the royal line. And, of course, this theme runs throughout the Old Testament, that the tribe of Judah, or the Lion of Judah. It's especially picked up with David in 1 Samuel 16 when David, who's from Bethlehem, is anointed king by Samuel. This really marks a significant turning point in the story of the Old Testament. But then what happens is when David does become king, — and it takes a good few years before that happens — when he becomes king, God makes promises to him in 2 Samuel 7, and the promises actually concern his son. And here's where the kingdom of God idea comes in. So, God promises that, "When your days are complete" — in other words, when you've died — God says, "I will raise up your seed after you ... and I will establish his kingdom as an everlasting kingdom ... and I will establish his throne as an everlasting throne." So, that's in 2 Samuel. So, clearly Davidic kingship is promised by God, and it's going to be this everlasting kingship. But what's interesting is in Chronicles, when the same passage in 1 Chronicles 17, when the same passage is quoted, now you get "my kingdom," God says — when he quotes about David — it's now said to be "*my* kingdom and *my* throne." So, you see the connection between the Davidic king and the throne. Then in 1 Chronicles 28, when Solomon is anointed king, and David actually quotes it and David says that, "God has set you as king *over* the throne of the Lord and the kingdom of the Lord." And Chronicles, there's about five other passages that Chronicles mention that. So, what you're starting to see is Chronicles is connecting the concept of the kingdom of God with the Davidic king ... But what the prophets will say, that in view of the failure of the Davidic kings, many of them, that there starts to be this hope that God will raise up a righteous Davidic king. And Jeremiah is going to say this. And Jeremiah, in spite of the fact that the kingdom is about to come to an end, he says that as surely as God has made a covenant with his son, that he has established his son on the throne. So, this becomes a very important hope throughout the Old Testament, but especially with the prophets, and they're waiting for God to raise up a righteous Davidic king. Just one more comment with this. So, when Jesus turns up and he's hailed, "son of David," which of course points him back to this Davidic promise — and Matthew's genealogy does the same thing — this king dies on a cross, and it looks like the promise of the kingdom has come to an end. But God had promised David, he said, "I will raise up your seed after you." Now, the term there "to raise up" in Hebrew is just an ordinary *qum*, it's an ordinary Hebrew verb. But the Greek is the same word for "resurrect." So, the resurrection of the Messiah is actually the place where his kingship is being established, and this gets picked up in both Peter's sermons and in Paul's sermons in the book of Acts. And they quote, "This Jesus who died on the cross, God raised him up in fulfillment of his promise to David," in 2 Samuel, that he will always have a son to sit on the throne, because Jesus is the only righteous Davidic king.

Dr. Tom Petter

Well, the hope for the coming of God's kingdom in the Old Testament is primarily through the prophets. And when you think about God's kingdom, you really have to think about kings, kingship, kingdom. You don't have a kingdom without a king. And so, a lot of what the prophets talk about, both the minor prophets and the major prophets, the longer ones and the shorter ones, those who address this question of the kingdom of God, they're going to talk about a king. And so, some of the prophets are very specific and others, they're more general. Amos will talk about a sanctuary that is to come. But then

you've got Isaiah in the eighth century B.C., and he really hammers the idea of a king in his kingdom. And it's more than that, it's a son, because in the ancient Near East whenever you have a king and a kingdom, they're begotten of the gods, and the ideal king is the deified king, the one who is a god-king. And so, of course, Isaiah is all over that, because he's going to say, very early, there's going to be a son, a Davidic son, in the dynasty of David, which is the main dynasty of the kings in ancient Israel. And this son — actually, he's going to say something radical, which is not radical in the ancient world — he's going to say he's a God-King. He's the Eternal Father, the Almighty God, but he's the son of the ultimate God. So, that's the ideal. And very quickly you realize that this king, especially in Isaiah — again, Isaiah is the most specific of the prophets to announce this kingdom of God and this king — this king is actually going to be a mighty warrior, which is typical also of the ancient world, but he's also filled with wisdom. That's chapter 11 of Isaiah. He has all the spirits of God: wisdom, knowledge, understanding. He is the king that was the wisest of them all, greater than Solomon, because Solomon failed at the end of his life. He failed in his own wisdom to be faithful to his wife and not to accumulate wealth, not to accumulate horses, like Deuteronomy 17 says. And so this coming king for Isaiah is the perfect, obedient king. But he is also the perfect sacrifice. And that's the connection, right? The king becomes a sacrifice. Why is that? Because the king has a dwelling, he has a palace, and this palace is also a temple, and he is the administrator of the sacrifices. You look at David, you look at Solomon, they perform sacrifices there, but they can never atone for sin. So the radical solution that Isaiah proposes is that this king, who is God himself, will sacrifice the perfect sacrifice to secure righteousness in the city. And, of course, the perfect sacrifice is himself. And so, there you have it. And clearly the Gospels, that's their entire focus. The king has come and he sacrifices himself on behalf of the people.

Question 4:

How did Jesus' contemporaries distinguish between “this age” and the “age to come”?

Dr. Sean McDonough

Well, if we're thinking about Jesus and his contemporaries and how they distinguished this age and the age to come, we assume that that's going to mean Jesus' Jewish contemporaries. And even there, we don't want to think of a monolithic Judaism where everyone thought precisely the same thing and then typically set that over and against Jesus, who remarkably believed differently in every respect. There's plenty of continuity between Jesus and his contemporaries. Probably the thing that's most important to stress is that Israel is going to be at the center of the theological vision of most of Jesus' contemporaries. And so, the restoration of Israel, the restitution of Israel, the fact that Israel, in contrast to its present situation, will be on top rather than on the bottom, that would have dominated the eschatological vision of Jesus' more Bible-believing contemporaries. I mean, there's people like the Sadducees who might not have made much distinction at all between this age and the age to come, but your Pharisees and your Essenes and all these other groups, they would have been looking for something to change for Israel. Now, of course, ultimately you've got the resurrection, which is

probably still Israel-focused, and anything that's in the Old Testament is always going to be fair game for a Bible-believing Jew to believe. So, the resurrection, the fructification and exuberant blessings on the earth, all those sort of things would be part of the package and are happily brought into the Christian faith as well.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

So, Jesus' contemporaries understood the whole of history to be divided into two ages: "this age," and "the age to come." "This age" is the age of suffering, death, persecution sometimes for God's people, God's people struggle, even the righteous don't prosper ... "The age to come" is understood as the time where God finally vindicates his suffering people, where righteousness is established, where God judges his enemies in the end. And so, there's a huge disjunct between this age and the age to come. Jesus himself thought in these terms, so he talks about those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, there's not forgiveness for them in this age or the age to come. The apostle Paul, in Galatians 1, says that Jesus gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age. So the New Testament authors themselves are thinking in these terms. And it really is, I think, both a realistic and a hopeful view of history. So, it's realistic because Jesus and his fellow New Testament authors recognize that we're not in the age to come yet. God's people are not vindicated; God's people often suffer. And yet, at the same time, it's hopeful because the age to come is coming. It's going to come. God's people will be saved.

Question 5:**What do theologians mean by the term "inaugurated eschatology?"****Dr. Constantine Campbell**

The term "inaugurated eschatology" refers to the overlap of two ages: the old and the new coexisting at the same time. The reason that the New Testament speaks like this about our eschatology, or the overlapping of the ages, is because, as the apostle Paul realized, a man has risen from the dead in the middle of time. And the significance of that is resurrection from the dead was supposed to happen at the end of time. And so, when Paul encounters the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, he realizes the end has come and broken into our current age and so that both ages exist together at the same time, which is why Paul can say, on the one hand, we are stuck in the flesh that is subject to sin, but on the other hand, we live by the Spirit who is a sign of the age to come and will one day come in full when the old is done away with completely. Only the new will remain.

Dr. Dan Lacich

When we talk about eschatology, most people think about events that will happen right at the very end; it's something off in the future. Eschatology means "end times," so I understand that. We think about the end. But "inaugurated eschatology" has more of the sense of the end times are now; they've already begun. And I think one of the key passages to look at to understand this goes back to Pentecost. You know, Peter stands up on Pentecost, preaches, and makes a quote from the prophet Joel about the Holy Spirit coming and being poured out upon people and that this will happen in the latter days.

And then Peter says, “This is that. What just happened here at Pentecost is that pouring out of the Holy Spirit that will happen in the latter days.” So, in Peter’s mind, with that sermon, he’s saying we’re living in the end times, it’s been inaugurated, it has already begun. You know, the final events have already been put in place, and things are in motion for the eventual return of Christ and the consummation of all things. So, end times, eschatology is not just a distant future thing. It’s something that really began to pick up speed, if you will, with the crucifixion, resurrection, and then the ascension of Christ, and then the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Mark A. Jennings

You’ll hear theologians use this term, “inaugurated eschatology.” And what they’re referring to is a way of understanding what the New Testament writers were depicting when they talked about the significance of Jesus’ first advent, his coming, his death on the cross, and his resurrection. And the relationship that that had with the way the end of things were considered, or the last age — “the *eschaton*” is the sort of technical term — the age of the Messiah, the messianic kingdom. And what these theologians find in the New Testament is that there’s a tension, that there is, on the one hand, what seems to be statements of the full arrival of the messianic kingdom, that it’s here, that it’s come, that the aspects that were associated with this great anticipated age — the presence of the Holy Spirit, the nations coming to worship God, the resurrection occurring — that those items were supposed to be part of “the coming of this age.” And so, in a sense, it has begun. It has been *inaugurated* is the idea. But at the same time, believers feel the tension of this brokenness of creation. People still get sick. People still die. People still sin. Satan is still unbound. There is this aspect of how this kingdom isn’t fully here yet, or fully *consummated* is the idea, that the wicked age still exists. And so, this teaching in the New Testament where you’ll have, for example, Paul talk about salvation and redemption and reconciliation as if it’s already occurred, and then almost immediately speak to it as if it’s coming, gets into this idea of what is called “inaugurated eschatology.” You’ll also hear it referred to as “already, not yet.” It’s already happened, but it’s not yet happened, or not yet fully arrived. And this concept that the New Testament writers have is in stark contrast to what you would see in mainstream Second Temple Judaism, especially in the Pharisees. The idea was that there was a wicked age, and at the end of the wicked age would come the messianic age. And it’s just basically two ages. But what the New Testament speaks to is that there’s a wicked age, and into this age comes the age of the Messiah, but for a while there’s an overlap; there’s a living in between both ages. Now, the wicked age is destined to fall away and we look forward towards when there’ll only be the full kingdom. Jesus speaks to this in the Gospel of John. Think about the story of when Lazarus is dead and Jesus’ coming is going to raise him out of the grave, and before he gets there Lazarus’ sister, Martha, comes to him and is pleading with Jesus, “If you’d only been here things would have been different.” And Jesus says to her, “Your brother will rise again.” And she says, “I know, I know, on the last day.” She’s working within that eschatology idea of a wicked age, and that at the end will be the new age when the resurrection occurs. But Jesus wants her to understand so much more, wants us to understand so much more, that it isn’t at the end of history, that, when this resurrection will occur, but that it’s actually in the middle of history and it’s occurring in Jesus, in his coming, that he is the resurrection, that he brings this new age. And I think this impacts

us as believers, that we don't think of eternal life as something that *will* happen. We don't think of the kingdom as something *yet* to come, but that we already are enjoying the eternal age, we already are living in this kingdom. And at the same time we yearn and we hope for that great second advent, that second day when Christ comes in his glory, when the inaugurated eschatology gives way to *just* the kingdom of God.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

"Eschatology" refers to the last things, so the last days, the age to come, the kingdom of God. And "inaugurated" refers to the fact that these things have begun already. Inaugurated is different from consummated. It's not fully here, but it's partially here. It's already here in principle. So, "inaugurated eschatology" is the viewpoint of the New Testament that, surprisingly, the last days have begun with the first coming of Jesus. And we see this throughout the teaching of Jesus and throughout the entire New Testament. So, Jesus says — he's talking about his ability to cast out demons — and he says, "If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" — past tense. It's already here. The writer of Hebrews says, "In these last days," referring to his own time period. Now, Paul says, "The ends of the age have come upon us." And Peter, the apostle Peter, in his Pentecost sermon quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel, prophesying things that are going to happen in the last days, and says, "This is coming to fulfillment already in our day; the last days are here." So, the teaching of the New Testament is that the last days, the age to come, the kingdom of God, has come already in part — not fully, but in part. Maybe a helpful illustration of this would be a tic-tac-toe game, or knots and crosses for people from the U.K. You can get, as you're playing tic-tac-toe, you can get to a point if you play your moves right and the other player plays his moves wrong, where the game is won in principle. If you play out the rest of the game properly, it doesn't matter what your opponent does, you're going to win the game. And so, if I held a board up like that to you and said, "Is this game over or is it not over?" the answer would be yes and no at the same time. The victory is achieved in principle, but you still need to play out the victory. And similarly, at his first coming through his life, death, resurrection, Jesus already has won the decisive victory over sin, Satan, death, but it's not fully implemented yet. Jesus needs to come again a second time. And this was totally scandalous for the people of Jesus' day. Jewish people of his day understood the kingdom of God as a fireworks display of God's judgment and wrath and vindication for his people. And Jesus comes saying the kingdom of God is here, and yet history is continuing on as it always was. And Jesus doesn't back away from this scandalous teaching. He presses in on it. He gives parables of the mustard seed, a little bit of leaven. He says the kingdom of God is like a little bit of leaven that's hidden in a lump. For Jews to hear that the kingdom of God is hidden would be unthinkable. But Jesus... this is very important for Jesus and his first coming to teach that the kingdom of God is here even though it's not fully here.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

When we run across this term "eschatology," we are concerning ourselves with the biblical disclosure of what lies ahead, the future, God's plan for the linear progression of time. "Inaugurated eschatology" means that we envision God's plan for the future still incomplete. Not everything has fallen into place in perfect and complete fulfillment of the

glorious promises. And yet, the inaugurated piece is the assurance that we're not waiting for the beginning of the fulfillment of his promises, but we have seen that beginning; it has been launched. It has been launched decisively, most decisively in the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. And so we are kind of in between the launch and the completion. This is what the term "inaugurated eschatology" is all about. It's very full of hope and expectation, but also confidence because we've seen the down payment on what's ahead.

Dr. Joel C. Hunter

What do theologians mean by the term, "inaugurated eschatology?" ... It's really a great term because eschatology, or the study of the end times, the study of the last things, is usually parsed by many people as that which we wait for. And that which we debate and we argue about *ad nauseam*, you know, and we go through the pre-mil and post-mil and a-mil and, you know, all of these, all of these different scenarios of how the end times are going to happen. And the discussions are much more detailed and distracting than fruitful. But when you realize that the eschatology is already here, that is, when Jesus came and established in fullness, he fulfilled those things that had been prepared in the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophecies, and when he came he said, "I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill the law," and he established incarnate, in the flesh, the beginning of the kingdom of God, then you realize everything from then on is living out the kingdom as it is supposed to be. He taught us to pray this great prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven." And so, we have this perspective of the end that we're supposed to be living by right now. We have a power in the end that is ours right now. We have a purpose and an agenda that we have somehow gathered up into, "Boy, things are going to be great after we die," when it was really meant to be an in-breaking of the future *while we live*. And that is what is called inaugurated eschatology. The inauguration has happened, the kingdom of God is here, and we are walking out that which God has for us even as we live today.

Question 6:

How was Jesus victorious over the enemies of God's kingdom in the inauguration of God's kingdom?

Dr. Constantine Campbell

God is victorious over his enemies through the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. In the death of Christ, by dealing with human sin and paying the penalty for sin, he has overpowered sin and, therefore, the power that sin might have over us. Once sin is dealt with, then the power of death is conquered because sin and death work together. Sin is kind of like the stinger that death has, and once it stings you with sin, once you sin, then you are subjected to death, and you belong to death... But if you break that stinger, as Jesus did on the cross, then death can no longer hold you. It's like a toothless viper, or a spider whose fangs have been broken off. And so, what follows after the death of Jesus is the resurrection of Jesus, which is the vindication of his right standing with God and that sin has been conquered. And his ascension to God's right hand is described in the New Testament as the final sign that he is victorious over his enemies, not only sin and

death, but the authorities, powers and dominions as mentioned, say, in Ephesians 1, they are under his feet now, they're already conquered. Nevertheless, they still exist, and so, at the end of Ephesians in chapter 6, we see that believers do spiritual warfare with them, but we battle with a team that's already lost, and we are just waiting for the final siren to sound, and then the game is over. We already know we're on the winning side.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

In Jesus' coming, it's very clear that the New Testament says that he inaugurates God's kingdom. God's kingdom is rooted and grounded in the Old Testament. Indeed, it goes all the way back to Adam as a vice-regent who is, as representative of the human race, is to rule over God's creation and indeed all of us as human beings are to do that. But because of sin, he does not do that. Sin enters the world, which then becomes not only that which is transmitted to all of us, but also in Scripture is described as a power, as a domain. Sin leads to death so that in our lives we ultimately die because we are sinners before God. It means that we are now under God's judgment because of our sin before God. And it also means that, as a result of sin, the ruler of this world, tied to Satan and his realm, is that which we are now under his power and rule. We're part of his kingdom, not the kingdom of God. And as you work through the Old Testament, the Old Testament anticipates the saving reign of God breaking into this world, that God himself in and through his Messiah will accomplish that saving reign and defeat the kingdom of Satan. He will defeat the powers of death. He will do that through, ultimately, the payment of sin and our restoration and reconciliation with God. Now, when it comes to the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ now comes as the second Adam, he comes as the Lord himself, fully God, fully man. He is the one who, in his ministry, brings the kingdom to pass, not only in his teaching but his miracles, but supremely in his cross where sin then is dealt with first and foremost. The power of sin, the penalty of sin is removed; it's paid for. Death, then, is defeated, evidenced in his glorious resurrection and ascension and pouring out the Spirit. The realm of Satan now over us is now defeated as we are now transferred from Adam to Christ, from the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of the ruler of this air to that of the kingdom of God. And in all these ways, through the life, death, resurrection, ascension, the pouring out of the Spirit, the inauguration of the kingdom which is now here, yet we await its consummation in the future, he has defeated the powers, he has defeated sin, death, the Evil One, and we are now victorious in Christ.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

The final conquests that are necessary for the perfection of God's kingdom remain ahead, but they have begun, and they were decisively inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus Christ. And we get some clue to what the inaugurating assault on the enemies of the kingdom looks like when we consider the text from Isaiah that he chose to speak from in the synagogue in Nazareth when he launched his earthly ministry. One of the decisive enemies of the kingdom of God is the rulers of darkness and the principalities and powers that do not give up their turf without a fight. Jesus launched a massive assault on them. And the New Testament celebrates, really, the intimidation that the greater strength of Jesus Christ created in the powers of darkness. And what this means to believers is that we are no longer under the dominion of fear, fear of evil spirits, fear of death, fear of the control of the bondage to sin. All of these things were, in the inaugurating ministry of

Jesus Christ, assaulted in a decisive way, and began, then, the dismantling of the structures of injustice and deceit and lies that perpetuate the forces of darkness and their stranglehold on human nature. He spoke truth. He assaulted the gates of hell himself and then empowers his liberated followers to continue that assault on the road to complete victory.

Question 7:

How will Jesus' victory over his enemies be complete when he returns?

Dr. Richard Lints

The reality of Jesus' final victory lives in the shadow now of victory which doesn't seem complete. We live in the midst of great conflict and tension, suffering, persecution, and so it's a natural question for us to ask, how will that change? We want to affirm that Jesus' return will be different than his first coming, that his return brings closure, brings finality to the questions of justice, that everything will be put right. In part, we trust that, though we do not see that. We trust it because God is God, that he will at the end of time, so to speak, that is, at the end of creaturely experience of time in its corrupted state, God will bring perfect justice. God will execute judgment perfectly. He will not judge harshly. He will judge in accordance with the standards of justice. So, all of death itself will be defeated. All of our own idolatries will be defeated. Everything will be put right. And there is no greater yearning in the human heart for that reality, and it is no mistake that we yearn for it because it shall come to pass as God so designs.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

So, with Jesus' first coming, he did not consummate his victory. He established a victory, he secured a victory, but he hasn't fully implemented that victory yet. So, he hasn't returned, he hasn't completely defeated his enemies, and yet already, through his ministry, his life, his death, his resurrection, he has achieved a victory over his enemy. So, death is defeated because Jesus came, died, and then rose again. He has defeated death. Satan is defeated because Satan's real power over believers is to be able to accuse them of sin and its consequences. And Jesus, by bearing God's wrath at the cross has deprived Satan of his grounds of accusation. So, already, even though it's not consummated, he's inaugurated a great victory for believers.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

I think we have every right to dream of that day when the kingdom of God is fulfilled in its entirety, and our experience of life, restored and renewed life, will be what God intended for us. In many ways, the journey back to the completion of God's perfected kingdom is a journey back to Eden, to linking back to what we lost in the Fall, and perhaps making it not only equal to that in a restored way, but better than ever. Jesus came to save us from sin, and that full restoration will involve a complete liberation from the guilt of sin, which we experience by justification now; deliverance from the power of sin, which we will continue to struggle with to some degree in this life; and most of all, it will involve a complete deliverance from all the consequences of sin, which is a category that encompasses not just death but all the dysfunction, all the pain, all the woundedness

that is our human plight in this life flawed by sin. So, what we look forward to is a comprehensive restoration project, a complete salvation from the guilt, the power, *and* the comprehensive consequence of sin — back to Eden through Jesus Christ.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

When Jesus returns, we see the completion of his victory, and we see the benefits that his followers gain at that time. The New Testament picture is really one that begins even as early as Psalm 2 where the nations conspire against the Lord and his Anointed One, but blessed are those who take refuge in the son, who kiss the son, but over his enemies he will rule with a rod of iron. And so, at the end of the New Testament, particularly in the book of Revelation, we see the risen Christ, the one who was dead but now is alive forevermore. He's the slain and standing Lamb next to the Father in Revelation 5, and his victory means the complete conquest of all the enemies of God's people and his. But that victory will be achieved in two ways: through gospel conquest, meaning gathering all those for whom he died to himself, and also the utter defeat and eternal punishment of those who remain opposed to him and his coming. And as we live as Christians looking for that victory to be completed, we have to remember we don't always know the difference, in fact, we never know for sure the difference between those whom Christ will conquer through the gospel versus those who he will conquer with the rod of iron, which is why our battle is not against flesh and blood but against dark forces and why we preach the gospel instead of bear the sword for the name of Christ.

Question 8:

**Can the doctrine of substitutionary atonement be held alongside
Christus Victor theology?**

Dr. Gordon Isaac

Let's talk about the theories of the atonement. In general there are three. One could talk about more, but there are three doctrines, or three theories of the doctrine of the atonement. The first is substitutionary atonement. In the twelfth century, St. Anselm developed a theory of the atonement in which he saw sin was a violation against the honor of God and it needed to be restored. And so, in developing his theory, he said, "We need to find someone who can repay this debt. It can't be an angel. It can't be a mere man. Indeed, it must be God himself." *Cur Deus Homo — Why did God Become Man?* That was Anselm's answer, and he thought that the sacrifice on the cross was sufficient to restore the honor of God. The second view of the atonement, we could say, was also developed in the twelfth century by Peter Abelard, a *brilliant* theologian, who, when looking upon Anselm's theory of the atonement, thought it insufficient. He thought, "You know, this really makes God something of a cosmic accountant. He's worried about these debts and things. It just seems not a worthy thing to think of with respect to God." And he was convinced that, really much more important than having the death of an innocent person being added on top of the sin of the world, he thought, really, what was happening is that Jesus, in his filial obedience to God, showed us the right path. And then when we look upon the works of Jesus, our hearts are transfixed and transformed so that we now, in our turn, follow after Jesus in that kind of moral, ethical approach. So his view could

be called the "moral theory" of the atonement. There's a third theory of the atonement: *Christus Victor*. And in this *ancient* theory of the atonement, the early church fathers loved to talk about how Christ had had total victory over the forces of sin, death, and the Devil — the "evil triumvirate" we could call it — and so, they delighted in talking about how Jesus was something of the bait on the hook, and the Devil came along and got a mouthful. But Jesus, being of divine nature, could not be held back by sin and broke through the boundaries and thus won victory for all mankind.

Dr. Constantine Campbell

Not only can penal substitutionary atonement be held alongside *Christus Victor* theology, but they must be held together. Jesus's death does not only have significance for human beings, it has significance for the entire created cosmos. This is what we see in the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, that, in the cross, the evil supernatural powers, the thrones, dominions and authorities of darkness are overthrown and put on public display — Colossians 2:15 — they're a public spectacle. The reason they are overthrown is because Jesus has dealt finally with human sin. Once human sin is dealt with and done away with, then those powers of darkness, the spiritual forces of evil can no longer control us. They no longer have a claim over our lives, and so, in that way, they are overthrown.

Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel

The death of Jesus, and Jesus himself, is interpreted in the New Testament in different ways. We are sometimes tempted, perhaps especially in the U.S., to boil down everything to a simple slogan. Preferably, it has to be so brief that it fits on a mug, at least on a T-shirt. And that can cause problems when we discuss the Bible where, like when we look at Jesus, for example, and how Jesus is interpreted, different areas of life, different metaphors are used. Different biblical traditions are used to understand what happened when Jesus died on the cross, what happened when Jesus came to this earth, lived his life, died on the cross and then rose from the dead. And so, one interpretation interprets Jesus' death as a sacrifice. In the Old Testament, animals were sacrificed; animals had to die so that the human sinner did not have to die, because for sins, especially serious sins in the Old Testament, there is death. And, as we learn in Genesis 3, for every sin there needs to be death. And so, animals were sacrificed where the animal took the place of the sinner. This would be called "substitutionary atonement." The animal is the substitute of the sinner. Another thought that is actually linked with this idea is representation, that the animal represents the sinner as the animal dies and is presented to God. And so, Jesus' death is interpreted in many passages in the New Testament as a sacrifice. And when we have sacrificial language in a church context, then we have the context of substitution. Forgiveness, in the New Testament, is not amnesty, that God simply decides not to punish. When, in the U.S., there are too many people in prison, more prisons are being built. In Italy, if there are too many people in prisons, they issue an amnesty, and so people are released who have to do only one or two years. So, they are just forgiven in the sense that they don't have to spend the time in prison; they don't have to suffer the entire punishment that they were condemned to. But this is not what God is doing. Sin has to be punished because sin is serious. Sin is an attack against the character of God. But in the Old Testament, God made it possible for sins to be forgiven by sin being

placed on animals, and so animals took the place of the sinner. And this is used to interpret the death of Jesus. There were no human sacrifices in the Old Testament, so this is completely unique. It was unexpected. There was no Old Testament passage that clearly indicated that this is what would happen. There is Isaiah 53 where the servant of the Lord suffers and dies, but if one reads Isaiah 53 as a Jew, one could wonder whether this suffering servant is Israel, the people of Israel, or whether it is the prophet. It became, then, clear when Jesus died and was raised from the dead that his death was not a death as the result of his own sin, because he did not sin. So, it was, therefore, possible that God put the sin of the world on Jesus, and so he died instead of us. This is called "substitutionary atonement." At the same time, Jesus then rose from the dead, which means that his death was not a defeat, but it was a victory, a victory over sin and a victory over death. And so, we need to hold both interpretations. We shouldn't neglect one for the benefit of the other. To talk about the *Christus Victor* theme, which means "Christ the warrior, Christ who is victorious," that is somewhat more popular. It's easier to talk about that. Who doesn't like to talk about victories, especially in a culture that is saturated with sports metaphors and sports ideas and sports aficionados? To talk about substitution that someone else dies instead of me, there seems to be even an ethical problem — how could that happen? If I do something wrong, then I need to deal with the consequences. But that is exactly the grace of God, that he allowed Jesus, that he made it possible that Jesus would die for sinners. So, we need to talk about both themes and many others besides.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

There's a huge debate about the nature of Christ's death on the cross and the atonement — what did Christ accomplish on the cross? And two of the main views are substitutionary atonement, that Christ's death paid the penalty for our sins, he was a sacrifice of atonement. Others argue, however, that Christ's death was really a victory over spiritual forces, over Satan, over sin, over the demons — *Christus Victor* — that he gains the victory over death. Sometimes that's introduced instead of substitutionary atonement. But I think we have to recognize that Christ's death on the cross accomplished a multitude of things. It was victory over sin, over Satan, over death. It paid the penalty for our sins. So, it's not really an either/or. It's not an either/or; it's a both/and when it comes to substitutionary atonement. Yes, Christ paid the penalty for our sins — *Christus Victor*, absolutely yes — Jesus' triumphed over sin, Satan and death at the cross.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Today we may be a little perplexed by the different theories or interpretations of the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Traditionally, evangelical believers have, along with the apostle Paul, understood the importance of understanding the death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection as a substitutionary atonement for our sins, reconciling us to a holy God. More recently, there has been a movement of recovered enthusiasm for an ancient classic understanding of the atonement, so called, that celebrates *Christus Victor*, or the triumph, the victory of Jesus Christ over all the powers of darkness and the gloom of death. Well, certainly we are wise to join the bandwagon of those who are recovering the *Christus Victor* enthusiasm and rejoice in this mighty triumph of Jesus Christ. All true, but we need to be cautious when people tell us that

Christus Victor is more an exultant shout of joy that cannot be explained in any meaningful way; it's just a mystery how the death of Christ makes us alive and forgiven. The New Testament has told us a little bit more about how that wonderful dynamic of *Christus Victor* played out. And one of the keys was this, that in order to conquer death, you must first *defang* death. And what is it that gives death its power? The curse of sin. And so, substitutionary atonement is an absolutely indispensable way of recognizing how God made it possible for the dynamics of victory to play out, as indeed they did. So, *Christus Victor* as an emotive theme of rejoicing, yes, but substitutionary atonement as a deep understanding of both the seriousness of sin and the way the victory was wrought.

Dr. James D. Smith III

When I think of the substitutionary atonement, I think of a teaching that's rooted really in the earliest traditions, earliest writings of the church. The classic expression, of course, is by St. Anselm, who died in the early eleven-hundreds, and his work on how, or the manner in which God became human, was a classic statement, the first full-length statement, on the atonements. And there he declares that the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ was brought to bear on this deep problem of our unrighteousness and that the humanity of Christ enabled him to be the perfect substitute, bearing the penalty of our sin. That would make him there on the cross a victim if it weren't for two things: If it weren't for the resurrection, the power of the resurrection, and the victorious appearance of Christ thereafter — that's Easter; that's the good news — and also the fact that it's a victory in that this was a path chosen and affirmed by Christ himself. So, there is a victory in his following this path of obedience, this path of humility, this path of triumph. And that's really what Gustaf Aulen picks up a century ago in his work *Christus Victor*, which, far from portraying Christ as some of the more liberal theologians would, as someone who prophetically challenged the great powers and wound up ground up by them, he says, on the contrary, resurrection victory, the obedience of Christ, his perfections, gained a triumph for us all — *Christus Victor*.

Dr. Constantine Campbell is Associate Professor of New Testament Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

Dr. Joel C. Hunter is Senior Pastor at Northland, A Church Distributed in Orlando, Florida.

Dr. Gordon Isaac is Berkshire Associate Professor of Advent Christian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Mark A. Jennings is Instructor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Carol Kaminski is Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological

Seminary.

Dr. Craig S. Keener is the F.M. and Ada Thompson Chair of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Dan Lacich is Pastor of Northland, A Church Distributed in Longwood, FL.

Dr. Richard Lints is Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Sean McDonough is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Alvin Padilla is Dean of Hispanic Ministries and Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Tom Petter is Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Eckhard Schnabel is the Mary F. Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California.

Dr. James D. Smith III is Associate Professor of Church History at Bethel Seminary, San Diego Campus, as well as an adjunct professor of religion at the University of San Diego

Dr. Aida Besancon Spencer is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Mark Strauss taught at Biola University, Christian Heritage College, and Talbot School of Theology before joining the Bethel Seminary faculty in 1993.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer is Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
THREE

THE NEW COVENANT



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Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

Lesson Three

The New Covenant

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how followers of Christ use a lot of familiar expressions in different ways? This was certainly the case with the words “new covenant.” We repeat what Jesus said — “This cup is the new covenant” — every time we observe the Lord’s Supper. And all over the world, local churches have names with the words “new covenant” in them. But if you ask most Christians, “What is the new covenant?” you get about as many answers as the number of people you ask. Sometimes differences like this don’t matter much. But as we’ll see in this lesson, the concept of the new covenant influenced New Testament authors so much that we may speak of their theology as “new covenant theology.” And for this reason, we need to do all we can to understand what the new covenant is.

This is the third lesson in our series *Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament*. We’ve entitled this lesson, “The New Covenant.” And in this lesson we’ll explore how New Testament authors relied on the concept of the new covenant to shape some of their most significant theological perspectives.

Our lesson will divide into two main parts. First, we’ll see how the new covenant characterized God’s kingdom administration. Second, we’ll explore how the new covenant reveals certain dynamics of interaction between God and his people. Let’s look first at God’s kingdom administration through the new covenant.

KINGDOM ADMINISTRATION

The Hebrew term we normally translate as “covenant” is “*berith*.” In the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, this Hebrew word is translated “*diatheke*.” “*Diatheke*” also appears for “covenant” in the New Testament. Both *berith* and *diatheke* have connotations of “a solemn agreement or pact.” In the Bible, we see covenants between peers. We also see covenants between kings and their citizens and between kings and other kings. And God covenanted with nations and people. In this lesson, we’re particularly interested in God’s covenants with people, especially his new covenant in Christ.

It’s important to know that one of the most significant breakthroughs in our understanding of God’s biblical covenants took place in the second half of the twentieth century. At this time, many scholars began to compare biblical covenants with a group of ancient Near Eastern documents usually called “suzerain-vassal treaties.” These documents were international treaties among nations in Old Testament times. In these treaties, suzerains, or great kings, administered their kingdoms through treaties with vassals, or lesser kings under their authority. As we’ll see, the similarities between

biblical covenants and these suzerain-vassal treaties make it clear that God's covenants in Scripture were his primary means for administering the affairs of his kingdom.

We see in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Genesis, two different types of treaties exhibited in Scripture. First, we see what we call a "parity treaty" between two people of equal ability, equal authority in which they make an agreement that is mutually beneficial to both. So take for example Abraham and Abimelech... The second kind of treaty that we see is actually between what some people in the ancient Near Eastern called the "suzerainty-vassal treaty," and that's usually between unequal powers, one who is stronger and greater, who most likely has already overtaken you and conquered you and would now like to be in a relationship in which the greater person, the suzerain, receives all the benefits from the vassal. So most often it requires allegiance from the vassal to continue to pledge their allegiance to the suzerain... But there is a benefit for the vassal and that is the suzerain will in turn come to its rescue whenever there is any conquering army or invading army that is in their presence, and so they had that kind of mutual protective relationship there as well.

— Dr. Daniel L. Kim

You know, we think in terms of kings as being oftentimes tyrants and wealthy overlords who oppress their citizens. But in reality, kingship in the ancient Near Eastern context of the time of Jesus and before was largely grounded in the concept of covenant. So we have evidence of treaties, ancient treaties, in which a king, or an overlord, or what's called suzerain would then enter into an agreement with some people who become essentially his servants or his vassals, and they define the relationship such that the overlord, the suzerain, defines a set of terms by which a relationship can be maintained, and he'd say something like this: "I will offer you protection, I will offer you prosperity, I will offer you identity in exchange for your participation with me by sharing a portion of your crops, by giving me your allegiance and by not forming allegiances with other kings or overlords." And so it tended to be a very mutual sort of a circumstance in one sense. And if we begin to think about kingship and the nature of covenant in terms of this kind of an agreement, then what we find is that various portions of the Old Testament seem to conform very precisely with the exact elements of these suzerain treaties.

— Mr. Bradley T. Johnson

We'll look at God's kingdom administration in three main ways. First, we'll note the significance of covenant representatives. Second, we'll see how God's covenants

focused on appropriate policies for God's kingdom. And third, we'll point out how God administered his kingdom through the organic development of his covenant policies. Let's look first at God's covenant representatives.

COVENANT REPRESENTATIVES

As we've already noted, ancient suzerains administered their kingdoms by making treaties with lesser kings or vassals. These vassal kings represented their nations and managed their kingdoms in submission to the suzerain. In a similar way, God administers his kingdom by making covenants through men whom he chose to represent his covenant people.

To see what we mean, we'll see first how God chose covenant representatives in the Old Testament. And then we'll look at the new covenant. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

Old Testament

It isn't difficult to see that God chose covenant representatives in Old Testament times. Genesis 1–3 and Hosea 6:7 both indicate that God made the first biblical covenant with Adam. Genesis 6:18 and Genesis 9:9–17 refer to God's covenant with Noah. And in Genesis 15–17, God made a covenant with Abraham. Exodus 19–24 indicate that God chose Moses as his covenant representative. And finally, passages like Psalms 89 and 132 refer to God's covenant with David.

God dealt with each of these men differently as he made his covenants. But all of them represented others before God in the judgments of God's heavenly royal court. The covenants with Adam and Noah may be called "universal covenants" because Adam and Noah represented all human beings as God's covenant people. The covenants with Abraham, Moses and David may be described as "national covenants." In these covenants, these men represented the nation of Israel and the Gentiles adopted into Israel as covenant people.

Keeping the covenant representatives of the Old Testament in mind, let's see how God administered the new covenant through a covenant representative.

New Covenant

The New Testament repeatedly identifies Christ as the new covenant representative. God engaged him in special ways on behalf of his church — every Jew and Gentile that God identifies with Christ. As we read in Hebrews 9:15:

Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:15).

Similar teachings appear in passages like Romans 8:34 and 1 Timothy 2:5-6.

The fact that Christ is God's chosen covenant representative for the church helps us understand one of the most important characteristics of New Testament theology. As many biblical interpreters have noted, New Testament theology is "Christocentric." In other words, every facet of New Testament theology is closely tied to the person and work of Christ. But why is this true? For instance, why does the New Testament teach that we must believe in Jesus for salvation? Why pray and show kindness in the name of Jesus? Why is the church called "the body of Christ"? The answer is clear. Christ plays this central role in New Testament theology because God administers every dimension of life in the new covenant through Christ as the representative of the church. To overlook this feature of New Testament theology is to miss one of its most crucial characteristics.

Having seen that God administered his kingdom through covenant representatives, and specifically through Christ in the new covenant, we should turn to a second feature of God's kingdom administration: the appropriate policies that biblical covenants established for different periods of biblical history.

APPROPRIATE POLICIES

All ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties had elements in common, but they were also different in many ways. This was because each individual treaty addressed specific issues that were pertinent for each international relationship. In much the same way, all of God's covenants had much in common, but each covenant's policies were designed for specific issues that were important at different stages of biblical history.

To see how the policies of God's covenants were appropriate for different historical stages, we'll look once again at Old Testament covenants, and then at the policies of the new covenant. Let's consider first Old Testament covenant policies.

Old Testament

A cursory reading of the terms of Old Testament covenants reveals a focus on policies that were relevant for particular stages of God's kingdom.

God's covenant with Adam may rightly be called the "covenant of foundations." It emphasized the goals of God's kingdom and the role of human beings in his kingdom before and after sin entered the world.

After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah that we may call the "covenant of stability." This covenant focused on nature's stability as the secure environment within which sinful humanity could serve God's kingdom purposes.

We may refer to Abraham's covenant as the "covenant of Israel's election." It focused on the privileges and responsibilities of Israel as God's chosen people.

The covenant with Moses is often called the "covenant of law" because it focused on God's law as he unified the tribes of Israel into a nation. With this covenant, God led the people of Israel toward their promised homeland.

And finally, we can regard David's covenant as the "covenant of kingship." This covenant established Israel as a bona fide kingdom and emphasized how David's royal dynasty was to lead Israel in kingdom service.

When we consider the appropriate policies established by covenants in the Old Testament, it shouldn't surprise us to find that the new covenant also established kingdom policies that were appropriate for the new covenant age.

New Covenant

The new covenant comes in the last period of biblical history — after God's covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. And for this reason, the new covenant may be described as the "covenant of fulfillment." As such, it established policies that were designed to reverse the failures of the past and complete or fulfill God's kingdom purposes in Christ.

The new covenant is mentioned in Scripture for the first time in Jeremiah 31:31 where we read these words:

"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" (Jeremiah 31:31).

In the larger context of this verse, the phrase "The days are coming" refers to the time after the end of Israel's exile. As we saw in a previous lesson, the message of the Christian good news — or "gospel" — was that God's kingdom would reach its final, worldwide victory after Israel's exile had ended. So, from the first mention of the new covenant, we see its association with the victorious fulfillment of God's kingdom.

For this reason, in Jeremiah 31:33-34 God revealed the policies of the new covenant, policies that were appropriate for this last stage of the kingdom in Christ. Listen to what God said:

This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time ... 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. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest ... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

Notice in this passage that the new covenant will bring God's kingdom to its ultimate end when "[God] will forgive [his people's] wickedness and will remember their sins no more." In this time of final, eternal blessings for God's people, "[He] will put [his] law in their minds and write it on their hearts." In fact, God promised to make this true for *every* person in the new covenant. As he put it, "they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Now in passages like Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4, God frequently called the nation of Israel to move beyond their outward association with his covenants and to circumcise their hearts. In other words, they were to love him deeply by writing his law on their hearts. But in the policies of the new covenant age, God promised to intervene in such a way that this would be a reality for *all* of his covenant people.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the shape of the kingdom of God remained the same in that God rules over his people in his place, but what that looked like changed entirely. The most significant thing from Jesus sitting at God's right hand is — as the apostle Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 — he has poured out his Holy Spirit upon his people as was prophesied in the book of Joel. And the indwelling of the Spirit in Jews, *and* — to their surprise and, at first, kind of shock — also Gentiles, is indication that God's kingdom is no longer going to be constituted of the people of Israel, the human descendants of Abraham, but those who are descendants of Abraham by faith, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 4. So, God's kingdom is constituted of people from every tribe, nation and language; whoever has faith in Christ will receive the Spirit, and whoever has the Spirit has God living and ruling in their lives.

— Dr. Constantine R. Campbell

As we saw in our preceding lesson, Jesus taught that the new covenant age would unfold over time in three stages. First, its inauguration came with Christ's first advent. In this stage, Christ fulfilled many, but not all of the expectations of the new covenant. Then, in the continuation, the new covenant age will continue for an indefinite period of time through the history of the church. In this stage, Jesus fulfills many more, but still not all of the expectations of the new covenant. And finally, the new covenant age will reach its consummation at Christ's second advent when every expectation will be completely fulfilled.

This threefold fulfillment of the new covenant helps us recognize a second basic characteristic of New Testament theology. Not only was it Christocentric; New Testament theology was also devoted to explaining the policies of the new covenant as it unfolded in these three stages.

In effect, New Testament authors had to spend their time adjusting expectations for life in the new covenant. For instance, unlike the expectations created by Jeremiah 31, passages like Matthew 6:12 and 1 John 1:9 explain that followers of Christ still need to ask for forgiveness because they still violate the law of God. We also see in passages like 2 Corinthians 11:13 and Galatians 2:4 that false believers remain among true believers in the new covenant church. How were these and other factors affected by the unfolding of new covenant policies? In one way or another, every dimension of New Testament theology was devoted to answering this question.

Now that we've seen how God administered his kingdom through covenant representatives and historically appropriate policies, we should explore the organic development of policies in biblical covenants.

ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT

When we speak of covenant policies developing organically, we have in mind something like the growth of a tree. A tree changes as it grows from seed to full maturity, but it still remains the same organism. We can look at Old Testament covenants in much the same way. Each Old Testament covenant had different covenant representatives and focused on policies that were appropriate for a particular time in history. But like a tree, there was organic unity despite these changes.

We'll look at the organic development of God's covenants, first in the Old Testament. Then we'll consider the organic development from the Old Testament to the new covenant. Let's begin with the Old Testament covenants.

Old Testament

We can see the organic development of Old Testament covenants when we keep in mind how the policies of covenants continued in force throughout Old Testament history. For example, from the time of Adam, God established that the human race, as his image, would spread his kingdom throughout the earth. This policy developed over time, but it was never utterly discarded.

From the time of Noah, God established the stability of nature as a secure place for God's fallen images to serve his kingdom purposes. This administrative policy changed in various ways with later covenants, but God never cast it aside.

From the time of Abraham, Israel was given special privileges and responsibilities as God's chosen people. This special role in history developed with the addition of more covenants, but it never disappeared from God's kingdom administration.

From the time of Moses, the Law served as the guide for Israel. This Law was to be applied differently as other covenants were added, but it was never nullified.

And from the time of David, David's royal dynasty has led God's people in their kingdom service. Although this leadership changed with the new covenant and the kingship of Jesus, it was not set aside.

The pattern of organic development that we see in the Old Testament continued with the new covenant in Christ. It too developed organically from earlier covenants.

New Covenant

Let's look again at Jeremiah 31:31 where God said:

I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31).

All too often, Christians have taken the expression “new covenant” to mean that the new covenant is *entirely* new, disconnected from earlier covenants in the Bible. It’s important to know, however, that the word “new” translates the Hebrew term *châdash*. Passages like Isaiah 61:4, Ezekiel 36:26 and Job 29:20 make it clear that this term, and its associated verbal forms, did not mean “utterly new.” Rather, this family of terms meant “renewed,” “renovated,” “rebuilt,” or “refreshed.”

This outlook is supported by the fact that God said the new covenant will be made “with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.” In other words, the new covenant is a renewed national covenant with the descendants of Abraham and the Gentiles adopted into his family after Israel’s exile ended.

Of course, like each Old Testament covenant before it, the new covenant established policies that were appropriate for its place in history. These new policies were revealed through Christ and through his apostles and prophets. But like each Old Testament covenant, the new covenant renewed, rebuilt, renovated or refreshed the policies that God had established in previous covenant administrations.

When we think of the kingdom of God across the canon of Scripture and across redemptive history, there’s changes in the administration of it as you work through the biblical covenants and reach their culmination in Christ. So, for instance, particularly in the Old Testament, as God brings his salvific plan through the nation of Israel into the old covenant, he’s working primarily with a nation, he’s working primarily in terms of a theocracy, a visible representation in terms of that nation where through them they will bring about the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the Lord Jesus. And you see a lot of the administration of that kingdom tied to them in a particular place, location, land, under particular rule and government and so on. And then as you think of its fulfillment in Christ, as you bring the kingdom to pass in the new covenant, there are some changes. Christ obviously is the King. He is the one who fulfills the type and shadows of the Old Testament. He fulfills the role of David and Moses. And he’s the one who in his life and death and resurrection inaugurates the kingdom, brings God’s saving reign to this world, and then brings about an international community — what we call the church, the one new man, Jew and Gentile together — so that he now rules in and through the church... It is the spiritual rule and reign of Christ through his people as men and women and boys and girls come to faith and repentance. As they believe, they enter that kingdom. The saving rule of God comes to them. That kingdom now is international where the rule of God now brings into it a people that come from every tribe, nation, people and tongue. And it shows itself in the local church where there’s a kind of theocracy there where Christ rules his people in the local church, but not exactly the same way as it was under the nation of Israel of old.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

So, when we think about God's administration of his kingdom and how it might change, we surely don't want to think of him as a kind of ancient bureaucrat trying to think up a new organizational chart because the first one didn't work out, so he kind of has "plan B." It simply can't be that. His purposes have to be consistent. So, it's best, I think, to assume that his operating principles are going to be relatively similar and then discern what changes might have been instituted. In this case, I think that fact that Jesus is no longer there is important so that the Spirit comes, so that the church can be empowered not just to center in on the physical Jesus in a given location but is free to disperse with the Spirit of Jesus to bring his message, to bring his mission to the whole world. Now, there is this shift in covenants where what had previously been operative under the flesh is now empowered by the Spirit so that the goal of the old covenant — loving God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself — the believers are now empowered to do that.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

These organic developments between Old Testament covenants and the new covenant provide us with a third crucial perspective on New Testament theology. In addition to being Christocentric and focused on policies that were appropriate for the threefold unfolding of Christ's kingdom, New Testament theology was *based* on Old Testament theology.

At its core, New Testament theology was not a new faith. Instead, New Testament authors applied the teachings of the Old Testament in the light of God's revelation in Christ. This is why the New Testament is relatively small. It assumed the abiding validity of the Old Testament. This is also why New Testament authors appealed to the Old Testament hundreds of times to support their theological perspectives. So, when we say that New Testament theology is new covenant theology, we don't mean that it's somehow divorced from the Old Testament. On the contrary, every dimension of New Testament theology incorporates and builds on the theology of the Old Testament.

So far in our lesson on the new covenant, we've explored God's kingdom administration. Now we should turn to our second major topic in this lesson: the dynamics of interaction between God and his people in the new covenant.

DYNAMICS OF INTERACTION

New Testament authors described the interactions between God and his covenant people in countless ways. They referred to God's grace as well as his wrath. They

demanded obedience and warned against disobedience. They described how God protects some from harm and how he calls others to suffer. These and many other direct and indirect references to interactions between God and his people raise some important questions. What theological outlooks undergirded this variety? How did New Testament authors make sense of it all? How did they approach the dynamics of divine and human interaction?

Once again, we'll start with the backdrop of ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. In general terms, these treaties focused on three features of the interactions between greater and lesser kings. First, greater kings always claimed that they showed benevolence to their vassals. Second, greater kings also stipulated certain ways in which their vassals were to prove their loyalty. And third, greater kings spelled out the consequences of blessings and curses that vassals could expect for obedience and disobedience. Now, we need to say that greater kings always reserved the right to enforce the terms of their covenants as they saw fit. But in general, benevolence, loyalty and consequences formed the basic principles by which these treaty relationships were governed.

And as we're about to see, the same elements appear in the dynamics of divine and human interactions in biblical covenants. We need to keep in mind that, as the supreme King, God was the one who determined how the dynamics of his covenants would come to fruition. And he did this according to his own incomparable wisdom, not according to the standards of human expectations. This is why the Scriptures explain that God's interactions with his people are often beyond human comprehension. But as passages like Deuteronomy 29:29, Isaiah 55:8-9, a number of Psalms, and whole books like Job and Ecclesiastes remind us, the ways God implemented these covenant dynamics were always good and wise.

We'll explore the dynamics of interaction between God and people by first noting God's divine benevolence to his people. Second, we'll see how biblical covenants involved tests of loyalty for God's covenant people. And third, we'll address the consequences of blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience. Let's begin with divine benevolence.

DIVINE BENEVOLENCE

We'll look at the element of divine benevolence in both Old Testament covenants and in the new covenant. Let's consider first divine benevolence in Old Testament covenants.

Old Testament

The Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that God's benevolence, or kindness, both initiated and sustained the relationships established by his covenants. To begin with, God showed divine benevolence to Adam as his covenant representative in the covenant of foundations. Before Adam's fall into sin, God granted kindness to Adam

by creating the Garden of Eden and placing him there as God's image. And he also poured out saving grace on our first parents, Adam and Eve, after their fall into sin. Additionally, Adam represented all of humanity in the court of God. So, the kindnesses God showed to Adam were passed on to the covenant people he represented. In one way or another God continued to show common grace to all people, including unbelievers. And to true believers, like Abel, Seth and many others, God also showed saving grace.

Throughout his lifetime, Noah also received divine benevolence — both common grace and saving grace — as God's covenant representative in the covenant of stability. And, just as in Adam's covenant, the kindnesses God showed Noah were also passed on to the covenant people Noah represented: all human beings. In a variety of ways, God showed all people his common grace. And to true believers, especially in the lineage of Shem, God also displayed saving grace.

Abraham also experienced the divine benevolence of common and saving grace as God's covenant representative in the covenant of Israel's election. The kindnesses God showed Abraham were also shown to the covenant people he represented: Israelites, and Gentiles who would be adopted into Israel. As he saw fit, God displayed common grace to the people of this covenant, including unbelievers like Esau. But God also poured out his saving grace on faithful figures like Jacob, Joseph and many others.

As the stories of Moses' life tell us, God showed the divine benevolence of common and saving grace in unique ways to Moses himself as the covenant representative of the covenant of law. And the kindnesses God showed to Moses were passed on to those he represented: the nation of Israel and those adopted into Israel. All Israelites benefited from God's common grace, even those who did not have saving faith. And God also showed his saving grace to many who were in Israel and adopted into Israel.

Last of all, David received the divine benevolence of common and saving grace in special ways as God's chosen covenant representative in the covenant of kingship. And the kindnesses God showed to David were passed on to the covenant people he represented: his royal sons, the nation of Israel and all Gentiles adopted into Israel. According to God's inscrutable wisdom, they all experienced common grace, including unbelievers in Israel. But true believers in Israel also received God's saving grace.

God's divine benevolence to his people through the Old Testament covenants set the stage for the ways God's benevolence influenced the dynamics of the new covenant as well.

New Covenant

In the first place, the New Testament draws attention to God's benevolence toward Christ, the new covenant representative. We should be clear that, like Adam before the fall into sin, Jesus never needed mercy, forgiveness or saving grace from God. Even so, passages like Matthew 3:16-17; Matthew 12:18; and Luke 3:22 indicate that during the inauguration of his kingdom, the Father anointed Jesus with his Spirit to empower him in his service. In fact, according to Romans 8:11, it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Father raised Jesus from the dead. Moreover, according to Psalm 2:4-6; Matthew 28:18; and Acts 2:31-33, the Father's benevolence toward Jesus lifted

him to his current position of authority and power during the continuation of his kingdom. And this kindness will lead to the privileges and glory Christ will receive at the consummation of his kingdom.

In the second place, the New Testament also focuses on what Christian theologians often call “union with Christ.” This teaching makes it clear that God’s benevolence to Christ also impacts the church, the covenant people he represents.

Believers’ union with Christ is twofold. On the one side, we are “in Christ.” This means that because Christ is our covenant representative, the people of the new covenant are identified with Christ in God’s heavenly court. So, in many ways, what is true of Christ is counted as true for all those he represents in the court of God. This is what Paul had in mind when he said in Ephesians 1:13:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation (Ephesians 1:13).

But on the other side, the New Testament doesn’t just speak about believers being “in Christ.” It also speaks of “Christ in us.” That is, Christ is present and at work within believers through the Holy Spirit in our day-to-day experiences on earth. Listen to Romans 8:10-11:

If Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he ... will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you (Romans 8:10-11).

As this passage indicates, although New Testament authors acknowledged that the church is identified with Christ in heaven, they also knew that the new covenant age had not yet reached its consummation. As a result, life in the new covenant now is different from what it will be when Christ returns. For instance, now God’s new covenant people continue to sin. Moreover, false believers — those without saving faith — remain in the visible church alongside true believers. Only at the consummation will the work of Christ in us be completed.

For this reason, the New Testament teaches that, prior to Christ’s return, God shows common grace to all people in the visible church, including false believers. In fact, passages like John 15:1-6 and Hebrews 6:4-6 illustrate that although unbelievers often experience great temporary mercies from God, they don’t receive saving grace. But at the same time, God has shown saving grace to true believers even now. It’s no wonder, then, that every facet of New Testament theology is cast in terms of divine benevolence.

In both the Old and the New Testaments we see that the Lord declares that he is kind to all mankind, to both the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, to those who are his children and those who are not. The Lord is kind in the following way: In the first place, he does not destroy us immediately despite all of us being sinners. He allows us to live by his grace. In the second place, he gives us the blessing of rain, and rain falls on both the farms of the wicked and the righteous. We

are also told that the sun makes the plants grow and gives life to the righteous and the unrighteous. This means that God is kind to all creatures, good and bad. And that he gives us all the opportunity to recognize who he is. He tells us that through his mercy, the Lord gives those who do not follow him or even deny him the opportunity to listen to his message, to study his Word and to be saved. So the Lord is kind even to those who deny his existence. And to those who are his, he promises to always be there and to bless them forever.

— Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation

As Paul put it in Ephesians 2:8:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).

Now that we've seen how the dynamics of interaction between God and people involves the display of divine benevolence, we should look at how life in covenant with God also entails tests of loyalty. These requirements of obedience reveal the condition of the hearts of those in covenant with God.

TESTS OF LOYALTY

We should mention here that in the twentieth century many scholars began to compare biblical covenants with another group of ancient Near Eastern texts, often called “royal grants.” In these grants, a suzerain granted benefits to a vassal or a subject. Early research led many to conclude that there were no obligations or requirements, no tests of loyalty, for the one who received the grant. And, as a result, a number of biblical interpreters suggested that some biblical covenants did not require loyalty from God's people. But, more recent research has pointed in the opposite direction. We now know that even royal grants required loyal service from the recipients. So, we shouldn't be surprised when Scripture tells us that God tested the loyalty of his people in *every* biblical covenant, including the new covenant.

When we say that God tests our loyalty as part of life in the new covenant, we need to avoid some serious misunderstandings. First, throughout the Bible, no sinner has ever earned salvation by good works. We'll never reach the perfection needed to receive God's eternal blessings by our own efforts. Secondly, every good work that we perform is made possible by the grace of God at work within us. We don't accomplish any good work apart from the mercy of God and the power of his Spirit. And thirdly, we still need to realize that God has always called his covenant people to obedience. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tested or proved the true condition of his peoples' hearts through their responses to his commands.

What I want all believers in Christ to know is that the personal relationship with God did not begin in the New Testament. It was a

fulfilling of a longtime “I will be their God and they will be my people.” That is a formula from the very beginning, you know, from the Garden of Eden, from Genesis 12, from the making of a covenant people. And so, inward devotion is the genesis of obedience. It is not the result of obedience. It is not aside from obedience... We obey God because he has loved us, because he has engaged us, because he has formed us, because he has been with us through every valley, through every wilderness, through every victory. And so, obedience is out of a relationship and not out of a regulation.

— Dr. Joel C. Hunter

To see what we mean, we'll summarize how tests of loyalty appear in Old Testament covenants. Then we'll look at tests of loyalty in the new covenant. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

Old Testament

Everyone familiar with the Bible knows that God tested Adam as God's covenant representative through his directives in the Garden of Eden. And we also know that God called for the loyalty of his covenant people in Adam: the entire human race.

Noah also was tested by God's directives as his covenant representative both before and after the flood. And the Scriptures indicate that God continued to test the hearts of his covenant people in Noah — again, the entire human race.

The stories of Abraham's life illustrate how God tested the patriarch's loyalty in a number of ways as his covenant representative. As just one example, Genesis 22:1-19 tells us explicitly that God tested Abraham when he commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac. In Genesis 22:12, the angel of the Lord said to Abraham:

Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son (Genesis 22:12).

We can see in this passage why God commanded Abraham. He tested him to prove the true condition of his heart.

In a similar way, the Scriptures teach that God tested the loyalty of his covenant people in Abraham: the people of Israel and Gentiles adopted into Israel.

Moses was tested by God's commands throughout his life as the covenant representative of Israel. And God explicitly explained that he gave his covenant people of Israel the Law to test them. Listen to Deuteronomy 8:2 where Moses told the people:

The Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:2).

In much the same way, the stories of David's life indicate that God tested David's loyalty as the royal covenant representative of Israel. And as the rest of the Old Testament illustrates repeatedly, God continued to test his covenant people, the sons of David and the nation of Israel, throughout their generations.

Having mentioned God's tests of loyalty in Old Testament covenants, now let's explore the way God tests his people's loyalty in the new covenant.

New Covenant

Now, as we've seen, God's grace has been poured out in the new covenant as never before in biblical history. Yet, it's also apparent that the New Testament has countless commands and directives from God. Why is this true? Well, just as in the Old Testament covenants, the new covenant also requires tests of loyalty.

For this reason, the New Testament gives a great deal of attention to Christ's loyalty as the new covenant representative. It tells us that during the inauguration of the kingdom, Jesus passed every test of loyalty that God required of him. In Hebrews 4:15 we read:

We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

And listen to Philippians 2:8 where Paul referred to Christ's remarkable obedience:

Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:8).

In New Testament theology, the height of Jesus' loyal service to God was his voluntary death on the cross. But why was this act of obedience so significant?

From the time sin entered the world, God made temporary provisions for the sins of his covenant people through the blood of animal sacrifices. But as Hebrews 10:1-14 teaches, these sacrifices were unable to secure the final, permanent forgiveness of God's victorious kingdom. And so, as Israel's exile approached, God revealed in Isaiah 53:1-12, that he required the voluntary death of the servant of the Lord, the Messiah, as atonement for the sins of his people. By his death, the royal covenant representative would bring God's people into the glories of his eternal victorious kingdom. Jesus fulfilled this role in the inauguration when he voluntarily submitted to death on the cross. We see this in passages like Matthew 8:17; Acts 8:32-33; Romans 6:10; and 1 Peter 2:22-25. By passing this test of loyalty as the new covenant representative, Jesus provided permanent atonement and eternal forgiveness to all who believe in him.

In addition to Jesus' death on the cross, passages like Hebrews 8:1-2 also point out that Christ, as the son of David, serves obediently in heaven throughout the continuation of his kingdom. And 1 Corinthians 15:24 teaches that when Christ returns in glory at the consummation, he will hand the kingdom to God the Father as an act of humble service.

Now, as much as New Testament theology emphasizes Christ's perfect loyalty as the new covenant representative, it also stresses that tests of loyalty are still in effect for the church, the people of the new covenant.

Once again, it helps to understand tests of loyalty for the church in terms of the church's union with Christ. On the one side, the church is "in Christ" in the sense that we're identified with him before God in his heavenly court. And according to 1 Timothy 3:16, Christ was the one who passed the test of loyalty perfectly and was vindicated when the Holy Spirit raised him from the dead. For this reason, as passages like Romans 4:23-25 teach, this legal vindication of Christ in the court of heaven is imputed to all who have saving faith in him. In Christ, true believers are judged as those who have passed the test because Christ has passed the test on our behalf. This wondrous truth about Christ in God's heavenly court is the basis for the New Testament theological perspective that protestant theologians have called "*sola fide*," or justification by faith alone.

On the other side, however, union with Christ also refers to the day-to-day experience of "Christ in us." While the church still exists on earth prior to Christ's return in glory, people within the church experience tests of loyalty that prove the condition of their hearts. And Christ's Spirit works within true believers to make us holy. This side of our union with Christ corresponds to the traditional protestant doctrine of sanctification, or the progressive pursuit of holiness. And Scripture teaches that testing is the way God moves us forward in sanctification. As James 1:2-3 puts it:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance (James 1:2-3).

Now, once again, we must remember that during the inauguration and continuation of Christ's kingdom, the visible church, consists of both false believers and true believers. And it's through the test of loyalty that both groups reveal whether or not they have saving faith. False believers fail the test of loyalty and turn from serving Christ. By contrast, true believers, although not perfect in this life, will persevere in their loyalty to Christ through the power of the Spirit. As we read in 1 John 2:19 regarding false believers:

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2:19).

As this passage indicates, New Testament theology contains many commands from God as tests of loyalty to prove those who really belong to the body of true believers.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus Christ launched a new covenant. And like all covenants, this one is one that involves reciprocating commitments and reciprocal obligations. And one of our chief commitments in this wonderful covenant is a commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ, to obedience to his will and his ways, to

surrender up our swords to his true lordship, and to live that out in authentic ways, both in the disposition of our hearts and our willingness to follow the heart of God into the world. But one of the things that's certainly necessary to add here is that the fulfillment of our covenant obligations today are fulfillments we live out in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit alters the disposition of that obedience and upgrades it well above grinding duty so that it becomes, in the language of Scripture, this covenant becomes a covenant of reciprocating delight. The one who looks over us delights in us and we in him. And it gives you some idea of why the apostle could say that the kingdom of God is not grinding duty, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Some of the greatest saints have told us that this obligation that exists to be faithful and loyal to our Lord is one that we fulfill not reluctantly, but eagerly, and with all of our hearts because he has won us over. And we find him and his ways delightful.

— Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Now that we've seen the dynamics of interaction in the new covenant in relation to God's divine benevolence and tests of loyalty, we should turn to a third element. Let's examine the consequences of blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience.

CONSEQUENCES

We'll look at the consequences for obedience and disobedience in covenant with God along the lines of our earlier discussions. We'll briefly survey the Old Testament covenants and then turn to the new covenant. Let's first see the consequences of blessings and curses in the Old Testament covenants.

Old Testament

Prior to the new covenant, the consequences of both blessings and curses were crucial dimensions of God's interactions with his covenant representatives, and with his covenant people as a whole. Now, as we've already mentioned, God often implemented the terms of his covenants in ways that were beyond human understanding. So, in Scripture God often hastened, increased, lessened, delayed and even cancelled the blessings and curses of his covenants at times in ways that were beyond human comprehension. But he always did so according to his perfect wisdom and goodness.

In the covenant of foundations, God cursed Adam, his covenant representative, with suffering and death in response to his disobedience. But, we also see God's blessings to Adam. In Genesis 3:15, God promised humanity's victory over the seed of

the serpent. And both this curse of death and hope of victory were passed on, as God saw fit, to the covenant people Adam represented, the human race.

In the covenant of nature's stability, the covenant representative, Noah, received blessings for his faithful service. But he also continued to face curses, such as troubles in his family after the flood. Similar blessings and curses came to future generations of humanity, the covenant people Noah represented.

In the covenant of Israel's election, Abraham also received the consequences of blessings and curses as God's covenant representative. These consequences were passed down to the covenant people of Israel and those adopted into Israel in subsequent generations.

In a similar way, in the covenant of law, Moses received God's blessings and curses in his life as the covenant representative. Additionally, Moses' law spelled out many specific blessings and curses that would come to the covenant people of Israel and Gentiles adopted into Israel.

In the covenant of kingship, David himself, as the covenant representative, received the consequences of blessings and curses as he was faithful and unfaithful. The same was true for the covenant people he represented, his royal descendants and the people of Israel and Gentiles adopted into Israel.

We've touched briefly on the consequences of blessings and curses in Old Testament covenants. These set the stage for what New Testament authors taught about the consequences of obedience and disobedience associated with the new covenant in Christ.

New Covenant

New Testament theology emphasizes that Christ, as the representative of the new covenant, experienced both God's curses and God's blessings. As Paul pointed out in Galatians 3:13, Jesus endured the curse of God for the sins of all who believe in him as he suffered death on the cross.

Now, Jesus didn't come under God's curses because of his own personal failures. He had no personal sins. But in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:1-12, he bore the judgment of God as an innocent royal substitute for the people of God in every age. By contrast, however, because of his own personal righteousness, Christ also received God's blessings. Jesus is the only human being who served God perfectly and deserved the reward of God's eternal blessings.

Listen to the connection between Christ's obedience and God's blessing in Philippians 2:8-9:

[Christ] became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:8-9).

In New Testament theology, Jesus' resurrection and ascension at the inauguration of the kingdom were the just reward for his perfect obedience to God. Jesus enjoys the blessing of God throughout the continuation of his kingdom as he reigns over all of

creation at the right hand of the Father. And he will be blessed even more at the consummation of his kingdom when he receives his eternal inheritance of ruling over the new creation.

Now, as much as New Testament theology praises Jesus for gaining the blessing of ruling over all creation, we know that the consequences of the new covenant also impact the church, the people of the new covenant.

Once again, the New Testament doctrine of union with Christ points out two sides of this reality. On the one side, because we are "in Christ," every eternal blessing of God has already been assigned to true believers. True believers can rest confidently in the fact that they will never experience the eternal curse of God. Their eternal blessings are secure because Christ is their covenant representative.

Paul had this concept in mind when he wrote his well-known doxology in Ephesians 1:3:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

Because we are identified with Christ in heaven, true believers have already received "every spiritual blessing." Just as Christ bore the eternal curses of God on our behalf, he also received the reward of eternal blessings from the Father on our behalf.

On the other side, however, our union with Christ means that Christ is in us. That is to say, he is at work in true believers so that they experience the consequences of obedience and disobedience in their daily lives.

Now, once again, we must remember that until Christ returns in glory, the visible church consists of both false believers and true believers. And New Testament theology explains how the consequences of blessings and curses, in this life and in eternity, apply to both of these groups.

Passages like Luke 12:45-46 and Romans 2:4-5 explain that, as false believers continue to rebel against God, the blessings they receive in this life increase God's eternal curses against them at the final judgment. And the hardships and curses they endure in this life are but foretastes of the eternal curses they will receive when Christ returns.

By contrast, true believers also receive both blessings and curses in this life. But the blessings that true believers receive in this life are foretastes of the eternal blessings that will come at the consummation of the kingdom. And for true believers, as passages like Hebrews 12:1-11 tell us, temporary hardships, or curses, are God's loving, fatherly discipline. These difficulties sanctify us and increase the eternal blessings we'll receive when Christ returns. As we read in Revelation 21:6-8, God says:

To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 21:6-8).

On that day, false believers in the new covenant church will be condemned to eternal judgment. But true believers will receive their eternal inheritance in the glorious new creation.

If we want to see the blessings that God's people receive after final judgment, we would go to Revelation 21 and 22, this amazing image of the new creation at the end of the world. And I love this description of the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22, because it's not just a recapitulation of Genesis, of the Garden, it's not just a return to the Garden. It's really an escalation of the Garden. It's dynamic. It's better than Eden was. So, in Eden, Adam and Eve had a responsibility to rule under God, to tend the Garden and steward the earth. In the new creation we will too, and that's our blessing. But we will never sin. Adam and Eve had the potential to sin. In the new creation, God's people will never fall away. In Eden, Jesus wasn't there, wasn't there physically, bodily. In the new creation Jesus will be. So, the blessing that we inherit as people of God, people of the new covenant is really a new creation that's better than anything the world has ever known.

— Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the new covenant in Christ, we've considered God's kingdom administration and seen how God administered his kingdom through his covenant representatives, and how he established appropriate policies as his covenants developed organically. We've also explored how the dynamics of interaction between God and his covenant people involved his divine benevolence, his tests of loyalty, and the consequences for obedience and disobedience.

As we seek to understand the New Testament more fully, we must keep in mind that the new covenant in Christ wasn't just one small part of New Testament theology. As the last of God's covenants with his people, the new covenant deeply influenced everything New Testament authors wrote. God made a solemn pact with his people in Christ through the new covenant. And the more we understand about this new covenant, the better we will be able to see the most important features of New Testament theology.

Dr. Simon Vibert (Host) is Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall of the University of Oxford where he also serves as Director of the School of Preaching. Dr. Vibert received his Th.M. from Glasgow University, his D.Min. from Reformed Theological Seminary, and his Postgraduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education from the University of Oxford. He is a Trustee of Latimer Trust, a member of the Church of England Evangelical Council, and served as Chairman of the Fellowship of Word and Spirit. Dr. Vibert also served for 8 years as Vicar of St. Luke's Church Wimbledon Park. He has produced numerous books and theological articles, including *Excellence in Preaching: Learning from the Best* (IVP, 2011); *Stress: The Path to Peace* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2014); and *Lives Jesus Changed* (Christian Focus Publications, 2010).

Dr. Constantine R. Campbell is Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Dr. Joel C. Hunter is Senior Pastor of Northland, A Church Distributed in Longwood, FL.

Mr. Bradley T. Johnson is Pastor of Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church and Adjunct Professor at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Daniel L. Kim is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary.

Dr. Sean McDonough is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Alvin Padilla is Vice President of Academic Affairs at Western Theological Seminary.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary, San Diego.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer is Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Lead Pastor of Pepperell Christian Fellowship in Pepperell, MA.

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
THREE

The New Covenant Faculty Forum



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Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

Lesson Three: The New Covenant

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Steve Blakemore
Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. Dennis E. Johnson
Dr. Craig S. Keener
Dr. Dan Lacich
Dr. Robert G. Lister

Rev. Jim Maples
Dr. Sean McDonough
Dr. Tom Petter
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel
Dr. Glen G. Scorgie
Dr. Mark L. Strauss

Dr. Douglas Stuart
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Question 1:

What role did covenants have in the Old Testament?

Dr. Tom Petter

Well, the question of covenants in the Old Testament is, it's so fundamental to understanding the narrative of the Old Testament, a compelling story of what... That *is* the Old Testament. And when you talk about the covenants, you have to talk about the covenant representatives, you have to talk about the covenant mediators, the tribal figures that tower above other people... There's a lots of people in the Old Testament, lots of great stories, but you have some of these people that we have in the story, very early from Adam, and Noah, and of course Abraham, and then Moses, and then David... And the primary covenant that governs the life of ancient Israel in the Old Testament is the covenant made at Sinai with Moses, the covenant of Sinai. Sometimes people call it covenant of Moses, Mosaic covenant. And that's a set of rules and regulations that govern the life of Israel... If you obey, then you will be blessed in the land, if you disobey, then you'll be cursed. And of course, then the life of Israel under this covenant administration is a series of evaluations. Do they obey the covenant or do they disobey the covenant? And guess who are the people who give the test, the exams? The prophets, because they're the covenant enforcers. And the tragedy, too, is that the kings in the line of David, they're supposed to enforce the covenant obedience and no disloyalty to Yahweh, but they themselves fail. And so, the end of Israelite history is basically a miserable failure of upholding the covenant. But then there is hope because in this catalogue of failure, failing to obey the covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the covenant in Sinai, God promises something to David, the one king who starts the dynasty of the covenant enforcers, the kings of Judah, and he makes a promise just like to Abraham and he says, I promise that your dynasty will endure forever. Yes, I will discipline my kings under covenantal law, the law at Sinai, but regardless of the discipline, I will make sure that there's always a king on the throne. And of course, that's the promise just like to Abraham, God will see to it that there's a lineage. And of course, this is the launching pad; this prepares us for the promised son of David. That's why the New Testament

writers nail it; Romans 1, who is Jesus? He is the son of David, right? The genealogies of Mark and... I mean of Luke and Matthew, he is the Davidic king.

Question 2:

How is the kingdom of God rooted in the theology of the Old Testament?

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

One of the questions that we might have is, is the New Testament where this vision of the kingdom of God first invented? It's certainly the place where it becomes more central and explicit, but we find the roots of the kingdom, or the reign of God, very pervasive in the Old Testament, in the old covenant as well. And just to give a couple of examples, we find in the Old Testament a great and growing interest in the condition of the human heart of God's covenant people. One of the great sadnesses and regrets of many prophets was how people could honor God with their lips but have their hearts far from him. So, even in the Old Testament, there was a growing sensitivity to the inwardness of the reign of God, the need to have hearts that had renounced and relinquished their egocentrism and their defiance in order to make their hearts a hospitable place for the reign of God. And so, that intimacy, the inner dynamic of the kingdom of God is already present in the great *Shema*, to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength." This is an anchoring text for the Old Testament, and it's absolutely central to what the kingdom is all about and where it begins. And then to have that inward reality expressed outwardly in structures of society that resonate with the heart of God, here we find the prophets, the major and the minor, speaking in a wonderfully consistent harmony about how that which is inward is to be outwardly manifested in how we do life together. This is the kingdom in the covenant of the people of God.

Question 3:

What does Scripture reveal about the organic development of God's kingdom?

Dr. Robert G. Lister

As we read the Scriptures with a view to determining the major eras that make up redemptive history, or the major epochs that make up redemptive history, what we're looking for are major transitions in the economy of redemption, major transitions in the development of redemptive history, or the way God is working in the world, or with a people at that particular time. At the broadest level, I tend to think of five subdivisions that are pretty easy to keep in mind. And we could obviously subdivide these, but I tend to think of five, being, first God, then creation, then the Fall, then redemption, then the new creation. Now when I say "God" as an era or epoch of redemptive history, what I mean by that is that there is a time in which only God exists and there's no created thing that God is relating to. And who God is in eternity past is who he demonstrates himself to be once there is a creation. So we're not starting, sort of, *carte blanche* in the moment of

creation. Prior to creation, there's an eternal relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that is as splendid as any relationship can ever be. And so we don't want to ignore the fact that God has a prior existence to creation, or somehow view God as dependent for his existence on the creation. So there's God. Then there's what God is doing in the moment of creation. What is he designing? What is he weaving into the world? What is his purpose for making image-bearers, and how does he intend to relate to them? Very quickly, in the development of the narrative of the book of Genesis, we find that after the creation comes the Fall, and so what God has designed now begins to be corrupted by his creature's sin, and there are detrimental effects brought about by the rebellion of the creature that bring corrupting effects to what God has made. And so what does that look like? How does that affect God's original design? And yet, very quickly in the aftermath of the Fall, God also announces a plan of redemption that certainly has different administrations within it, but it begins as soon as God's pronouncing the curse on the man, woman and serpent; he's announcing a plan of redemption as well. So, God's going to redeem and restore what has been corrupted by sin. And that redemptive category is obviously the largest one, and you could subdivide that into old covenant and new covenant administrations. You could subdivide that into Mosaic administrations, administrations of the monarchy in the time of Israel. You could certainly get more refined. But then, on the other side of the fulfillment of God's redemptive aims is the new heavens and the new earth and the restoration of things to what they were originally supposed to be. So, if you think in terms of those five categories, you've kind of got the broadest transitional moments in Scripture which you could obviously subdivide from there.

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... 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 descendant. 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 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. 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. And 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 4:**How does Jesus continue David's royal dynasty as God the Father's vassal king?****Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Normally when we think about the kingship of Christ, we think of that as something very exalted, high, up there because Jesus is now at the right hand of God the Father, and he is the King. But we must remember that Jesus was exalted in his kingship in his human nature. That's to say, in his divine nature, Jesus was always the King; he was always ruling as the sovereign over all things. But Jesus was given authority in heaven and earth in his *human nature*. And Jesus is the Son of David, and therefore the one who represents the nation of Israel and the people of God. And the Son of David, like David himself, was a vassal king. He was a servant of the greater King, God the Father in heaven.

Dr. Simon Vibert

The language of vassal king as opposed to suzerain king speaks about delegated authority, and Jesus, as great David's greatest Son, was of that line of kingship. And even as David had his authority as king delegated from the Father, so too Jesus did as well. God being the one with all authority. In fact, he is the one of whom Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me," and therefore sends his disciples in the Father's name to make disciples of all nations.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus preaching the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God; it was another Jewish way of saying the reign of God. And yet, Jesus is demonstrating his authority or his reign on earth in various ways: healing the sick, driving out demons, stilling storms, and so forth. And at one point, he says, "that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," alluding back to Daniel 7 where the Son of Man will have great authority. But when you come to the climax of Matthew's gospel at the very end, Jesus then says, after he's been raised and he's about to ascend into heaven, Jesus says, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. And so, the difference is that now that Jesus has risen, he's the ruler of the cosmos. One text that he cited is in Psalm 110:1 where, "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'" where Jesus is now at the right hand of the Father and he's reigning, and he says that that will continue until all of his enemies are put under his feet.

Question 5:**Does the author of Hebrews consider the new covenant to be a covenant renewal or something completely new?****Dr. Peter Walker**

There's always quite a bit of controversy as one looks at the Bible to discover, is it one big covenant or is it divided up into two halves, or perhaps even more covenants? And,

especially this language of the new covenant, which we find first used in Jeremiah, picked up in Matthew's gospel when Jesus talks about "the blood of the new covenant," and also especially here in Hebrews 8, when it talks about the new covenant. Is that a *brand new* covenant, such that everything that happens in the New Testament is something which is completely new, fresh, and in one sense in opposition to the Old? Or is it a *renewal* of the original covenant? I think it holds the Bible much more closely together if we see it as the renewal of the original covenant. And what's that original covenant with Abraham and God's people? It is that God is going to remove sin from his people and from his creation. And therefore, Jesus comes not to do something entirely new, but to fulfill the original purpose of the covenant. He does that when he dies on the cross; his blood is the blood of the new covenant. And then the writer of Hebrews is showing the benefits of that renewed covenant. Yes, it does mean certain things from the old are to be removed. And he says that in Hebrews 8, that aspects of the old covenant are close to destruction, he says, but the deep underlying theme is one of unity and continuity, a renewal of the covenant.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

Hebrews 8 talks about the establishment of the new covenant, and this is not a brand new covenant. This covenant was promised in the Old Testament. In fact, he quotes from Jeremiah 31, the promise of a new covenant. God made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, but he promises that one day — Israel had broken that covenant — and one day God would reestablish a new covenant, and that new covenant wouldn't have the law written on tablets of stone. It would have the law written on our hearts. It would not provide just temporary forgiveness of sins, it would provide eternal forgiveness of sins. You wouldn't need a mediator, to go through the priest. You would know God. All of God's people would know God through the Messiah, through Jesus Christ. So, the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 has come to fulfillment, and that's what the author is arguing. And with that promise and fulfillment, God's salvation is now not just for Israel but is going forth to all nations everywhere. So all along, the author says this is what God had intended, this is the fulfillment of the promises. He tells the audience, "Don't go back. Don't go back to your old way. Don't go back to the shadow. Don't go back to the promise, because the fulfillment has arrived. We are under the new covenant, not the old Mosaic covenant."

Dr. Dan Lacich

When we look at Hebrews 8 and we see the idea of a covenant and a new covenant, it really is a good question, is it a new one or is it just sort of reformatting the old one? There's a sense in which the answer is both. But ultimately, it is a *new* covenant. It builds on the previous covenant, and that's why it has a sense of being renewed or reformatted. But it's new on a number of levels. It's new because it has a different group of people who are being addressed in that covenant. You move from just the people of Israel to all who would have faith in Christ, so you have a different participant there. The mediator of that covenant is now specifically Christ, which changes it. And even the requirements of the covenant change. Certainly faith was what gained salvation even for the Old Testament saints, but the requirements of the covenant, because they were so nationalistic for Israel as a people, were different for the requirements of us as God's people who are

scattered throughout the world and throughout his kingdom. So, it is a new covenant, but it is *built* on the previous covenant with similarities, but a new and improved version, if you will.

Question 6:

Can we say that those in the church that reject Christ have received saving grace?

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The warnings against apostasy in Hebrews, especially in chapters 6 and 10, are sobering, they're troubling because the author, especially in chapter 6, says if someone has participated in the life of the new covenant community and heard the good word of God, seen the Holy Spirit at work and then turns away, that turning away for that individual is not something that is going to be reversed. It's a very sobering thing. I think we need to realize that the author here is writing to a congregation. He's not presuming to read the hearts of every individual who will hear this sermon read aloud. He's not presuming to peek into the Lamb's Book of Life. So, he's really talking to people who profess faith in Christ, but he knows that the new covenant church, like the old covenant church in the wilderness, as he says in chapters 3 and 4, from Psalm 95, is a mixture of people who genuinely trust in Christ. For *those* people, he will say so clearly in chapter 7, that Christ is able to save to the uttermost those who approach God through him. But others who may be professing faith in Christ but don't have a genuine saving faith, and he says, for them, the very fact of their being associated with the church and then turning away means a more severe judgment. So, it is a warning. It's not to cause us to be living in constant fear, but it is to call us to love one another with a proactive love, to hold onto one another, to encourage and exhort one another lest there be someone who is weak and falls away. Ultimately, our calling is to encourage one another and to hold fast, knowing that God holds fast to his own people, and he uses us to make that perseverance take place in the lives of his people.

Dr. Simon Vibert

The warnings against apostasy in Hebrews are, they're stark and they're quite scary for us to read. Let me remind you of what it says here at the beginning of chapter 6, verse 4:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance (Hebrews 6:4-4).

And we read those words and, quite understandably, we quake. We're fearful because we don't want to fall away and we worry, is there a possibility that we might. And the first thing to say is that I think we're right to hear those warnings. The writer has written them because he is deeply anxious that those who have tasted some of the goodness of God might fall away. And the pressures upon those Hebrew Christians was intense and some

of them *did* fall away. But at the same time, the warnings are given because the writer believes that, if you've truly appreciated all that Christ has done for you in these last days, you will endure to the end. And he's given you all the sustenance, both in terms of the Holy Spirit to help and also this cloud of faithful witnesses, of those who have endured to the end, who help motivate us and keep us going.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

There are a number of warnings against apostasy in Hebrews... Now, a couple of questions arise: One is, why does the writer of Hebrews keep addressing this, even though he says in chapter 6, "I'm persuaded better things of you." But with each of these, there are exhortations attached. He's saying, don't become like this, but rather, persevere. He calls them to persevere in a number of ways. He uses all of the example in Hebrew chapter 11 and then comes to the ultimate example of the faith in Hebrews 12, Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and says, "You haven't even yet resisted to the shedding of your blood." So, he uses these to call people to persevere. Another question, though, is the theological question of how we take this. And it's taken different ways by different schools of theology. For example, a Calvinist who would say, "Well, the elect, those who will be saved, will persevere. And so, if they don't persevere, they were never a part of God's elect." The Arminian would say, "Well, these people experienced salvation but they fell away, they lost it." And I think one is speaking from the standpoint of God, and one is speaking from the standpoint of human experience. And I think we have texts that address both kinds of perspectives; I think they're both in Scripture. But I think it's a warning to those who hold kind of a cheap version of like, "Well, I prayed a prayer fifty years ago and, you know, I live however I want to, but now it's my ticket to heaven." That's *not* what Scripture teaches. Scripture teaches that we need to persevere.

Question 7:

How does Scripture describe God's benevolence to believers and unbelievers alike?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Scripture describes God's benevolence both within the covenant community and outside. Within the covenant community, there are believers and unbelievers; it's assumed from the very beginning, at the Old Testament all the way through the New. There are people who profess faith who are genuinely Christians, who are generally born again, and there are those people who profess faith who, in the end, appear not to be. But it's important to recognize that within the covenant community, God blesses all, regenerate and unregenerate... Often the benevolence of God within the covenant community is the means by which the unbeliever comes to faith. For example, in the covenant community you have a priority on common relationships, on providing for people in need. The church is a society which is different than the world outside, where it's a safe place, where people value the things that God values, and the unbeliever can benefit from those things just as a believer can. And, it's good to remember, those are often the means by which people come to true saving faith. Outside the church, we can speak of what theologians call "common grace," which is the rain that falls on the just and the unjust.

All people alike experience beauty and goodness in creation, although, as we learn from Romans 1, that the blessings on those who never turn to God in thanks actually accrue to their debt, rather than to their benefit. But God's kindness within the covenant community assumes that there are people who will be, for lack of a better expression, "tares among the wheat," and we don't know until the final harvest who is truly to be gathered in.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Scripture speaks of God's love and care and benevolence to believer and also unbeliever alike. Now, the way God loves and shows his care towards each is different. To the believer, all of God's promises, all of God's grace, all of his mercy and love is given to us in Christ Jesus so that all of his promises are "yes and amen." We have his Spirit. We have the gift of adoptions, our justification. You think of all of the outworking of salvation, all of that is God's love, grace and benevolence towards us as his people. Romans 8 is really important here, that even in the midst of suffering and difficulties as we await the coming of the Lord Jesus, that nothing separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, that all of God's promises are sure, that we are more than conquerors as we await the coming of the Lord Jesus, that we are heirs together with him as we await all of that still to come. Now, what about unbelievers? Well, unbelievers also experience something of God's benevolence and God's love. Now, they're not experiencing it in the way of salvation. We do call unbelievers to salvation, to repent and believe the gospel. But if they remain unbelievers, they do still experience God's, what we call, his "common grace," his grace that comes in sustaining the universe. It goes all the way back to the Noahic covenant where God has promised that, until the end, seedtime and harvest, summer and winter will continue, that the giving of food, the giving of rain, the giving of care to them is displayed abundantly, in preserving some of the structures of God's creation and family and in government and in order, I mean, all of this shows God's care towards both believer and unbeliever alike. And so all of this speaks of God's love for, certainly, his people, his children, but also even unbelievers as he cares for them, calls out to them as the church ministers to them, and we see this abundantly through redemptive history as we await the coming of the end. So, all of those are ways that God's love and care is displayed to both believer and unbeliever alike.

Dr. Dan Lacich

Scripture clearly gives us an understanding that God blesses his people, but that's not an exclusive blessing; it's not for us alone. There is very strong biblical teaching in both Testaments that God pours out his blessing on the just and unjust alike. Jesus makes it clear, the rain falls on both. Good things happen to bad people; bad things happen to good people, and vice versa; that all comes into the mix. And it's because God's grace over all creation is going to impact people even if they aren't following him and don't even believe that he's there. Paul says that it's his kindness that leads us to repentance, and so I think one of the ways that God wants to bring people to him is by pouring his grace out on them even when they don't believe in him. And even as followers of Christ, we are told to bless those folks; we're told to be an instrument in God's hands, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy, to serve them. And even back into the Old Testament as Jeremiah tells the exiles in Babylon that they should work for the welfare of the city

where they're held captive, because as the whole city is blessed, even as their captors are blessed, they will be blessed.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

One of the things we need to understand about the heart of God is that he loves the whole world; "For God so loved the world..." It is important to acknowledge that those who are united with Christ and are adopted as his children enjoy a special love relationship with their heavenly Father. And at the same time, though, there's room in this extravagantly generous heart of God for a passionate love for all his creatures, longing for his children to return to him. And so, even in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it very clear that we are to love our enemies and not just the insiders close to us, because this is how God is, that he has a care and concern even for those who are adversarial to him. And that is illustrated, Jesus taught, in the way that the sun rises and brings warmth and nourishment to unbelievers and believers alike. And he provides rain for crops to grow for people who do not know him through his Son. And so, these are just illustrations of the magnanimousness of the heart of God. Sometimes we summarize that in the language of common grace, but the heart of God is much bigger than the petty distinctions we sometimes make between, "like this group, hate this group," insiders and outsiders. The heart of God is passionately committed to all those he has brought into this world and given life.

Question 8:

In what ways did the Old Testament require inward devotion to God as well as outward obedience?

Dr. Dan Lacich

When we look at the Old Testament, I think, often, we get a misconception that it's only concerned about what we do, about the external activity, but it really is also about the heart. Jesus is quoted as saying that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Well, that's not just a New Testament passage; he's taken that right out of the Old Testament. So, there is this concern that who we are in the inside matches who we are on the outside. Jeremiah speaks about the heart being deceitful and wicked, and so we need to be guarding our heart; we need to understand that the heart impacts things. Ezekiel promises that we'll be given a new heart, you know, a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone. And throughout the Old Testament we have this kind of language that tells us that God cares about what is happening inside of us as much as what's happening on the outside. And it's a matter of integrity, that who we are in here should match who we are on the outside.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Some people might read the Old Testament, with all its formal requirements for worship and holiness, and wonder, how does this outward obedience relate to inner obedience? And they might even mistakenly think that the New Testament calls for inner obedience while the Old Testament only called for outward. But within the Old Testament itself, it says it's not about the outward obedience only. In Deuteronomy 10, Moses gave a speech

to the second-generation saying, “Don’t be like the first, but circumcise the foreskin of your hearts,” meaning that the sign of the covenant wasn’t simply to represent something external but something internal, to the heart. In 1 Samuel 15, Saul is confronted by the prophet Samuel who says, “Has the Lord as much delight in sacrifice as he has in obeying the voice of the Lord?” So, even though Saul had offered sacrifices, he hadn’t given inner obedience. Psalm 51 says the sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart. So, all the external ritual of the Old Testament was never intended by God to be seen as external only but pointing toward inward obedience.

Dr. Douglas Stuart

It’s easy to think that in New Testament times we get so much about really understanding God internally and the Holy Spirit in us and an internal devotion to God, and in Old Testament times they just did rituals and didn’t really have too much to think about or pay attention to inwardly. It’s just going through the motions, offering the sacrifices and so on. That’s really a misunderstanding. The Old Testament wants us, and wanted the people of Israel in the first place, to appreciate that following God is an outward *and* an inward thing. So, first of all, the Israelites had to show their faith by the elaborate requirements of worship that were placed upon them. It wasn’t easy three times a year for families to travel from their homes, sometimes hundreds of miles, to go to one central place, which for most of that period was Jerusalem, and encamp there somewhere out off in the outdoors and to spend time there for the festivals. They had to do that three times a year for Passover, and for Pentecost, and also for the Feast of Tabernacles. That takes a lot of devotion. That takes a resolve. That takes arranging for things back on the farm to be taken care of. It takes a resolve to commit a lot of days out of one’s year. And when they got there, or whenever anybody was worshiping, they had to spend a lot of time learning Scripture. The text tells us that the priests taught Scripture by the hour in those temples, and people sat there and listened. Furthermore, after they made the offering, they would eat the sacrificial meal, which represented their relationship to God. A meal is an indication in a lot of cultures of friendship — we eat together, we must know each other, we must like each other, we must somehow be connected — otherwise you wouldn’t sit down and have a meal with somebody. So sitting down to have a meal with God at God’s house, Wow! That’s a recognition inwardly that you belong to him, that he really is your Father and your Savior and the one who is your Lord. Likewise, the psalms show us lots of inward devotion. The psalms are *sometimes* about sacrifices or worship practices, but an awful lot is about, how do you love God? Do you care about him? Can you trust him? There are seventy psalms devoted to nothing other than having the awareness internally to know that, no matter how much you are suffering, God will be faithful. We call those lament psalms. And there are psalms of thanksgiving when God has been merciful. You’re praying to him and you’re saying, “You did this for me. *I know it*. I know it in my being that I can trust you.” Then there are the trust psalms themselves. There are the law psalms, the Torah psalms, that indicate how it is that we know God internally, how he is a part of our lives... the Holy Spirit was there, and people internally still were supposed to sink themselves into God’s goodness, his truth, his love, and obedience to him and his purposes for their lives.

Dr. Sean McDonough

Yeah, there's sometimes the assumption that the Old Testament is really just concerned with outward obedience, and then Jesus comes along and gives a whole new operating principle based on what's going on in your heart. But that's really a caricature, I think. Probably the easiest way to demonstrate that is just by looking in the Psalter: "clean hands and a pure heart." God was always concerned about the state of one's inward disposition towards his law. Look at Psalm 119. The psalmist loves the law of God. He doesn't just see it as this nettlesome burden that he just can't wait until the Messiah comes and takes it away. He really wants to do what God wants him to. And to the extent that we see the Holy Spirit active during the Old Testament era, surely that would involve concern on God's part for what your heart was leaning towards, not simply whether you were checking off all the correct boxes.

Question 9:**Why did Jesus have to remain loyal to God the Father and obey the Law during his earthly life?****Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

The Bible says that the law is a schoolmaster that points us to Christ, that brings us to him, prepares us for him. The law is given, and it's a reflection of God's character, but we fail to keep the Law. And so when Jesus comes he shows us perfect humanity fulfilling its intended purpose, which is relationship with God typified with faithfulness to God's commands. So Jesus comes, showing us true humanity in the way it's supposed to be, but also fulfilling that law for us. Jesus fulfills the Law in his continual faithfulness, in his to covenant keeping, law-abiding behavior, so that he becomes our righteousness. The Bible says that God is both just *and* the justifier. And so he comes with his law, and then he comes with his Son keeping the law for us. So he both is the just one, and the one who justifies us in Christ.

Rev. Jim Maples

It was necessary for Jesus to be sinless because Christ worked to carry out his messianic task as Messiah, as Savior, as the last Adam and to effect the salvation of those he came to save directly depended upon his personal obedience to God's law. We speak of Christ's active obedience, that is, all the things that Christ did to observe the law of God and to keep it perfectly. If Christ had not been sinless, his human nature would have been damaged, just as ours is. He would have been unable to make atonement for his own self, much less anyone else. And if — playing off that — if Christ had only suffered the penalty for our sin, we would have been in the same state that we were as Adam before the Fall. We still would not have had any holiness, righteousness, obedience to the law. So Christ's perfect obedience, which — this double amputation that took place at the cross — our sins were imputed to Christ, but his righteousness, his obedience, his holiness, was credited to our account. So it was very important that Christ be sinless, and his perfect obedience actually merits for his elect their adoption as the sons of God and eternal life.

Question 10:**Why does God require loyalty to Christ as he is revealed in the New Testament?****Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel**

Christians are called Christians because they believe Jesus is the Messiah. That's what the word means. The Greek word *Christos* is a transliteration... or the word Christian or Christ is a transliteration of *Christos*, which in Hebrew would mean Messiah. So, "Christians" really means "Messiah people." And it means our loyalty is to Jesus. At the same time, we know about Jesus only through the New Testament, through the Bible, and therefore conservative Christians, evangelicals, have often been accused of worshiping the Bible, being loyal to the Bible. There's even a technical term that was invented to bash us, which would be "bibliolatry," that this is what fundamentalists do, they worship the Bible. And one obviously always needs to be careful that there are not developments starting that might be problematic. But I don't know whether any Christian ever actually worshiped the Bible as a book. We treat the Bible with utmost respect. My grandfather, who worked for a publishing company, never would put a book on top of a Bible. He would never stack... He would stack books, but the Bible would have to be the top book. There was an expression, "Not of his worship of the Bible but of his respect." Of course, as Christians, our basic loyalty is to God and to Jesus Christ our Savior, and that always needs to be clear. At the same time, we learn from God, we learn about God only through the Bible and through Jesus, and therefore we are indeed loyal to the Bible as well. We want to defend it, but more importantly, we want to understand it; we read it and there is no contradiction, really, between being loyal to God and Jesus and being loyal to Scriptures, because one entails the other. Without the Scriptures, we wouldn't know anything reliable about God and nothing about Jesus, and therefore our primary loyalty is to God and to Jesus. But that means we are loyal to Scripture as well.

Dr. K Erik Thoennes

Jesus placed such a strong emphasis on faithfulness to God. He did this because faithfulness is an expression of trust. It's an expression of realizing God really does deserve our faithfulness, our trust, our obedience, our devotion, above all else. When you disobey doctor's orders, you're not just saying something about the orders; you're saying something about the doctor. And when you disobey God, you're not just saying something about his commands that you're disregarding, you're saying something about the God who gave those commands. And so faithfulness is an expression of trust. It's an expression of seeing God for who he is, and then of course, doing what he says. And so when Jesus comes, he submits to the will of the Father as the Son, but he also displays for us what our lives as human beings should look like, obeying God, being faithful to him. Jesus becomes the faithful one, the one who we put our faith in because he always expressed faithfulness to God by obeying God. So, faithfulness to God is an expression of obedience, it's an expression of daily devotion and trust in who he is. Paul, in Romans, talks about the Christian life in his apostolic ministry as one that should lead to the "obedience of faith." It's a beautiful expression, which in some ways summarizes the Christian life. We see God for who he is, we put our faith in him, and that naturally leads to obedience. We obey the God that we trust.

Question 11:**Do unsaved people benefit from involvement in the church?****Dr. Simon Vibert**

Unsaved people in the church receive a lot of benefit from being members of the visible church of Christ on earth — the social function, the benefits of knowing people, and all that kind of thing. But that can actually work against them, of course, if they don't come to a saving knowledge of Christ for themselves. And therefore, the sort of, the distinction that is made between the visible and the invisible church becomes all important, that God knows those who are his, which is a narrower group of people than those who may attend week by week in a corporate worship experience.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Well Jesus tells us that in the church there will always be tares among the wheat, unbelievers present with believers. We can't always tell those apart, but we can assume that if someone's an unbeliever functioning in the context of the church, they will experience the common grace of God in powerful ways and hopefully those common ways of seeing God will lead to saving grace in their lives.

Dr. Steve Blakemore

When you think about the life of the church as the people who are the people of the gospel, you could say, the people who live in the life of God in Christ, those who have heard the gospel, listened to the gospel, responded to the gospel, we have a context for thinking about the relationship of those who are unsaved in the life of the church, but participating. And the way we should think about that in terms of what it benefits them is this: It truly places them by God's providence in the context in which they *can* hear the gospel, in which they *may* see the gospel lived, in which they may encounter what Jesus Christ alive in the fellowship of a group of people looks like. And therefore, in the sovereignty of God, perhaps that is his mechanism to bring someone before they are saved into the life of the church so that they can respond to the gospel. So that is one way that a person who is unsaved benefits by being involved in the life of the church. But I think there are other ways that an unsaved person, whether or not he or she responds to the gospel, benefits at least in this life by being involved in the life of the church and it is in this regard: If a church is truly living the love of Jesus Christ, if a person, if a church is truly teaching what it means to be alive in Christ, then in some way, those teachings themselves begin to inform some of the values that an unsaved person has. So, it could end up having a great impact on the way that person treats his or her children, or the way that person relates to her husband or her friends. So, in the long run, it is a tragedy that a person who sat in the hearing of the gospel did not respond to gospel, it's a great sadness, but by the same token there are even some benefits to the gospel being heard in a person's life that are not ultimate benefit, but in this life do provide an improvement for their lives.

Question 12:**What blessings will God's people receive after final judgment?****Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

When we think of the end of history, we know that Christ will return; there will be a final judgment that will involve both believer and unbeliever. We will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Unfortunately, unbelievers will be seen to be judged eternally in terms of final judgment. For the believer, though, there will now be the receiving of all of the inheritance and promises that are given to us in Christ. The Bible lays these out in very specific terms. We will live in a new heavens and new earth. You think of the end of Revelation 21 and 22 where we now will live in a renovated universe, we will dwell in the presence of God, and that seems to be given in and through the glorified Lord Jesus Christ. We'll be able to commune with him in and through him and his human nature as we will touch him and see him. We will know God in an undiminished way. We will receive all of our inheritance, which is tied to, I think, that new creation and all the benefits of our adoption, our justification, our salvation are ours. This will be for eternity as we then, and we don't even know that will transpire, but it seems that we will explore the wonders of that new creation, that we will carry out our role as image-bearers, bringing all things unto God's glory. And our inheritance, our future is rich; it's glorious. We have hints of it in Scripture, but it'll be far beyond what we can even imagine. But ultimately for us, after the final judgment, all of our inheritance promises, our privileges as sons and daughters of the King will be ours, and we will receive them in fullness.

Dr. Dan Lacich

When we talk about final judgment and the blessings that believers will receive, I think we have a real hole in our theology. There's a lot that's missing there. Most people think, well, heaven, I'll live eternally and it will be wonderful and blissful and that everyone will pretty much be equal. But when we look at the teachings of Jesus and in the letters in the New Testament, one of the things that we find is that there's going to be different levels of blessing for different people based on how they lived their life after coming to faith in Christ. How we live our life doesn't gain us salvation, but once you're saved, how you live your life will determine what your blessing is in heaven, if you will. You know, James makes the point that those who teach will be judged more strictly. Well, what does that mean? Well, it means that their reward will be judged on a harder standard because a teacher is expected to live by a higher standard, and so if they don't live by that standard, the reward won't be as great as it may be for somebody who wasn't a teacher but did their best, you know, following Christ. The picture I think of oftentimes is salvation is what gets you in the stadium. Some people are going to have front row seats. They're going to be right up there up front. You know, James and John asked Jesus, "Can we be on your right- and left-hand side?" And he said, "Well, that's yet to be determined." So, clearly there's some blessing right up next to Jesus. There'll be some other folks, probably a whole lot of preachers and teachers, like myself, who will be way up in the cheap seats and just be happy to be in the stadium, to be in heaven. But it will be determined based on what we've done with what God has given us. One of the images Scripture gives us is that we each receive a crown. I think some crowns are going to be bigger than others because of how people lived. But even in that, the crown is something

we just turn right around and give back to Jesus as an honor to him. But I think the one blessing that most speaks to me is that, as a follower of Christ, when you get there, to hear the words of Jesus and be embraced by him when he says, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” there’ll be nothing greater than being in his presence in that way.

Dr. Sean McDonough

So, when we’re thinking about what blessings the righteous will receive after final judgment, they are, of course, many. The first one is a gift of a resurrected body and a new heavens and new earth. This is pretty important because plenty of Christians even imagine that the ultimate goal of all things is for your invisible soul to die and go to heaven with God. Now, that may in fact, and I believe does happen after you die, but the fullness of God’s blessing is resurrected, re-embodied life, at a sort of “2.0 level,” a much more intense level in a purified and beautified earth. But it’s not simply a matter of having a better physical situation. I think the theologians down the centuries have recognized the greatest blessing is the glory of God poured out, filling the earth as the waters cover the sea, as the prophets say, that this glorious expression of God, this union with him is really the ultimate blessing of the eschaton.

Dr. Steve Blakemore is the Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

Dr. Robert B. Chisolm, Jr. is Department Chair and Professor of Old Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson is Academic Dean and Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Seminary California.

Dr. Craig S. Keener is the F.M. and Ada Thompson Chair of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Dan Lacich is Pastor of Northland, A Church Distributed in Longwood, FL.

Dr. Robert G. Lister is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University in La Mirada, California.

Rev. Jim Maples is Director of the Doctor of Ministry in Pastoral Leadership program at Birmingham Theological Seminary in Birmingham, Alabama.

Dr. Sean McDonough is Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Tom Petter is Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. is President of Third Millennium Ministries and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

Dr. Eckhard Schnabel is the Mary F. Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss taught at Biola University, Christian Heritage College, and Talbot School of Theology before joining the Bethel Seminary faculty in 1993.

Dr. Douglas Stuart is Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University and is a frequent guest speaker at churches, conferences, and retreats, in addition to co-pastoring a local church.

Dr. Simon Vibert is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

Dr. Peter Walker is Tutor in Biblical Theology at Wycliffe Hall and lectures in New Testament studies and Biblical Theology.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.