

# Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON  
ONE

Why Study New  
Testament Theology?  
Faculty Forum



THIRD MILLENNIUM  

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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 live; 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."

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