Welcome. This one is on contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation. This takes us into the 20th century, and now into the 21st century, where we have seen an enormous amount of shift in the biblical interpretation and in the work of Scriptures themselves. The biggest attack, of course, has come on the concept of absolute truth. It is thought that there are no absolutes.

When I was at the university, I decided to take an elective course at Brandeis University on the “Origins of Christianity.” I thought, “Why not? I have room in my schedule, I’ll take one.” So it started out with Professor Goodenough, [then] recently retired from Yale University, whose grandfather had also written the standard textbook for personal evangelism in the United Methodist Church. He sat at one end of the seminar table, I was always on the other end, and there were about six or seven on either side: rabbis on this side, evangelicals on this side. And [he said], “I want you to get it straight: in this class, there are no absolutes.” And he pounded the desk. Well I had heard of liberals, but I’d never seen one. He saw me smiling and he said, “There are no absolutes! You,” then he said, “What’s wrong with you? What’s your name?”

I said, “Kaiser.”

“What’s so funny?”

I said, “Well sir, would you say absolutely there are no absolutes.”

“Absolutely!” he said.

And he just didn’t get it. He didn’t get at all. I don’t know whether he was having a slow day or what.

Truth has definitely been put at a discount value, and what really erupted during this particular time are a number of key interpreters. I think, if we go back and try to start putting this whole thing together, let me go back to Immanuel Kant. I’m going to draw two lines here; one “downstairs,” and the other “upstairs.” This is the realm of the everyday world that can be seen—he
called it the empirical world. And then there was the world of the unseen—the noumenal world, as he called it—the world of God, the world of heaven, the world of the unseen from our particular perspective. Now Kant said, “You ‘Kant’ go from one to the other,” that’s the way to remember that. He said, “It’s impossible to get from down here, this phenomenal world—where you have the phenomenon of what is happening—to go up to God.” So what he said, you have to do a “run around right end.” There is only that imperative, that du solst—German, “thou shall.” He said, “That’s left on our conscience. And, yes, we can have that as somewhat of a marker to God, but we just can’t get there at all.” Well Immanuel Kant set the trend for modernity in many, many ways.

And you have a number coming along. Schleiermacher, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), he changed the climate too, as well. He said, “It’s our human feelings, what we feel, or our consciousness of the immanency of God, is really what makes up religion.” So religion is that feeling, that feeling that you have. Kant is going to try to get it through conscience and through a categorical imperative that says, “You must, you shall”; and Schleiermacher is going to do it through feelings—everyone is trying to get to God. But nevertheless, you have this “upstairs” (I’m going to refer to it popularly) and “downstairs,” the realm where we are living down here. Meanwhile, the realm of God remains separate from us.

Well there comes a moment in which liberal theology continues to build. In liberal theology, which really was the hallmark of the 20th century, the 1900s, liberal theology actually is saying that “God is totally other. God is so removed from us, that in no way is He anything like us at all. God is up here in the noumenal world, we’re down here in this world.” They also said that “The world is getting better and better.” We are seeing, we move this forward to the 1900s, we see the tremendous advances of science. “We’re going to get rid of measles and chickenpox, scarlet fever, lung problems here. All of these are going to be gone because of the advances of medicine and science.” And, sure enough, we had many of these. And we have technological advances too. All sorts of things, the motorcar, which we can drive around and it takes us any place, and on and on it went. “Man is basically good.” These were some of the real hallmarks of liberal theology in that day.

Now what really put the “kibosh” [a clamper] on this was World War I. World War I came about, and “man is essentially good.” So you’re on your way home rom services at the local European Church, and here comes a man in khaki uniform with a machine
gun, and he shoots grandmother. And “Why did that man do that, because he’s essentially good?” But no, he’s rotten, he is a rascal. Why, as a matter of fact, he must be a sinner because look what he did? And then we go home, and the message had been on how “the world through science and through the human mind is getting better and better.” And you look for your home, and it’s down in the cellar, smoking! It’s been bombed, because a plane came over. Boom! And the whole thing went up. And God! “Where is God?” And it just didn’t seem right at all.

Karl Barth, who had been trained in liberal seminaries before World War I, now tried to start holding services in Swiss Churches at the beginning of World War I. This is about 1915 to 1917, and he says, “I can’t do it.” He says, “I get up to preach and it feels as if the Law of God (He didn’t say the Word of God) is slipping out of my hands.” He said, “There’s nothing to preach.” So he decided to do something drastic. He said, “I’ve got to find a way to get to God. This is not working the du solst—“thou shalt”—the categorical imperative that is in the heart of man. Feelings are not operating.” He said, “Let’s go back and do what the reformers did. What about the Good Book?” And so he began to take the Bible, here, as a source. Now he was trained in liberal seminaries, so “the Bible is not the Word of God.” But he said, “What if the Bible could become the Word of God in that moment of preaching, because it must have relevancy for me.”

And he read Luther’s introduction to his commentary in Romans, and then the whole book of Romans [opens to him]. And he said, “I’ve changed my mind. Man is not basically good. He is, excuse me, a sinner.” Well this was revolutionary. Man’s a sinner? And in need of God? Yes. And the world is not getting better and better. This world is crazy, despite all the technology, despite all the advances in medicine. Look what they’re doing here! Thirteen million civilians killed in World War I, not to mention those who were active on the battlefield. It doesn’t make sense. So he said, “If you’re going to meet God, and that’s what I want to do, I want my people and I myself want to meet God. If you’re ever going to meet God, it’s going to be here in this book, in the Bible.” Why? Because he says, “The witness of anyone who has ever found God is in here.” He did say as he began, “You can meet God through Das Kapital—through Hitler’s work.” He said, “No, I can’t do that. I’ve never met anyone who said that.” And he thought some other things too, Mein Kampf and that. But he said, “No. When it comes down to it, everyone . . . [is a sinner]” and his key word here was witness. He wanted to get away from “the truth.” He didn’t want
to say there was “absolute truth.” That would be anti-20th or 21st century.

So he didn’t want to say that it was the truth he was after. It was a witness, a pointer. And everyone pointed to this book. You say, “Well what happens, Mr. Barth?” (this is Karl Barth now who is saying all this), or Barth if you wish. The continental way is to drop the “h”; it’s Bart. “So what happens here?”

He said “You keep reading.”

“Well, will it automatically happen?”

“No!”

“Well, Mr. Barth, what about reading Song of Solomon? Has anyone ever met God? Have you met God there?”

“No.”

“Have you met anyone that has met God?”

“No.” But he said, “That doesn’t mean it’s impossible. You keep looking for an encounter.” That was another big existential word.

We are now into the philosophy of [Martin] Heidegger and the existentialists—also was the continent—and existence: essence of being as existence of just who we are. It’s not, “I think, therefore I am”—[René Decartes] (that was putting “Decartes” before “de horse”) but rather it was, “I am, I live, I am a being.” See?

So Mr. Barth says, “What happens if God in His sovereignty. . . See, it’s God who breaks through! And where will He break through? Not down here, but in His Book. If He ever grabs hold of you, you’ll know it.”

You say, “Will it be true?”

“No, no, no!” he says. “It’s I, Thou!”

Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher and theologian, he says, “It is first person, second person, but no it. You never say it’s true—that’s third person. That’s out. But it’s ‘I-Thou,’ and you’ll have an encounter” (we’re still using encounter terminology left over from the beginning of the first third of the 20th century). So he says, “God will meet us in this text.”

You say, “Oh well, then that text will be like John 3:16, ‘For God so loved the world (which is me) that He gave . . . [that will be one text that is true and divinely inspired].’”
“No, no, no” he says, “that’s it truth! The only thing you will say if you meet God there is, “Thou,” “You, Lord,” and the only thing that comes back to us is that we are sinners, we are sinners. So what happens here is you’ve got to leap; it’s a leap of faith.”

You say, “Well how do I know which way to leap?”

And he says, “Read the Book, keep reading the Book.”

“Why? Because it’s true?”

“No! It’s because it’s the locus [where you go to meet God: the place]. It’s the place where God has chosen in His own sovereignty to meet us. So He’ll meet us there. But He will never tell you it’s true. You’ll never say, “Oh that’s my verse, where Revelation really was Revelation. It was really an absolute truth.”

“No, no!” he said. “The only thing you’ll know is you fall down flat if you ever receive the living God. You’ll know what that is. You’ll know you’re a sinner because you feel cruddy, and you’ll see the magnificence of His person.”

Well now, I don’t know. Some people ask me, “Are we going to see Barth in heaven?” “I’m not a prophet, my father is not a prophet,” (Amos 7:14) and you know the rest. But at any rate, this whole business here is one in which it surely sounds like a salvation experience in many ways, but it’s devoid of content. And it’s all personal truth; it’s a relationship, a relationship that is going on there.

So you say, “Well, which parts of the Bible [are true]?”

He says, “The 66 books that are in the Canon.” He chose the Protestant Canon and he said, “Those are the ones.”

You say, “How do you know? Because it’s true?”

“No!” he said. “You always ask me that fundamentalist question. No, not because it’s true, it’s because it’s where God has met us; that’s the witness that’s true.”

At any rate, theology continued to go on here, and we had what was called the Biblical Theology Movement. The Biblical Theology Movement was in the 1950s through the 60s. G. Ernest Wright at Harvard Divinity School, David Noel Freeman of Ann Arbor, [The University of Michigan] are some of the people who were in the Biblical Theology Movement who were trying to find witness in a Biblical Theology Movement—which was going through the Bible diachronically. Dia, through; Chronos, time; going through it
temporally to show the sort of progress of Revelation. But always from the standpoint not of the third person—it is true—but first and second person that there was a relationship.

Well this always raised the philosophical conundrum: “Was there revelation if no one witnessed it at all? Must a hearer be there?” Or like the conundrum, “If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a noise or doesn’t it?” This was the old philosophical conundrum. And many said, “No, it didn’t make a noise because no one heard it.” And so there was a tendency to say here, “There is no Revelation (at least propositional revelation, truth-telling revelation), because no one heard it.”

I was at a lecture where one of the men, Dr. Karl Barth’s son, Marcus Barth, who was at the University of Chicago, was out lecturing to our class. And the question was, “Here is the philosophical conundrum: Did it make a noise or didn’t it?”

And I said, “Didn’t the apostles and prophets claim they were there? They heard the tree fall, and that’s what they’re saying in Revelation! ‘We heard the Word of God, and what can we but speak and write about what we heard?’” Well that was dismissed out of hand.

But certainly you have Karl Barth (1886-1968) who was working. He certainly reestablished God’s transcendence. So much so he kept the first point here: “God is other, totally other.” That still left a great gap there between the two [God and us]. He did not see how Jesus Christ bridged that gap so that it became, “God with us, God among us.” The whole grace and truth came in a “pup tent,” in a tabernacle, in the midst of us (John 1:18 and following). So that was followed.

Also, there was a follow-up of a Rudolf Bultmann. Now Rudolf Bultmann, also German, was writing in this area, and he brought out the “New Hermeneutic.” He uses the word, not “hermeneutics” in the plural, but in the singular. And his attempt is to say, “[We must] demythologize the Bible. That is, since we now have the electric light bulb and the radio and other modern things like this, and they didn’t have that in the Bible, then we’ve got to take all of the ancient Bible and science out of existence here. And we’ve got to re-mythologize it so that it talks about existence.” Bultmann did not think the Bible was inspired; he didn’t think it had truth in it. He said that the only thing it could tell us is about existence and about God. So they located all the miracles—supernatural things like incarnation, resurrection, anything like prophecy or
foretelling the future—and they discarded all of those [as myths]. Yet, they said, “We must keep the religious intention.” Well what’s that? When you get rid of all the supernatural, what’s the religious intention? He said, “Well, there is an existential deposit.” Well what’s that? “Well it’s a residue of talking about us, about being, about just ourselves being an ‘I’ to another self, ‘thou.’ But no speaking of ‘it.’ We just can’t have a proposition.” So by the middle of the 20th century, there is a huge turn against any kind of doctrine, any kind of truth, any kind of statement that God is.

So we asked Mr. Barth, “Mr. Barth, if you are standing on a corner and there are four different people that are giving invitations [to four different religions] and saying, ‘Come and believe in us, and believe in the message that we have.’ Then I think the question is: Why would they listen to you [a Christian] if indeed on the one corner someone is Sikh and someone on this corner is Islam and someone in this corner is an Atheist, and you, Mr. Barth, are here and you tell all of them, “Leap, leap [take a leap of faith]!” All of them are saying “leap!” But where should I leap, and why should I leap?”

Barth is saying, “Well it’s because of the witness of so many people. And so what you have, revelation in itself—what the Scriptures give to us, revelation, the content of God’s disclosure—is a person. There’s the existential part of it; there is a “thou”; there is a person. And it’s event: [there is] the great events of the Exodus, the great events of Easter.” But he doesn’t believe they really happened; he just says there’s a witness to their happenings. But he says that “revelation is not and can’t be content; it can’t be propositional; it can’t be truth-telling. No, no”

So I say, “Well Barth, what do you find then?

He said, “We find Jesus—person—[who] died. Yeah, he was on the cross.”

I say, “Well what did you do [what does Jesus mean?].”

He said, “Because some people witnessed that He died for us, then we’re going to trust Him.”

I said, “That’s all? Didn’t the prophets stand, didn’t the apostles stand in the council of God and say, “Christ died [but watch this] for our sin.” That value, that estimate, that meaning that’s put on the person and on the event is terribly important. That’s what Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism is all about. Christ died for our sin! That’s an interpretation, then, given to the person and to
the event [by God Himself].

But Barth couldn’t see that. He still couldn’t see it. He said, “We have to listen to the witness!” And many people got that idea, but not through this [Barth’s method], you can’t get it. They were inbred with the liberalism of the beginning of the 20th century—a leftover from the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment which said that “We are the masters of our fate, we are the captain of our soul (William Hanley’s Invictus poem), and we can put it all together. And if there is a problem, we will technologically solve it. If there is a disease, technologically, medically, we will solve it. If there is a problem in theology, we will solve it because of the witness of the people.” It was still optimistic. A lot of the optimism was gone with World War I, and then by the time of the Depression, which came in the 1930s, and World War II that came in the 1940s, now we had a world that was very, very pessimistic.

With great pessimism, and now the question was, “Where do we turn?” And then, in the midst of all that pessimism—being left in a vacuum, in which the great symbol of [the day’s] culture and society was plastic—humanity could be really, sort of described like the coming together of oil and all that stuff in liquid form, and then shaped, molded in any way and pressed in any way [mold]. So you have the plasticized man coming in the middle of that century.

And this left it [things] open for Joseph Fletcher to come along with Situational Ethics in 1960. And Fletcher just said, “Well the situation determines it. There are no absolutes in ethics except love.” If you have two consenting adults that love each other, then the word was (now they will use the “it” word) “Do it!” But that was all, and there wasn’t much for the post-World War II generation to go on.

(I remember, I’m a product of that. I began college in 1951. We were inaugurated by the sophomore class with all kinds of stupid things; we had to shave our legs in 1-inch strips and carry alarm clocks and get down in front of sophomores and set the clock off and say some stupid thing. By the next year, [when] the freshmen class came in we said, “Peace brother!” and that was all. There was no more time for all of this initiation and this kind of thing. And they called us, in those post war years from 1952, 53, 54, 55, as the “silent generation.” “Don’t make waves! Don’t raise a lot questions. Don’t do a lot of things. Let’s just be quiet for a while.” It was too noisy in the 1940s, and so this was the relief.)
This begins to show up in biblical studies. We have the historical critical method. And the historical critical method was one which began to analyze how we got the Bible. They said, “If we’re really going to be scholars, we’ve got to get behind the Bible.” Therefore, they used history. Well so did the rest of us use history. But they used the historical critical method, a critical method which wanted to get behind [the text]. Now, in this day, they want to get in front of the Bible. That’s another story—that’s going to be the 21st century. But there, rather than going to the Bible, they wanted to get behind the Bible. “Where did the Bible come from? Who wrote it? What were the sources? Did they use [many] sources?” Of course they used sources. Luke [1:1-4] says, “There are many that have taken in hand to write a history and life of Jesus, but I have checked out everything most carefully so that, Theophilus, you might know, in order, from the beginning according to sources.”

Now it’s the Holy Spirit helping you with sources. So don’t put down that “Evangelicals or Fundamentalists were against sources.” The book of Chronicles lists 75 sources—the Wars of the Lord, the Wars of the Kings of Israel, the Kings of Judah, and on and on it goes. That lists them, so we were not against sources; we were against (get this) hypothetical sources created out of “whole cloth.” So what were the key ones that were being taught in university courses? Anyone who took a university course on the Pentateuch—the first of five books of the Bible, otherwise known as the Torah, the Law of God . . . (which by the way comes from the verb yarah, which means “to point,” “to direct”). No wonder the Psalmist says, “Oh how I love thy Law. It’s sweeter than honey and sweeter than the honeycomb. Why it’s more to be desired than gold, yea than much fine gold.” And you want to say, “Hey, Psalmist—that’s Psalm 19—watch that stuff, it’ll kill you.” But no, he’s going on and is just exuberant about this. Why? Because it’s direction, everyone says, “I need guidance.” That’s what Torah is about, God giving guidance. “Your Word is a light unto my path.” Why it helps me—how to go. And so many people say, “I need guidance.” They need Torah, because that’s what gives them guidance. It’s a pointer, it’s a direction.

We use in French and in German, English, and in Greek nomas. When we speak of law, it’s boundaries. We speak of it as being hedges. But not in the Bible; it’s direction, guidance, it’s a way to go. Yeah, [in] Psalm 119, he “blows a fuse” on the longest chapter in the Bible—176 verses. On and on he goes, with 20 different synonyms for the Law of God. So how did the liberals do this? Well I began to tell you a story, [in] 1753, a French surgeon by the name
of Jean Astruc. This was called “Astruc’s Clue.” And he looked at Genesis 1, and 2 and 3 and all of the way up to 11. And he says, “Look, there are two names used for God. There is Yahweh and there also is Elohim.” So he says, “These must be two sources.”

Nice try, but it doesn’t really work out. Why? Read anything from the Near East. My teacher always said, “I want you to read Egyptian hieroglyphics, middle and late Egyptian; I want you to get a little Coptic; I want you get Arabic; I want you to get Ugaritic; I want you to get to cuneiform, Assyriology; I want you get Classical Greek.” That’s what he told us.

We said, “Why?”

He said, “Look, there’re of a lot of diseases in this world. But what you’ve got, we’ve got cure for.”

I said, “What’s our disease?”

He said, “Ignorance.” And he said, “Just learn. Read the primary sources.” So he put us through the paces on all of those and we read the primary sources.

Now you read from the Ancient Near East, and they routinely have two, three, four, five names for deity. Just as, in our writing, you don’t use the same noun all over again; you try to come back and use a synonym so that your style isn’t clogged [up by repetition]. Well at any rate, they came out and said there was “J” document, which represented Judea, and there was also Jehovah, or Yahweh [source], that was used. God was crude in His ethical things, and it was written for the Southerners about 850 BC.

And then there was an “E” [Elohim] document, which was for the northern 10 tribes—Ephraimites. It used Elohim. And it’s better in ethics, but still bad (written in 750 BC). Now a redactor worked on each of those like a copy editor, and smoothed it out and brought them together.

Then there was a “D” document, which was found in 621 BC as they cleaned out the temple. “A pious fraud.” That is what Pfeiffer at the Harvard University said. “Pious fraud.” Now those were his words—created in which they were trying to end the dialectic.” For indeed we did have this dialectic here.

[Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel also had influence beside Kant. Hegel had said, “You have a thesis, which is opposed by an antithesis [remember this from your history of civilization
classes?], and out of it comes the synthesis.” So what does God want? Well the “D” document was saying, “God wants blood!” Those were the priests. Others are saying, “No, help the old lady cross the street. Do social goodness, social justice.” And out of it came, “Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind.” That was supposed to be the synthesis [compromise].

And then “P,” which were all priestly things, came in 450 BC. Now finally they welded this all together with redactors, and we finally got [JEDP] the Torah—the first five books of the Bible. This is hypothetical all the way. There is no evidence for it or whatsoever. It is created out of “whole cloth.” But from 1753 to this moment, it is dogma [for most liberal theologians].

I tried to get into the University of Chicago, and they said, “Frankly, you went to Wheaton College. You’re probably a fundamentalist.” They didn’t make any distinction. And so, they said, “You would not be able to study with us because you don’t believe in JEDP.” There was a theological test for me on liberalism. And I tried Harvard. In those days, same kind of thing; [I was] turned down. I’ve got letters from it. And they were very, very frank and open. Today they would be libel. But, in that day, nobody was paying attention to it. Well I’m happy to tell you that, in the university study in the last 20 years, that has reversed tremendously, though they still teach this. Bruce Waltke was one of the few that did get in. There was a group that went through—Kenneth Kantzer, Sam Schultz—a group that went to Harvard and also Boston University—Carl Henry. They were back in the 40s. Then there came a hiatus from the 50s, 60s, 70s, and it was in the 70s [maybe 60s] that Bruce Waltke was there. But they said to Bruce Waltke, “We’re terribly disappointed. You’re going to go back to Dallas and teach.” They said, “After we put all of our work in you and you are still going to be a fundamentalist.” They gave him the business for returning back there.

These are some of the developments that are part of the historical critical method. And then, the autonomy of the texts, which comes with the rise of the text being independent from the author, and the reader being the one who really determines what the text should say. You’ve heard me already, but the new role of the reader is extremely important. This became one in which we didn’t really try to do inductive Bible study; we didn’t try to ferret out what the text is saying. Rather, we read the text and “the first impression off the top” we gave out and the rest of the group shook their heads and bobbed up and down—either they
agreed or they wanted us to hurry up. That was the new role for the reader. And what languished, then, was really the authorial intent [in the text]. The author, who stood in the counsel of God, who heard the Word of God, who got the message from God, was ditched by most in the modern study. And the conclusion was that they had a meaning which came on their own.

These critics who raised this fuss about how to understand the text are still writing books in which they hope that they, themselves, will be understood. [It’s a] funny thing; they don’t want us to read their books according to their new method. They want us to read their books according to the old method [of interpretation] that they, as the author, are trying to get a meaning across. Now the best way to write a review on this is, I guess, to use their own style back, and to say, “I tell you what I got out of what you said,” and then say the reverse of what they said. It makes them blazing mad. I’ve done it; I know all about that.

I saw a similar thing years ago in a P. B., Plymouth Brethren, magazine which did a review of The Amplified Bible, it was called, where you have a parenthesis and then a synonym is given for each one. Well they wrote the review that way too. “I’m happy (glad, somewhat joyful) to do this review (criticism, exegesis) about this Bible (translation, paraphrase, other sort of things) which can be amplified (which is this, which is this).” I read that thing for a while, and I said, “Who in the world was this stupid that wrote this?” and then I caught on. He was doing the same thing back. You couldn’t make out after a while (no wonder I heard the “certain lewd fellows of the baser sort” sing the hymn in a reverse way: “Years I spend in vanity and pride, knowing not the Word was amplified.” Bless her heart. The dear woman who did that shouldn’t get so severe a critique.

If you’re going to take the view (she didn’t, of course. That’s another view), but if you’re going to take the view that the reader sets the meaning, then the reviewer should set the meaning of what the author wrote too, as well. God’s Revelation stands whether anyone heard the tree fall or not. It stands, and “it stands written.”