

Why Study New Testament Theology?



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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 twice: first in Acts 9:1-19 and then 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.

— Dr. 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 ascent. 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 series of timeless proverbs that would make sense automatically in every culture. 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 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 T. 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.