

History and Methodology, Continued

In this lesson I would like to finish what we were talking about last time, and then we will launch into our discussion of canon. We probably will not finish our discussion of canon this time, but that is all right. In light of all that, I would like to pray for us, and then we will start.

Father, we continue in our discussion of these complex issues, issues that have to do with the history of the study of New Testament, how we ought to study the New Testament, and the inspiration and authority of Your canon. We, Your people, should submit to that God-given Word. As we look at these issues, we desire that You would give us wisdom and that You would illumine us into how we as Your people can better serve You as we think of Scripture. Father, I pray for these students, that You would excite them about all their studies and even the work they are doing for this course. I pray that they would see it as worship unto You in the way that they serve You by learning here to take that knowledge to others and to spread abroad Your Gospel. In Your wonderful name we pray. Amen.

We ended last time talking about some movements and trends in New Testament study. I included some selected keys to understanding contemporary New Testament study. It seems like every 20 years or so somebody comes up with a new way of doing New Testament studies. Sometimes it is a positive advance, and sometimes it has some very negative consequences. As a consequence, New Testament scholars have to think through how they are going to employ these new techniques and thoughts and to what degree they are going to critique them.

We talked about some of those trends that you need to know as you are reading F. F. Bruce and Ladd because they are living this stuff. They know about Ferdinand Christian Baur, the quest for the historical Jesus, and the variety of methods that are being employed. This includes source, form, and redaction criticism. At the end of the last lesson I switched gears and said, apart from understanding the history of the study of New Testament theology, we need to talk a little bit about our task. We had just entered into that discussion last time. We talked about what I think to be the most correct way to approach the study of the New Testament, looking at it from a theological viewpoint. We do not need to look at it from a systematic theological viewpoint, but from a viewpoint of understanding inductively what the individual authors of Scripture are trying to say to God's people. This is in terms of how we should think about God, our relationship to God, and how we should act as a consequence. That is what I mean when we talk about New Testament theology.

I stated two working goals, and I unpacked those a bit. The first goal is to inductively synthesize the major theological themes in each New Testament author within his historical backdrop. That was the idea of looking author by author, understanding them in their historical context, and doing good exegesis or good interpretation. Exegesis is a word you should know. It comes from a Greek word that basically means "to lead out." The idea is that you lead out what is in Scripture. You seek to understand what is there. This is in contrast to eisegesis. The difference is between a preposition in Greek. "Ex" means out and "ic" means in. Eisegesis is to read into something. You are to read your own presuppositions into the text of Scripture. That is not what you want to do. We are not doing eisegesis; we are doing exegesis. We do good exegesis of the individual New Testament authors, and we seek to understand what their particular emphases are. The second working goal is to further appreciate the organic unity in New Testament theology in the midst of the diversity of its expression. Having done the work to see the distinct theological emphases in Matthew versus Mark versus Luke versus John, and so forth, we now seek to understand the organic unity that is there. Those are the two working goals.

Having said that, you should be aware of some presuppositions that I am working with. I want you to work with these as well. They are presuppositions, so let us bring them out into the open so they can be critiqued should they not be correct. First, the superintending work of the Holy Spirit does not obviate individual human expression in the writing of inspired and inerrant documents. Basically I am saying that the fact that the Holy Spirit inspired an inerrant work of God does not mean that He overrode the human agents. They did not lose their humanity and become divine vessels. This is in keeping with the diagram about author, audience, and the Holy Spirit overseeing the whole process. The Holy Spirit uses the humanity of the authors to create an inspired, inerrant Word. It is something that is truly God-breathed, unlike any other work of literature, and it is without error in all that it seeks to affirm. That is what I mean by inerrant.

Let me give you some examples of that. It is striking to me the number of times in Scripture that you see the combination of the human author with the divine author put together. For instance, in Matthew 22:43, “[Jesus] said to them, ‘How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him “Lord”?’” The human agent is David. Jesus is talking about the Psalms, and this is a psalm of David. The Spirit is the divine author. You have divine and human together. Acts 1:16 says, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus.” Again you have the divine author, the Holy Spirit, and the human author, David, working together with one another. David is the mouth of the Holy Spirit, and yet David is very much there. That is an expression that is used a few different times in Acts. Acts 4:25 says, “You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?’” Second Peter 1:20-21 says, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

The example from 2 Peter especially focuses on prophecy, but you need to realize that ancient Jewish people mainly viewed the Old Testament as a work of prophecy. Most of us consider the prophetic books in the Old Testament to be Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets. But that is only half of the books that are called the prophetic books in the Jewish canon. The other half includes Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. Those are considered prophetic books because even the historical books were understood to have been written by prophets. Certainly Moses was seen as a prophet as well, so the Pentateuch was considered a prophetic act. In the first century when Peter says “prophecy” he is probably referring to a lot more of Scripture than you think of when you think of prophecy. Men, moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God. He says it is not an activity of the human will; yet we also see humanity and the human living situation of the people inbred in Scripture. We reconcile these things in that we have to acknowledge that there is a divine element and a human element in Scripture. The human is in no way obviated or destroyed by the divine intent. This is wholly consistent with recent and long-held evangelical interpretation of Scripture.

Some of you may have heard of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. This is the statement where some of the most profound evangelical thinkers of a generation ago got together and defined inerrancy. It was something that was much debated in society, so they needed to sit down and define what they meant. They came in a large committee and formed a wonderful document called the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Let me read to you two articles from it. Listen carefully, because it is a lot of academic speak, but it is worth hearing. Article Seven says, “We affirm that inspiration was the work in which God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. The origin of Scripture is divine. The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us.” That is what inspiration is: God by His Spirit, through human writers, gave us His Word. We do not know all the complexities of inspiration that are involved. In the Chicago Statement there is an affirmation and a denial. The denial

says, "We deny that inspiration can be reduced to human insight or to heightened states of consciousness of any kind." This is something beyond just mere human insight. There is something divine in it. They quickly follow this up with the human nature of Scripture. Article Eight says, "We affirm that God in His Work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared." He used the divine agents as he has prepared them, especially with regard to their personalities and their literary styles. "We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities." Somehow when you look at Scripture and you talk about the inspiration of Scripture, you live in that human-divine intersection. That is very important because we are going to go on to talk about Matthew, Paul, and others as authors. We have already begun to do that. We will speak of them as real, living human beings. We will allow them to have their own distinct personalities, literary styles, and emphases. They have different perspectives. I would argue that that is consistent with our understanding of the doctrine of inspiration. That was the first presupposition.

The second presupposition is that each author makes a distinct theological contribution. When I say that, I am not saying that each author always consciously sought to write theologically. For instance, when Matthew was recounting the Gospel of Jesus, he was not thinking about the checklist of things he wanted to emphasize in the book. He did not lay out a systematic theology that he then wove into his narratives. I am saying that the authors have their own distinct emphases that they are going to make. I have three points to make here.

First, each author was writing to a different situation. Naturally that called forth different emphases. You can see that with Paul. There is a profound difference in the tenor of Galatians compared to 1 Corinthians compared to Romans. They sound very different in terms of how Paul treats his audience. This is in part because he is extremely annoyed with the Galatians, he is fairly annoyed with the Corinthians, but he is fairly happy with the Romans. Each different situation called forth a different response and therefore different emphases because the audiences also had different problems going on. So Paul was writing to different situations.

Second, the nature of human beings is that we all see things from a finite perspective though we may all be looking at the same thing. Let us say that you walk out the door and suddenly out in the courtyard someone is singing opera. That would be an unusual event. Chances are, if I sampled any three of you, you would have a slightly different take on that event. Some of you might find it extremely annoying. You have never liked Italian, you have never liked people singing in Italian, and you wonder why the person is breaking the peace. You might have a different take on that. Someone else might be enthralled with the quality of his or her vocal utterances. Some others might have been so enthralled in your own conversations that you barely noticed the person was there. That is the nature of human observation when you go out and see something like that. If I were to pull all of those opinions together, chances are I could synthesize a pretty accurate understanding of the event that occurred even though it was seen from three different perspectives. There is a sense in which each of the perspectives has some level of validity. That is the nature of human observation.

Change that scenario to Jesus giving a sermon to His disciples. Matthew and John are sitting at the feet of Jesus, and afterward people give accounts to Mark and Luke about what happened there. You will have several different perspectives on the same event. They all have validity to them, and they all draw out particular emphases in terms of what Jesus was teaching. For instance, Jesus probably taught for hours at a time. Yet if you read the discourses in Matthew you could go through them by oral reading in 15 minutes or less. Clearly they condensed, constructed, and brought things together so we could get a

gist of what went on. That means there is a possibility that one has one perspective and someone else brings in something new that we should also take into account. The difference is, in holding the inspiration of Scripture, we hold each of those emphases and distinct perspectives to be the very perspectives God would have us take into account. We will return to all that later with regard to the Gospels.

Have you ever wondered why we have four Gospels instead of just one? The early church wondered about that, so there was a man named Tatian who put together his accounting of the four Gospels. He brought them together in one continuous narrative. That means he dropped something in Mark if it was already in Matthew. He just dropped it. That sounds much more efficient to me than having four Gospels. But what are missed are the distinct emphases from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all looking at the same events. Each of their emphases provides not just a valid perspective, but a God-given inspired perspective. Therefore we do not discard the Gospel of Mark even though 93% of the material in it is found in Matthew and Luke. That is why we still have Mark in the canon. So the nature of human beings is we all see things from a finite perspective though we may be looking at the same thing. Finally, all these authors were working under the superintending inspiration of the Holy Spirit. My three justifications for the presupposition that each author makes a distinct theological contribution are they were writing to different situations; they each saw things from a human, finite perspective and therefore had different emphases; but all of this was under the superintending work of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The third presupposition is that each author's contribution must be viewed in its historical context. I have emphasized that already, so I do not need to say much about it. I am not saying that the results cannot be trans-cultural. Rather, the first point of contact with the author is in relation to his writing within a specific historical situation. We need to view the authors in terms of the historical situations in which they wrote. But they still have something trans-cultural to say. The reason for presupposition three is in working goal I say, "In each New Testament author, within his historical backdrop." That is the presupposition that is undergirding that.

Finally the fourth presupposition is that there is unity to New Testament theology. This is the one that I am most interested in you being able to defend. Most of my New Testament colleagues in broader theological circles would happily agree with me that different authors have different emphases. But they may doubt the idea of ultimately hoping to come to a synthesis where there is a unity to New Testament theology. So I am interested in you being able to articulate a defense for that as well.

I have at least four points to make about why we can expect unity in New Testament theology. One point is on a very human level, these authors were in contact with one another. The early church was a fairly small entity. It was a fairly international entity. Most of the authors in the New Testament traveled fairly widely. If you go with the historical identifications of Mark and Luke, they were traveling companions of Paul, Barnabas, and possibly Peter. Paul obviously traveled very widely. John ended his life in Asia Minor, from all historical accounts. These people traveled widely; they interacted with one another. Therefore you would expect that the early church was cross-fertilizing. It is not a surprise on a human level to find a degree of unity in their constituent theologies.

The second point is also on a human level: the authors were working in fairly similar situations. There was significant cultural variation between Palestine and the city of Corinth, for instance. But the elements of continuity were stronger than the elements of discontinuity. They were working within similar situations. They were all speaking to a church that knew its Old Testament and the teachings of

Jesus very well. There were similarities, not just in human contact they had with one another, but in situations. This leads us on a human level to expect some level of unity. It is defensible even there on a human level.

The next point is on a human level and is now moving to a quasi-divine level. Point three is that the authors were consciously reflecting on the same material. Namely, they were reflecting on the teachings of Jesus and the Old Testament. They held these to be their authoritative Scriptures. They were thinking about the same things. This also leads to a great possibility of unity, at least on a human level. On a human level we have people who were in contact with one another in similar situations thinking about the same things. That leads us to think about the possibility and synthesis.

The final point is the one I think we would all ultimately turn to regarding our expectations of unity and New Testament theology. It is a purely theological point: the authors were all working under the superintending inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is God speaking through human authors, so we expect there to be a unity in the thoughts that God would have us know. We start off with the expectation that we will be able to synthesize the different theologies. That is the expectation. From an academic perspective, I have to say that that is our starting point. We have to prove our starting point by synthesizing, proving that it can be done. We can synthesize between the distinct theological emphases between Matthew and Paul. I hope to show that in the course of this class. There are probably other points that I could make as to why we would expect unity to New Testament theology, but what I have given are at least some rational reasons. You could give these to somebody else who is asking why we bother to say that Paul said the same thing that James said.

Some have noticed that Mary and Martha are portrayed differently in some slight respects between Luke and John. One Bible study has pointed out that you can see how Martha had grown up between one narrative and another. I would argue that that is probably inappropriate. I am not ultimately against trying to do character studies like that, but we have to admit that we do not have a lot of information about Martha. You have probably heard an untold number of stories about Mary and Martha. Mary was willing to sit at Jesus' feet, and Martha was always busy in the kitchen. She was upset with Mary, but Jesus corrected Martha for that. If all you have is that narrative about Martha, then Martha does not come off so well. The preacher has a wonderful sermon pitting Mary against Martha in terms of the way the sermon is structured. There is a real danger in that because we do not know enough about them to say what they are like. We hope we can empathize with character traits in both. It is not wholly wrong to make a comparison there, but we should not abstract that as if the main character trait we know about Martha is that she is a busy body and cannot sit down at even Jesus' feet when He is there teaching. Then you go to the Gospel of John, especially with the Lazarus account, and you see that that is not quite her response. That breaks with our character understanding. That would be like taking any one major episode from your life and saying your whole character can be revealed in this one episode. That is not fair to Martha. The broader issue is whether or not John or Luke wanted to portray character development in Martha. If they wanted to do that then it is valid to see it. But taking it that way makes a lot of assumptions about what John thought his audience understood. We are saying that John wanted his readers, in the back of their minds, to be thinking about Martha in the kitchen when he brought in one other narrative and showed she is better off than they realized. That is making a lot of assumptions. I would be very cautious about that. It is probably safer to say that by looking at both narratives we get a fuller picture of who Martha is. And we can leave it there.

When you sit down to read Scripture, 1 Peter for instance, you may think, "I am reading the Word of God." You do not think, "I am reading the word of Peter." My reaction is that it is extremely good to

think that you are reading the Word of God when you sit down to read 1 Peter. That is absolutely the foundation and starting point. On one level I am happy for Christians to have that as the first and foremost thing in their mind. I do not see why that means that you cannot also say you are reading the words of Peter. I want you to look down and say, "I am reading the Word of God as spoken through Peter." Peter was a real person speaking to a real group in Asia Minor. Let us see what Peter said to those people in that particular place. Realize that all of that was under the divine superintending power of the Holy Spirit. I would not pit the two against each other.

Some have asked if you can apply the idea of fully God/fully man and the incarnation to Scripture. I have been very careful not to mention the word "incarnation." There are many people who would teach exactly what I teach, and they would be very happy to use the "incarnation" word. I want to reserve "incarnation" because it is a very special word in my mind. It refers to God in human flesh, but it especially refers to the one God-man, Jesus Christ. I do not want to say that Peter ever approached that same status of fully God/fully man. People love to use incarnation vocabulary in Christian missions or in counseling. They will say, "We are Christ in that moment when we are presenting God to people. Therefore we are incarnating God; we are Christ's representatives. We become the human expression of God." I do not like that because I think the term "incarnation" needs to be reserved for Jesus. It has been very popular, and there are a lot of theologians who have gone that way. It has been picked up on in popular Christian writing. But it makes me really uncomfortable and queasy. I want to reserve the "incarnation" word for Jesus as the God-man. He is fully God and fully man. At the same time, I think it is a good question in that there is something similar going on in Scripture. There was even something similar going on when David in the Old Testament wrote Scripture. David became the human agent through whom God spoke. The two worked together to produce a divinely inspired Word that was spoken to a particular historical situation. I see the analogies there. It may just be me, but I do not like using the "incarnation" word there, though it is natural to draw some connections and analogies.

Some of my students in the past have said that they became discouraged at this point in the class for two reasons. The first reason is that what I have introduced is not how most people approach the Bible. They do not approach it with such care; they certainly do not approach it with such theological emphases. Are we setting ourselves out as an elite group? Second, you have said that you and most people you know are lazier than this. You want to be lazy, but I am not letting you be lazy! Part of the whole point of this course is to address your laziness when you approach Scripture. Laziness is extremely dangerous because this is the Word of God. Let me address this comment and another one for a minute.

It is not normal for people in Western society to take a book off the shelf, for instance Hemingway, and hang on every word in every sentence as if it is divinely inspired. I hope that is not normal. You would not do that with Melville, Shakespeare, or other literary authors either. Therefore, when we come to Scripture, we often bring the same level of laziness. Let us just read it through and get the big picture. Or we read it with such detail because we want the verse to apply to our lives. But we have never been taught how to read in that level of detail. Our English classes have taught us how to read 300 pages and write a book report. We do not know how to read three sentences and talk about how each word is important in our lives. Any time that you approach Scripture, you should see it as divinely inspired, and you should want every word to matter. Inevitably, Scripture calls forth a different approach to it as literature than you would use for any other book. It is something that requires more rigor and study. When I interact with laziness I want to say, "Sorry—it is the Word of God!" Dare we approach the Word of God lazily? Most people are lazy in their Bible study. They have 10 minutes. They are going to read their passage for the day in their weekly reading cycle. They are going to try and get something out of it, and they are going to leave. They do this instead of going through the hard process of all the things that have to go into understanding each and every word. That is to our shame. That leads me to the

second point.

At the same time, I do not want us to create an ultra-spiritual elitist group because we suddenly have the right way and the right tools to approach Scripture. We should not try to feel better than or superior to the person next to us in the pew. In fact, I know people who could not articulate a single word about how to interpret Scripture well. But because they have read Scripture for 50 years, they are much holier than me, and they know Scripture much better than I do. I acknowledge that that happens, and it is part of the way that the Word of God impresses on people's souls. That is a good thing. I want to acknowledge that. At the same time there are some helpful correctives to how most people approach their study of Scripture. We need to take those correctives into account and try to bring them to God's people as well. The clarity of Scripture is known technically as the perspicuity of Scripture. Scripture is so clear that if you sit down and read it you get the big picture. Jesus died for our sins, and He was resurrected on our behalf. You cannot miss that in the New Testament if you are reading at all carefully and with the Holy Spirit working in your life. We need to think about how we can be more precise with the smaller details of Scripture so that everything we say about it is increasingly accurate. I am speaking to a group of people who are training to be Christian leaders.

James 3:1-5 says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts." It is easy and appropriate to see in this passage a broader point about being careful with what we say in all avenues of life. But James starts off with a specific application to teachers. There is a stricter judgment on teachers. That makes sense. I bear very seriously the fact that I am speaking to 70 people plus a videotape right now. What I say could influence you for good or for ill. Therefore what I say matters quite a lot, especially if we are in a Bible study in which we are opening God's Word and looking at a few verses. What we say and how we lead people to understanding in a small group Bible study matters a lot. We need to take that responsibility very heavily. We need to hone our skills so that we are indeed better off than the people who are not teaching. It is good to be even more precise in the way that we interpret Scripture.

I would readily acknowledge that the history of interpretation in the church is often full of very unsound exegesis with good theological implications. Very often people approach Scripture with an allegorical approach. Instead of trying to understand each word, they read into it their theology. This is especially done in Old Testament narrative. This was done throughout the history of the church. In the second century any time Justin Martyr saw the word "wood" in the Old Testament he took it as a symbol of the cross. That was not right, but there was good theology there. He was still talking about the cross of Jesus, the death of Jesus on our behalf, Jesus' justification, and how He dealt with our sins. The theology was good, but the exegesis was bad. Somehow God in His good providence has often used bad interpretation with good theology to His glory. I want to acknowledge that. At the same time, often it has been to the detriment of the church that somebody misinterprets Scripture with bad theology. They do not realize it is bad theology; they might be doing it with the best of motives. Suddenly there might be a teaching about Jesus being born or begotten later. He is not fully God in that He did not always exist in eternity in trinitarian form. That gets out there because somebody interprets a few texts in a few ways, and suddenly you have Arianism spreading throughout the ancient church. Heresy spreads, and it gets worse and worse. Honing our interpretive skills prevents us from reading bad theology into a text. It also helps us read the theology that is in the text, to exegete instead of icegete. That is always good to

do.

Yes, we are doing something that is different from a lot of the rest of the church, but this is something we can bring to the church to help the church interpret Scripture better. That is a good thing. It requires us to be more careful in our work and less lazy. We want unbelievers to have the Word of God. We hand it to them because the clarity of Scripture is such that the major points cannot be lost. But as believers we need to hone our skills so that when we are called to exegete a passage that is 10 verses long, we do so with a greater degree of accuracy than if we just went into it very sloppily and lazily. There is something different required of Christian leaders than of people who are young in the faith. We dare not say that, because people who are young in the faith just open up the Bible and read, Christian leaders can do the same. We have to recognize that there is something that involves growth in our approach to interpretation, and we need to do it.

I give an annual lecture about the way that New Testament interpretation relates to missions. I talk about the historical context in which Scripture is written and the trans-cultural approach to understanding it today. One of the benefits to that is that it makes the Word of God not an American Word of God. People in any culture can own it because we all approach it as something written to a different context. It was not written to Americans; it was written to first-century Christians. I also draw a whole category of ways in which twenty-first century American society is like first-century society. I also draw a whole list of ways that twenty-first century American society is unlike first-century society. We look at the similarities and dissimilarities between the two cultures. The similarities are part of what make the Word trans-cultural.

For instance, there was decent transportation in the ancient world, there were highways, and there were robbers back then. These things make it possible for us to understand the narrative about the Good Samaritan. We know what it would be like to be walking from one place to another and suddenly be knocked on the back of the head. That immediately speaks to our context. We understand that even if we do not quite envision it exactly how it would have been envisioned in the first century. That is what allows us to immediately have contact with Scripture. The danger is where our twenty-first century society is unlike the first-century society. We start misreading first-century teaching in light of twenty-first century teaching. We read passages on slavery in light of the horrors of American slavery 200 years ago. There are elements of continuity, but there is also discontinuity there. We have to be careful that when Paul talks about how slaves should interact with their masters and how masters should interact with their slaves that we understand that in a first-century setting and not in a nineteenth-century setting. The possibility of interpretation is increased by areas of continuity, and it is hindered by areas that the cultures are dissimilar. That is another reason why someone in the twenty-first century can open a Bible and understand it. In that context I point out that one of the main similarities between the twenty-first century and the first century is that people were sinful, and we are sinful too. They need the blood of Jesus to atone for their sins, and we do too. The very spiritual makeup of us as human beings is true for all time. The very nature of Who God is is true for all time. Because of these things, when we open Scripture it immediately speaks to us. That allows for anybody to open Scripture and understand it even if some of the dissimilarities can hinder us and make us misunderstand Scripture.

Let us move on and talk about the dangers and benefits of this approach to New Testament theology. We will start with the dangers. First, with this approach we can over-theologize choices that New Testament authors made. The fact that Matthew chose to include something that is not in Mark can make us draw big theological consequences. It might just be that Matthew liked the story. It might not be a big theological choice. A second danger is that we could end up emphasizing distinctives to the point that one ignores commonality. This is often done, especially in contrasting Matthew and Luke. Luke talks a

lot about the poor; Matthew does not. That does not mean that Matthew did not care about the poor. Some narratives point out that he does. Luke talks more about it, so it causes some people to say that these are distinct theologies. There is actually more commonality there than we realize.

The third danger is that we can emphasize unity to the point that we ignore distinctives. That is the main danger in the evangelical church today. We assume that Matthew, Peter, and Paul are all always talking about the same thing. Then you end up with troubles. For instance, Paul talks about justification coming by faith, and James talks about justification coming by works. One way of dealing with that is that we immediately assume that the term “justification” is a theological term that would be used exactly the same way by the two authors. We assume they are talking about the same thing. They might be talking about a different meaning of the same Greek word, “justify.” I would ultimately argue that this is what they are doing. If we too quickly say we can synthesize this and ignore the tension, we can lose the distinct emphases that are going on in James and Paul. We need to listen to those emphases, though.

The fourth danger is that it can become a mere historical enterprise without applying it to the church today. At the end of the day, we might interpret what Paul said to the audience in Corinth and leave it at that. If we are done there, then we have lost application for us today. That is also commonly done in a lot of New Testament commentaries out there. We do not want this to become a mere historical enterprise without application to the church today.

Now let me talk about the benefits of this approach to New Testament theology. First, this can provide new insight into New Testament teaching. Second, this can provide new material for the work of systematic theology. I gave an illustration about the resurrection and how most systematic theologies have not dealt enough with the resurrection of Jesus. Yet when you read the New Testament, it is everywhere. You see that that is a theological emphasis in nearly every New Testament author. That can cause you to sit back and reevaluate your systematic theology. That is a good thing. Finally, it can also help us better read the work of the author. For instance, you probably think you know what the word “believe” means in the Gospel of John. I daresay you do not understand all the nuances in John because you have not spent the time to understand the levels of belief and the different ways that belief works out in John. How can somebody who claims to believe in Jesus then walk away? We need to understand what is going on there. John has distinct theological emphases with that word “belief.” Understanding those emphases can be very important in understanding John himself and his writings.

We have talked about working goals, presuppositions, dangers, and benefits to approaching the New Testament theologically, as we are doing here. I wanted to be transparent with you about all of that. Too often in class, especially in a Master of Arts level class, you plunge in and work without ever taking the time to step back. You need to do the hard work of acknowledging what your method looks like and what presuppositions are going into that method. I want you to have a chance to critique on your own whether or not this is the right way to approach Scripture.

Ferdinand Christian Baur, Rudolf Bultmann, Adolf Schlatter, Donald Guthrie, George Eldon Ladd, and N. T. Wright (Tom) are just a few big names in the field of New Testament theology. Many of them have books that say in their titles “the Theology of the New Testament.” These are people who have overtly done what I am doing here. They have all had slightly different approaches.

Baur coordinated New Testament evidence with a philosophical and Hegelian system. That was the juxtaposition of Paul and Peter in the dialectic. I do not like that method because it is so theory laden. He has a philosophical presupposition, and he is going to make sure that the New Testament fits into his theory. I do not want to approach it that way. We need to approach it much more inductively.

Rudolf Bultmann is a name that will come up again later. I mentioned him earlier in regard to the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Because he holds the historical Jesus to be very different from how the early church understood Jesus, he has two parts to his theology. First he talks about what Jesus actually did. Then there is a huge leap to what the church thought about Jesus. There is very little continuity. I do not think that is appropriate either. We need to see continuity between Jesus and the people who followed Jesus.

I am a lot closer to Adolf Schlatter, who wants to associate the work of the apostles with the historical reality of Jesus. He still began with Jesus and witnessed the development in the apostolic tradition. Donald Guthrie is an evangelical author and New Testament scholar whom I have great respect for (not the same Donald Guthrie who teaches here at Covenant Seminary). What I do not like about Guthrie's approach is that he tends to use systematic categories. He goes author by author, but in each case he tries to find his systematic categories in the author. That is not inductive enough for me. I very much appreciate Ladd in the way that he goes through corpus by corpus and lets each corpus speak. By corpus I mean that he lets Luke, John, and Paul speak, and he has chapters on each. He shows the theologically distinct contributions of each. I very much like that. What most bothers me about Ladd is that he puts Matthew and Mark in the same chapter. That bothers me because I think Matthew has some particular emphases that are distinct from Mark and vice versa. By putting them in the same chapter he does not allow them each to have their own say. I like that Ladd attempts synthesis.

Tom Wright's project is still very much in development. He starts off talking about the historical context. This is a helpful way to start off. He has a projected five- or six-volume New Testament theology. Every year it grows. He spent the better part of a whole book talking about the historical context of first-century Christianity. I think that was very helpful and such a great way to start. That is something that he has contributed that most people have not done up until now. At the same time I have some questions about other ways that he has approached things. That is a different matter.

Now we are going to completely change topics. Up until now we have been talking about our presuppositions, the way that we should approach interpretation, how to synthesize theology, and the importance of studying history. Now I want to talk about the canon itself. If you were to study the New Testament at most religious studies departments in the universities today, there would be an assumption about the relationship of us to the canon. The canon is the idea that we have 27 books of the New Testament. We are not going to add any to that; we are not going to subtract any from that. We see all of those 27 books as inspired and inerrant from God Himself. We do not see any other books in that same category. That is what a canon is.

I mentioned earlier that there was a guy named Walter Bauer who talked about Orthodoxy and heresy. Bauer held that what we consider to be Orthodoxy was just one of several paths that Christianity could have taken. It is the one that had the great power behind it and ultimately won as a result. He said these other so-called heresies were just alternative paths. This same point has been taken as a critique of the idea of canon. The New Testament canon is simply the books of the winning party. Therefore some people would basically say we should reopen the issue of canon today. People say we should consider some of the Gnostic literature and whether it is actually spiritually edifying. Before we go into studying the New Testament, we need to ask why we are not reading the Gospel of Thomas or Philip. Why are we not reading the so-called Acts of Paul and Thecla? Why are we not reading the Apocalypse of Peter? All of these are second- and third-century books written in the name of the apostles that were contributions from people outside of the so-called Orthodox branch of early Christianity. Why do we not read them? I am happy for you to glance through them and read them, but people will ask why you do not read them as if they have something to say about your theology and the way you live your Christian life. That is

the issue with New Testament canon.

We will just go through some introduction in this lesson. First, let us discuss one of the reasons to bother talking about canon. You will encounter people who have been in religious studies programs who have been taught that there are other books out there. The books you are reading in your New Testament are part of a limited corpus—a theologically biased, limited corpus. I will talk more about this next time, because I want to bring in an example of a contemporary who reads a lot of other books as if they are as important as our canon.

Within the Christian church, there are basically five contemporary views about the canon. The first is naïve conservatism. For instance, the naïve conservative does not know that, of the 27 canonical books that we have, not one received official church sanction until the end of the fourth century, over 300 years after Jesus lived and died. Some people will come to you and ask if you knew that it was not until the fourth century that the Bible came together in its entirety. The naïve conservative simply believes the Bible because he has always been told to. Suddenly when he is told something about the history of the development of the canon, it rocks him for a bit. He does not know about the historical context.

The second view, and one that I am going to push for, is an historically informed conservatism. It is a conservatism that says this is the canon, these are the inspired books, and these are all the inspired books of the New Testament Scriptures. Yet the informed conservative also understands the process that took the church a while to recognize all the books that should be in the canon. I am going to push toward that.

The third position is the one held by the Catholic or Orthodox Church. They say it does not matter how long it took. The church itself is its own authority. In the Catholic Church the pope, the cardinals, and the church councils still bear the inspiring work of God to the extent that the pronouncements they make are infallible. When the church decides what the canon is, you trust them because you trust the pope and the church councils. That is the Catholic or Orthodox position, and that is how they think of canon.

There are a couple of other positions. One handles well the historical issues involved in the development of the canon. Yet it argues from a purely historical perspective, without a lot of theological argument, that this should remain the canon of the church. They just say it is too late to change the canon.

The last position is antagonistic historianism. This is what you see on most college campuses today. With some glee, the religious studies professors look forward to the lecture on canon. They want to shock you by saying the canon was not put together until the fourth century. They have the goal of breaking down people's assumption that we should only read the 27 books of the New Testament as inspired Scripture.

I think that probably most people reading this lesson are approaching Scripture from the first point-of-view, naïve conservatism. You simply believe it is Scripture. That is not bad. It is certainly better than the last position. In the course of the next lesson, I want to bring some history in and talk about the development of the canon so that you have something to say to someone who comes to you from position five and calls you an idiot. He or she will tell you that the canon was not put together until much later, and there were a lot of different options in the early church. The critic will say that you are just going with the people who were the major power brokers. You need to know how to interact with such critics. We will do that next time. Thank you for your time.