

Introduction

My Name is Dr. Chapman, and welcome to the course. My area of research is actually in crucifixion. I am particularly interested in backgrounds. Understanding something about the historical context of the New Testament is important for our study of the New Testament in terms of interpreting it, understanding it, and applying it to our lives. So that is one of my emphases. It will come out here. It is also why I am attached with the archaeology institute at Covenant Seminary. I have interests in trying to immerse us into ancient culture so we better understand the Old and New Testaments in their context. That is a bit about me.

Please open your Bible to Matthew 2. In thinking about the Christmas season, we tend to leave it behind very quickly. There is so much celebration, and there are certain parts of the Gospels that we only read around Christmas time. But that is not a good thing. In particular, at the beginning of January, there is a celebration in the church calendar for those churches that follow it, especially the Anglican churches. It celebrates the visit of the magi to Bethlehem to see Jesus. That is the narrative I want to read together. I want to pay attention to not just what it says, but what it says in history and time and the theological implications Matthew wants us to draw. Matthew 2 says,

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

This is a very famous passage. You have probably read it dozens or hundreds of times. In that regard it becomes all too familiar. There are a couple of things that I want to point out about this. One is that it assumes a very specific historic location: Bethlehem. There is a very specific timing, namely the time of King Herod. This would have been Herod the Great. That means that Jesus’ birth did not occur in 0 AD, if there is such a thing. In theory all of history has been broken down into BC (before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini*, the year of our Lord). That should have been the time when Jesus was born, but in point of fact Herod was dead by 4 BC. This narrative probably occurs earlier, and roughly 6 BC would have been Jesus’ birth. So just from reading that little historical tidbit we realize that the later church, as it sat down to put a calendar together, got it a little off. So there is an historic fact.

More importantly, let us talk about Herod the Great. Later we are going to talk about the history of Judea, Palestine, and especially Herod. Let us just say that Herod was not a very nice man. We later read that he kills all the infants after Jesus and his family escape to Egypt. From that we learn that Herod was not a very nice man. But if you lived in the very first century, in the time that Matthew wrote this, as soon as the name Herod came up there would be images about who that person is. Those images do not come up for us; all we know about Herod is basically two facts. He saw some magi, and he killed babies in Bethlehem. That shows the limitation of our perspective when we come to approach the New Testament. Matthew did not intend that to be the case. He intended for the reader to already know something about Herod. He assumed that knowledge. He assumed, for instance, that you know that Herod built the temple. Herod did not just build the temple, but he built all around Judea and even into the Gentile world. He built pagan temples around the Roman Empire. Herod played both sides. He was a very good client king of Rome. He did what every good king does. He had a capital city (Jerusalem); He built a temple in his capital city (the temple of Jerusalem). He benefited the rest of the Roman world. He gave gifts to other cities, especially for their temples and for their coliseums. He played the Roman side. But he also had to watch out for his Jewish constituency. Generally he did not do as well with them as he did with the Romans. One of the main things he did for them was build them a temple. Even the rabbis, several hundred years later, although they hate the man, still have to speak nicely of him with regard to the building of the temple. That is who Herod would have been for them. Of course, he also put to death most of his own children. He was afraid that they were going to take the throne from him. You see that this text has an historical context to it. You are distanced from that, and that is not a good thing. That is not what Matthew intended. You now know more about Herod than is just found in the pages of Matthew. There is the historical dimension of the text.

Let us talk for a minute about the theological dimension of this text. There are some words that recur here. There is one in particular that recurs a number of times. It would be a theological word. It is not just “child,” “Bethlehem,” or “star in the east.” The word “worship” occurs three times. We tend to think that this whole narrative is about magi. We think it is especially about giving gifts. You have probably heard enough sermons on this to know that our construct of this, with the little drummer boy, is really messed up. Even the song says, “We three kings of orient are.” There are not three kings in the narrative. There are three gifts, so that is where we get three kings. They are not even kings in the narrative; they are magi. That means they were not kings. Magi generally were counselors to kings. The term “magi” would mean they were Babylonian. There is a lot of historical investigation we would like to do there. We wish we knew a little bit more about who the magi were. They may have a connection to Judaism because there was a large Jewish population in Babylon at this time. This is because in around 586 BC there was an exile. The leaders were taken into exile into Babylon. Some of them returned in the return under Ezra and later under Nehemiah. But there is a large Jewish population in Babylon. Two centuries after this, the two major rabbinic centers of rabbinic learning were in Palestine, near Caesarea, and in Babylon. There is a Jerusalem Talmud and a Babylonian Talmud as the great codifications of rabbinic law. So there may be some connectedness there. We will leave that aside for now.

Gifts, kings, and royalty get in the way of seeing what this text is primarily about. What gives it away is the repetition of the word worship. It comes up in Matthew 2:2, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” The purpose of their coming was to worship. In fact, verse 10 says, “When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.” The Greek word *proskuneo* means “they fall down” in front of him. That is the means of giving Him worship and homage. The second place that this is repeated, if you are counting in order, is in verse 7 where “Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find

him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” Herod was not really going to worship Him, though. Immediately as Matthew’s first century reader you are skeptical. Herod was the guy who put to death his own children because he was afraid that in his old age they were going to usurp the throne from him. How was he going to put up with a person who was born king of the Jews? You are immediately skeptical. By the time you get to the end of chapter 2, you know that he has gone and slaughtered all the children in Bethlehem because he hoped to kill this king of the Jews.

If we were to approach this text from a literary dimension, there are two major groups of characters: the magi and Herod. Herod would be, in literary terms, a character foil. He knows what is right, he knows he should go to worship, but he refuses to do so. In fact, he tells a lie to the magi in order to get some information from them. That shows a very important detail—that the two major sets of characters know what the right response is. The right response is to worship Jesus. One set of characters does it, the other set does not. The very person who most should worship Him, the one who is crowned king and who should give over his title of king to the one who truly is the Messiah, refuses to do so. On that level within the narrative itself, I can say that worship is a theological theme that Matthew wants us to notice. Repetition of a word; that is one evidence. You do not want to make too much of repeated words, though. Sometimes authors repeat words only because it is stuck in their head and they just keep coming up with it. Here it is repeated at key junctures. More importantly, it is repeated by contrasting characters, and it is the very point of contrast between the two of them. That increases its theological import for Matthew.

Matthew 2 is the first time we actually meet Jesus as a baby in the whole book of Matthew. Before that the whole story is a genealogy followed by all the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. Those are all focused on Joseph and Mary. It is at the beginning of chapter 2 that we actually meet Jesus. When Jesus shows up on the scene the response of the people should be to worship Him. That increases the theological import of this because it is the first time we meet Jesus. We find out that we should worship Him.

One final evidence that this is an important theological theme for Matthew is that it does not just show up in Matthew 2. In the next five or six chapters the idea of worshiping Jesus is repeated. It is usually in the sense that he is a grown man, walking through the streets of some city, and somebody comes and bows down (*proskuneo*) in front of Him. They worship Him right in front of Him and ask Him to heal them or someone they know. The very repetition of that theme in the next several chapters helps improve it. There is also a very important repetition at the end of Matthew. At the end of Matthew 28 is a passage we call the Great Commission. I know you know a lot about the Great Commission because as Christians we focus on missions. Somebody has to mention the Great Commission in that focus. You end up talking a lot about going and making disciples. That is the focus for us of the Great Commission. It is a very important focus; I do not want to say otherwise. We are going to return to that later. By the way, at the beginning of several lessons I would like to give homilies. We are going to be doing a lot of technical stuff that is removed from the text, so occasionally at the beginning of the lesson, just to get us back into the New Testament, we are going to do these little homilies. Matthew 28:16, the Great Commission, starts off by saying, “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Then it goes on and Jesus gives the Great Commission. The first response to Jesus in the book of Matthew is worship. There is a recognition that even those who are going to turn against Him understand that that is the proper response. At the very end of the book of Matthew, in His resurrection glory, the response is worship. Therefore, you can see that worship is a very important theological theme in the book of Matthew.

Let me talk about the methodology that I just employed. A lot of this course is actually going to be about method. Then let me talk about some practical application. The way that I framed the question is perhaps a little differently than we typically approach the New Testament in evangelical circles. When we approach the New Testament, we usually do so either in the context of a Bible study or a sermon. If you have done a lot of reading in Christian work and writing, you may approach the New Testament in a systematic theology, either applied or in its theoretical area. I did not do any of that, though. I did not just stay with our passage like you would in a Bible study. I let the passage speak for itself. We saw that there was a theme that was very important in the passage that we did not dare ignore. But I was interested in the broader ramifications for it in Matthew as a whole. That is one thing. I was sermonic in some respects, but I did not try to immediately apply it. I wanted to step back and see what the text was trying to say to us theologically and historically. I was trying to bring us into the historical context of the text itself. I did not apply systematic theology either. We would all agree that in terms of systematic theology, Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, the very Word of God, is worthy of our worship. You might even have a little paragraph or even a whole chapter on that in your systematic theology textbook. The way they are going to prove that is by showing a little passage from Matthew. They are also going to look at John, Hebrews, and elsewhere. They will bring together a whole smattering of different things. When it is done well, everything is done in context. Sometimes it can leave you with the impression that this theology is being abstracted from the context. You wonder if that really was a big deal for Matthew, the author of Hebrews, or Paul. Therefore, the way I framed things was not in terms of a broader systematic theology, the theology of the Christian faith, but I framed things in terms of the theology that Matthew wants us to understand. As soon as we did that, it became very important, not just that this word was repeated in this passage, but that the word is then repeated elsewhere in Matthew and especially at the very end. You can see this is a major theme in Matthew. What I did was New Testament theology as it is practiced commonly today.

We are interested in the themes and the different emphases that we find in the different New Testament authors. We want to see what the theologies are that they are conveying to their own communities. We are trying to understand them in history and time and in the day that they were speaking. Later, you definitely want to synthesize that and develop a whole systematic theology. We are not there, though. We stop short of that because we are interested in the theology of Matthew primarily at this stage. That is a bit of what we are going to do in this course. The name of the course is New Testament History and Theology. I assume you know a lot about the content of the New Testament. There is a Bible content class offered here at Covenant Seminary in which students run quickly through the whole Bible. Students look at the Old Testament one semester and the New Testament another semester. They read through the whole Bible, and they remember a lot of what it says. I am assuming that you have already taken the course and that you know all that; I am assuming you already know your New Testament pretty well. If you do not, you will need to do a lot of extra reading in the class. A good place to start would be Matthew because we are going to spend time here for a few weeks in our area of homilies. I am interested in taking you to the next level. I want to do things that commonly are not done in churches so that it can expand your idea of how I should be reading the New Testament. I should be reading it as an historical book and also as a series of theological books that ultimately can be synthesized into a theological whole. That is what we are going to be doing in this class.

Practically, we should worship our Lord. Our first and last response to the Lord should be that of worship. Jesus was worthy of worship when He was a little baby lying in a dirty, scummy, old manger. This was before He had accomplished anything, before He had died for our sins, and before He was raised from the dead. The very fact of His birth made Him worthy of worship at that point. All the more, after He had taught, was crucified, was in resurrected glory, and now that He has ascended to heaven,

He is worthy of our worship. Worship is falling down before Him, adoring Him, and committing our lives to His service. That should be our response to this text.

I started this class differently than I usually will. Usually we will start in prayer, but I want to start here to bring us to the point where we have something to pray about. Let us pray.

Father, as we are reminded in this passage, we are reminded that our Lord, our Master, the One Who is Lord of Lords, Who is crowned King of us and King of the universe, that He is worthy of our bowing down and our submitting to Him of our worship. Father, we would desire in our lives that that would be true. We would desire that as individuals, and, Lord, I would desire that this whole course would be an exercise in worship, that at the end students here, as they have been taken through sometimes very academic and very practical messages, that all of it would lead to Your glory and to service to our Lord Jesus Christ. We dedicate this course to You. I would ask with these students, who will have much work here, that You would help us worship You. Father, through all of this let us not lose sight of worshipping our dear Lord. We pray these things in Your wonderful and holy name. Amen.

Let us talk a little bit about what this course is about. Perhaps what is most helpful is to think through course objectives. These are very important objectives for me because it says what I want to bring to the course. I cannot force you to learn; you want to do that anyway. I cannot cram information down your throat. These are worded in terms of what I want to bring into the course. These objectives give you an idea of what I think this class is about. As I said a few minutes ago, this class is not what you would expect. This is not intended to bring you up to speed if you do not know the New Testament very well. This class is intended for those who know the New Testament pretty well. Maybe you have been in the church for years. Every year in a class like this, by the way, I have people who may have only been Christians for just a few months. Therefore they do not know their New Testament quite as well. The predominate context in this class is people who have read the New Testament before, hopefully cover to cover, Matthew to the end of Revelation. I want to do something different. I want to bring you into a more careful study. I actually want to take the best of what academia has to say about the New Testament and bring it into your knowledge so that you can use that in your future ministries. This may be while you are sitting across from somebody in a counseling session, teaching somebody in a Sunday school, or pastoring a church. Whatever the context is that you find yourself in, I want this to help inform how you approach the New Testament. Honestly at the end of all this, there will probably be a lot of content you have learned, but I am fundamentally less concerned about content and more concerned about method and approach. I am going to be overt with you about that from the beginning. The course objectives reflect some of these emphases.

The first objective is to critique current scholarly approaches to New Testament study and develop a working methodology of how one can better study the New Testament historically and theologically. This is the objective that we will spend a lot of time on for the first few weeks. It is also the one that I have the most difficult time convincing people that you need. This is because most people, frankly, do not care what is going on in a religious studies context in a university. They do not feel like it is going to hit them at all. For instance, we will look at questions like, "Did Jesus really say what is represented in the Gospels?" There is the whole issue about what is known as the historical Jesus. Most people think, "I know, I am a believer, I read the New Testament, I know it is true. That is enough. I do not need to know reasons for me to be able to defend that. It is enough for me because, frankly, what I am often most concerned about is my own personal devotional life." What I would like to say to you is you are going to be constantly encountering, increasingly over the next generations, people who do not start from those same assumptions. They are going to start from a set of assumptions like, "The New Testament is not very trustworthy as an historical document. It does not represent who Jesus really was

and what He taught. You need to comb through it and find out the stuff that Jesus actually said. You are a Protestant, which means that your theology comes from Paul. But you have not read the rest of the New Testament. You do not understand that that is just one side of things. It is a later side of things. Paul is different than what Jesus would have taught.” That is what is commonly taught in universities today. It is what is increasingly being taught in the media.

During the last two years on ABC News Peter Jennings did two different religious reports. One was on Jesus and another on Jesus and Paul. He interviewed the major university scholars, who are people who are extremely skeptical. There are some wonderful people working in the universities, but there are some who are extremely skeptical of the New Testament. Because they say the controversial stuff, that makes for great news. He interviewed them and gave them hours of airtime. These were two-hour shows. Do you know how many millions of people saw that? Someday you might be sitting down in a counseling session across from somebody and want to point out something in the Gospel that Jesus said that would speak to that person’s life. In your mind you are thinking, “This is the Lord Jesus Christ, so you ought to listen to it, obey it, and heed it.” What is going on in that person’s mind is, “Did Jesus really say that?” If you do not know that they are thinking that, and if you cannot speak to that context, you have lost the person right there. So this is very important. This objective involves critiquing current scholarly approaches to New Testament studies and developing a working methodology. This is both a negative and a positive reflection on New Testament study today. There is some really good stuff out there, and there is some stuff that you have to be wary of. I am going to help us work through that. We are going to critique, but we are also going to positively state a working methodology of how one can better understand the New Testament. Then note the two words; these are intentional: historically and theologically. I already spoke to that a bit earlier.

The next class objective is to survey the historical context and purposes of individual New Testament books. This is not to say that we are going to survey all the content of the books. It is to say that we are going to situate them in their historical context so that you understand how they would have sounded in the first century. Ultimately what I am going to say to you is that the way to seek to understand Matthew or any other book of the New Testament is to understand what the writer was saying to the audience to whom he was writing. In addition, and this is a shock, he was not writing to you! I will qualify that statement in a minute. Matthew did not have you in mind when he was writing his Gospel. He could not have. You live 2000 years later in a completely different historical context. He was writing to a first-century audience, and to the extent that you want to understand what Matthew was trying to say, you have to get into the situation of his first-century audience. That is why we need to understand the historical context. The qualification is that under God’s providence and superintending work of His Holy Spirit, what was said was inspired and inerrant. It was intended for God’s people for all time. But it was intended in very human categories. You first have to understand what it meant in the first century and then apply the timeless and eternal truths of Scripture to twenty-first century America or whatever your context is if you are coming from another country. We are going to talk about the historical context, and we are also going to talk about the purposes of New Testament books. This is because often it is better to interpret a book in terms of its broader purposes. For instance, now that you see in Matthew that one of the themes is worship, I guarantee that when you read that word again, when you are reading about the person who comes to Jesus, bows down, and worships Him so that He will heal them, you will read it differently. You will see that this is part of a bigger plan in Matthew himself.

The third course objective is to consider major theological themes in the New Testament author by author, and more particularly, delve into the riches of each New Testament author’s understanding of the cross of Christ. For instance, we will talk about some of the main themes in Matthew. We could spend the rest of this course just talking about one of these New Testament authors. We will not have time to

develop everything, so my approach is going to work on two levels. We are going to quickly survey the broader theological themes. Then we will take one area and mine it repeatedly in each different New Testament author. That area is the cross and the death of Christ. What did Jesus intend by that, and how was it understood by the different New Testament authors? So we will have broader theological themes book by book, and we will have individual ones.

The next course objective is to promote appreciation for the organic unity of New Testament theology in the midst of the diversity of its expression. We will have looked at the individual theological themes author by author. The New Testament is all superintended by the Holy Spirit and the mind of God. It is the early Christian church; they knew each other and interacted with each other. I am going to argue that for all those reasons we expect, and we see that the theological themes in each of the authors cohere. They all come together. Matthew is not the only one to emphasize worship, although he does do so. This is very important because it serves as a potential corrective to our own personal theologies. If I told you to pick the book of the New Testament that has most influenced you theologically, chances are that 80% to 90% of you could immediately come up with a book. It might be different from your neighbors, but you could come up with a title. It might be Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, or the Gospel of Luke, but there is one book that especially stands out to you as one you are really interested in. That is good because you probably know the theological themes that are in that book. But the Lord gave us a canon, a whole collection of books. The themes that are in Matthew are complimented, supplemented, and reemphasized in other New Testament books. For instance, if your book is Romans and your doctrine of salvation is all about justification, which is a good thing, you do not have a complete doctrine of the salvation of Christians. There are other aspects of salvation, other aspects of the cross of Christ, that we will encounter in other books. Other books will help us have a fuller understanding of what Jesus was really doing when He was crucified. So we need to integrate the unity of New Testament theology in the midst of its diversity of expression.

Finally, the last course objective is to provide a climate that encourages the practical application of New Testament teaching. This is going to take a lot of academic work. I am not going to bring these fancy illustrations in so you are going to go home and say, "He wants me to pray more." That is not necessarily what I am going to be about. I am going to be about broader issues of method, but I also want it to have practical import in your Christian life. We will do that as well.

One of the reasons I have spent so much time talking about these objectives is because you may not have known what the course was about. So I want to say that whatever you thought the course was about, this is what it really is. It is really good for you, I promise. I can also promise you that the normal emotive reaction that people have to this course is that for the first three or four weeks they are largely perplexed. They wonder, "What is all this stuff? This is not what I came here for." By the end of the course, hopefully everything will fall into place and people will realize why we did all of this stuff at the beginning. It is all right if that is your reaction to this course. It does not bother me. Hang in there, and we will see how we do at the end. We are going to start with the situation in contemporary American scholarship. Some of you have seen that in your religious studies class or in another context. But some of you have not seen it, so it is not of particular interest to you. But it should be.

There are three books that are a part of this course. The two poles of this course are represented by a book by F. F. Bruce called *New Testament History* and a book by George Eldon Ladd called *New Testament History and Theology*. That is why we are reading these two books. They will help us look at the New Testament in its historical context and also understand theological themes author by author. The other book is by Carson and Moo, and it is called *An Introduction to the New Testament*, the second edition.

I want to get us started on what we are going to talk about next time. Contemporary New Testament studies are largely influenced by contemporary literary studies. If some of you who were English or French majors know something about literary criticism, this is huge for New Testament studies now. A quick way to understand where New Testament studies is at is to describe the three major players when you read any text, but especially the text of Scripture. You have an author, a text, and a reader. These are the three major players. The text is not a person, and the other two are persons, but this is what is involved. As readers you do not have direct access to the author; nobody personally knows Paul. The author produces a text, but the reader only interacts with the text. He cannot directly interact with the author. Fifty years ago if you were studying *Moby Dick*, the assumption was that, as a good English major, you were interested in what the author, Melville, was trying to say. So you are interested in what the author is trying to say. There would be a variety of sub-disciplines that would affect that. For instance, some people would be very interested in Freudian psychology. They would be interested in the Freudian dimensions of what Melville was trying to say. They would look at his life experiences as a youth and how that impacted his writing. The point is, they are applying psychology to Melville, but they are really trying to understand Melville. You are trying to understand the author 50 years ago. Since that time people have begun to ask, "Can you really get to know Melville?" He is no longer around. You cannot ask him any questions. You cannot get him in the counseling room and actually try to delve into those dreams that he has had or experiences that he remembers from his infancy. In fact, is it ever possible to leap into the mind of the author? For instance, Beth is sitting in the front row. She tells me that she likes football. I can try to understand all the deep implications of that and what that really means for the life of Beth, but I can never leap into her brain. I will never really know if I have gotten it right. That is the idea. This is known as the intentional fallacy. I cannot know what the author intended to communicate because I cannot leap into his or her brain. If that is true of Melville, it is all the more true of Matthew or Paul. We have even less writings from Paul and Matthew. To claim that we know what Paul really intended to communicate is pretty presumptuous of us because we are not in his brain. That is known as the intentional fallacy. In modern studies, and literary studies especially, there is a major break here from the perspective of the reader. The author has authored a text, but we do not have the author. All we have is the text. So our job as readers is simply to understand the text without speaking of what the author intended to do with the text. That is one of the things that has been said.

As people began to look at the text as it stood alone, it became more and more obvious to them what has been known for years. That is that Beth, Mike, and I read Matthew 2, and we might get different things from it. In other words, different readers approach texts differently. The text does not seem to constrain what the reader wants to get out of it. In fact, it seems to be more what the reader brings in with him or her in terms of what the reader gets out of it. One of the things that came out of all this is what is known as reader response criticism. No longer am I really even trying to come up with the absolute objective interpretation of the text. There is no interpretation of the text that people who think well would agree is the way to understand the text. That is not possible; it does not work. We are subjects approaching a text, which means we approach it subjectively. We approach it with our own presuppositions, and those presuppositions color what we see in the text itself. Therefore what one seeks to do in reader response criticism is not ask how I ought to read the text but how I want to read the text. I can read the New Testament and ask what I am getting out of it. Whatever I get out of it is assumed to be valid. It may not be valid for everybody, but it is valid for me. That is where we stand in contemporary literary theory.

I would like to point out that this is very disheartening sometimes. We like to think that the Bible has a meaning. It is a meaning that is written into it ultimately by the superintending work of God. There is an objective meaning that critiques our theology and understanding, and we can be wrong when we seek to understand the Bible. That is what we like to say. But literary theory and approaches say that is not even

possible. They say that is a false hope; do not even try. The question I have for you is, "How do you respond to that?" I am going to ask you that in the next few lessons. I want you to interact with that question. One of the reasons I point this out is because I want you to ponder this a little bit. Do you agree that when the reader approaches the text the reader is just reading in his or her presuppositions, and that is the best the reader can do? Do you agree that the text is so abstracted from the author that we can no longer speak of the intentionality of the author in approaching the text? Why do you agree or disagree? That is what I want you to think about. I also want you to know that probably the majority of people sitting in the pews approach the Bible this way even though they do not agree with the presuppositions there. Most people approach the Bible by opening it up and asking what they get for their lives in the text of Scripture. Whether they know it or not, they are approaching the Bible using reader-response criticism. They are assuming in the way they are conducting themselves that there is not an objective truth in Scripture that should be the point of deciding the validity of what they hold to be true about that passage. Most of the people in the congregation are really there even if they may not be there in terms of their philosophy.