

# Building Biblical Theology

## Lesson 3

Diachronic Developments  
in the Old Testament

Faculty Forum



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# Contents

<b>Question 1: What is the difference between “diachronic” and “synchronic”?</b> .....	1
<b>Question 2: Do we start with synchronic or diachronic analysis?</b> .....	1
<b>Question 3: Does synchronic or diachronic analysis have priority over the other? ...</b>	2
<b>Question 4: Did biblical authors ever use synchronic and diachronic approaches at the same time?</b> .....	3
<b>Question 5: Why does the theology of the Bible change?</b> .....	4
<b>Question 6: How do we reconcile God’s sovereignty with theological development in the Bible?</b> .....	7
<b>Question 7: Do theological developments ever occur simply because God changes his mind?</b> .....	9
<b>Question 8: Do all biblical theologians divide the Bible according to covenants? ....</b>	11
<b>Question 9: Besides matching epochs to covenants, how else do biblical theologians divide the Bible?</b> .....	12
<b>Question 10: Why did God establish so many covenants?</b> .....	13
<b>Question 11: What does the multiplicity of covenants teach us about God's character?</b> .....	14
<b>Question 12: Are there both conditional and unconditional covenants?</b> .....	15
<b>Question 13: Are some covenants more conditional than others?</b> .....	18
<b>Question 14: Is the new covenant conditional?</b> .....	19
<b>Question 15: How do we fulfill our covenant obligations under the new covenant?</b>	21
<b>Question 16: What is the difference between epochal and topical development? ....</b>	22
<b>Question 17: What are the dangers of a topical approach to Scripture?</b> .....	23
<b>Question 18: What is the proper way to use typology in studies of Scripture?</b> .....	24
<b>Question 19: Is it always necessary to look for types of Christ when we study the Old Testament?</b> .....	25
<b>Question 20: Is a type a figure of speech?</b> .....	26
<b>Question 21: What are the elements of a type?</b> .....	28
<b>Question 22: How do types depend on and reflect theological development?</b> .....	30

# Building Biblical Theology

## Lesson Three: Diachronic Developments in the Old Testament

### Discussion Forum

With  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students  
Rob Griffith  
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#### Question 1:

**What is the difference between “diachronic” and “synchronic”?**

**Student:** Okay, Richard, now we’ve had a lesson on the diachronic approach to Scripture. Can you talk a little bit about the differences between that and synchronic?

**Dr. Pratt:** Let’s review that real quickly because it is important that we get it, that everybody sort of has that in mind, because if we don’t have that, we can’t go anywhere. Synchronic means looking at things as if they are happening at the same time. Now, the measurement of time is the problem, because if you have more than 2 or 3 nanoseconds, even human beings can tell that things move and change. So it’s somewhat artificial when you take let’s say a hundred years of Bible history and you say, okay, there’re our one period of time, or some people would go a thousand years, there’s our one period of time. It can get so big that it’s ridiculous to call it synchronic. But the idea is that you’re looking at a part of the Bible, the part of a history of the Bible that is happening at the same general time. Diachronic, like the etymology says — through time — means that you’re looking with a focus on how things develop, and in biblical theology we do both things. Biblical theologians will take a slice, what I often call a synchronic slice of history, pull it out and look at it, and they’ll examine it for what it is in and of itself, and then they’ll push it back into the time frame and then set it in conjunction with other things to see how movement occurs from what happened before and what happened after, and how the development occurs through time. So that’s the basic idea.

#### Question 2:

**Do we start with synchronic or diachronic analysis?**

**Student:** So which one do we start with, synchronic or diachronic?

**Dr. Pratt:** Both. Always both. It’s just like any other aspect of interpreting anything including the Bible. You don’t start a blank slate and then choose step one. We can’t do that. We always come to the Scriptures with all kinds of information and ideas and

feelings and habits and things that are already priming us, as it were, preparing us for jumping in. And so, what a person does is come with a lot of synchronic and diachronic background already, having looked at the Bible either formally or informally, either in their younger age or in their later age, however it may be, but you've got a lot of that already going on. And then what you do is say what I want to do now is look at this section of the Bible synchronically, or I want to look at this diachronic movement. And even when you make that sort of artificial step into the melees of what you're doing when you interpret the Bible, even then there's not a right way to start. It's not as if you can identify what goes on in a period of time and then, because that seems simpler — and it does in some respects — but then you can stretch it out and see how it develops over time. The fact is that every synchronic period has diachronic movement, and so in order to make your synchronic synthesis, you have to already have at least implicitly accounted for the diachrony that's in that segment of the Bible. And that's the problem.

### Question 3:

#### Does synchronic or diachronic analysis have priority over the other?

**Student:** Now is there one that should have priority over the other, though?

**Dr. Pratt:** No. Priority has to do more with what you're trying to do. If you're trying to understand how this part and this part connect to each other, then you're going to give priority to diachronic analysis. But if that's not your goal, if that's not your purpose for study at that time, then you're going to go ahead and just do synchronic primarily and minimize the diachronic concerns. You know, I just think that when you look at the Bible and the way it treats itself, it does both. Sometimes Bible figures will emphasize one or emphasize the other. They'll do one first, then move to the second. But even they are not coming at it as a blank slate taking step one, taking step two. They're coming with a whole tradition, a whole knowledge of what's going on in the Bible already, and they're even talking to people that know a lot about it already. And so they are stepping into this process with a lot of background that is unspoken. And that's always the case. We must always remember that. Any time you take the exercise of reading the Bible and interpreting it and you break it down into steps, it's artificial, always artificial. No matter what the discipline, no matter whether it's systematic theology, biblical theology, whatever it may be, it's always artificial to some degree because you're bringing all kinds of things that are unspoken to your methodology. And of course that's true for everything we do in life.

### Question 4:

#### **Did biblical authors ever use synchronic and diachronic approaches at the same time?**

**Student:** Now Richard, can you give us an example where a biblical writer is using both the synchronic and diachronic approach?

**Dr. Pratt:** I think we actually do it in the lesson, so let me see if I can just pick that one, and we can go further if you'd like. In Romans chapter 5, the apostle Paul is working out the significance of Jesus and how big his significance was. That's really sort of the goal in Romans 5. And the way he does that is he compares Jesus with Adam. So, what he basically does in Romans 5 is he does a synchronic assessment of the period of time from Adam to Noah first, and then he does a synchronic assessment of Jesus and what he did in his time. So what does he say about that period from Adam to Noah? One of the things he observes is he says people in that time did not sin by violating the law or a direct command of God like Adam did. Adam violated a specific command that was given to him directly, but from the time of Adam's fall all the way up to the law of Moses, in fact, there's no commandment that's given explicitly at least in such major proportions. I don't know exactly what he meant, but let's just put it that way. And so they did not directly violate a categorical command from God, shall we say? So then he asked the question, well, in that period of time were they sinners or not? Since there was no law, well, were they sinners? Now the way he assesses that is he goes further into that period of time and he looks at different theological configurations that are in the Bible talking about the period from Adam to Moses, and he says, well, yes they were sinners, and the reason we know that is because the people in that period of time died. So he's taking all kinds of things from the period of Adam to Moses and he's bringing them together in a synthesis and concludes because they died they were therefore sinners.

So on the basis of that, he makes his point that Adam's fall into sin was catastrophic in its effect. I mean, it was huge in its effect. Then he takes that synchronic assessment of that Old Testament period and he moves to Jesus and he says now look at what Jesus has done. Just as Adam brought in a whole age where people died even though there was no law, specific commands, Jesus has brought even more life. And so he first does this synchronic assessment, then he does that synchronic assessment of Jesus and what he had done, and then he compares the two to make the point that Jesus is greater than Adam was, and so, that salvation is greater than the death that Adam brought. So that's two synchronics connected to each other, two synchronic assessments connected by diachronic assessment.

**Student:** Okay, let me see if I understand this, because it's starting to be a little bit clearer for me. Another example — I'm thinking of Jesus' response when he was questioned about divorce — it seems like two different situations. But his first response was the two are created one...

**Dr. Pratt:** Two become one flesh.

**Student:** Two become one flesh, and that is a synchronic assessment.

**Dr. Pratt:** Before sin.

**Student:** Before sin.

**Dr. Pratt:** Right, because he says it was not so from the beginning. So he's saying now at that beginning that's not the way things worked.

**Student:** Okay, but later on because of their sin, because of their hardness of heart, Moses allowed them. So he makes a synchronic assessment, their hardness of heart is a synchronic assessment, but the transition between the two, that's a diachronic change.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's diachronic. And how do you take what was true before the fall into sin — the two shall become one flesh, no permission for divorce, no commands for divorce, no policies for divorce. And then you come up to Moses who's the spokesperson of the same God who said this in the beginning, and he gives a policy for divorce. And so Jesus says, okay, you've got this situation — there was no sin, it was not fallen, it was not so from the beginning — and then you have this situation where the people's hearts are hardened, and so he takes that data and works it together into a synchronic synthesis, and he says that's the reason God gave that command because you're so hardened. And then he compares the two and decides, well, what Moses was giving them as policy of divorce was not God's ideal. That's God's ideal over here with Adam and Eve. But this he gave by permission. He was not endorsing it. He was permitting it because of the hardness of their hearts. Now a lot of Christians don't like that idea that God would do that kind of thing — give permission for something that he really didn't like, but he does do that a lot in the Bible. And that would be two synchronic assessments with this diachronic trace between them, comparing the two ages.

### **Question 5: Why does the theology of the Bible change?**

**Student:** So given God's immutability, why does theology change?

**Dr. Pratt:** Do you mean our theology? It changes because we're always trying to get closer to the Bible, but I think maybe the more basic question is why does the theology of the Bible change? I mean, it's not making mistakes like we do. I mean, we know why we have to keep reforming our theology is because we're not perfect, but we believe that the Bible's inspired. So if God is inspiring the Bible and he is unchanging, why does the theology of the Bible change like we've said here from the

days of Adam to the days of Jesus and the sorts of different settings that we've already talked about?

I think we just have to realize a couple of things, and the first thing is that when we say God is unchanging, sometimes we overestimate what we mean by that. When we say he is immutable, systematic theologians have worked this out rather carefully, and it doesn't mean that God is unchanging in every imaginable way. It doesn't mean that. It means basically that he's unchanging in his character, he's unchanging in his covenant promises, and he unchanging in his eternal decrees. And that does not mean, however, that God does not say to one person one time pick up the pail of water, and the next person another time, put down the pail of water. That doesn't mean that God's character has changed. It doesn't mean his eternal decree has changed. It doesn't mean his covenant promises have changed. That's really important because I think that sometimes people get the idea, and it's probably the influence of Hellenism and things in the background of who we are, that immutability, divine immutability, means that it's impossible for him to say different things at different times or expect different things at different times from his people, or reveal things that are different at one time than another. And that is not the case. For that to be true, you have to have a God other than the God of the Bible.

So what we're saying here is that theology in the Bible changes primarily I think because God does not reveal everything about himself and his will for his people all at once. Don't ask me why he did this, but what he decided to do was to sort of pull this thing back layer by layer by layer. Now I think we could speculate as to why, but honestly, I think the only answer is because he decided that would glorify him the most, to keep certain things secret and not reveal them until later. And so he did that, and as a result of him revealing more of himself and his will, every time he does that, every time he opens up or pours a little more information in, or a few more commands in, those kinds of things, they mix in with what's already there, with what's already been revealed and has a changing or transformational effect on what God had told people prior to that time, what was in effect at that time. He pours in, things change.

Well, this is the analogy the apostle Paul uses. Just like parents when they teach their children, they'll teach them certain things, and then as they go a little further in maturity, they'll tell them a little more. Well that little more isn't just added on like a layer on top of a layer, it actually mixes into what was there already, and the child has to learn how to incorporate it into what was already a part of the belief system that the parent had given.

**Student:** I see. So then what are the limits to the changes that are occurring in the theology of the Bible?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well the non-answer answer is whatever the Bible does. Those are the limits. In other words, we may have preconceptions of what the limits are that find themselves dashed to the ground when you look at the Bible itself. I mean, just to



give you an example, it would be very difficult for us to have guessed that the God who commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son would then say that anyone who sacrifices their children later in the law of Moses deserves to die. Now that would not have been something we would have expected. It would be something that would surprise us for the most part, I think. But that's exactly what he does. It would not be expected, I think, to hear that God has all these rules and regulations for sacrifice this animal, sacrifice that animal, do this ritual or this, do this ritual for that, and if you don't do that, then curses are going to come upon you, and then find that later in the New Testament the same God is saying if you do those rituals, I'll curse you. That would surprise us.

But apart from just saying that the limits are what the Bible tells us, and don't be too hung up on specifics until you look at the Bible and discover what it does, I think we could say a couple of other things that are very important. All of God's revelations are true to his immutable character, they're true to his eternal decree, they're true to his covenant promises that will not be broken. That's one thing we can say. And sometimes that knowledge, knowing that, helps us understand revelations as they are displayed diachronically, because you could get the impression that God is willy-nilly sort of changing who he is. I had a Sunday school teacher that told me that, that God in the Old Testament is mean and God in the New Testament is nice, and she said, "Boys and girls, aren't you glad that you live in the New Testament?" And of course we were glad because we didn't want a mean God, we wanted a nice God. But she was wrong about that. God didn't change who he was from one to the other. And so knowing that his character doesn't change, his covenant promises don't change, and that his eternal decree doesn't change, helps limit and guide us as we assess the nature of diachronic transformations of theology.

And I think there's another thing that we can say. Because God doesn't lie and he cannot deny himself, his commands in one situation do not contradict his commands, his expectations, the revelations of fact that he gives in another situation. This is a problem because theologians, especially biblical scholars, tend to use the word contradict in a very non-technical way. If something looks like it's saying something different than what was said before, then they say, "Ah! You see? A contradiction." I mean even evangelicals are doing this now, unfortunately, that God contradicts himself in later revelation from what he gave in earlier revelation. But we have to remember that a contradiction is when you say that something can be and not be in the same time and in the same sense. We might even add the word place, saying time, place, and sense. So when you find for example that in the book of Ezra the people are called to divorce their pagan wives, but you find in the book of Esther that Esther is a heroine because she marries a pagan. Now this is about the same time, but it's in a different place. She's over in Susa and they're in the Promised Land. And there's a different sense also, because the reason behind the commands in the Promised Land with Ezra and Nehemiah was because the people of God were being corrupted by these intermarriages, and Esther's intermarriage with a pagan was designed to actually save the people of God. So you have all kinds of differences.

So it's not a bold, logical contradiction, nor is it a bold, logical contradiction to say that God commanded that we sacrifice animals in the Old Testament, but now we'd better not do that anymore. That's not a contradiction either, because the command for sacrificing animals was designed by God as a temporary measure for the place and the condition of the people of God at that time, and that's what his later revelation tells us. And so the Bible's commands and information don't contradict each other just because they're different. Things can be different, things can grow, things can develop without being contradictory of each other, and that is a very important thing. So the character of God and the importance of this idea that the Bible itself limits how much change we should expect, but also that we know that God will not lie, he will not contradict himself in that sense.

### **Question 6:** **How do we reconcile God's sovereignty with theological development in the Bible?**

**Student:** Now Richard, if God is sovereign, how do we reconcile that with development in theology in the Bible?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, this gets us into a whole mess of issues that Christians disagree over. Let's start there. Let's just say, if you can think about it this way: There are Christians, and by that I mean people who do genuinely follow Christ, and they differ on the sovereignty of God over history and his control over history and how they work that all out. It ranges very broadly from what's called today "open theism" which in its extreme forms actually says that God doesn't know what's going to happen next, and so he's always reacting just as much as a human being might react to something. That would be an extreme form of open theism but it's out there. The other I guess extreme would be something like what we would call fatalism or a hyper-Calvinism that says that God is not actually involved in historical events. He's just fixed everything and just sits there and sort of watches it happen, and if he is involved, it's only the appearance of involvement, so there's no genuine involvement. And then you have everything in the middle, everything spread out this way, some tending more toward this side, some tending more toward that side. But let me just say it this way: No matter where a person comes down on how much of history is up to God's eternal plan or how much of it is still open under God's sovereignty, things like that, it's really a non-issue for us.

Now I personally believe God has planned everything, everything right down to the last detail; that's what I believe. And so then the question does come up, well if he planned it all and if he is doing everything the way he wanted it to be done, then why do things change? Why does theology change? And the answer for that is basically because God does not just simply have a plan for all of creation, but God is genuinely and really involved with his creation. It's not a fiction. And this is one of the problems that people in my branch of the church have. They think that somehow

when the Bible talks about God answering prayer or God doing this and moving forward that way, and going this way, then going that way, that this is all a fiction. Sort of like the shadows on Plato's cave wall. It's not real. Well, that's not true. It's true that God is involved in history in his providence that much, that he actually interacts with events and reacts to events. That's what the Bible teaches. It's even what my own branch of the church teaches. And so there's a lot more in common in the middle ground among these different views than people often suspect. So I think what we have to do is just everyone needs to affirm that the Bible does not just say that God is sovereign over everything and in control of everything in one way or another, which I think almost all Christians would say except for the extremes, but we also have to say that God is genuinely and really involved in the process of history as well, and the difference there is often put in terms of the first being his eternal decrees and the other being his providence. That's more or less a traditional way of distinguishing those. The eternal decrees are his sovereign control and his sovereign plan for everything, but his providence is his real and genuine, authentic involvement in history, down into the details of history.

And when we think of God having those kinds of involvements, you can categorize the kinds of developments that start taking place. You can be sure, for example, that every theological development that takes place in the Bible has an endpoint in mind. God had a plan for it, he's pushing things in that direction, in providence; he's moving things in that direction. Now why he moves this way, why he moves that way, why he does this, why he does that, we can't always be sure. So many of those things are secret. But sometimes we can make sense of it. God accommodates himself and his revelation to situations, and you look at them and you say, well that makes sense. I mean, we mentioned in the video that when God revealed himself to Moses during the wilderness wanderings, he told them build a tabernacle. And then later on when David takes Jerusalem and Solomon is established as the king, then God says forget the tabernacle, I want a permanent structure now. Well, that makes perfectly good sense to us. Even we can understand why that would be the case, because if God had said build a temple on Mt. Sinai, now go to Jerusalem, we'd have been in trouble, right? The temple would have been back there and we'd be going this way. Why would we want to leave the temple? So the tabernacle had to travel with them, and so that makes sense. Now once they're settled and the capital city is established and the people of God are centered around that capital city with a monarch and that sort of thing, it makes sense that he would then have a temple.

Sometimes the transformations that occur, the developments make sense even to us. Sometimes, however, they don't make a lot of sense to us. They almost seem — they're not actually, but seem — arbitrary. I think a great example of that is when you think about the holiness code in the book of Leviticus. You look at that and what you realize if you compare what Israel believed was holy and clean and unclean, those kinds of terms, and you can compare it now with Canaanite religions of various sorts — the worship of Baal and that sort of thing at Ugarit — when you compare the ceremonies, sometimes Israel's ceremonies are very much like the ceremonies of the pagans around them. So their ideas of what's holy and their ideas of what's clean and

acceptable to God and what's not acceptable to God are very much like their pagan neighbors. And then, for no obvious reason, the opposite is true, that sometimes what's considered clean and holy or unclean is the opposite of what the people around them believed.

I'm sure you've seen the iconography of for example Babylonian and Assyrian and Egyptian kings, and many of them had beards, of course, but they were very well-trimmed beards. Now in Israel, to square off your beard like an Assyrian was considered an abomination. That's why you see many orthodox Jews today with beards that are "out here." It's because you don't trim it like that. Why? Because it makes you look like a pagan. But then on the other hand, who was it that helped Solomon build the temple? Do you remember his name? Starts with an "H."

**Student: Hiram**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. And what nationality was he?

**Student: Phoenician.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Phoenician. And when you compare the structure of the temple in Jerusalem with the temples that we know from Phoenicia and other parts, you can see the similarities. In fact, the tabernacle of Baal at Ugarit had dolphin skins and latticework just like the tabernacle of Yahweh did. And so when you look at this, there's just no rhyme or reason for this. This is a secret thing that belongs to God, and Israel had to accept that certain things were going to be acceptable and certain things weren't, and you just did it because that's the way God said to do it, plain and simple.

### Question 7:

**Do theological developments ever occur simply because God changes his mind?**

**Student:** So regarding the developments in theology, in some cases the developments make sense. In other cases we can't really make sense out of it. Is it safe to say — I don't know if I want to say this, but is God just sovereignly changing his mind on these things? Or can we assume that there is a purpose in everything?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well changing mind is a slippery expression among Christians. There are Bible verses like Numbers 23:19 that says he does not change or repent. And then there are other Bible verses that say he does repent, using the same Hebrew word "*nacham*", to change, or to relent, to change his mind. And so it all depends on what you mean by change his mind. Now, where I am believing that God is sovereign over everything and that he has a plan for everything, we believe — people in my tradition believe — that God does not change his plan. So in that sense, he doesn't change his mind. But does he change in his providence? In other words, does he say one thing

and then say, okay, I won't do that. I'll do this instead? The answer is yes, all of the time. A great example of course is that famous passage in Exodus 32 where God says get out of the way, I'm going to destroy these people, they're stiff-necked, and I'll just make my nation out of you, Moses. And Moses prays and then verse 14 says, "And he relented from what he had" — as some translations put it — "planned to do", or "*asher hara'ah*", there meaning that he had thought about doing. And that's not talking about his eternal plan. That's talking about his involvement in history, his providence.

So you do have the situations where you can understand why God does certain things like the tabernacle to the temple; you have situations where you sort of shake your head and go, well, okay, I'll just have to accept that he's God, I'm not, like the Israelites did with the clean and unclean and holy regulations. And then you have situations — now this is the really important one in my opinion because it's the one that people often forget about. You have situations where the theology of the Bible changes as God responds to the actions of people. Now if you think about that for just a minute, that's pretty important. The classic example of course is the example of Esther when God says if you step up and do your job then great, but if you don't, don't worry, God will just get someone else. In other words, the theology changes; it changes from Esther's the chosen one to do all of the rescuing of Israel to now we'll get someone else — "Thank you Esther, now you're out of the picture."

Another situation would be where God promises or offers to Israel all these wonderful, wonderful blessings that the house of David will reign and spread all over the world, and then by the time you get to the prophets you discover they have sinned so much and they refuse to repent of their sins so much that God decides to send them into exile. And at first, Jeremiah chapter 25 and 29 says that he's going to send them into exile for seventy years. But then Daniel chapter 9 says it's not just going to be seventy years, it's going to be seven times seventy years. And so you have all that kind of thing happening, because in his providence — not in his eternal plan, but in his providence — God actually genuinely does respond to people. When Jesus looked at Jerusalem in Matthew and he said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not", he is responding to the actions of the people of Jerusalem. And however you work that out with the sovereignty of God, which is what God is onto this, it's true that Jesus was offering Jerusalem his salvation, but because they rejected him, the program changed. And that's the way it is in the Bible through and through, because God genuinely is involved in providence. Without that, then diachronic transformation of theology in the Bible doesn't make any sense, because if God is not deeply involved in the course of history — which he is in the Bible — if he were not involved in the course of history, then it doesn't make sense for the theology of the Bible to be shifting one way and then shifting another as it moves toward that final goal that God's established.

### Question 8:

#### Do all biblical theologians divide the Bible according to covenants?

**Student:** So Richard, do all biblical theologians divide the Bible the same way according to covenant?

**Dr. Pratt:** No. Now, every biblical theologian that I know of understands that there's an epochal quality to Bible history. In other words, periods of time tend to batch together as you go through the Bible, but they do it in different ways. Now, I emphasize covenant in large part because I believe that's what the Bible emphasizes, and I think it fits with the overarching destiny and the overarching coherence of the whole Bible. But you actually could divide the Bible any number of ways, into any number of periods. And we know that this is true because Bible writers themselves do. You know, I could ask you the question this way: How many ways can you slice a pie? And the answer is...?

**Student:** It depends on the pie.

**Dr. Pratt:** It depends on the size of the pie I guess, or how thin your knife is. But the answer in theory is every way you can possibly imagine, right? And that's the way it is with the history of the Bible. It's convenient to use covenants and I think very helpful to use covenants for many tasks but not for every task. So let me just give you the example of Peter and Paul. The apostle Paul divided the history of the Bible into two main periods much like most rabbis did in his day. He divided the history of the Bible between this age and the age to come, and by that he meant the time before Messiah and the time after Messiah. So history for him is in two stages. You can find that in Ephesians 1 and all through his writings.

Peter, however, in 2 Peter 3 divides the history of the Bible into three periods. He talks about that world before Noah's flood, then he talks about the present heavens and earth between Noah and now that we live in today, and then he talks about the new creation that's to come. So here are two apostles dividing the history of the Bible into different periods of time, or different epochal developments. And the fact that apostles are doing this with variety lets us know that we can do it with variety.

Now the question would be, so then how do you decide if one approach, one way of chopping up the pie, is better than another? And the answer in many respects is it all depends on what you're going after and what your goal is. It's not as if there is one way to do it that's appropriate for every goal that you might have as a teacher or as a pastor or as someone just studying the Bible on your own. Rather, it depends on what you're trying to emphasize and what you're trying to get out of the Bible as to how you chop it up into various periods of time. Peter, for example, believed that Noah was very important in the history of the Bible. And oddly enough, Paul never even mentions Noah. So Peter's propensity toward Noah made him have this threefold

approach to the history of the Bible. Paul just relied on his rabbinic tradition and stuck with the two ages.

And so when we think about how to divide the Bible into epochs, you're not free to do just whatever you want, but rather you're looking for periods of time that have enough continuity, enough stability that you can say, okay, this period of time works together, and then this period of time works together, and then this period of time. But people will go at that in different ways, and I think covenant works best because covenants are the ways in which God administers his kingdom coming to this planet, which I think is the theme of the whole Bible.

### Question 9:

**Besides matching epochs to covenants, how else do biblical theologians divide the Bible?**

**Student:** Now can you give us other examples of other ways that biblical theologians divide?

**Dr. Pratt:** A number of critical biblical theologians divide the history of the Bible according to archeological categories: Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Early Iron. They'll use those kinds of categories and they'll say, well, this was the religion of Israel in the Middle Bronze period, this was Israel's religion in the Late Bronze, this is Israel's religion in the early Iron Age, and so on and so on. And there's nothing utterly wrong with that, but it probably isn't biblical enough in that sense, because I don't think Bible people thought in terms of the great transitions of human civilization occurring with metallurgy and things like that. So I think there are more dramatic shifts that occur in Bible history than what an archeologist might give as a scheme or a grid for dividing up the Bible.

Others will divide according to other criteria that they have. One well-known biblical theologian sees the theme of the Bible as promise, the promise of God. In my opinion, that's a fine theme to be emphasizing, but it's not "the" theme of the Bible, not the comprehensive theme of the Bible. But if you believe it is, as he does, then what you're going to do is you're going to look for the promises of God, and then you tend to cut the Bible at the stages where those promises are given. And so it all depends on the criteria you use to segment history out, and it will have an effect on the way you understand the chronological developments, the diachronological developments, and we just have to be aware of that. I do propose that covenant is the best way to do it. I think it's more indigenous to the Bible itself and to the ancient Near East and those sorts of things. And I think when Jesus comes announcing that he and his religion is the religion of the new covenant, I think that that should give us a clue as to how we should be thinking about the Bible's history, too. But there's no absolutely correct way to do it.

### Question 10: Why did God establish so many covenants?

**Student:** Richard, why did God establish so many covenants in biblical history?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yes, you would think that if you got it right the first time, that's all he would need to do, right? So, why so many? That's a good question. I think that once again the way God made covenants and established covenants in Bible history has a lot to do with this providential interaction that God has. Sometimes we can make sense of it, sometimes we can't. Sometimes it involves him responding to situations and that sort of thing. But I think the covenants of the Bible really do unfold in a way that we can understand. I don't think it's as difficult sometimes as people want to think of it.

Now traditional covenant theology is different than the kind of thing we're talking about now. Traditional covenant theology speaks of two covenants, the covenant of works with Adam before the fall, and then the covenant of grace that extended from the fall all the way to Christ and beyond to the second coming. That's not what we're talking about here. That's another whole way of approaching the theme of covenant. But what we're talking about is where the Bible actually gives us good evidence that there is a covenant being made between God and people at this point and at that point and at that point and at that point, and those points in biblical history are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Christ. Did I miss any? I don't think so. I think I got them all. Now what happens in each one of those is they are very similar to each other in many ways, but each one of them is also different from each other, because they have different emphases that are appropriate for what's going on at that time. That's the critical thing. God is not bringing up these covenant policies and covenant promises and those sorts of things willy-nilly. He's doing it as he's involved in history where it is at the time.

And so what you find is in the first three chapters of Genesis that the covenant that God makes with Adam emphasizes certain kinds of things, certain very basic things. I call it the covenant of foundations for that reason. That's just my term, but they're very basic. What is the world? What's a human being? What role do these things have with each other in service to God? I mean, it's so fundamental that that's the foundational covenant, as it were, with humanity.

Now the next big covenant of course is with Noah, and the thing that God emphasizes there is the way that nature is going to be stable — “seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease” — and that he's not going to destroy the world again with a flood every time things get bad. Well why did he do that? Well because he had just destroyed the world by a flood when things got bad. And he says I realize that people are sinful from the moment that they're born, and so if we're going to make this work, we're going to have to be patient. I'm creating this



sphere of nature that's going to be stable so you can make mistakes and get up and go at it again, and make a mistake and get up and go at it again. And so he promises and emphasizes the stability of nature in Noah's covenant.

But then in Abraham's covenant, you have a major shift that happens, because it's at that time that God is choosing the nation of Israel to be his leading people, the ones who are going to lead the rest of humanity into the blessings of God, and so with Abraham, he's focusing on what's so special about Israel. What are they going to get out of this. What are their responsibilities in this. And so early on, right then when God chooses Abraham, the covenant is appropriate for that action of God, establishing what this line of humanity is going to do and what its role is in the whole history of humanity. And we can see it played out even in our own day that Abraham's children are still very central in the whole history of humanity.

You move on to Moses, well, they're becoming a nation. They've left Egypt and there's a lot of them, and they're getting ready to set up a nation in their promised land, so naturally Moses' covenant is going to emphasize the laws of the nation, the laws that govern life among the people of God. And then as Israel grows into a legitimate, bona fide kingdom with a king and those kinds of things and the stability of kingdom is what is the concern, then God's covenant with David establishes his family as the permanent dynasty that will lead the rest of humanity in service to God in the future.

And then with Christ, of course Christ comes to remedy all sin, all failure, and he comes to establish the kingdom of God on earth perfectly and completely, and that's what that last covenant is about, the new covenant that the prophets predicted. So that's why God has so many. It's because his plan is unfolding piece by piece, bit by bit, moving toward that final goal, but at each step along the way, different direction needs to be taken, different administrations, different things need to be emphasized. And I think that is why he has so many rather than just one that he establishes forever.

### **Question 11:** **What does the multiplicity of covenants teach us about God's character?**

**Student:** So Richard, what does this multiplicity of covenant teach us about the character of God?

**Dr. Pratt:** I think it teaches us a lot of things. It teaches us that God is intending to fulfill his purposes, and he will do so, and that he moves history toward an end, a goal, an *eschaton*, and this is a reflection of God's character, that God is a self-glorifying God, and the way he is going to glorify himself on the earth is by fulfilling his purposes for the earth, and this he administers by means of covenants. I think it also says to us that God is very patient, that he works with people where they are; he

does not treat the Israelites as if they lived in the New Testament period because they didn't. He treats them as they were needing at that time, and he's very wise in the way he unveils these things, telling Abraham what's going to be in the future, then Moses' laws, and then David as king. Of course those things are anticipated, but they're not built out and brought out fully. So I think we can learn the patience of God.

I think we can learn his love, his covenant love for his people. God has a people in this world that he's redeemed, and he's going to ensure that they're eternal destiny of glory will occur, and the way he does that is by making these covenants work out step by step by step by step for the final purpose of the great reward for those that are his. So I think we can learn a lot about the character of God if we will take the time to look at covenants as his appropriate activity and his appropriate revelation for a particular time that then moves to another time and then moves to another time. So it's a wonderful thing. Covenants in the Bible really are very central, and I think they do help us understand the movement of Bible history.

### Question 12:

#### Are there both conditional and unconditional covenants?

**Student:** Richard, I've heard it argued that some covenants are conditional and some covenants are unconditional. Could you explain that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, there are lots of people that say that kind of thing, and we need to address it because in the lesson I'm emphasizing the idea that the covenants really are very similar to each other, at least in terms of their basic dynamics. And if that's correct, then what I'm saying is different from what a lot of people have said — not everyone, but a lot of people — have said and then what some people are even saying today. Now people in the past — I just have to put it this way — before 1950 or so when people talked about covenants, more or less their views of covenants were not very well informed from the world of the Bible, the world of the Old Testament.

After the 1950s and the 60s and 70s, discoveries were made of different kinds of archeological texts, ancient texts, Babylonian, Hittite, Assyrian texts, things like that, where archeologists were discovering that there were similarities between Bible covenants and these different ancient texts from these different cultures. And early on, when those discoveries were made and people began to decipher them, they started distinguishing between two different types of ancient Near Eastern texts. On the one side, they talked about what they called suzerain-vassal treaties, which means basically an imperial treaty with a subordinate, and they described those suzerain-vassal treaties correctly by saying that they were very conditional, that blessings were offered to people, but if they disobeyed or rebelled against their emperor, well, then they wouldn't get those blessings, they'd get very serious curses.

At the same time, in the early stages of deciphering those documents, another group was discovered and identified that are often called royal land grants, royal grants shall we say because there were different kinds of grants that were made. Now in the early analyses of these royal grants, the assumption was that there were no conditions attached. The suzerain-vassal treaties, yes, they had conditions, but the royal grants had no conditions. This was the way people thought probably about until 1989 or so. And the reason for this was because, unfortunately, sometimes people who are archeologists and even theologians, sometimes lose common sense when they read the Bible and when they study the ancient Near East. Okay? So imagine this situation. Imagine a king, an emperor grants some property to someone and that person rebels against the king who had given him that property. What do you think the king would do?

**Student:** He's going back. He's getting his property back.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. He gets his property back as well as kill the man, and those sorts of things, right? Now, does that have to be written down in a document for you to know that that's true?

**Student:** The king is supreme.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right, king is supreme. So these grants from the kings and from superiors to their inferiors often do not have explicit conditions. Now some of them do. Some of them actually have conditions attached to them, but often they don't because they're grandiose, they're wonderful, they're magnificent — “Oh, you're such a good man, you've helped me in so many ways, and I'll give you this land for you and for your children and for their children and their children.” But you'd better believe that if the subordinate rebels against the great king, the great king is going to say, “Did I say forever? Forget that, it's my land now.”

**Student:** So you're saying the conditions are implied?

**Dr. Pratt:** Conditions are implied simply because of the relationship between the king and his subject. When you go to a marriage, when the couple make their vows and those sorts of things, you know, “to have and to hold from this day forward, till death do us part”, those kinds of things, they don't stick in all the conditions that are implied in the wedding ceremony. They don't stand up there and say to each other — maybe some people do this but normally this is not what happens — they don't say, “Now I'll do all that so long as you are faithful to me,” or “so long as you take care of all these things that you're supposed to take care of. And if you don't, then forget this marriage, we're going to get a divorce.” You don't do that because it's not appropriate for the celebrative feeling of what's going on at that time. That's the way royal grants were. You didn't emphasize all the things that might ruin the association, ruin the grant and make it reversible, because that wasn't the nature of the gift.

Alright now, the suzerain-vassal treaties were of that nature. They were legal documents between one nation and another spelling out the responsibilities of each side. Now when people early on made this sharp distinction between royal grants and suzerain-vassal treaties, they started associating those two kinds of documents with the covenants of the Bible. And so what they did was they started looking at the covenants of the Bible and they would say — in different ways because there was not any agreement on exactly how to do this — well, these covenants look like a suzerain-vassal treaty, but these Bible covenants look like a royal grant. And so of course early on, again, these are conditional, and these are unconditional.

And again that's why I say we're losing common sense again, because you're dealing with God here, and you're dealing with the servants of God, and when God says I'm going to do this for you, he doesn't have to say unless, unless, unless, unless because that's implied in the very relationship that we have with God. I often think about it this way. I mean, imagine you have a son who is 13 years old, and it's the first day you're going to take him to the shopping mall, and you're going to let him go on his own. And you say to him, "Okay, son, have a great time," and he gets out of the car and he goes into the mall. He's all alone with his friends, and you get a call from the police an hour later saying your son's at the police station because he's been shoplifting. And you go pick up your son and you say, "Son, what were you thinking?" And he looks at you and he says, "Well Dad, you told me to have a good time. I was only doing what you told me to do." Now what would you say to him?

**Student:** You're out of your mind.

**Dr. Pratt:** You're out of your mind, yeah. Give me a little more information of what you might say. You have a son, what would you say to him?

**Student:** I would tell him he understood that there were bounds to "have a good time."

**Dr. Pratt:** "You know that I do not mean shoplifting when I said have a good time," right? That's the way it is with covenants. Covenants don't float in midair without any context. Agreements between God and people, the solemn organization of rules and regulations, do not float in the air. We know from the rest of Scripture that God expects his people to live in certain ways, and if they don't, there are going to be consequences. And just like you when you let your son out at the mall and you said, "Have a good time," you didn't have to tell him, "but don't you shoplift." God doesn't have to say all the "buts" either, all the "unless, unless, unless, unless" every time he says anything. You don't have to repeat everything every time you talk to your child. If you do, you'll never say anything because there's a lot to repeat. Well, the same thing is true with biblical covenants. They cannot and do not repeat all the conditions that have already been set up by prior revelation from God to his people.

So when you start thinking about the covenants of the Bible, rather than saying well these are like the suzerain-vassal treaties and these are like the royal grants,

conditional and unconditional, what we need to do is use a little Bible common sense here and realize that it's all from God, and it's all involving inferiors of God, his servants, and that sets up a basic, fundamental relationship that is true whether a particular Bible chapter or a particular biblical passage says anything about conditions or not. See, that's very important, because there is always a conditionality to any relationship that we have with the Creator of the universe. He expects us to live in certain ways and to respond in certain ways to his mercy and to his grace, and if you don't, then you're proving the true condition of your heart and you're not going to be receiving his blessings. It's really that simple. Even Jesus says that: You have to believe in me, and you have to follow me, and you have to take up your cross and follow me, or just sit back and forget this; you have to count the cost if you're going to follow me. Well see, that's a condition that Jesus is putting on his followers. And so this is the way biblical religion works, and the covenants don't violate that. So I just think it's wrong to say that certain covenants are conditional and others are unconditional.

### Question 13:

#### Are some covenants more conditional than others?

**Student:** So Richard, you are saying that there are no sharp distinctions between the covenants in the Bible. Would you say some are more conditional than others are?

**Dr. Pratt:** I think that's fair to say. I think it's fair to say, at least in this sense, that some of the covenants of the Bible spell out conditions more than others do, yes, that they emphasize conditionality more. For example, I mean, who could disagree that the many, many rules and then punishments for violations of rules that are in the Mosaic Law obviously stress the conditionality of this: If you do these commands then you'll be blessed, if you don't do these commands, you'll be cursed. I mean, there's a great deal of emphasis in the Law of Moses on this. But at the same time when people start talking about, for example, the Abrahamic covenant as unconditional, what they usually refer to is Genesis 15 which is the time when God appeared to Abraham in a dream and God moves as smoke and fire among the pieces of meat, the carnage of the animals that Abraham had cut up, and then God makes covenant with him. Well there's no mention explicitly of any conditions there, and so people say, you see, that's like a royal grant. Well the problem with that is that we don't just have Genesis 15 for Abraham's covenant. God comes back to Abraham in chapter 17 and he says I'm now going to confirm my covenant with you, walk before me and be blameless. And then he says in chapter 17 to Abraham, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants, and here is how you do this — through circumcision. So circumcision, of course, for Israel represented fidelity to the law, commitment to the law. So Abraham's covenant is not just one-sided. It's given in two different places with two different emphases, one on the kindness and mercy and benevolence of God, chapter 15, but chapter 17 emphasizes the responsibility that Abraham and his descendants had in the Abrahamic covenant.

And so even this most unconditional covenant, as many will talk about Abraham's covenant, actually has plenty of conditions. I mean, we don't know for a fact, but we can speculate a bit here and ask the question, what would have happened if God said to Abraham, "Sacrifice your son to me," and Abraham said, "No, I'm not going to do that. I don't love you more than I love my son." There might have been some negative consequences of that. Yes? Fair to say? Okay, so there is conditionality involved even in Abraham's own life much less in Isaac's and Jacob's and Joseph's, prior to Moses. So the relationship that the covenants of 15 and 17, this one covenant that's initiated in 15 and ratified or confirmed in 17 of Genesis, this one covenant has conditionality in it. And the same would be true even of Noah. I mean, there is no emphasis on the conditions of Noah's covenant, but as soon as God tells that he's going to make covenant with Noah — "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" — the next thing he says to Noah is be fruitful and multiple. There's a responsibility Noah has. And he goes on to say that if someone murders someone else, then his life must be taken. And don't eat unclean animals. All these kinds of things go on. And so there are always conditions associated even if they're not emphasized, although some do emphasize conditions more than others.

### **Question 14:** **Is the new covenant conditional?**

**Student:** So now you're saying that all covenants are conditional. That makes me a little nervous. Are we also saying that the new covenant is a conditional covenant?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a great question, because that's what should bother us as Christians, because we're told that the new covenant is the covenant where God will just take care of sin, wipe it out, remove it as far as the east is from the west, and he'll make all things new, and it'll be a wonderful thing, you know, you'll never have any troubles anymore once the new covenant comes into effect. Well, there is a sense of course in which then the new covenant represents a special cataclysmic intervention of God after Israelites exile that will bring about the rectifying of all evil. It will bring about the redemption of all of creation; all of God's people will enjoy the creation forever with him and honor him and those sorts of things. And it is secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus fulfilled every condition that could ever be laid on humanity for the reward of eternal life, and the new covenant draws our attention to him and says if you trust in him and you have saving faith in him, you will enjoy the benefits of the covenant forever, the new covenant which is the culmination of them all.

So having said that, there's this unconditionality that's associated with the new covenant, let me back up and say the same kind of thing is true for the other covenants. Everything that's talked about at the various covenants of the Bible had

this unconditional quality that God is going to bring about certain things through this covenant relationship. For example, he established Adam and Eve as his image, he was going to fill up the whole world and bring the kingdom of God to the planet. Well, that did not fail even though sin occurred and certain descendants of Adam and Eve are out of the picture, it will not fail, because the seed of the woman will have victory over the seed of the serpent. God did a similar thing in Abraham's day. He made all these big promises to Israel. Well, that will not fail. In one way or another, God was going to bring that about. But now the specific descendants of Abraham, now that's another story, whether they get to participate or not. The same thing with the kingdom of David and his dynastic promise. Yes, the house of David will reign forever over all the earth and will never fail to be so, but that had nothing to say about the specific individual sons of David, many of whom were not the best kings in the world and did not suffer inappropriately for their crimes.

And so while we would say that there is this unconditional quality that every covenant will move history forward to the next step, to the next step, here's Jesus' covenant, the last step of history. So yes, he takes us without fail to the last step of history. But now here's the question. Has the new covenant come in its fullness yet?

**Student: No, not until the consummation of....**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right, not until the new heavens and new earth. So I can ask you right now — let's assume that all three of us are true Christians and we really have given our hearts to Christ and we really are exercising saving faith in him — have our sins been forgiven?

**Students: Yes.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Why then do you pray for forgiveness of your sins every day?

**Student: I'm not sure.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, the Bible tells you to for one thing. Right? So why do we do that? Well it's because, yes, our sins have been forgiven, but we're now living life prior to the final open vindication when Jesus comes back, and the final judgment has not been rendered yet. So we must continue to live in this sort of in-between time where the new covenant has started but it has not been completed. You won't be confessing sins in the new heavens and new earth because you won't do any. And the new covenant promises that you won't have anyone who will have to teach you or tell you to know the Lord because they will all know me from the least to the greatest, in Jeremiah 31.

And so there is this conditionality in the New Testament faith, the new covenant faith, not that people can lose true salvation that's given to them by Christ, but that they can demonstrate by their lives that they have not had saving faith. And that's why the New Testament constantly tells Christians and people in the visible church, be

careful, watch our what you do — “Do not be mocked, God is not deceived; whatever a man sows, that he shall also reap” in the book of Galatians, which is supposedly the most unconditional book in the New Testament, right? There it is: “Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows he shall also reap.” And so if you sow to the flesh, you will reap destruction. If you sow to the spirit, you will reap eternal life. Well that’s conditionality. It sounds like Moses, blessing and cursing, because it is like Moses, blessing and cursing in the new covenant. But what this assumes is that people who have saving faith in Christ, receive the Holy Spirit, and they are justified by God in the heavenly court, they receive the Holy Spirit, they are sealed by the Holy Spirit and kept until the day of judgment, kept safe. But there are lots of people who join into this who are not justified and who are not sealed by Holy Spirit, and they come out in the process. They come out in the wash as it were.

My favorite verse, I guess, in the New Testament, many times anyway in this regard is 1 John 2:19: “They went out from us because they were not of us; if they had been of us, they would not have gone out from us. But they went out from us so it might be clear that they were not of us.” There’s a lot of doubletalk there, but you understand the idea. People look like, act like, talk like they’re Christians, and then suddenly they no longer do, and they leave the faith. What does this mean? It means that they never really were of us, because if they had been, they would have stayed with us. But they went out from us to demonstrate that they were not of us. That’s the conditionality of the new covenant. And until Jesus comes back and fixes all things and brings the final state of all things, we will continue to have that kind conditionality in our covenant life with God even in the new covenant.

### Question 15:

#### How do we fulfill our covenant obligations under the new covenant?

**Student:** So then how do we as believers fulfill our covenant obligations under the new covenant?

**Dr. Pratt:** By sincerely giving ourselves in trust and devotion to Christ; that’s the first thing, because it’s not a matter of external works primarily. It’s a matter of the mouth and of the heart. Remember how Paul says that in Romans 10? You confess with your mouth, you believe in your heart. Well, he gets that idea of loyalty to God being in the mouth and the heart from Deuteronomy chapter 30. He’s quoting Deuteronomy 30 when he says that. So he’s saying my new covenant faith corresponds to the mosaic covenant faith. And so it’s not fundamentally different. Loyalty to God is not perfection. Loyalty to God is a matter of your confessing of your sins and confessing of the truth of God, and it is a matter of your heart commitment. Nobody is perfect in this life, but when the Holy Spirit indwells someone, their hearts are given over to loyalty to God, and though they will fail and go up and down, deep within their souls there’s a love and a commitment to Christ that does not die.



And so we fulfill our obligations to covenant, the conditions of the new covenant, by our basic trust and dependence and love for Christ, but then as we grow in Christ and as Holy Spirit sanctifies us, we bear the fruit of the Spirit. When we are walking by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit, then good fruit comes from this. Some people do better at that than others, and sometimes we do better at certain times than at other times, and in certain areas than in other areas. I mean, let's just face it, it's a very complicated, messy thing, but God can see our hearts, and that's what important. And if our hearts are given over to God, then we know that we are his and we are sealed forever.

### Question 16:

#### What is the difference between epochal and topical development?

**Student:** Now when we are looking at the Bible, what is the difference between epochal and topical development?

**Dr. Pratt:** Good. I think that is an important one, because biblical theologians will go both ways when they are doing diachronic assessments of the Bible and how its theology develops. If you can just think of it this way, the epochal approach and topical approaches work together, because all these things always depend on each other, forming webs of multiple reciprocities as you recall. But an epochal approach basically tries to take a period of time as a whole and then compare that to the next or a future period of time as a whole. So you'll talk about what was going on here and how things shifted on the whole this way in this time, and then how things this way, how they developed that way, and you're taking these epochs and the systems as a whole in each epoch and comparing them and their development along the way.

A topical approach, which is a lot easier to do, is basically you take a piece of an epoch and then you trace how that piece correlates to other pieces later on. So you might take the question of worship, that topic, and you see how worship was done in the days of Abraham, how it was done in the days of Moses, you do it in the days of David, you do it in the days of Christ, and you try to explain those diachronic develops rather than the whole package wrapping up and then moving to the whole package which is more of an epochal approach. So both epochal and topical use each other, but it's a narrowing down of the focus.

A lot of times in early biblical theology, the assumption was that the categories of systematic theology identified the topics. And so you'll find even today some biblical theologians who are basically doing systematic theology but they just do it diachronically. So they'll say what's the doctrine of God? And you look at the doctrine of God as it develops through the Bible. What's the doctrine of humanity? And you look at its development. What's the doctrine of the people of God, the church? And you see its development, and so on and so on. So they'll use the same

categories and just trace those through the Bible. That was early on in biblical theology, but again people still do that today in large part because systematic theology has had such an influence on us that it's hard for us to think about the Bible in any other way. Now let's face it, when you think about the Bible, it's different for you to talk much about it without putting God up front. And so just go ahead and do it, but this time trace it this way rather than just taking the final picture, which is what traditional systematics tends to do, the final picture rather than tracing the developments of the themes. So it's an approach that really does work well. There are books that are written on things like the worship of God in the Bible and they'll just trace how it goes. There are whole books written on subjects like the doctrine of humanity and trace the whole thing through. And so it works very well.

### Question 17:

#### What are the dangers of a topical approach to Scripture?

**Student:** It seems that doing a topical approach, though, you would approach the danger of trying to force a topic into a passage, or actually you're missing what a passage is really trying to speak about.

**Dr. Pratt:** You can. You can, and in fact that's the accusation that biblical theologians often have against systematicians. You see, the systematician is bringing foreign ideas — Hellenistic ideas, remember, from Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism, and in the modern ideas — to the Bible. The wrong questions are being asked. Of course you're going to get certain answers if you ask the wrong questions. So the biblical theological movement is designed, at least it's ideally designed, to allow questions that are more indigenous to the Bible itself, that they're not exogenous. They don't come from the outside, but they are within the Bible and they're raised by the Bible's own theological patterns or theological structures.

And that, of course, is the great challenge. How do you do that? What are those patterns? Now, of course you know in this lesson I'm suggesting that as we did in the earlier lesson that one of the patterns we must constantly remind ourselves of is covenant, that every part of the Bible is going to talk about God's benevolence, every part of the Bible is going to talk about human loyalty, and every part of the Bible is going to talk about the consequences of blessings and curses. And just that framework, which I think is a little more indigenous to the times of the Bible as well as the Bible itself rather than Neo-Platonist questions about the relation of body and soul and things like that, I think that will really help us grasp how various topics develop in the Bible. Because if you take an idea like blessing, if you take that as your topic and you keep it within the covenant framework, you will see that different kinds of blessings are offered to different kinds of people through the history of the Bible. And of course the ultimate blessing is eternal life in the new heavens and new earth with Christ, and all these other blessings are just sort of preludes to that. So you could do curses the same way, you could do the kindness of God because he shows

his benevolence in different ways, and you can show the requirements of human loyalty shift and change as each age goes by. And you could even narrow it down to just take a piece of that, just a piece of each one of those ideas of covenant. And so I think there are lots of ways to approach it, and that's where biblical theology is pushing the edge even at this point, and that is to try to organize a theological assessment of the Bible that fits with the Bible itself. And we're trying to do that in this lesson by offering covenant as one of the ways to do that. But it's not the only way.

### Question 18:

#### What is the proper way to use typology in studies of Scripture?

**Student:** Richard, let's talk about typology. It seems like there's a lot of that going on, in some cases out of control. Is there a proper way we can utilize typology when we're studying Scripture?

**Dr. Pratt:** You're right, there is a lot of confusion about typology, in my opinion, because people know that they're supposed to be thinking this way, and there's a lot of emphasis now, especially as people are trying to teach and preach more from the Old Testament, to use typology as the way to get from the Old Testament to the New Testament. And so they will often do what I call "leprechaun Christology." You know how if you catch the leprechaun you get the pot of gold, but you can never really see them. Somebody says, "There's a leprechaun," and you try to catch him, but if you catch him, you get it. And by that I mean simply that the belief is that Jesus is somehow hidden behind walls and trees and bushes in the Old Testament and that you just have to accept that these comes more or less at random. I don't think it's quite as random as people often think it is. I think, rather, that what we are doing when we say that you take it ad hoc here, ad hoc there, you know, this is a type of Christ, that's a type of Christ, so on and so on, that what we're doing is shortcutting the hard work that it may take to understand the theological reasoning behind the typologies, for instance, that we find in the New Testament.

I think you can make sense out of most of them, and we need to work hard at trying to do that, even if we can't. And if we can make sense out of how New Testament writers fought through typologies, then we can find ways to manage, control methods that can guide what we try to do, what we should do. A lot of people are afraid of that because they believe that the New Testament writers were just sort of willy-nilly, spotting Jesus any way they could in the Old Testament, and you don't want to do that now because you're not inspired. They had special insight and were able to do it because they were inspired. I don't think that's the best approach. I can understand that because in the sense that when we don't get what New Testament writers are saying, we still have to accept what they're saying. If we can't make sense of it, you still accept it. But I think we can make sense out of a lot of the moves that they make theologically as they go through these typologies that bring them to Christ, bring Old

Testament things into the Christian faith, and I just think we have to work at it a little bit harder than we normally do.

### Question 19:

#### Is it always necessary to look for types of Christ when we study the Old Testament?

**Student:** So are you saying it is not always necessary to find types of Christ in the Old Testament?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's a good question, because a lot of people will tell you that unless you openly and explicitly in a sermon or in a lesson take an Old Testament theme and then relate it to Christ in some kind of specific typology, that you're not teaching or preaching as a Christian anymore. Okay? I mean, it used to be said in circles where I hung around that you could preach that sermon in a synagogue and not in a Christian church because you don't take it straight to Jesus. Now, here's what I would say in response to that idea: We have to look at the Old Testament as Christians, which means that we take the theological structures of the Old Testament and we realize that they have been transformed or developed by the theology of the New Testament. So we take Old Testament faith and we apply it to ourselves by running it into and running it through and filtering it through the teachings of the New Testament. But the teachings of the New Testament are about more than just Jesus. That's the key here.

It's fascinating, really, in some respects that often when people do what they call Christocentric teaching or Christocentric preaching, that kind of thing, that they will relate Old Testament themes to Jesus or to Christ, but normally they only think about Jesus in his first coming when they do this and typically just as death and sometimes as resurrection, they don't relate it to his birth, his teaching ministry. They don't relate it to his ascension into heaven or his return in glory, or to his body, the church. I mean, the tendency is to be just very pinpoint on the death and resurrection of Jesus rather than realizing all of this New Testament teaching about the birth, life, death, resurrection of Jesus, ascension of Jesus, the church growing as his body filled with the Spirit, and then the return of Christ in the new heavens and earth. All those things are one big package for New Testament writers, and so you do relate Old Testament themes to Christ when you bring them into the context of the whole of the teaching of the New Testament, because all of that comes from him. It is the result of his work and it's the religion that he proclaimed, it's the faith he proclaimed, the end time or eschatological version of Old Testament faith. That's what it was.

And so we have to get out of this mode of thinking that typology is like a single thread that points right to this thing that Jesus did, because often when we do that, we are searching diligently to find some little golden thread that can take us to Jesus, but often rather than being a single thread, it's more like a tidal wave that's moving from

the Old Testament, and it's echoing and building and growing, and it smashes into its climax in the whole of the Christian faith rather than just pinpoint into Jesus. And I think that's a better way to think about it for the most part. But it involves a whole lot more concentration on the theological methods that New Testament writers used as a whole rather than just on pinpoint comparisons.

Let me remind you of one thing we talked about in an earlier lesson. Remember how we said that you had to have word revelation with act revelation, and one reason for that was because acts revelations are radial in their significance? So you can think of an event as fireworks going off, Boom! and it goes in every direction. Well, if you have an Old Testament event and it explodes and it goes in every direction, and here you have a Jesus event, something he did in his life, Boom! and it goes in every direction. Well you put these two things next to each other going in every direction, you're going to have crossover. They're going to hit each other. They're going to cross paths. And some of those paths will be significant, but some of those paths where they cross over will be coincidental. I mean, Jesus wore sandals, so did Moses. Now is Moses wearing sandals a type of Jesus because of this? No, that's just coincidental; people in Moses' day wore sandals, people in Jesus' day wore sandals. Now Moses was taking the people to the Promised Land. Jesus lived in the Promised Land. Now was that coincidental? No. You see, that has heavy theological significance. But because events are radial, they will cross each other in many different ways, and we mustn't focus on the tiny little coincidental details that connect and act as if this is theologically significant when it isn't. The fact Jesus had two hands does not make him the fulfillment of every other person that had two hands. Or that he had a head, or that he drank water, those kinds of things. This is something people do. And so we have to look not for coincidental connections that come from the fact that all events are radial, but rather, we need to look at theologically significant connections.

### **Question 20: Is a type a figure of speech?**

**Student:** Now this is important. You're different categories of typologies. I want to go through each one of these. How is a type a figure of speech to begin with?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, people have approached typologies in different ways. They usually think in terms of types being a comparison of events or sort of objective things, and that's fine because that's true. But in trying to get into this, I thought a good way to deal with it — and it's not the only way to — but a good way to deal with it is to sort of recognize that on a literary level when you're reading a text that's displaying types or talking about the types, that what you have there basically is a figure of speech, a particular kind of figure of speech. The category would be a figure of comparison. Now you know there are lots of those. Metaphors are figures of comparison where you compare one thing to another, a simile is a figure of comparison, an analogy is a

figure of comparison, and so on and so on. Because that's what's being said fundamentally is a type is a comparison of one thing to another.

Now in biblical faith that means usually an earlier thing to a later thing, but nevertheless it's a comparison. And any time you have a figure of comparison, it's just important to realize the way they work, because this gets it right down to the bottom line here, and it really simplifies things if you can just get these categories. You have the thing that is being compared, and then you have the other thing to which it is being compared, and then you have the comparisons of those two things. So if I say the rain is like pennies falling from heaven. Now what are we saying? We're saying here that the real thing we're talking about is the rain. We're comparing it with the pennies but what's the point of comparison? Well one is that they're falling out of the sky, or they're coming from heaven. They're gifts that are good. They're things that can enhance your life. There are all kinds of comparisons that are implied in that comparison between rain and pennies. But now here's what's wonderful about it, and that is that when people talk about figures of comparisons like similes and the like, metaphors and that sort of thing, they don't have to say all three pieces. They don't have to say explicitly the thing, the thing it's being compared to, and the points of comparison. They often expect people to understand those things. And so you don't just bring them all out explicitly.

A figure of speech does this on a very basic, normal level, and I think that that is what is fundamentally going on in a typology in the Bible. They're taking something, let's say from the Old Testament, and they are comparing it to the reality over here of something in the New Testament, and then they are having all these different points of comparison. Now one of the things that Aristotle said about metaphors is that they are inherently deceptive because metaphors are comparing things that are not alike, so you not only have points of comparison that they're like each other, but also differences. Now can you imagine that if you were doing a Bible typology, a biblical typology, you might mention one of those, you might mention two of those, but you don't always have to mention all three. And that's what's important to realize, that a typology is not all that difficult to understand if you realize that what you're doing is you have something in mind, you're comparing it to something else, and you have points of comparison that are either explicit or implied.

So if I were to say to you that the sun shining its light onto the earth is a type of Jesus, what would I be saying? I would be saying that the sun compares to Jesus, and Jesus is the reality that I'm comparing the sun to. So this is the real thing we're interested in learning about; it's not the sun. We're interested in learning about Jesus. So he's the real thing, we're comparing the sun to him, but then you would want to come up with certain kinds of points of comparison. What might some of those be?

**Student:** He gives life.

**Dr. Pratt:** Alright, he gives life like the sun gives life. What else might you say?

**Student: Glory.**

**Dr. Pratt:** He's glorious. Good, that's right. Those kinds of things. And that comparison is not magical because it's part of what we mean when we say God reveals himself in all things. So it isn't surprising then that Simeon says that Jesus is like the rising of the morning sun. This was a common metaphor in the days of the Bible. Every time — not every time, but many times — when kings would talk about their kingdoms coming, a new kingdom coming, a new king comes to the throne — they would compare it to the rising of the sun, that the period before was a period of darkness, now the sun is rising in the rising of the new king. Well, when you have that kind of common metaphorical use, royal metaphor, well, then it's no surprise at all, is it, that someone who believes Jesus is the king bringing the kingdom of God will be compared to the rising of the sun. So you have these kinds of connections that go on all the time in the Bible, and fundamentally they are figures of speech with the three items of the thing that you're concerned with, the thing you're comparing it to, and the points of comparison, similarity and dissimilarity. That's fundamentally what I mean when I say that a type is a figure of speech.

### **Question 21: What are the elements of a type?**

**Student: Now Richard, as it relates to typology, you mentioned that there are different kinds of elements. Can you explain those and talk about them?**

**Dr. Pratt:** Remember when we say that a type is like a typology is like a figure of speech — you've got the thing, got the thing you're comparing it to, and the points of comparison — well, those are three different elements; we could call them, parts of a typology. It won't work without them. Now they don't have to be explicit, but they have to be there at least implicitly. Now it's very traditional for theologians to identify the pieces or the elements of typology in three categories: people/persons, institutions, — and just sort of a generic catchall — events that happen. Now when you say people, what you mean by that is things like God, human beings, angels, or personified animals, things like that. When you say institutions, you mean things like the monarchy, the temple, even significant real estate like the Promised Land, things like that. And when you say events, it would mean things like the opening up of the Red Sea because that's not an institutional thing; it doesn't happen over and over and over again. Or the flood in Noah's day, or a particular war like Jericho, that's not something that's institutionalized, and it's rather just, as it were, a generic event.

Now the idea is that when you look at examples in the New Testament of typologies, what they do is New Testament writers will compare different elements in different ways. They will sometimes compare people to people, sometimes they'll compare events to events, and sometimes institutions to institutions. That's the logical one. That's the one that sort of makes sense to us, okay? So you might say for example

that Melchizedek, who is a person, is a type of Christ, who is a person, so person-to-person? Okay, I've got it. On the other hand, however, you might say that an institution, like the temple, let's say, is a type of the heavenly tabernacle in heaven right now. So the temple, the heavenly tabernacle, two institutions. You might also say generic events; that the flood in Noah's day looks like something that happens in the New Testament, whatever that might be. So it's just like you're just comparing events to events. But typically what happens in the New Testament is they don't follow that pattern of one-to-one, one-to-one, one-to-one, person-to-person, and then institution-to-institution, and event-to-event. What they do is they mix them, and the way they can do that is because persons, institutions and events are never separate from each other. There's always some connection among them, so they can draw these things and weave these things together knowing that there will be points of comparison. Let me give you an example of that. If I were to say for example that you have Jesus being compared to the temple. Now, you've got the temple. What piece is that? What element is that? An institution. And what is Jesus?

**Student: A person.**

**Dr. Pratt:** A person. Now how in the world can you say that Jesus is the temple? He's a person, not an institution. Well the way you do that is you realize that Jesus has the office of the high priest, the great high priest of the ceremonies and the rituals of the heavenly tabernacle that replace the old institution of the old temple. And so as the high priest he is — the word was synecdoche, which means a part standing for the whole — he was the synecdoche of the whole thing. So Jesus as the high priest is sort of like the central point, the central person in the whole operation of the heavenly tabernacle, sacrificing his own blood, ministering before God the Father, all those kinds of things. And so this is how the New Testament can say that Jesus is the temple. But then it also helps us understand how the New Testament can also say without contradicting itself that the church is the temple. See, this is the key, that the body of Christ is spiritual stones being built upon each other to create a temple for the worship of God on the earth. Well, why is that? Well because the institution of the church and the people involved in it look a lot like the kinds of things that went on in the temple in the Old Testament. So which is it? Is it that Jesus is the fulfillment of the typology of the temple? Or is it the church? Which is it?

**Student: Both.**

**Dr. Pratt:** And we can say that because we have the Spirit of Christ in us, we are joined to him, we are one with him. So can you see how all these things kind of mingle together here and twist and turn and form webs of multiple reciprocities? Okay. But let's go a step further. The apostle Paul doesn't just affirm that Jesus is the temple as John does. He doesn't just affirm that the church is the temple of God, but he also says your body, your individual body is the temple of Holy Spirit. So now which is it? Is it Christ that is the fulfillment of the temple? Is it that the church is the fulfillment of the temple? Or that your body is the fulfillment of the temple?



**Student:** All of them.

**Student:** All the above.

**Dr. Pratt:** Okay. And how is that possible? It's because we are indwelt by Holy Spirit, joined to Christ who is the great High Priest who is the central figure in the heavenly tabernacle, which is the fulfillment of the institution of the temple in the old. Does that make sense? And so Paul is able to say that your physical body is the body of Christ on this earth. He actually says that you know in 1 Corinthians 6. And so we must realize then that a typology — and this sort of goes against the Christocentric notion — the typology is not just fulfilled in Jesus. It's fulfilled in Jesus as a synecdoche of something much more complex than that which is the heavenly tabernacle and the people of God joined to him in service and worship to God. And so as these various elements come up, they don't come up separately, they don't come up individualized or isolated from each other, but there's this whole complex of interconnection that's assumed by New Testament writers that then allows them to say explicitly just this and that. And that's the kind of complex theological arrangement or theological structuring that we have to become aware of so we can handle and then even go beyond them in expressing the typologies of the Bible.

### Question 22:

#### How do types depend on and reflect theological development?

**Student:** Okay, so we've covered figures of speech, a variety of developments, and you touched briefly on theological structures. Can you speak to the theological developments?

**Dr. Pratt:** I think it's really important to get that. Fundamentally, types are figures of speech. At least it's helpful to think of them that way. That means that there are different elements that are compared to each other in a variety of ways, and that the comparisons rest on or grow out of complex theological structures that the New Testament finds in the Old, and that the comparisons are birthed out of those complex structures. But the fourth element here, or the fourth piece or characteristic of a type in the Bible is that there has always been some theological development between the type and the antitype, the type and its fulfillment, the precursor and the endpoint.

So let's talk a little bit about what we mean by theological development because I think that's important. I think that what becomes important about this is the way people think about the development of theology which is largely a function of the way they think about theological ideas. It's really unfortunate, but most people when they think about theological ideas, they think of them as if they are wooden blocks that are separate from other ideas. So you have this theological idea, that one, that one, that one, and you've got a Bible that's laying out these theological ideas,

separate ideas, in rows on top of each other as it goes down its path from Genesis to Revelation.

Now when you think that way about it, it's okay so long as you don't feel any tension between the lower levels, say the book of Genesis, and the upper level, say the book of Revelation. So as long as everything works together you're fine, you're building a solid wall, and we feel good about solid walls. But the problem is that when you look at the way that, say, Genesis and Exodus present theology and the you go ahead and allow the other layers to be laid up as the Bible progresses, you begin to see that some of the things that the upper rows say look like they don't really fit with what the lower rows said. We always use the example of the sacrifice of Isaac. It's crazy to think that Abraham's faith was exactly like ours. It's not true. Now it was fundamentally, but not exactly like ours. And so we feel an incompatibility between what God asked Abraham to do and what we're being asked to do. The same thing with the sacrifices of the Old Testament. The same thing with the Promised Land of Israel. I mean, none of us are going on a plane over to Egypt to walk across to Sinai to get to the Promised Land like Israel was supposed to. In fact, if you did that we'd think you were crazy.

So how in the world then do you deal with it when you've got these rows of blocks like this and there's this tension between the upper levels and the lower levels? Well typically what Christians do is they'll leave the lower levels alone except where those tension points come, and when the tension comes then they'll pull the lower level block out and they'll say, "Well that's irrelevant now, or that's irrelevant now, or that's irrelevant now." And so the wall that they're constructing then begins to have holes in it, and of course you know what will happen eventually; it'll all come tumbling down, right?

See, that's not the way the Bible treats itself. The Bible doesn't treat itself by saying things like, well, just forget what they said about things back then. I mean it's sort of like when people say today, the common parlance is, "Well, that was just Old Testament." You would not have found a New Testament writer saying that. You would not have found Jesus saying that, because he said I did not come to get rid of the law. I mean, just forget that idea. Instead, what they did was they saw that their New Testament faith, the higher levels of those blocks, was actually built on and compatible with the lower levels. Now how did they do that when they weren't the same, obviously not the same? Well they didn't do what we do. They did not think of the ideas of the Bible, or theology, as wooden building blocks.

I think there's a better analogy that we can use. The block method is fine to some degree, but just realize every analogy is limited. But I think it's a lot better for us to think of ideas more along the lines of the ways we think of liquids mixing with each other. So you go to the early part of the Bible and let's say we have a glass beaker that has white paint poured into the bottom of it, and that would be like the beginning of the Bible, the first systems of theology that are coming out of the Pentateuch let's say. So we've got this system, it's white. Then you get a layer that's poured in; say

it's a little beaker of blue. So what's going to happen is, of course, the blue is going to mix with the white. If you don't stir it too much, it will mix un-homogenously, unevenly. So we'll have some sections that are fairly white, some that are really dark blue, and then everywhere in between. That's the way theological ideas work. When you go from Abraham building alters all through the land of Canaan and then you pour in the blue paint of David saying now we're only going to worship in Jerusalem, he wasn't saying forget what Abraham did, he was saying this is a development from what Abraham did. Now why was it a development? Because it was moving Israel more and more toward an imperial structure, which was always the goal, always God's intention, because it was always his intention to build the kingdom. Okay? So you pour in this blue paint of now we're just going to worship Jerusalem and you die if you build alters anywhere else. I mean this is serious business here. So you can understand some people wanting to say, "but wait a minute, we're doing it like Abraham did. Why are you going to kill us? We're just doing what Abraham did at Shechem. He had he alter her at Bethel. He had these altars everywhere. We should do this. David, you're wrong." But David had received revelation from God, and so the law now is only in Jerusalem, and he pours that in there, and he says to them we can learn from Abraham and what he did, but we're not to do exactly as Abraham did.

We mustn't imitate the earlier levels of revelation, but we mustn't forget them. Simple imitation will always lead to misapplication. You can bank on that, because more revelation has been given. And the same thing comes especially when you come to the New Testament where you get this yellow paint poured in, so some now is white, some is blue, some is all the shades of green, and you have some yellow in there, some things that are very strange in New Testament teaching compared to the old. And these things mix together in a variety of ways and affect each other rather than being building blocks that you have to get rid of because they don't fit with the later revelation.

And so that's the way typology works. You have to think of these ideas as much more fluid rather than thinking of them as simply building blocks. Well, I have the temple back here, there's one block. And now up here I've got Jesus. Now I can relate those two blocks to each other by comparison and that makes a type. Well it does, but the temple back here in the Old Testament was a part of a large system, and that large system is developed by further revelation that comes especially in the New Testament about the final sacrifice and about final atonement and how we've gone to new heights and all those sorts of things in Jesus's death and resurrection and now his participation in the heavenly tabernacle and then in the new world where there'll be no more sacrifices because we won't need any, it's all been done. So see, all of this is yellow paint being poured in, and that's how the typology can move then not just from this block, the temple to Jesus, but it can also move from the tabernacle, temple, to the church, to your body, to Jesus. It's because they're fluid and they mix together in all those varieties of ways.

And for this reason, types will never be exactly the same as their antitypes. That's necessary because theological developments have occurred between the type and the

antitype. So when you read, for example, when Peter says that Noah's flood was a type of Christian baptism, would you have ever guessed that on your own? Probably not. You'd go, "Well that's okay Peter, I accept that." But the reason they look so dissimilar, going from one family in a boat with a bunch of animals to a person being baptized, the reason they're so dissimilar is because of all the theological paint that's been poured in in between Noah and Christian baptism. But the comparison of Noah to Christian baptism is not the only comparison that needs to be made, because it actually compares to other things, too, like the second coming of Jesus, like Jesus' own baptism. And all these things in New Testament theology are fluid and mix-and-match with each other too, and interact with each other. So you get this one typology then that's used by the New Testament in a variety of ways. So it's a lovely thing if we can understand that theological development is much more the mixing of things rather than the laying on of one layer on top of another on top of another.

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