

Module: The New Testament

Session 31 – Other Major Themes in the New Testament

What is the New Testament about? We have already touched on two major themes:

- Jesus Christ
- the Holy Spirit

Apart from the Gospels and Acts, most of the “books” in the New Testament include apostolic responses (almost like circular letters, as it turned out) to doctrinal and everyday “issues” faced by the Christian community in the years that followed the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. These included: dealing with factions in the church that sought to bring the movement back under the norms of its roots in Jewish traditions, and others that sought to bolt elements of their pagan religions onto Christianity; responding to moral and lifestyle issues; leadership; functioning as a Christian in a non-Christian world; and preparing for the Second Coming and the end of the age.

It did not take long for false Gospels to start to spread throughout the Christian community. These included false teachings about the person and nature of Christ; false opinions about the Holy Spirit; and false versions of the way of salvation. All of this occurred in the face of persecution from Jewish leaders in Palestine and civil authorities in the empire.

While the corpus of the New Testament (as we know it today, 27 books, neatly organised) was not formally agreed until the fourth century (we will discuss this later in the course), it quickly became apparent that the unity of the church and integrity of the message it preached required leaders such as Peter, James and Paul to provide strong, principled, anointed leadership from the first generation.

Later church “Councils” sought to clarify Christian theology, but not to articulate new theologies. Imagine doing so without the New Testament as we have it now, as an agreed, commonly shared and understood operations manual.

This week we will look at several high level (mainly theological) themes, as a cluster. As you read the New Testament you will come up with many other themes. Do so; it is a rich source of teaching. Ask God to give you understanding and personal application; after all, the Gospel always involved the Word becoming flesh.

[Next week, we will look at aspects of practical Christian living that defined the people of God and marked them out from their previous lifestyles, relationships and preferences.]

1. **The meaning and power of repentance and conversion.** From the Fall, a universally sinful world, to a new creation, a new birth.

Repentance, *metanoia* = a change of mind. Conversion, *strephō* = a change of direction.

- Consider the case studies of Peter (a Jew), Cornelius (a Gentile), Paul (a man of two worlds), Lydia (a businesswoman), Onesimus (a slave, then a brother). Conversion can touch an individual, such as the Ethiopian eunuch, or a group (3,000 on the Day of Pentecost, the households of Cornelius and the Philippian jailer).

2. **Law versus Grace, the expression of God's great Love** - Understanding the uniqueness of Christian teaching about God's grace? Judaisers (legalists through and through) and antinomians (those who refused law in any form) versus grace and freedom in Christ. Not merit but the loving gift of God; "by God's grace I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

In his letters to the churches, especially in Romans and Galatians, Paul summarizes his lifelong question about the relationship between Jewish law (the Torah), which required specific observances and actions, and salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8) in Jesus Christ, which is given freely and without regard for good works. This issue was particularly problematic in Rome because the early church consisted both of Jewish followers of Christ, who observed the Law of Moses, and Gentile followers, to whom the Law was relatively unknown.

The Law was originally a gift from God. At face value, it can help people become more faithful, but ultimately we cannot keep it. We are justified by faith alone. The grace of God that makes this possible is available to both Jews and Gentiles. In the end, the New Testament declares that the way to salvation is to be a follower of Jesus.

3. **A new covenant** - fulfilling the Old Covenant. God's promise to Abraham: "All the Nations". Types. New covenant living.

"The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old is unveiled in the New"
(Augustine of Hippo, 354-430)

Each of the books of the New Testament has a unique relationship to the Old Testament. We cannot understand the NT unless we see it as a fulfilment of the OT. This diversity is largely due to the location and audience of the different authors of the New Testament. The first church was entirely Jewish. Matthew was written for a largely Jewish group to convince them that Jesus was the hoped-for Messiah; for Matthew, everything about Jesus was prophesied in the Old Testament. The narratives to which he refers served as ways in which early followers of Jesus could make sense of his birth, death, and resurrection. In contrast, Luke makes little or no reference to the Hebrew scriptures because they would have been unfamiliar to his largely Gentile audience. Hebrews explains in detail how the New Covenant fulfilled the old (rendering the old redundant). God's promise to Abraham about the coming of Christ was a new beginning, ultimately for the whole world.

4. **Justification and redemption** - acquittal and freedom

The New Testament introduces another perspective on the Hebrew Scriptures with its theology of “faith versus works,”. In Christ we are saved “through grace alone,” not through doing good works (Ephesians 2:9). We are justified (no record of our sin remains), not merely pardoned; we are redeemed and set free, but we belong to Christ; we are “set apart” (or “sanctified”) as His people. We are adopted as God’s children. The end result is a new life, characterised by right living, something we cannot do in our own strength, but the DNA of God and the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in us.

5. **Discipleship and practical Christian living**

As Christians, we are not called to be better people, but to become like Jesus. He called us to be His disciples (mathétés/μαθητής, ie followers, learners). Many of the Epistles explain what this means on a daily basis. Christian discipleship is the process by which we grow in the Lord Jesus Christ and become more and more Christlike. This process (which takes time) requires us to respond to the Holy Spirit’s prompting to examine our thoughts, words and actions. It requires that we study God’s Word, pray over it, and obey it. Being a disciple of Christ involves commitment to Him and personal growth, not defined by compliance but in our character and relationship with Him.

6. **The Church** - all the “saints” in community. Structures. Governance. Ministry gifts. Lifestyle issues.

We are the Body of Christ, the Church, the “called out ones” (*ekklesia*). In 1 Corinthians 12:12, 13, Paul writes about the variety within the church and spiritual gifts that come from God, using the image of the human body to convey that each of these gifts is needed and complementary, just as every part of the body is needed. “Fellowship” (*koinonia*) = “fellows in the one ship”. “The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit.” Timothy and Titus set standards for leaders.

The New Testament uses the symbol of the church as a way to deal with the difficult issue of balancing unity and diversity in the church; though we are all uniquely gifted and called individuals, we are also all parts of the one united body of Christ.

7. **The Kingdom of God** - what is the Kingdom? The King and His realm.

The longest section of Matthew’s Gospel is his “proclamation” (Matthew 4:17-16:20) of the kingdom of heaven. In one place, Matthew likens God’s kingdom to a small mustard seed, which has in it the potential to grow into a “tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches,” something startlingly different in size and appearance from its humble beginnings.

Jesus’ proclamations about the kingdom of God symbolize the results yielded by living in obedience to the commandments of Christ. Who is sovereign in our lives?

8. **Salt, and light** - Christians in the marketplace. Agents of preservation. The brighter the light the stronger the shadow.

Jesus used the concepts of salt and light a number of different times to refer to the role of His followers in the world. “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavour? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.” (Matthew 5:13).

Salt had two purposes in the Middle East of the first century. Because of the lack of refrigeration, salt was used to preserve food, especially meat which would quickly spoil in the desert environment. Believers in Christ are like preservatives in the world, helping keep it from the evil inherent in the society of ungodly men whose unredeemed natures are corrupted by sin (Psalm 14:3; Romans 8:8).

Salt was also used as a flavour enhancer. The followers of Christ stand out as those who “enhance” the flavour of life in this world. Christians, living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in obedience to Christ, influence the world for good.

In the analogy of light, the good works of Christ’s followers are to shine for all to see. Light dispels darkness. “You are the light of the world - like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” (Matthew 5:14-16). The presence of light in darkness is unmistakable. The presence of Christians in the world must be like lights in the darkness, not only in the sense that the truth of God’s Word brings light to the darkened hearts of sinful people (John 1:1-10), but also in the sense that our good deeds must be evident for all to see.

The role of the Christian as salt and light in the world may be hindered or prevented through choices that involve compromise, or settling for that which is more convenient or comfortable, rather than that which is truly best and pleasing to God. Only by remaining focused on Christ and being obedient to Him can we expect to remain effective as salt and light in our modern settings.

9. **World Evangelization** - God's long-term plan. Pentecost, persecution, people groups, missionaries.

Jesus commanded the disciples (us) to carry His message of salvation to all the world, to every *ethne*: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

This extends the Gospel to every nation, tongue, and people group in the world. The Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost with power on the believers (with a promise that this was for every age), to share the Good News with all people.

10. **Eternity** - past and future. Resurrection and life, future. Apocalypse.

Early Christians met one another with the greeting “Mara tha” (“The Lord is coming.”)

When the Bible speaks of eternal life, it refers to a gift from God that comes only “through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). This gift is in contrast to the “death” that is the natural result of sin.

The gift of eternal life comes to those who believe in Jesus Christ, who is Himself “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). The fact that this life is “eternal” indicates that it is *perpetual* life—it goes on and on and on, with no end.

The New Testament finishes with graphic descriptions of the end of the world and the ushering in of the eternal reign of Christ. As Christians, we have such a hope and confidence.

This course has been *about* the New Testament; but you are encouraged to *read* the New Testament. Read it straight through. Read it a book at a time and think about what it is saying to you. Read a portion each day. Be systematic. Try not to be restricted by verses and chapter divisions, which did not exist in the original. As you listen internally to the message, your life will change. Jesus will become more real to you. Before long, you will realize that you are the *living in the New Testament*, even today.

