

**Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 17, Sociological - bad
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In a later session, we'll return to bring together much of our discussion in the previous few sessions related to more hermeneutical theory concerning author historical-centered approaches, text-centered approaches, and more reader-centered approaches including deconstructionism. We'll bring that all together and consider how we might implement that into an evangelical approach to hermeneutics and interpretation and how those methods might be integrated and implemented. But what I want to do in this session is move on to begin to discuss a number of other methodologies related to hermeneutics and interpretation and today we'll begin by looking at sociological criticism or what is sometimes called socio-scientific approaches to interpreting the Old New Testament.

Actually, these approaches are in some respects too broad of a field at least for me to master and too broad of a field to be treated in much detail here. So I can only hope to introduce you to some of the very broad contours of sociological approaches and social, what are called social scientific approaches to the Old New Testament. In some measure sociological approaches grew out of discontent with other methods of interpretation and when we consider sociological approaches or social scientific criticism, it's important to understand that scholars have identified at least two areas or two different approaches to sociological criticism.

Number one is investigating the social background of texts, of biblical texts, of social background and the history of biblical texts. In this way this approach has a lot of overlap with some of the traditional historical-critical approaches that we already talked about. But a second area or avenue of approach to social criticism is to

investigate the social background of texts, of biblical texts, of social background and the history of biblical texts.

In this way this approach has a lot of overlap with some of the traditional historical-critical approaches that we already talked about. But a second area or avenue of approach to sociological criticism is to investigate the social background of But a third area or avenue of approach to sociological criticism is the application of modern sociological models, taking entire models and the wholesale application of those models to biblical text or sections of biblical text to explain what is going on. And again, as I said, the field is too broad and at least my expertise too limited to go into a lot of detail about this approach.

But again, I want to whet your appetite and at least give you an idea of what it is and how it might be useful. There are, let me say at the outset, there are numerous books that can aid one in exploring the social dimensions of the Old New Testament text. Books that are entitled Sociological Criticism or social scientific approaches to interpreting Old New Testament texts and things like that.

But let me just briefly look at these two different facets of sociological criticism. Again, that is exploring the social background of the biblical text and then the second one exploring the wholesale application of entire sociological models, especially modern sociological theories and modern sociological studies to biblical text. And I'll just give some examples of how that has been done.

So first of all, looking at the social background of biblical text, and as I've said, this area in many respects could fall under the umbrella when considering methods of interpretation, could fall under the broader umbrella of historical approaches to the Old New Testament where you examine the history behind the text, the historical references within the text. Part of that could be looking at the social background and

the social dimensions of an older New Testament text. And that's precisely what this method does.

It looks at the social background or the social dimensions referred to either explicitly or implicitly within the text. It seeks to uncover the social structures or the social values in the ancient biblical world. Again, looking at the social dynamics, implicit or explicit, in the biblical text that would make a difference in the way we read it and mean it and read it and interpret it.

And obviously this then would function or is meant to function to shed light on understanding and interpreting the text. The difficulty though is that for most of us, this might not be true of all cultures, but for many cultures, including my own, the difficulty is that our culture and the social values and dynamics that we operate with are at times very different from and distant from the social values and dimensions and dynamics of the ancient biblical world. A very simple example is that the ancient world valued the communal over the individual.

It valued the group or the family unit or the community that one belonged to which makes it difficult for persons living in highly individualistic societies or societies where it's acceptable or appropriate to isolate oneself and where the emphasis is on who a person is as an individual and what they have achieved as an individual. When one reads a biblical text, sometimes that can provide a create a barrier in understanding a society that socially valued the community so that more important than who you were as an individual was the group that you belong to. And so sometimes this gap between our world and the world of the ancient texts can provide a barrier.

So it's necessary then to try to come to grips with what might have been the social values and the social dynamics and the social background that is implicitly or

explicitly referred to or lies behind the biblical text in order to try to understand it more clearly. In fact as some who apply sociological analysis to the text, especially evangelical scholars, have recognized this is necessary in analogy with the person of Jesus Christ who is God incarnate in a world governed by social values. So the fact that Jesus was God incarnate in a specific social context, in historical context, means then that it is incumbent on us to investigate or to pursue an incarnational, as some would describe it, an incarnate view of hermeneutics where we ask the question of the sociological context that would have produced the biblical text.

The assumption again that I'm operating with is that we want to understand the text on its own terms in its historical and in its sociological context in light of what was shared between the ancient author and the ancient readers to whom he wrote. And therefore we must become familiar with the ancient Near Eastern world or the Greco-Roman world and again the the social dynamics and the social values that would have governed the way that they lived life and that is now reflected in the texts of the Old New Testament and how that might make a difference in the way we interpret the text. Especially if we're prone to read it in light of our own social values and our own social context.

So what I want to do is just give you a handful of examples very briefly of how social values in particular or social dynamics, that is how persons relate to each other, how they view life, how their relationships and lives are governed in the society and culture in which they live and how that makes a difference or how that might make a difference in the way one reads biblical text. For example, and as I said one can there are a number of tools at your disposal that help you to come to grips with some of the sociological background of the Old New Testament text, but to give you just a handful of examples. As we've already said one of the important and key sociological dimensions or values of the biblical world was the focus not on the individual but on the group to which one belongs.

So as I said what was most important was not who you were as an individual or what you accomplished as an individual but the family that you belong to or the group that you belong to or the community that you belong to. So that family often family belonging and loyalty were prized above everything else. Again we here at least in my own North American context we often we see a very distinct difference where sometimes family loyalty and even sometimes fragmented families are often the norm and there often is there's frequently not that tie between family members and family units, but in the in the ancient world, especially the Greco-Roman world, the family unit would have been valued above many or most all other relationships and units.

Reading the text in this way reading the biblical text one then would find statements such as this one made by Jesus rather shocking and challenging at least to the ancient reader. Most of us probably read this text and don't think much about it but I'm convinced the ancient hearers those that heard Jesus say this and those then read the text would have found this rather shocking maybe even offensive. When in Mark chapter and there's other examples of this in the parallel accounts and the other synoptics, but I'll look at Mark chapter 3 and verses 31 and through the end of the chapter verse 35 which probably is also applying the categories of form criticism.

This is an example of a pronouncement story where the climactic statement seems to be the key feature of the text, but listen to what the author, the story that the author tells. Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived and immediately for those who are attuned to the sociological dimensions of the ancient world already recognized an important sociological dimension taking place. Jesus' own mother and brothers, his family unit, now arrived.

Standing outside they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around and they told him your mother and brothers are outside looking for you, and we might not think that's unusual, but again in this context that deprived the family unit that was a crucial statement. Then Jesus responds, who are my mother and my brothers, he asked, to which question most would have answered by emphasizing one's physical lineage and one's physical familial ties and the physical family unit.

But what Jesus says in response to this question is very in a sense countercultural. When he says, then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and my mother.

That again is rather shocking because Jesus has in a sense redefined family to include not specifically those who are of flesh-and-blood relationship or physical lineage, but now Jesus defines it as anyone who does the Father's will. So Jesus defines the family unit in a way that is not physical, but spiritual, which I think would have been rather shocking, perhaps even offensive, though not to us, at least to many of the first century readers. This emphasis on the family unit as a key sociological value of the first century may also explain instances such as what we find in a text like Acts chapter 16, where entire household units would often respond to the gospel and respond to the saving message of Jesus Christ, Acts chapter 16 verses 14 and 15.

One of those listening was a woman from Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.

So notice that intriguing reference that it wasn't just Lydia, but the entire household is converted and then baptized. This is probably a little more easily understandable,

though there are obviously theological issues and explanations, at least at a sociological level, this is a little more explicable in terms of the emphasis on the family unit as a key and significant communal unit in the first century Greco-Roman world. This is probably also reflected in Paul's statement in 1st Timothy chapter 3 and verse 15, where he actually, an example for the author of a letter, tells us exactly why he's writing it.

But in 1st Corinthians, I'm sorry, 1st Timothy chapter 3 and verse 15, Paul says, I'll back up and read verse 14, Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, or in the household of God. So even the church, frequently, Paul compares to the family unit, that is he portrays the church in terms of kinship ties, of a family unit that has ties just as close as a physical one, and that Paul expects that they will show the same concern and care for each other and the same support that one would in a broader, actually in a physical family unit and the physical kinship ties. So that's one social value that seems to be important in the Old and New Testament, that is the emphasis on the group that one belonged to.

So I think the phrase, no person is an island, no man is an island, was certainly true in the biblical world, because more important than who you were as an individual or what you accomplished as an individual was who, what group you belong to, especially the family unit and the kinship ties being a crucial social value. Another important social value was that of honor-shame. Particularly the New Testament reveals an honor-shame society, and what that means is you were expected to avoid shame at all cost, you were expected to avoid bringing shame upon yourself by acting in a way that was acceptable and honorable, and if you, if your honor was lost, you were to act in a way that restored that.

So for example, to go back to a parable that we've already spent some time on in Luke chapter 15, the parable of the prodigal son, we've already suggested a couple of features of that parable that are intriguing, but in my opinion it can be understood clearly as operating according to the honor-shame dimensions of the first century. That is, but when the son asks the father for his inheritance, he is actually shaming the father. That is, that is, some have said almost equivalent to wishing the father was dead, because as upon his death, the son would receive the inheritance.

So the son acts in a way that brings shame upon the father. And furthermore, if, as I suggested, perhaps the setting for this parable is not on some farm out in the middle of nowhere, but is in a typical ancient Middle Eastern town and village, everyone would have been observing and known what happened, perhaps what happened. And so it's interesting that the father, not only does the son bring dishonor upon him by asking for his inheritance, but the way the father acts, his very, by running out, which a father did not do, and greeting his son who had treated him this way, the father further risks his honor and risks his reputation and standing in society.

So his very reputation is at stake, and he actually brings shame upon himself by acting in this very manner. To give another example, in the Gospels you frequently find Jesus, especially towards the end of the Gospels, you see Jesus entering into debates or disputes with the religious leaders, whether the Sadducees or Pharisees, different Jewish authorities, and often this takes place in terms of the Jewish authorities asking Jesus a question to trap him. And most likely what is going on when they ask Jesus a question, it's not simply because they have a problem they want solved or that they're simply looking for information or to see if Jesus can really answer the question, though that could be part of it, but most likely by asking a question in this way, they are challenging Jesus' honor.

They are trying to bring shame upon Jesus in a culture that values honor, that works with the honor-shame dynamic, and when Jesus often responds by asking a question back, that is tantamount to bringing shame upon his opponents. So sometimes Jesus being questioned about a different biblical text, or I think about the conundrum they present with if a woman marries several times and all her husband's die, whose husband will she, wife, will she be in the resurrection, questions such as that are all meant to, again, not just trip Jesus up, although they do that, and to put him on the spot, but probably to challenge his honor and bring shame upon him. And then, as I said, Jesus often does that in reverse by questioning his opponents.

In Revelation 2 and 3, the seven messages to the seven churches that provide the backdrop and the context for the writing of the book of Revelation, you often see Jesus, John speaking the words of Jesus, recording the words of Jesus to the seven churches, you find Jesus using terms of his opponents, such as Jezebel, an Old Testament text, or the synagogue of Satan, terms such as that. One of the things, among others, that those terms might do, again, is function to bring shame upon the opponents in an honor-shame society. And there's a number of other examples that we could give where biblical authors might be working with the honor-shame dynamic, to the idea that one must act in a way that brings honor and avoid acting in ways that bring shame upon them.

Another rather interesting, and I'll just touch on it very briefly, but an interesting sociological dimension is was expounded most clearly, prominently, by a New Testament scholar that has perhaps more than any other applied sociological study and analysis to New Testament texts, an individual named Bruce Molina. And Molina developed what he called the theory of limited goods, and what he said was that, especially when it comes to wealth, wealth existed in a limited amount. That was, if someone had wealth and money, it was at the expense of someone else.

If someone had money, someone else did not. We have a saying, sometimes you hear a saying in North American English, that there's more where that came from. In the first century, with the theory of limited goods, the statement could be revised to say there's no more where that came from.

But just simply, this understanding of a theory of limited goods would probably explain the resentment of the poor towards the wealthy that you see reflected several times in the New Testament text, but also even in the Greco-Roman world more broadly. The last sociological value that I want to discuss is one that has been recognized by a number of New Testament scholars, and a number of them have picked up on it and utilized it to explain what is often going on in biblical texts, and that is what is known as the system of patronage, or the patron-client relationship in the ancient world that seems to have been very prevalent in the Greco-Roman world, and seems to lie behind a number of texts. And what that was, the patron-client relationship, to be real simplistic, was a patron was someone who was well-to-do financially, who was of an elite social status, and who had the financial means, and this person would also would often enter into a relationship, this patron would enter into a relationship with a client.

A client was someone who was poor, who was not so well-off, who was probably very poor and on the lower rung of the social economic status. And what that the patron would do is enter into a relationship with the client, and bestow benefits on the client financially or otherwise, perhaps providing them with work or other ways of providing help in exchange for the clients, usually for their political support. And the only the appropriate response then of the client was to go around basically in society and tell everyone how wonderful this patron was.

So that we might say that when it comes today, we might say when it comes time to vote, then everyone knows who to vote for. But the the client then would sing the

praises of the patron, provide them with you know, the political support, etc. in exchange for it as a response and in gratitude for what the patron had done.

To fail to respond appropriately, to fail to respond with gratitude, was a serious breach of this relationship and a serious breach of this social dynamic. In one sense, some have very, very broadly, some have suggested that God Himself is portrayed in the Old New Testament as the ultimate patron who bestows benefits on the people and there to respond in gratitude. But this patron-client relationship seems to lie behind a number of issues in the book like 1st Corinthians.

For example, in 1st Corinthians 8, 9, and 10, Paul includes a section where he refuses the financial support of the Corinthians, even though he had the right to receive their financial support as an apostle and even though he received the financial support of other churches such as the Philippians and probably the church in Rome and some others, is when it came to the Corinthians, he refused their financial support and some of that may be because of the patron-client relationship and dynamic that he wanted to avoid confusion in accepting their financial support. And there's other things going on as well, I think, that another dynamic in the the Corinthian society would have been traveling philosophers and kind of teachers of wisdom that would have gathered a following, there would have been competition for gathering the following, they would have paid one of these philosophers and these traveling teachers for their services, and so Paul wants to avoid all of that. But the patron-client relationship and some of the issues related to that might have been one of the reasons why Paul refuses financial support in Corinth.

The way the Corinthians treat their leaders in chapters 1 and through 3, you remember that statement Paul says, some of you say, I am of Apollos, some say I'm of Paul, I'm of Cephas, some say I'm of Jesus, that may owe, that sort of attitude that was in danger of dividing the church may owe itself to this patron-client dynamic that

existed in first century Corinth. In chapter 5, a very interesting text, in chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians, the author Paul deals with a man involved in incest and the church seems to be willing to tolerate that. What Paul's really upset at is not so much the man, although he's upset at that, but the people that get the excoriated for what they're doing is the church.

What really has Paul upset is not just that the man is committing incest, sleeping with his mother, his father's wife, but the fact that what really has Paul bothered is the fact that the church would tolerate it. And at least to us we would think, well, why would anyone be willing to do such a thing? Is it possible that this man is a wealthy patron? And so no one wants to touch him, no one wants to call him out in this activity. That would be inappropriate for someone who is a patron, who had bestowed benefits.

Maybe this is a wealthy man who is the church is meeting in his home or one of the churches and he has bestowed financial benefits for certain persons. No one wants to call him out on this and so they're quite willing to turn a blind eye and tolerate it. So is it possible that the patron-client type of dynamic explains why the church would be willing to tolerate this.

And there's probably a number of other, as many commentators on 1st Corinthians have recognized, there appears to be a number of other issues that Paul deals with in the church in Corinth that probably stem from this system of patronage, the patron-client dynamic. To give an example of another book in the New Testament, the book, a scholar named David de Silva has argued that the book of Hebrews depends on the patron system of patronage and the patron-client type of dynamic, especially the warning passages. He interprets in light of this that what is going on is the readers are in danger of refusing to demonstrate thankfulness and refusing to demonstrate

gratitude to someone, God, who has bestowed so many benefits salvifically upon them.

And for the readers to refuse that and turn away would be tantamount to a client refusing to acknowledge and be grateful for and to show gratitude for what the patron had done and the gracious gift the patron had given him. So de Silva analyzes much of the book of Hebrews in light of the social dynamic of patron-client relationship. The letter to Philemon most likely also, at least partially, assumes the patron-client dynamic because when you read Philemon, the very last book in the Pauline corpus, when you read Philemon, Paul writes in the way that he expects Philemon to recognize his responsibility and the debt of gratitude that he owes Paul.

And Paul seems to focus on that and utilize that as a way of getting Philemon to follow through and take Onesimus back. Paul's main purpose in the book is to get Philemon to receive Onesimus back and part of what's going on is this patron-client system of patronage dynamic that Paul wants as one who has done something for Philemon, now he wants Philemon to in turn do something for Paul. In a sense, return the favor and showing gratitude for what Paul has done.

So there might be some of the patron-client dynamic operating there as well. More broadly, intriguingly, this seems to lie behind a number of New Testament books, especially the book of Revelation, but I'm not going to focus on any one book. The whole system of imperial rule in many respects seems to seem to have been built on the system patronage and the patron-client relationship.

That is, Caesar was seen as a patron and even beyond Caesar, sometimes the gods, the Greco-Roman gods, including the Caesar, the emperor, who was increasingly deified and given titles of deity and often worshipped along with the pantheon of Greco-Roman gods. Often, I think the patron was, I'm sorry, the emperor would have

been viewed as, along with the other gods, as the patron who had bestowed benefits such as peace and wealth and security upon Rome, the subjects of Rome, and they were a client who were expected to show gratitude towards the emperor and towards the other gods by participating in festivals or ceremonies or opportunities to do that. And you can begin to see how this might create difficulties, and especially for some of the New Testament authors in trying to get readers not to participate in what they saw as participation in pagan religious worship and compromising their relationship with Jesus Christ and the exclusive worship that belonged to God and Christ.

But many of them operating under the system of patronage may have seen it as unthinkable and a breach of social values that one would not show gratitude towards the emperor for all that he bestowed. So when you go to work and you get a paycheck, that's not necessarily how it happened, but whether it was a fruitful crop or the wealth that they had or the job that they have, they owed a debt of gratitude towards their patron, the emperor, and also the Greco-Roman gods for bestowing that upon them. And it would be a serious breach not to show gratitude, for example, through opportunities to express worship.

And so in that context, sometimes New Testament authors have to, are wrestling with a very important social code and must call readers to sometimes disentangle themselves or disassociate with situations where they're called upon to show gratitude and honor to their patron, the emperor, or the Greco-Roman gods. So at times looking at the Old and New Testament from through the lenses of the social values and the social dynamics of the ancient world through sociological criticism can be a value as it overlaps with more traditional concerns of studying the history in the text. So that it's important then to be alert to the sociological world that is referred to implicitly or explicitly within the biblical text.

One final interesting example, we've already referred to this when we talked a little bit about character and narrative, but in John chapter 8 verse 44, when Jesus calls the Pharisees that he's in dispute with, when he calls them, he says, you are of your father the devil. That is again reflecting an important sociological dynamic. It draws on the notion of kinship ties related to the idea of family.

That is who you belong to, your familial origin is reflected in your character and in your own life. And so the way that the Pharisees were treating Jesus by refusing to believe the truth and by wanting to kill him in in John chapter 8, Jesus then now demonstrates and tells them that they are actually demonstrating their true lineage, their true kinship ties. They belong to their father the devil because he himself is a murderer and he himself is the teller of lies.

So there's all kinds of insight to be gained by looking at the the sociological background of Old and New Testament texts. And as I said, there are a number of helpful books and there's a series of the the whole social rhetorical commentaries that are often sensitive to the sociological dynamic of biblical text and can provide new and fresh insight into how we understand the text and provide sort of a welcome corollary and an addition to our traditional historical approaches to the background of biblical text. But we said beyond studying the historical background of a text is the application of sociological models, usually modern-day sociological models, to biblical text.

That is theories about human behavior and insights from modern-day sociological models that are applied wholesale to entire texts or sections of biblical text in order to shed fresh light on understanding those those texts. Again, let me just give you a couple of examples of scholars who have applied sociological models to explain what's going on in the biblical text and my purpose is not to agree with them or evaluate them or disagree with them, but just to give you examples what's been

done and how that works just very quickly. In the Old Testament, one of the most well-known examples that most people refer to to illustrate a sociological interpretation of the Old Testament centers around the rise of Israel as a nation and also the rise of their monarchy.

A number have tried to explain the rise of Israel, particularly the conquest of Canaan, the settlement in the land, the rise of the nation of Israel, or how the monarchy, the kingship, arose and trying to explain that by using sociological models. For example, one Old Testament scholar named Norman Gottwald suggested and developed a theory that explained Israel's origin that is often called the origin of peasant revolt for understanding Israel's conquest. And he says basically what happened instead of a more nomadic model of Israel entering the land, he said what you have are disenfranchised peasants who are oppressed by the the Canaanite elite and the hierarchical society of Canaan and now they revolt against that and creating a more egalitarian type society.

So he uses the theory of peasant revolt to explain the conquest narratives in the Old Testament. Also considering very broadly again in the Jewish world, apocalyptic literature, including books like the book of Daniel in particular and other Jewish apocalypses, I think we've referred to Enoch before, but we'll turn back to this kind of literature when we talk about genre criticism later on, but a two-volume work by an individual named James Charlesworth called the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. The first volume includes a collection of English translations of most of the early Jewish and some of the early Jewish Christian apocalypses.

But apocalyptic literature, which basically records the visionary experience of an individual who ascends to heaven or they through a dream or a visionary type experience, they see visions of heaven, of the heavenly world, of hell. Sometimes they go on journeys and see different locations. Sometimes they see the future.

But apocalyptic literature has provided a fruitful field for a sociological analysis. That is, there's been a lot of interest in the social setting and the social dynamics that gave rise to such literature. Why would this literature be important? What sociological factors, what social setting in the ancient world, gave rise to this kind of literature, these apocalyptic visionary experiences? For example, a common understanding is that this type of literature is the literature of the marginalized and oppressed.

That is, apocalyptic literature arises out of a group, a sense of group alienation or deprivation. This is the social setting for apocalyptic literature. So it arises out of a group that feels alienated and disenfranchised from society and from the status quo.

Apocalyptic literature then, such as the book of Daniel and other Jewish apocalypses or the book of Revelation, is meant to address those concerns. It grows out of and it is the literature of a group that is oppressed and alienated from the rest of society. And some have even created rather elaborate theories of the emergence of this kind of literature, especially seeing it as part of emerging from the struggle, emerging out of prophecy, Old Testament prophecy, emerging out of a struggle between a visionary group and a group that is a priestly elite and that out of that struggle apocalyptic literature arose.

So, so the social setting then of apocalyptic literature that engenders this type of literature is often seen to be a situation of persecution or oppression or deprivation and furthermore, this is also understood in sociological terms. There's been a lot of debate in some of the apocalypses as to whether there's really a specific crisis. Is there really, do apocalypses really address specific situations of oppression and persecution and crisis? One sociological model suggests that apocalypses arose in response to perceived crises.

So the readers are not really necessarily experiencing a crisis. What is important is not whether they are objectively oppressed or persecuted, but whether they feel that way and whether they perceive there is a perceived crisis. Now, I think, I think there's the last word has not yet been said on the social setting of apocalyptic literature, but again, I simply give you this an example of how sociological analysis can be used to try to explain the origins of a movement, apocalyptic movement or apocalyptic type of literature.

Again, in the past it's often been associated with with the social situations of oppression and alienation, failed expectations and perceived crisis as the sociological setting for this type of literature. Just to mention a handful of others just very, very briefly, especially related to the New Testament. For example, there have been a number of theories of what kind of prophet Jesus was, a number of social, again, taking sociological models that move across to cultures and times and applying that to Jesus.

Was Jesus a millenarian type of prophet that expected the end of the world? Was Jesus more seeking to transform society? Was he a healer and a miracle worker? Was he a charismatic type of prophet? And without going into detail there have been all kinds of suggestions as to what type of theory, what type of prophet Jesus was and how that might help us understand who he was and what he did. There are a number of theories that attempt to explain the emergence of the early church and what kind of society it was. A number of theories that try to explain how did the church move from a more charismatically oriented movement to a movement that was more institutional and institutionalized and a number of theories have tried to explain that.

Again, my intention is not to evaluate that or express agreement or disagreement, but just to give you examples of how sociological models have been used to

understand the movement of early Christianity. But we will, in our conclusion, talk a little bit by way of evaluation overall, how do we utilize these approaches. One interesting example, one sociologist, sociologist John Gager, who is well known for some of his work in explaining the origins of the early church community, explained the rise of Christianity as a reaction to failed prophecy.

And in examining a number of other movements, Gager basically said a common phenomenon in many movements is when early on the movements have to deal with failed expectations and failed prophecies. And one of the ways they do this is by proselytizing, and through proselytizing and evangelizing, gathering the following in a group, kind of the idea of safety in numbers. By doing that, they are able to, in a sense, save face or they are able to maintain their existence in the group and perhaps then deal with those failed expectations.

So Gager tries to explain the emergence of Christianity through this understanding of a reaction to failed prophecy. Again, there are other countless theories. We've already mentioned a person, the name of David da Silva or Bruce Molina.

Gerd Tyson is another important person who's written a lot on sociological analysis. Again, taking entire models to explain the early movement of Christianity or again the emergence of Israel's a nation or its monarchy or something like that. By way of evaluation, positively, sociological models, not only the sociological background, but the application of models, sociological models can provide, at times, valuable interpretive insight in shedding new light on the text and explaining what is going on, providing new explanations for what one finds happening in the text and helping us to overcome our distance with the text.

For example, in 1st Corinthians chapter 11, where Paul addresses the another problem or situation in the Corinthian Church and starting of verse 17, Paul

addresses a problem in the Church, Corinthian Church, as it gathers for worship with the way it conducts communion or the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. In 1st Corinthians 11, starting with 17 to the end of the chapter, sociological analysis and background has actually helped shed, I think, valuable insight on that text. The main problem is not only a theological one, because often we've interpreted this text, especially when Paul castigates the Corinthians for taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.

We've often interpreted this text mainly along theological lines, that Paul is castigating the Corinthians because of sin in their lives by taking the Lord's Supper when they have unconfessed sin. And so Paul calls on them to evaluate themselves, and that is carried over today in the way we often treat this text, especially when we participate in our churches and congregations in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper today. But a sociological explanation might actually provide a clear avenue into understanding the problem, and that is the whole patron-client dynamic, or the whole wealthy and poor social dynamic, is probably the main problem lying behind the Corinthians' abuse of the Lord's Supper.

That is, most likely, as the Corinthians participated in the communion or the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the whole patron-client or the whole social strata between the wealthy and the poor would have bled over into and influenced the way that the Corinthians, this whole dynamic and secular society, now bled over into their church services and their gatherings and now was influencing the way that they participated in the Lord's Supper. That is, what would have been natural for anyone living in Corinth in this patron-client or in this society with this, the strata between the wealthy and the more poor members of society would have been, when they sat down and ate a meal, it was common for the wealthy to meet in a certain place in a home and to actually participate in more expensive and more finer food appropriate for the wealthy. Whereas the poor members in society, those in the lower

socioeconomic strata, would have met in a different location in the house and would have eaten a poorer quality of food.

And to add to that, perhaps you would have had slaves serving both, especially the wealthy. And so the main difficulty, the main problem Paul has is not that the Corinthians are participating in the Lord's Supper with a wrong theological understanding or with unconfessed sin in their lives, but they are taking a meal, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, that should indicate and celebrate their unity. They are now participating that in a context that further perpetuates the socioeconomic distinctions of the Greco-Roman society.

By dividing the poor and the wealthy, the wealthy and the poor, having the wealthy in one location, eating the best food and the poor somewhere else, eating a lesser food, and the wealthy getting drunk and gorging themselves, and calling that the Lord's Supper. That's what has Paul so upset. So when he says, when he castigates them for participating in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, again, I'm convinced he's primarily aiming his comments and his rhetoric at the way the Corinthians are using the Lord's Supper.

That is, they're participating it in a context that reflects the social, the sociological dimensions of Corinthian society, where the wealthy and the poor are distinguished, the patron-client dynamic that is going on. And so when he tells them to examine themselves, it's not so much to ask forgiveness for everything wrong they have done. It's more to to examine the way that they are using the Lord's Supper to create division and perpetuate social division than it is to use it to create unity and express their oneness in Jesus Christ.

A second value of this approach, obviously, is that it then places the Old and New Testaments, once again, in its historical and sociological context. As some scholars

have said, it's an incarnational approach to interpreting the Bible. That is, all that means is it's a reminder that it grew out of a specific social and historical context.

And these approaches can help us to come to grips with that. One of the, a few of the concerns of the sociological approach, especially the application of wholesale, the wholesale application of sociological models, particularly modern sociological models, is number one, is sociological approaches to the Old and New Testament at times have a tendency and a danger of being reductionistic. That is, it gives you the impression that the sole explanation for the text and the sole explanation for what is going on is a sociological one, and may rule out other theological and historical explanations for a situation.

So sometimes reductionistic tendencies lie behind the application of sociological models. Another one is, sort of related to that, is often sociological models that tend to be anti-supernatural. That is, that they provide a solely natural sociological explanation while ignoring the possibility of God's intervention into history and providing a theological explanation as well for what is going on.

That leaves out explanations that would allow for divine intervention and God's, God's working in the midst of the people. So, for example, to provide a solely a sociological explanation for the emergence of the nation of Israel while ignoring the theological dimensions and the activity of God in bringing about his nation would be an example of a reductionistic approach, but also one that ignores the divine and supernatural dimension to the biblical text. A third one is, sociological models are in danger of forcing a model, especially modern models on the Old New Testament.

There's nothing objectionable itself about applying modern-day models to biblical text. The problem is when they are forced onto the text, when they are actually models that do not fit the biblical text, but they're used anyway to try to explain

them. Some modern sociological models may actually reflect values and situations that are very different from the ancient world.

So, in the biblical text, so especially modern sociological models must continually be tested by the data of the text and what we know about the ancient world. And finally, some models require, actually require, rejecting and setting aside parts of the data and parts of the text, the biblical text, in order to make the model work. And so more appropriate, I think, is a call for an eclectic approach that utilizes sociological models along with other models, such as historical critical approaches and typical historical approaches, but also uses them as an integration with other interpretive techniques and other interpretive methods.

So when used along with other historical methods, when implemented with other methods of hermeneutics and other methods of interpretation, sociological criticism does have the potential to be a valuable tool for bringing fresh insight into the biblical text and helping us understand it more clearly. Again, something that I've only been able to touch on in this session. Beginning with the next session, we will move on to talk about another method of interpretation, and that is the issue of genre criticism.

How does understanding the type of literature that one is dealing with affect the way one understands a biblical text? We'll consider that in the next session.