**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

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**LESSON EIGHT: Reading the Epistles**

“…the ‘ease’ of interpreting Epistles can be quite deceptive.”

Gordan Fee (p. 57)

INTRODUCTION

* The NT contains four primary genre: Gospels, Acts (narrative), Epistles (letters), Revelation (letters, prophetic, apocalyptic). Within these categories most every type of literary device occurs. What you have learned from narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, etc. will resurface in the Epistles.
* Epistles are ancient letters. They reflect the form and nature of letters. As letters, one major characteristic is that they are “occasional” literature. That means they were written TO/WITHIN an occasion between the writer and the recipients. By analogy, the NT letters are like a “one way telephone conversation.” We only have one end of the phone. To understand the phone conversation, significant reconstruction of the total context is required.
* Epistles have particularly been abused by “proof texting.” This is when the reader finds words/sentences that fit their “need” and they use the text as a crowbar to manipulate others to their view. Such use is English Version specific, often from the KJV.
  + 1 Thess 5:22 (KJV), “Abstain from all appearance of evil.” (put down guilt by association)
  + 1 Cor 7:1 (1984NIV), “It is good for a man not to marry.” (justify celibacy)
  + 1 Cor 11:7 (2011NIV), “A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God;” (to require removing your hat for prayer)
  + 1 John 2:27 (2011NIV), “…you do not need anyone to teach you. …” (down play teaching)
  + Your examples of verses others use to manipulate you?
  + Proof-texting is a common use of any part of the Bible. It ignores contexts and sets up false expectations as a form of manipulating God. It HARMS the naïve believer who practices proof-texting because it often sets up false expectations.
    - Ps 118:24 (KJV), “This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.”
    - Ps 37:25 (ASV), “…I have not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread.”
* Observe the paradigm of “meaning and significance”

Meaning Interpretation What an author intends to communicate

Significance Application How the author wanted his audience to

Apply his communication. A text cannot be applied to what its meaning never intended.

Contextualization Application Bringing the M&S of a text into the current context. A text must have continuity with its original M&S.

**A. Epistles Follow Letter Genre**

1. The following illustrates standard letter form in the Greco-Roman world.

*Introduction* (prescript or salutation)

including: sender, addressee, greetings, and often additional greetings or wish for good health.

*Text or Body*

preceded by characteristic introductory formulae.

*Closing*

including: greetings, wishes, especially for persons other than the addressee; final greeting or prayer sentence; and sometimes dating.

Observe that 1 Cor. 1:1-9 follows the Greek letter pattern.

[**Introduction/Salutation**, 1:1-9]

A. The identity of the senders (1:1)

1. Paul - the author

2. Sosthenes -

B. The identity of the addressees (1:2)

1. Their corporate identity (v. 2a)

2. Their spiritual identity (v. 2b)

1a. The spiritual description

2a. The universal intention of the address - "all"

3a. The unity emphasized - "their Lord and ours"

C. The salutation (1:3)

1. The salutatory duo - grace and peace

2. The divine duo - Father and Son

D. The thanksgiving (1:4-9)

1. The statement of thanksgiving (1:4)

2. The reason for thanksgiving

1a. Enriched by God (1:5, 6)

2a. Endowed by God (1:7)

3. The confidence of thanksgiving (1:8-9)

[**Main Body**, 1:10-16:4]

[**Closing** 1 Cor 16:5-24]

2. The “Christianizing” of letter form

The term "greeting" (χαίρειv) is the standard Greek letter salutation. In the NT it only occurs three times (Acts 15:23; 23:26; Js. 1:1) and is only used by James in a NT letter. Paul does not use this term, but rather a simple or combined use of the Greek terms ***grace*** and ***peace***. The OT and Jewish letters often used "peace"/shalom (cf. Ezra 4:17; 5:7 and *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 3:114b, c). It is also interesting that 2 Maccabees 1:1 combines shalom and "greeting".

3. Letter form IS protocol. Only Galatians breaks protocol in the NT…and that sends a message. Also note the content of Paul’s intro/salutation to the Corinthians in 1 Cor.

**B. The Core of Letter Genre is “Occasional” in Nature.**

1. All epistles, as a product, are more or less ***a one way telephone conversation***. The author of an epistle knew and assumed certain information with and about his original audience. We, the modern reader, only have one end of the telephone and need to reconstruct the other end (i.e. the original audience).

2. The occasional nature of an epistle means that they were ***not written as theology text books,*** covering all aspects of a given subject. They were, rather, specially addressed to situations about which both the audience and author were aware.

3. Epistles are to be read as addressing specific problems in a specific setting. They were not written to be systematic theology books but letters addressing the needs of the audience.

For example, Philippians 2 is actually a statement about humility and service with Christ as the supreme illustration. It was not originally designed to be “the kenosis theory.”

Ephesians 1 is designed to be a liturgy of praise, not a systematic theology of election, although what it teaches about election is true.

1 Timothy 2:12 was written to address a problem in Ephesus. It is not a universal “blank check” prohibition of women teachers.

Consequently, the self-emptying of Christ and a doctrine of election are **by-products** of other purposes within a context. *This nature of epistles also accounts for why we often feel that every question about an issue is not resolved in the text we surface to answer our questions— that is, they were not written to do what we often demand that they do.*

4. Therefore, our reading of NT letters requires that we study/understand the original context of the audience and author. Not to know this context is a license to abuse the Bible by turning its statements into statements that serve OUR purposes.

**C. Epistles Utilize a Wide Range of Literary Techniques to Communicate with the Original Audience.**

1. The best structural entrée into Epistles is by analyzing the PARAGRAPHS that occur. Paragraphs are units of thought and organizing them surfaces the flow of thought.

* To analyze paragraphs in English versions is difficult because of the history of English versions. The KJV placed every verse to the left margin and did not indicate paragraphs. The first real paragraph Bible is the 1901 American Standard Version (ASV). It is the model for FULL paragraphs. Some eighty years later, the 1984 NIV issue a Bible that reflected the structures of the Bible. Poetry was set in poetic form. Paragraphs marked all narrative type material. HOWEVER, because of the status of English in 1984, the NIV chose the smallest paragraphs and failed to show how they related to the full paragraph.
* Meadors has created a process of paragraph analysis in order to organize the flow of thought in an Epistle. The current class context does not provide the right opportunity to practice this method. This would be a good exercise in another of your 8 week small group settings.

2. Internal to the paragraph structures, Epistles utilize a wide range of techniques to convey their information.

1a. Sometime, the Epistle will give clear clues to its organization.

* 1 Corinthians is a classic illustration of structure.

After the Opening, 1:11; 5:1 and 7:1 clearly indicate section flow. In 7:1, the phrase “now concerning” (ASV; “Now for” NIV) is used to organize the flow of interchange.

1:1-4:21 Paul’s response to oral reports from Chloe’s household

5:1-6:20 Paul’s response to oral reports

7:1-16:4 Paul’s responses to a letter from Corinth

* Romans illustrates logical progression of subject structure.

Chapter 1-8; 9-11; 12-15, with inner developments

* Most of Paul’s epistles are a 50-50 presentation. The first half addresses theological foundations; the second half presents the ethical expectations. This pattern is very consistent.
* Each epistle has its structure. It is your responsibility to find it. Research yields results.

2a. Internal to an epistle, the authors use a variety of devices to organize their presentation.

* Virtue and Vice Lists (See Meadors’ website on Fruit of the Spirit)
* Household Code Lists

Eph 5:22-6:9

Col 3:18-4:1

* Key Words

2 Peter 1:

* Use of “slogans”, especially in 1 Corinthians

A “slogan” is when an author takes a statement of his opponents which captures their thinking (i.e. a slogan they use) and expands and explains what it ought to mean. This is often in contrast to the meaning the opponents have assigned to their slogan.

Samples: “it is good for a man not to touch....” (7:1)

“All things are lawful....” (6:12 [cf. 5:1ff.]; 10:23)

“on account of conscience” (10:25; 10:27)

“women keep silent” (14:34)

“how are the dead raised...?” (15:35, rhetorical question)

* Use of “triplets” (cannot over interpret since using triplets was popular)

Body, Soul and Spirit

Faith, Love and Hope

Jude’s use of triplets!!

* Hymns and Confessional Statements

Col 1:15-20 (note how it is the crescendo of context)

1 Tim 3:16 (baptismal formulai?)

* The discipline of maintaining an interpretation in its own context:

Interpreting disputed texts, in Epistles or elsewhere, requires a research process known as “validation.” Here is an example of this process:

**ILLUSTRATIVE EXERCISE IN VALIDATION**

**The Problem of 1 Cor 14:33b-36**

**[The first task is to define the problem/issue being investigated. This will require adequate pre-research in order to understand and state what the problem is].**

Apparent Problem: 1 Cor 11 validates women's participation in the public services of the church. 1 Cor 14:33b-36 seems to say the direct opposite--women are to be silent without exception and consult their husbands at home.

**[The second task is to surface views in valid resources that address the problem. This is a paper chase. When done right, you will always think, “If I could just find one more article or book, I might really nail this.” You will discover a lot of overlap in what is stated. You use the multitude of sources to provide variety in source citations. All cited views must be supported by sources that actually hold the view cited…no secondary sources.**

***Views List Arguments Pro/Con*** [not done here]

1. Face value, and ignore 1 Cor 11. (popular literature)

2. Ch. 14 prophecy context = no authoritative teaching (Hurley, Carson, et.al.)

3. Interpolation, the text was not part of the original manuscript (Conzelmann, Fee, Payne; several variations here)

4. Feminist's Pauline Patriarchalism (Fiorenza)

5. Statement relates to family codes and not to public assembly (Ellis)

6. Response to Corinthian Slogan (Kaiser, Talbert; best option among many difficulties)

7. Pauline ironic sarcasm (Allison)

Select Bibliography on 1 Cor 14:33b-36

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NOTE: While this kind of work can be done by anyone, to their own level of ability, it is primarily the task of a Church’s leadership. It is their responsibility to do this work and then explain it to the congregation.

* There are other sophisticated literary structures that commentaries will expose (e.g. rhetorical devices like Diatribe in Romans; Discourse Analysis; etc.)

IV. Reflections on Reading Epistles

1. Statements in the epistles are not to be isolated from their original historical, cultural, and literary contexts. What the Bible meant is what it still means.

2 Contemporary application of New Testament teaching must have continuity with what it meant and how it was applied to the original audience. The dictum “one interpretation and many applications” is often abused by removing the “m” from “many.”

3. The epistles are “occasional” literature as letters; they are a two-way telephone conversation. We only have one side of the conversation and need to reconstruct the other end of the phone in order to accurately listen in to the conversation. This is a task of research.