

Bible 101

How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth

The Epistles

- [T]he “ease” of interpreting Epistles can be quite deceptive. (57)
- [I]t is necessary to note that the Epistles themselves are not a homogeneous lot. (58)
- Real letters=nonliterary, only person(s) they were addressed to. (58)
- Epistle=artistic literary form, intended for the public. (58)

Letter Form Parts

1. Name of the writer
2. Name of the recipient
3. Greeting
4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving (variable)
5. Body
6. Final greeting and farewell

- It will be noted that New Testament Epistles that lack either formal elements 1-3 or 6 are those that fail to be true letters, although they are partially epistolary in form.
- Despite this variety of kinds, however, there is one item that all of the Epistles have in common, and this is *the* crucial item to note in reading and interpreting them: They are all what are technically called *occasional documents*, and they are *all* from the *first century*. (60)

- Usually the occasion was some kind of behaviour that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light. (60)
- The occasional nature of the Epistles also means that they are *not* first of all theological treatises, nor are they summaries of Paul's or Peter's theology. (60)
- The first thing one must try to do with any of the Epistles is to form a tentative but informed reconstruction of the situation to which the author is speaking. (61)

- [In response to questions of finding context] *First*, you need to consult your Bible dictionary or the introduction to your commentary to find out as much as possible about [the city] and its people. (61)
- *Second*, and now especially for study purposes, you need to develop the habit of reading the whole letter through in one sitting, and preferably aloud, so that mouth and ear join the eye. (62)
- We cannot stress enough the importance of reading and rereading. (62)

- [Y]ou may find it helpful to jot down a few very brief notes with references if you have a hard time making mental notes. [] 1. what you notice about the recipients themselves, 2. Paul's attitudes, 3. any specific things mentioned as to the specific occasion of the letter, and 4. the letter's natural, logical divisions[.] (62)
- As you approach each of the smaller sections of the letter, you will need to repeat much of what we have just done. (65)

- Assignment: Read a section of an Epistle
 1. Read it through at least two times
 2. List in a notebook everything that tells you something about the recipients and their problem
 3. Make another list of key words and repeated phrases that indicate the subject matter of Paul's answer

- The next step in studying the letter is to learn to trace [the author's] argument as an answer to the problem[.] (67)
- Assignment: Trace the argument of the section, paragraph by paragraph, and in a sentence or two explain the point of each paragraph for the argument as a whole—or explain how it functions as a part of [the author's] problem. (67)

- [Y]ou want to be able to do two things: (1) In a compact way state the *content* of each paragraph. *What* does Paul say in this paragraph? (2) In another sentence or two try to explain *why* you think Paul says this right at this point. How does this contribute to the argument? (67)
- *[A]ll of what we have done here, you can do.* It may take practice—in some cases even hard work of thinking—but you can do it, and the rewards are great. (70)

Problem Passages Guidelines

1. In many cases the reason the problem passages are so difficult for us is that, frankly, they were not written to us. [] [T]ruism: What God wants us to know has been communicated to us; what God has not told us may still hold our interest, but our uncertainty at these points should make us hesitant about being dogmatic. (72)

2. Despite some uncertainty as to some of the precise details, one needs to learn to ask what can be said for certain about a given passage and what is merely possible but not certain. (72)

3. [E]ven if one cannot have full certainty about some of the details, very often the point of the whole passage is still within ones grasp. (72)

4. On such passages [] you will need to consult a good commentary. (72)

Hermeneutical Questions

- *All* people “do” hermeneutics, even if they know nothing about exegesis and don’t have a clue as to the meaning of these two words! (74)
- The big issue among Christians committed to Scripture as God’s word has to do with the problems of cultural relativity—what is cultural and therefore belongs to the first century alone and what transcends culture and is thus a word for all seasons. (74)

- [W]e bring our own form of common sense to the text and apply what we can to our own situation. What does not seem to apply is simply left in the first century. (75)
- Let it be emphasized here that most of the matters in the Epistles fit nicely into this commonness hermeneutics. (75)
- Our problems—and differences—are generated by those moments that lie somewhere in between these two, where some of us think we should obey exactly what is stated and other of us are not so sure. (75)

- Without necessarily intending to, we bring our theological heritage, our church traditions, our cultural norms, or our existential concerns to the Epistles and we read them. And this results in all kinds of selectivity or “getting around” certain passages. (75)
- *[A] text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers. This is why exegesis must always come first. (77)*

- *Whenever we share comparable particulars with the first-century hearers, God's word to us is the same as his word to them. (78)*
- The great caution here is that we do our exegesis well so that we have confidence that our situations and particulars are genuinely comparable to theirs. (79)

- When there are comparable particulars and comparable contexts in today's church, is it legitimate to extend the application of the text to other contexts, or to make a first-century case-specific matter apply to a context totally foreign to its first-century setting? (79)
- We would argue, therefore, that when there are comparable situations and comparable particulars, God's word *to us* in such texts should be limited to its original intent. (80)

- The next problem has to do with two kinds of passages in the Epistles: those that speak to first-century issues that for the most part are without twenty-first-century counterparts, and those that speak to problems that could happen also in the twenty-first century but are highly unlikely to do so. (81)
- [H]ow do the apostle's answers to these non-contemporary problems speak to twenty-first-century Christians? (82)

- First, we must do our exegesis with particular care so that we hear what God's word to them really was. In very many cases a clear *principle* has been articulated, which usually will transcend the historical particularity to which it was being applied. (82)
- Second, and here is the important point, the "principle" does not now become timeless to be applied at random or whim to any and every kind of situation. We would argue that it *must be applied to genuinely comparable situations*. (82)

- Guidelines for matters of indifference:
 1. What the Epistles specifically indicate as matters of indifference may still be regarded as such.
 2. Matters of indifference are not inherently moral but are cultural—even if they stem from *religious* culture.
 3. It is especially important to note that the sin-lists in the Epistles never include the first-century equivalents of the items we have listed above. Moreover, such matters of indifference are never included among the various lists of Christian imperatives. (83)

- The problem of cultural relativity:
 1. Epistles are occasional documents of the first century, conditioned by the language and culture of the first century, which spoke to specific situations in the first-century church.
 2. Many of the specific situations in the Epistles are so completely conditioned by their first-century setting that all recognize that they have little or no personal application as a word for today, except perhaps in the most distant sense of one's deriving some principle from them.

3. Other passages are also thoroughly conditioned by their first-century settings, but the word contained in them may be “translated” into new but comparable settings.
4. Is it not possible, therefore, that still other texts, although they appear to have comparable particulars, are also conditioned by their first-century setting and need to be translated into new settings, or simply left in the first century? (84)

- Guidelines for distinguishing between culturally relevant and universally normative:
 1. One should first distinguish between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent on or peripheral to it.
 2. [O]ne should be prepared to distinguish between what the New Testament itself sees as inherently moral and what is not.
 3. One must make special note of items where the New Testament itself has a uniform and consistent witness and where it reflects differences.

4. It is important to be able to distinguish within the New Testament itself between principle and specific application.
5. It might also be important, as much as one is able to do this with care, to determine the cultural options open to any New Testament writer.
6. One must keep alert to possible cultural differences between the first and twenty-first centuries that are sometimes not immediately obvious.
7. One must finally exercise Christian charity at this point. (85-88)

- One must always be forming—and “reforming”—a biblical theology on the basis of sound exegesis.
(90)
- 1. Because the Epistles are “occasioned” [], we must be content at times with some limitations to our theological understanding.
- 2. Sometimes our theological problems with the Epistles derive from the fact that we are asking *our* questions of texts that by their occasional nature are answering *their* questions only.