

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE



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The Epistles – Study #14 & #15

Epistles constitute 21 of the 27 New Testament books.

Book	Group	Author	Date				
Romans		Paul	AD 57				
1 Corinthians			AD 53-56				
2 Corinthians			AD 56				
Galatians			AD 49-50				
Ephesians	The Prison Epistles		Paul	AD 60-62			
Philippians							
Colossians							
1 Thessalonians				Paul	AD 50-51		
2 Thessalonians							
1 Timothy	The Pastoral Epistles				Paul	Mid AD 60's	
2 Timothy							
Titus							
Philemon	The Prison Epistles					Paul	AD 60-62
Hebrews	The General Epistles						Unknown
James		James					AD 40's
1 Peter		Peter					Early AD 60's
2 Peter							
1 John		John					Late AD 80's to Early AD 90's
2 John							
3 John							
Jude			Jude				AD 60's – AD 70's

Introduction

- They are letters (epistle; comes from the Greek: epistello, "to send to").
- They follow the general custom and form of letters that became an important part of communication in the Greek-speaking world about 300 years before the birth of Jesus.
- The epistles are not random ramblings, but carefully constructed and organized documents.

The basic foundational structure and outline of an epistle consists of:

1. The name of the writer
2. The person(s) or church(es) that the letter is addressed to
3. The greeting (generally a formula that was common in letter writing at that time)
4. A prayer, wish, or thanksgiving
5. The body of the letter
6. The final greeting or farewell

The body of the letter is the most “fluid.” Each letter addresses different topics, needs, or concerns that prompts the author, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, to write.

- Some are written to churches (e.g. The church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:1); or to the churches in a geographical area (Gal 1:2; 1 Peter 1:1).
- Some are addressed to the churches throughout the known world (James 1:1; Jude 1:1). These letters tend to be more general, and deal with doctrinal/theological and ecclesiastical matters.
- Some are written to individuals (1 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4). These tend to be more personal. However, they are intended to speak to the beliefs and practices of the church at large (e.g. pastors, deacons, right teaching).
- They would have been written on a scroll. Often, they were dictated and then delivered by a messenger.
 - Peter mentions that his letter was written down by Silvanus, or Silas (1 Peter 5:12).
 - Timothy was involved in the writing and delivery of several of the apostle Paul’s letters (Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; Philemon 1:1), although Paul signed each one to verify that he was the author (Galatians 6:11).

Foundational Principles for Interpreting Epistles.

Generally, the reading of NT epistles is easy. However, there are guidelines for interpreting them properly. For instance, consider these:

- Why aren't any of us going to Troas for Paul's coat? (2 Tim 4:13)
 - Why do we not greet each other with a holy kiss? (Rom 16:16)
 - Why are women in our churches not wearing head coverings? (1 Cor 11:5-6)
1. The epistles were meant to be read as wholes, not parts or pieces. This is called "unit reading." It gives a sense of context and flow.
 2. The epistles are "occasional documents," and must be read in light of their historical and cultural settings

They were written in a time and place and to a particular audience. This is why understanding the introduction of a letter is the first step to good interpretation.

They were addressing specific issues and concerns of that time and moment. They tend to address the following issues:

- A kind of behaviour that needed correcting.

See 1 Cor 11:17-22; James 2:1-13

When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. ²¹ For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. ²² What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this! (1 Cor. 11:20-22)

- A doctrinal truth that needed clarifying or doctrinal error that needed correcting.

See Gal 1:6-10; Rom 3:21-31

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News ⁷ but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ.

⁸ Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. ⁹ I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed. (Galatians 1:6-9)

- A misunderstanding that needed further light (theological, personal, ecclesiastical).

See Philippians 1:8-16; 1 John 2:7-11

And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News.¹³ For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ.¹⁴ And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear.

¹⁵ It's true that some are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry. But others preach about Christ with pure motives.¹⁶ They preach because they love me, for they know I have been appointed to defend the Good News. (Philippians 1:8-16)

- We are really reading only one side of a conversation (see 1 Corinthians 1:11; 5:1; 7:1)

Therefore, we need to develop skills in:

- a. Researching the backgrounds to the epistles (letters). This is done by using good Commentaries, Biblical Surveys, Handbooks, etc.
- b. Reading between the lines (inductive hints). (For example, read 2 Peter 3:1-2. What can you assume about the audience from these verses?)

This is my second letter to you, dear friends, and in both of them I have tried to stimulate your wholesome thinking and refresh your memory.² I want you to remember what the holy prophets said long ago and what our Lord and Savior commanded through your apostles. (2 Pet. 3:1-2)

- c. Recognizing time-bound vs. timeless instructions and norms. (For example, how do you handle a passage like Titus 1:10-14?)

For there are many rebellious people who engage in useless talk and deceive others. This is especially true of those who insist on circumcision for salvation.¹¹ They must be silenced, because they are turning whole families away from the truth by their false teaching. And they do it only for money.¹² Even one of their own men, a prophet from Crete, has said about them, "The people of Crete are all liars, cruel animals, and lazy gluttons."¹³ This is true. So reprimand them sternly to make them strong in the faith.¹⁴ They must stop listening to Jewish myths and the commands of people who have turned away from the truth. (Titus 1:10-14)

3. Each human author tends to have his own emphases

There tends to be internal consistency in the writings of Paul, John, and Peter. Sometimes we have to be careful when we move between authors because they tend to emphasize one thing over another. For example, we sometimes hear that Paul and James are contradictory. They are not, but there is a definite difference in emphasis.

For example, read Romans 3:27-28; 4:1-5 and James 2:14-18 (cf. Romans 12:20).

Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith.²⁸ So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law. (Rom. 3:27-28)

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?¹⁵ Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing,¹⁶ and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

¹⁷ So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.¹⁸ Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds. (James 2:14-18)

4. While the epistles are "occasional documents" addressing specific issues, they are authoritative as God's Word.

- The apostles recognized their own authority (1 Thess. 2:13, cf. 2 Thess. 3:6)

Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe. (1 Th. 2:13)

- But when they spoke to theological and ecclesiastical issues, they spoke with apostolic authority (John 14; 16; 20).

This obviously has implications for the church today. These letters were canonized.

5. Bringing the epistles into our time/context.

Most problems can be solved by "common sense hermeneutics." For instance, nobody is running to Troas or attempting to get to Rome by winter.

When problems do arise, though, the issues usually revolve around whether it's an immediate cultural/historical situation or a universal one.

Below are some helpful guidelines:

- I. We must seek to determine the central core of the gospel message and Christian doctrine and teaching. (What is the consistent witness?)

e.g. teaching about: God
Christ
Salvation, etc.

- II. We must look for the things that are inherently moral (or immoral), in contrast to the things that are cultural or neutral.

- Sin lists vs. holy kiss
- Homosexuality vs. women's head-coverings

- III. We must look for items where the NT and the rest of Scripture has a consistent witness.

e.g. Love as a basic ethic, salvation by faith in Christ, baptism as an expression of discipleship, resurrection of the body.....

- IV. We must work hard at grasping a universal principle from the specific and cultural teachings of the Epistles.

e.g. 1 Cor. 11 - head coverings
1 Cor. 11 - men with long hair
1 Tim. 5:23 - wine and water
Rom. 14-15 - weaker brother

Note: Sometimes to practice a specific instruction in our culture may in fact express the opposite value intended (e.g. wearing a hat may indicate pride and vanity).

- V. We must try to discover the options available to address an issue within the cultural milieu of the author and audience.

e.g. Full complementary roles for women, freedom of slaves, abolition of polygamy was not something that could be implemented in the culture of the day. Therefore, the writers regulated them with Christian values of care, compassion, and decency, rather than confront the culture at such a significant level.

- VI. We must understand that due to the change in culture between then and now (or us and them), some teachings are impossible to perpetuate without at least some

modification or “principilization.”

e.g. We don’t have a king (Rom 13:1-6; 1 Tim 2:2)
We have abolished slavery - Does this mean that the teachings of Ephesians 6:5-9 apply to employees and employers?

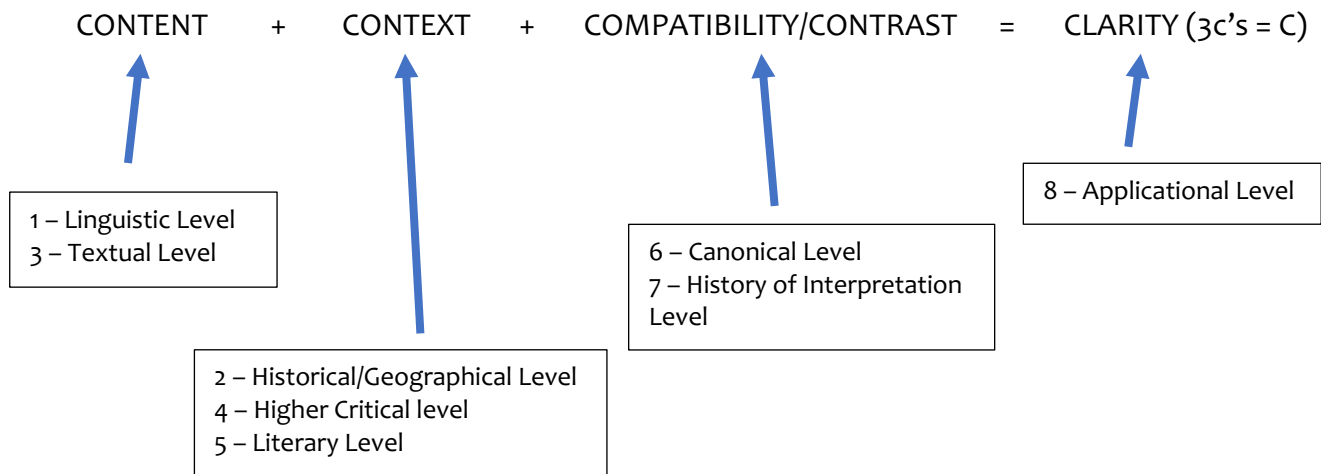
VII. We must exercise liberal Christian charity

Good people differ! We need to work at unity with diversity. We are inevitably limited by what the text does not address (even though we would like it to) and understand that the text is answering its questions, not ours.

Summary and Conclusion

Reading the Epistles is probably some of the most straightforward reading in the Bible. These are texts that speak most directly to the life of the church. They are letters, set in a context and culture, but they have been canonized to instruct the ongoing church. Let’s read, learn and take proper care to make the message live with power and relevance.

The Simple Formula Revisited.



Finding the Key Principle(s).

Every attempt at interpreting a Biblical text is for the purpose of understanding the principle that is being taught. Two principles can be gleaned from every text.

1. A theological principle. What does it teach us about God? (The vertical dimension).
2. An applicational principle. What does this mean for me? (The horizontal dimension).

The Journey of Interpretive Discovery!



What does the text say?

What did the text mean to them?

What are the differences between us and them?

What principles does the text teach us

Are they compatible with Scripture as a whole?

What does it mean for me?