

## Lesson Three: The Epistles: Learning to Think Contextually

- I. Introduction:
  - A. Why start with the Epistles?
    1. They reflect the most natural form of writing.
    2. Understanding is not difficult.
  - B. But...
    1. The difficulty with the Epistles isn't so much with how to understand the style of writing as it is with how they are to be applied.
    2. For example:
      - a. How do we apply 1 Corinthians 5 in our modern culture?
      - b. How do we apply 1 Corinthians 12-14 today, or do they even apply today?
      - c. How do passages like 1 Timothy 6:1, 2; Ephesians 6:5; Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18, apply today, or do they have any application today?
      - d. Again, with such passages, it is easy to understand what is written but how are they to be applied?
  - C. Because of this, the Epistles serve as a good example of important principles of effective Bible study.
- II. The Nature of the Epistles:
  - A. Epistle means "Letter"
    1. LETTER *especially*: a formal or elegant letter; a composition in the form of a letter (Webster's).
    2. Different kinds of letters:
      - a. A personal letter (i.e. Philemon, 1 Timothy, etc.).
      - b. A group letter (Romans, Ephesians, etc.).
      - c. An open letter (Galatians, 1 Peter, etc.).
    3. The Groupings of the Epistles:
      - a. Paul's Epistles (Romans – 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, also Ministerial Epistles).
      - b. Ministerial Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus).
      - c. General Epistles (Hebrews – Jude).
  - B. Epistolary Form:
    1. Letter's have a specific form.
    2. "Just as there is a standard form to our letters (date, salutation, body, closing, and signature), so there was for theirs.
    3. Thousands of ancient letters have been found, and most of them have a form exactly like those in the New Testament" (Fee, p. 56).
      - a. Name of the writer.
      - b. Name of the recipient.
      - c. Greeting.
      - d. Blessing.
      - e. Body.
      - f. Closing exhortations.

4. Some of the New Testament Epistles match this form exactly, however there are some (i.e. James, Hebrews) that don't fit this form of ancient letter writing hardly at all.
- C. All of the New Testament Epistles are "Occasional Documents"
1. That is, they all arise out of and address a specific occasion (Fee, p. 58).
  2. This is the **crucial key** for how to read the Epistles.
    - a. It is crucial to understand the situation precipitating the writing the of the letter.
    - b. For example, there are several question address in 1 Corinthians that shows Paul is responding to questions asked by members of that congregation – like reading a one-sided phone conversation (1 Cor. 1:11; 5:1; 7:1, 2; 8:1; 9:3, 11).
    - c. The "occasion" of Galatians is to counter the false teaching of Judaizers (cf. Gal. 1:6-9; 2:11-5:15).
    - d. The "occasion" of Hebrews is backsliding to Judaism (Heb. 6:1-8).
  3. These were 1<sup>st</sup> Century "occasions" or situations that were being addressed and we **must** strive to **first** understand how the letter applies to that situation; **then** we can make correct application to the situations we face today.
  4. This means that the doctrine contained in the Epistles is **applicable doctrine**, not simply intellectual, impractical knowledge.
- III. The Historical Context:
- A. Historical Reconstruction
    1. To get the most out of our Bible study we must, to the best of our ability, reconstruct how the text would have been read in the historical setting of its original writing.
    2. So many of the doctrinal errors we face come from a failure to do this most fundamental task of effective Bible study.
  - B. The Process:
    1. Research:
      - a. Bible dictionaries.
      - b. Bible encyclopedias.
      - c. Introductory notes from commentaries (NOTE: a good commentary will have an introductory section on the historical setting of the book. This is not the same thing as checking textual notes, you won't want to do that until later in your study of the text).
    2. Reading:
      - a. Read through the entire book repeatedly.
      - b. Make notes from the text of any historically relevant information.
        - 1) About the writer.
        - 2) About the recipients.
        - 3) About the situation.

- 4) “There are some things you should be looking for as you read, but you are not now trying to grasp the meaning of every word or sentence. It is the big view that counts first” (Fee, p. 60).

#### IV. The Literary Context:

- A. Read and Reread
  1. As you read through the book look for natural breaks in the subject matter.
  2. Look for central themes and how those themes are addressed throughout the letter/book.
  3. It may be necessary to overlook chapter and verse breaks (i.e. Heb. 5:12-6:20).
- B. Literary Form
  1. Paragraphs have central themes.
  2. Groups of paragraphs connected by the same central theme make up the contextual section.
  3. For example:
    - a. In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul is specifically addressing the use of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian congregation.
    - b. In Romans 2-11 Paul is specifically addressing problems relating to Jewish Christians.
    - c. Grouping the contextual sections of the book will form a thematic outline:
      - 1) 1 Corinthians 12-14 is addressing the specific issue of spiritual gifts within the larger context of the assembled church (1 Cor. 11-16).
      - 2) Romans 2-11 is part of a larger context (Rom. 1:18-11:36) and itself a larger context within which are more immediate contextual sections, i.e. The Universality of Sin (Rom. 1:18-3:31), which can also be further broken down.
  4. The most important literary element for understanding the immediate context is the paragraph.
- C. Levels of Context (Horner)
  1. Canonical Context
    - a. Where the letter/book fits into the Bible
      - 1) Old Testament
      - 2) New Testament
    - b. This will determine how it is to be understood.
  2. Book Context
    - a. The book itself.
    - b. Other books by the same author.
    - c. Other book addressing similar situations.
  3. Sectional Context
    - a. Chapter Section
    - b. Paragraph Section
  4. Immediate and Remote Context (Conley)

- a. Immediate context is the paragraph and immediately surrounding paragraphs, may or may not be entire chapter.
- b. The remote context is the entire book/letter, how does the immediate paragraph(s) fit into the book as a whole.

V. Conclusion:

- A. It is not possible to correctly understand and apply written communication without respecting context.
- B. When we seek to understand and apply the word of God, we **must...**
  1. Respect the context!
  2. The historical context.
  3. The literary context.
- C. *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* (2 Timothy 2:15, NKJV)