

How To Read The New Testament Letters

Introduction

Imagine that you are sitting in your living room and the telephone rings. Someone picks it up and speaks to the person phoning in. You hear only half of the conversation, which runs something like this:

Hello Dave, How are you?... Yes, I've been thinking about that question and I think that you should go ahead as we discussed... No, that's not a good idea because I've never been able to get it to work that way... Yes, I'll meet you there at 4 o'clock... Well, do your best... Good bye for now... Click!

You are left trying to fill in the gaps in the conversation from the clues given in the parts that you could hear. If you know who Dave is and what he is calling about you have a good chance of filling in the gaps correctly. If you don't, you can always check with the person who answered the 'phone .

When we come to read the 23 letters found in the New Testament we are faced with a similar situation to the one described above. However, we are separated by almost 2 000 years of history from the writer and the recipients, and we cannot ask Paul or Peter what the questions were that they were answering, much as that would help us. Our task is not hopeless, because there are enough clues within the letters, the NT and background material, to reconstruct the situation and understand the argument. In a sense we are involved in a detective game and by following a few simple principles we can succeed in our goal. This study will outline these principles. Later we will learn how to apply what we learn to our lives today.

Letter Writing in the First Century AD

Letters in the 1st Century followed a conventional style, just as modern letters do, whether they are business or personal in nature. The following list explains the various elements that you would expect to find in an ancient letter:

- 1) The name of the writer. (e.g. Paul, Peter, etc.)
- 2) The name of the recipient (e.g. the church of God at Corinth).
- 3) A greeting (e.g. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father...").
- 4) A prayer wish our thanksgiving (e.g. "I always give thanks for you...").
- 5) The body - containing an argument, answering questions, giving instructions, etc.)
- 6) Final greeting and farewell (e.g. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you...").(1)

Not all of the letters in the New Testament follow this pattern. Some have various elements

missing, so don't think that they all **must** be there because they are in this list! In ancient times it was usual for a person wanting to send a letter to have someone write it down for him. He would then read through what his secretary had written, making changes were necessary and adding a personal note at the end in his own hand. The NT writers also followed this practice as we can see from Rom. 16:22 (see also 2 Thess. 3:17 & 1 Pet. 5:12).

Reading The Letters

There is no substitute for reading the letters through in one sitting. After all, you wouldn't read part of a letter from a friend in dribs and drabs. Remember that most of the letters contain an argument or series of arguments that develop as the letter progresses. Take time to read the letter right through, then again in another translation if you can. The idea is to be continually asking yourself "What's the point?" "What was the writer trying to communicate?" Then start again and ask the following questions. Writing your thoughts in a notebook as you go will be helpful.

- 1) What do you notice about the people being addressed by the letter? Are they Jews or Greeks, wealthy or slave, their problems, attitudes, etc.
- 2) What was the writer's attitude to them. Was he rebuking, encouraging, giving instructions, etc.?
- 3) Note any specific things that give you a clue as to why the letter was written.
- 4) Note the letter's natural, logical divisions.(2)

Number 4) requires some further clarification, especially if you use a version that divides the text so that each verse begins on a new line. Remember that the New Testament writers, the same as every other writer wrote in paragraphs and not in verses. The verse divisions were added to the New Testament in 1557 by Robert Stephanas, a Parisian printer while he was on a coach journey.(3) The story goes that every pothole in the road made his pen jump and create another verse number! Versions that divide the text into paragraphs are better, but make up your own mind where the paragraph divisions should be. The paragraph titles in modern versions are not in the original - try to ignore them and get the meaning from the text for yourself.

In addition to the information given about the recipients in the text, compare the information in the book of Acts to see what light that throws upon the situation. Consulting a good Bible Dictionary (such as the *New Bible Dictionary*, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* or the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*) will also help you. This will provide you with all the available background information available from other 1st century sources and archaeology.

Finally, it is important to remember that our cultural and lifestyle is very different to that in New Testament times. The letters contain a great deal of theology, but it is always theology directed to a particular person or situation. Remember that while understanding what the text meant to its original audience is the essential first step in reading the letters, it is *only* the first

step (even if it is the easiest and in many ways the most exciting). No one who reads the Bible can say that he or she has succeeded in understanding it until they have been able to apply it to their own lives.

Applying the Letters

Applying the NT letters to the modern church is often more difficult than it might appear at first. There are many books that discuss the issues involved in detail, but here I want to provide some general guidelines, supported by examples, that will help. These guidelines are intended to allow you to understand what the NT letters have to say to the Church. There is no contradiction between this meaning and any you might arrive at through your devotional reading of the Scriptures. The difference is while the personal meaning may be authoritative for you, only the meaning for the Church is authoritative for everyone. Try and let your devotional reading be informed and enhanced by the methods I will explain, and not replaced by them. They may not provide you with all the answers you would like, but they should help you to ask the right questions.

1.) A TEXT CANNOT MEAN SOMETHING TO US THAT IT COULD NOT HAVE MEANT TO ITS ORIGINAL READERS.(4) This is a very important principle and is the best test of whether you have applied the text correctly. A good example is found in 1 Corinthians 13:8. Many churches teach that this means that when the Bible was completed, spiritual gifts would cease. They then go on to say that modern day Christians who speak in tongues are carnal or deceived by the devil. This could never have been the text's intended meaning, because Paul was not referring to the Bible as the perfect thing that was coming - he was talking about the return of Jesus.

2. Whenever we share similar specific life situations with the first-century world, God's Word to us is the same as his Word to them.(5) There are many passages in the letters which can be related directly to our lives today. The sin lists in the letters are an obvious application of this principle. Wherever you go in the world certain things will always be wrong, e.g. 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21.

3. When our situation and that of the original recipients is different, look for the universal principle behind what is being said. No one in Britain is a slave, so Paul's instructions for slave/master relationships are not directly applicable. It is not hard, however, to recognise the principles underlying Colossians 3:22-25, and apply them to your workplace. Similarly, no one is likely to be offered meat that has been sacrificed to an idol (Rom. 14:1-15:2; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:14-11:1). However, the underlying principle of not offending a weaker brother or sister's conscience is extremely important. There are many things that are not specifically mentioned in the Scriptures that believers may have different opinions about - sometimes quite strong opinions. We are not to offend others by expressing these opinions. In these situations it is better to keep our opinions to ourselves.

4. A scripture's context will help you decide whether a verse has a direct or indirect application for today. 1 Corinthians 15:29 refers to a practice called "baptism for the dead". From it the Mormons derive their doctrine of baptizing people for their deceased relatives and ancestors. Although over 40 possible meanings for the verse have been proposed, no one can say for sure which is right. The wider scriptural context (the whole of the Bible), ancient

literature and archaeology give us no clue here. As Paul only mentions it is passing he was probably not approving of the practice, but merely using it as an example of the Corinthians illogical thinking. It could well be that this is one of the matters that Timothy would clear up when he arrived (1 Cor. 4:17). If the practice could be substantiated elsewhere as something that all believers should do, then the situation would be different: as it is, we don't baptize for the dead. Some texts can have what is called an extended meaning. A good example of this is 2 Cor. 6:14-16. This has traditionally been understood as forbidding a Christian to date or marry an unbeliever. However, it is not clear what Paul was forbidding the Corinthians to do - all we know is that it involved idolatry. The application to marriages in this case is still valid, but only because it is supported elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:39).(6)

5. There are some texts that do not have either a direct or indirect application today.

This might seem to be a strange thing to say, but when we read the letters we recognise many of these passages without thinking. Good examples are the personal remarks and greetings given by the writers, e.g. no one to my knowledge (except Timothy) has ever felt called to fetch Paul's cloak for him (2 Tim 4:13), or pass on his greetings (Rom. 16:3-15). This being so we should be very cautious about saying that a text has no meaning for the church today, because as we grow in our understanding we might find that it is relevant after all (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16). The texts given as examples all serve to illustrate something about the writer and his situation, and are therefore useful to us indirectly. You may find that the Holy Spirit will speak to you through a text that has no meaning for the church in general, so if you are called to be a Turkish cloakroom attendant on the basis of 2 Tim. 4:13 - go for it!

Finally, if you are struggling to understand the letters, you are not alone. Even in the first century believers found Paul's letters difficult (see 2 Peter 3:15-16). This does not mean that we give up. Correctly interpreting and applying the Bible requires diligence and effort on our part (2 Tim. 2:15), but this does not put the meaning beyond the grasp of anyone.

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References

(1) Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 46-47.

(2) Fee & Stuart, 50.

(3) The Old Testament divisions were added by Mordecai Nathan in 1445. Wilfred Kurht, *Interpreting The Bible: A Handbook of Biblical Understanding*. (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1983), 18.

(4) Fee & Stuart, 64.

(5) Fee & Stuart, 65.

(6) Fee & Stuart, 67.
