

## ***The Epistles: Contextual Thinking***

### **What is an Epistle?**

- All of the New Testament except the Gospels, Acts, & most of Revelation
- 2 categories:
  - Letters: Communication between the author and a specific individual or group with whom the author has personal knowledge and connection.
    - 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon
  - “Real” Epistles: A literary style that is written to a broad-based audience who has some commonality, but who is not necessarily known personally by the author.
    - Romans; Hebrews; James; 1 & 2 Peter; 1, 2, & 3 John; Jude

### **The Form of Epistles**

- Name of the writer (“Paul”)
- Name of the recipient (“To the church of God in Corinth”)
- Greeting (“Grace and peace to you from God our Father”)
- Prayer wish or Thanksgiving (“I always thank God for you...”)
- Body
- Final Greeting & Farewell (“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.”)

### **Occasional Documents**

- All Epistles are written due to and to deal with specific occasions/issues.
  - In order to understand the scope of what the author is saying, we must understand the issues he is addressing
- The Context of the Letter
  - What questions is he answering?
  - What concerns is he addressing?
  - What heresy is he correcting?
  - Why did he write what he wrote?!

### **Historical Context**

- Forming a tentative, informed reconstruction of the situation to which the author is speaking

*Step 1:* Find out as much as possible about the audience/recipient(s) & their relationship to the author

- Historical & cultural information about the city, person(s), etc.

- Use resources like Bible Dictionaries, Atlases, Commentaries, Introductions in good study Bibles

*Step 2a:* Read the Epistle through in one sitting

- Preferably aloud
- Gives a better understanding of the flow of the “argument” of the author

*Step 2b:* Reread the Epistle and take notes on:

- I. What you notice about the recipients (i.e. primarily Jewish or Gentiles; wealthy or slave; their problems, attitudes, etc.)
- II. The author’s attitudes
- III. Any clues to the specific occasion of the Epistle
- IV. The Epistle’s natural, logical divisions
  - Often laid out in the introduction in good study Bibles\*

### **Example: 1 Corinthians**

*Step 1a:* Recipients: Church in the Greek city of Corinth (1:2)

- About Corinth (from Bible Dictionary, commentary, or Study Bible book introduction)
  - Less than 100-year-old city when Paul visited
  - Located on the isthmus of mainland Greece
    - Commercial, cultural, & religious center
      - Contained a large temple to Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love
        - Temple prostitution

*Step 1b:* Sender: Paul (1:1)

- Paul visited during his 2<sup>nd</sup> (c. 52 AD) & 3<sup>rd</sup> (c. 56-57 AD) Missionary Journeys
  - See Acts 18
- The 1<sup>st</sup> time immediately after Athens
  - See Acts 17:18-34 (esp. 32-34)
  - See 1 Cor. 1:17-2:5

*Step 2a:* Read the epistle in one sitting

*Step 2b:* Reread the Epistle and take notes on

- I. What you notice about the recipients
  - Love wisdom & knowledge (1:18-2:5; 4:10; 8:1-13)
  - They are proud & arrogant (4:18; 5:2, 6)
    - Even to the point of judging Paul (4:1-5; 9:1-18)
  - Yet have a lot of internal problems
- II. Paul’s attitudes
  - Rebuke (4:8-21; 5:2; 6:1-8)

- Appeal (4:14-17; 16:10-11)
  - Exhortation/Command (6:18-20; 16:12-14)
- III. Any clues to the specific occasion of the Epistle
- Paul received reports from Chloe's house and possibly others (1:10-12; 5:1)
  - The Corinthian church wrote a letter to Paul (7:1; see also 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12?)
    - Possibly delivered by a delegation of church leaders: Stephanas, Fortunatus, Achaicus (16:16-17)
- IV. The Epistle's natural, logical divisions
- A. Introductory remarks (1:1-9)
- B. Reported Problems (chapters 1-6)
1. Problem of Division in the church (1:10-4:21)
  2. Problem of the incestuous man (5:1-13)
  3. Problem of lawsuits among believers (6:1-11)
  4. Problem of Sexual Immorality (6:12-20)
- C. Responses to the Corinthians letter to Paul (chapters 7-14)
1. About behavior within marriage (7:1-24)
  2. About behavior for the unmarried (7:25-40)
  3. About food sacrificed to idols (8:1-11:1)
  4. About women's head coverings (11:2-16)
  5. An abuse of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
  6. About Spiritual Gifts (12-14)
  7. The bodily resurrection of believers (15:1-58)
  8. About a collection for the church in Jerusalem (16:1-11)
  9. About the return of Apollos (16:12)
- D. Concluding exhortations and greetings (16:13-24)

### **Literary Context**

- A trace of the author's argument throughout the Epistle
  - Avoids taking texts out of context
- Good tips:
  - Think Paragraphs
    - KJV/NKJV\*
    - Try to compact what the author is saying in each paragraph
    - Ask yourself why the author says what he says at this point
- Good exegesis is self-contained

- You shouldn't have to go outside the text (in its proper scope) to understand what it means
- Nothing in the text doesn't fit into the argument
- All of the content makes good sense when kept in its original context

### **Example: 1 Corinthians 3:5-16**

- Leading context:
  - They misunderstand that the Gospel stands in contradiction to human wisdom (1:18-25)
    - As does His choice of a new people (1:26-31)
    - Paul's own preaching stands as an illustration of divine contradiction (2:1-5)
  - This is wisdom from the Spirit (2:6-16)
    - Since the Corinthians have the Spirit, they should understand this and stop acting like they don't
    - Arguing over Paul & Apollos (3:1-4)
- 1 Cor. 3:5-9
  - Nature & function of these leaders
    - Merely servants, not lords
  - Agriculture analogy
    - Both Paul & Apollos have a common cause, even though their tasks differ
    - Everything & everyone belongs to God: The Church, the servants, and the growth
      - They are dividing by who they follow, when they need to see that they should all be following God
- 1 Cor. 3:10-15
  - Architecture analogy
    - The particulars are the same as in the previous metaphor
    - But Paul's point is different: "But each one should build with care." (v. 10b)
      - Still about the Church as a whole, not individuals' lives
      - The warning is to be careful with what the Church builds upon the foundation of Christ
- 1 Cor. 3:16 : "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"
  - Conclusion: The Christian community is God's temple in the midst of the world
    - Together, the Spirit dwells in her midst

## Problem Passages

- *“Ones that we don’t have access to enough information to have a clear understanding of what they meant in their original context, much less now.”*
  - Examples: “because of the angels” (1 Cor. 11:10); “baptized for the dead” (1 Cor. 15:29); Christ’s preaching to the “imprisoned spirits” (1 Peter 3:19); “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:3)
- Guidelines
  1. They may be difficult to understand because they were not written to us.
    - The author may be assuming the understanding of the original audience about shared experiences that we are not privy to.
    - Must learn to be content about what we don’t know and trust that we know what we need to.
      - Example: 2 Thess. 2:5-6
  2. Despite the uncertainty of some precise details, we need to ask what is certain about the text and what is possible
    - Example: 1 Cor. 15:29
  3. If we can’t know all the detail, the big picture is still within our grasp
    - Example: 1 Cor. 15:29
  4. Check out a good commentary
    - There may be multiple possible explanations
    - Requires humility on our parts