

## The Epistles: How to read them...

The Epistles are central to the New Testament and a crucial part of our theology and church life. From them we have our clearest interpretation of the Scriptures' teachings and our best understanding of the nature and life of the church.

It is important to recognize that they are letters written by the Apostles to real groups of people and address their real situations and needs. Because of this we need to observe along with the rules of grammatical - historical interpretation some principles related to their unique character.

It is important that we take each epistle **as a whole, reading from beginning to end**. You do not read a letter in fragments or read pages out of order - the same applies to these Apostolic letters. While often they are preached on in segments, those segments should not be understood out of the context and flow of the letter. It is a good idea to sit and read through them in one sitting, maybe several times as you study.

It is also important to recognize that they are "**occasional**" correspondence between the writer and a particular congregation or group of people with a context of relationships between the writer and the original readers and addressing situations and concerns they shared. We need to know as much as we can from external evidence about the writer and readers, but much of this background we must infer from internal evidence in the letters themselves. We need to look for what motivates the Apostle to write, what needs he perceives and addresses in the congregation. What is the point? Why has God included this in the Bible?

Usually **carefully thought out** documents, the writers use argumentation, logic and rhetoric in addressing concerns. We need to trace the flow of the argument and outline its points. It is important especially to think in terms of paragraphs and determine the connections of the parts to the whole as clearly as possible. At times Paul might actually be quoting his opponents sarcastically or asking questions rhetorically, it is important that we see verses in their contexts.

The epistles are full of **teaching and doctrine** - but it is always related to specific needs and concerns, doctrine is never abstracted from life. We need to find how the Truth met those needs, and then we can begin to relate it to our similar needs and concerns.

The New Testament writers wrote from a unique eschatological perspective. Many of the Promises of the Old Testament had now been Fulfilled in Christ - His work on the cross was now accomplished. They could look back to it with clear understanding. At the same time, they were looking forwards to His Second Coming when God's work would be Consummated. They recognized a "**NOW... BUT NOT YET!**" perspective on the Christian life. Satan, sin and death are defeated, but still they struggle, and Christ, righteousness and life are ours - the Spirit now at work building the Church, calling God's people to Christ, working faith and sanctifying them.

As **First Century letters**, there is a normal structure:

Sometimes parts are missing, especially in the General Epistles like Hebrews or 1st John, though these books clearly had specific readers in mind, only the body was circulated "generally" through the churches.

A Salutation identifying the writer, and the readers

A Greeting, often in the form of a prayer

The body consisting of an introduction,

the content

and a conclusion

A Benediction

Sometimes a P.S. - personal greetings, other remarks