

Going By the Letter

Interpreting Epistles

I. Introduction to Genre

- A. Genre: A group of writings that have certain traits in common with each other.
- These common traits create shared expectations between the author and his audience, which are invaluable for interpretation.

II. Introduction to Epistles

A. Common Traits

1. A Letter
2. Structure:
 - a. Greeting
 - Eph. 4:1-2: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesians, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
 - b. Transitional Paragraph
 - Col. 1:3: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...”
 - c. Body (numerous sections)
 - d. Final Greeting and Benediction
 - 2 Cor. 12:13-14: “All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

B. Impact on Interpretation

1. Written to address a specific situation.
 - a. Example: 1 Corinthians 7 and divorce
 - 1 Cor. 7:1: “Now concerning the matters you wrote about.”
2. **The Key to Interpreting Epistles: Follow the author’s flow of thought.**
 - Study the way the authors put sentences and paragraphs together to make their points.

III. Five Principles for Interpreting Epistles

1. Look for words and phrases that explicitly connect one idea to another.
2. Look for connections between ideas that are implied rather than explicit.
 - Matt. 18:15-18: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”
3. Locate the main thought of each paragraph.
 - a. Location: The main thought is usually in the first or last sentence, or both.
 - b. Repetition: Authors often repeat key words, or restate the same concept numerous times.
 - c. Addressing the Audience Directly: i.e. “Hear, O Israel...” “Brothers...”
 - d. Introductory Formulas: i.e. “I write these things to you so that...” “I want you to know...”
 - e. Concluding Formulas: Look for words that summarize a discussion, such as *therefore, thus, and so*.
4. Determine the relationship between paragraphs.
5. What unifying idea ties all of the paragraphs together? Use your answer to create a one-sentence summary of the message of the section. Repeat the process on a larger scale to discover the message of the entire book.

IV. Application: Galatians 3

Survey:

- Written by Paul to a group of churches he had planted in the Roman province of Galatia.
- Judaizers: Jews who claimed to be Christians, and taught that gentiles had to be circumcised and obey other ceremonial laws to be saved.
- Main message: justification by faith.
 - Thesis statement is Gal. 2:15-16: “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”