PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING EPISTLES

I. Introduction to the Epistles

Twenty-one of the 27 books of the New Testament— which accounts for nearly one-third of the total content—are epistles. “In addition, two brief letters are included in Acts (15:23-29; 23:25-30); seven letters appear in Revelation (2:1-3:22), which itself has an epistolary framework (cf. 1:4-5; 22:21); and the use of letters is mentioned elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Acts 9:2; 22:5; 23:25, 33; 1 Cor 5:9; 16:3; 2 Cor 3:1-3; 10:9-11; Col 4:16; 2 Thess 2:2, 15; 2 Pet 3:1, 16). This shows the importance of letters in Christian circles of the first century” (John Grassmick).

In the first-century church, epistles essentially functioned as a substitute for a personal interaction between the writer and recipient of the letter. For this reason, they served the same purposes as oral communication: “(1) to provide information or instruction, (2) to make requests or issue commands, and (3) to maintain or deepen the relationship between the correspondents” (Grassmick). The goal of this section is to set forth specific principles for interpreting this particular literary genre.

II. Guidelines for Interpreting Epistles

It is quite possible that the principles of general hermeneutics “apply more directly to the Epistles than to any other genres” (Grant Osborne). For this reason, the interpreter should keep in mind that these additional guidelines should be applied as a supplement to the general principles of hermeneutics he is already using.

A. Be aware of the standard ________ used in most ancient epistles.

Studies indicate that the New Testament epistles share the same basic characteristics found in many Greco-Roman letters of the first century. The standard form of ancient epistles included six basic parts:

- Name of Writer
- Name of Recipients
- Personal Greeting
- Personal Prayer, Wish, or Expression of Thanks
- Body of Letter
- Final Greetings and Farewell

Although the biblical author was not enslaved to this form, “it is usually important for the interpreter to note those instances when the author chose to deviate from it” (Stein). In other words, “the interpreter must observe where and how the author modifies the conventional letter structure and determine the interpretive significance this has for understanding the letter. This is especially applicable to the opening and
closing sections” (Grassmick). For example, “when Galatians has no thanksgiving (had Paul written one, it would have come between 1:5 and 6), and when 1 Thessalonians has two (1 Thes 1:2-10; 2:13-16), readers should sit up and take notice. Paul stresses the severity of the Galatians’ lapse into legalism by ignoring standard conventions and plunging directly into the heart of his complaint against them. Conversely, Paul has more words of sustained praise for the Thessalonians than for any other apostolic congregation” (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard).

B. **Read the entire epistle _______________ and interpret the individual parts in light of the whole.**

When epistles were delivered to their intended destinations, they were read aloud — and in their entirety — to the congregation (Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27). For this reason, “each NT letter should be read as a whole from beginning to end to grasp the full impact and development of the author’s thought. Ideally, this should be done several times [and perhaps with different English translations]. This provides an overview of the author’s message and helps the interpreter better understand the meaning not only of the whole letter but also of the individual paragraphs and their relationship to the whole” (Grassmick). In addition, it allows the interpreter to “become quite familiar with its contents, the concerns and apparent purposes of the author, the way the argument is developed, and so forth” (Silva).

The reason for this is obvious: “All of us, upon receiving a letter from an acquaintance, proceed to read the whole letter at one sitting….What would one think of a man who receives a five-page letter from his fiancée on Monday and decides to read only the third page on that day, the last page on Thursday, the first page two weeks later, and so on? We are all aware of the fact that reading a letter in such piece-meal fashion would likely create nothing but confusion. The meaning of a paragraph on the third page may depend heavily on something said at the beginning of the letter — or its real significance may not become apparent until the next page is read. The more cogently the letter was written, the riskier it would be to break it up arbitrarily. Moreover, part of the meaning of a document is the total impact it makes on the reader, and that meaning is often more than the sum of its parts” (Silva).

C. **Interpret epistles in light of their _______________ nature.**

Each of the epistles in the New Testament arose in response to specific historical circumstances. For this reason, epistles are often referred to as “occasional” documents. “This means they reflect a particular historical situation and were written to address specific issues or problems related to the author or, more often, the readers….For example, Paul wrote Galatians because some false teachers were opposing him and troubling the Galatian Christians by advocating a return to the Mosaic Law and
pressuring them to abandon the gospel of grace he had preached to them” (Grassmick).

As Fee and Stuart observe, the historical occasion for the epistle was usually “some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.” Regardless, the goal of the interpreter is to identify and reconstruct this historical situation as precisely as possible. For example, “What was going on in Corinth that caused Paul to write 1 Corinthians? How did he come to learn of their situation? What kind of relationship and former contacts has he had with them? What attitudes do they and he reflect in this letter? These are the kinds of questions you want answers to” (Fee and Stuart). In order to reconstruct the occasion of the epistle, Michael Vlach suggests asking the following:

- Who is writing the letter?
- Who is the audience of the letter?
- Why is the author writing the letter?
- What situation does the author face while writing his letter?
- What problems does the author address in the letter?
- What are the geographical issues related to this letter?
- Does the writer state his purpose for writing the letter?
- What are the major themes, concepts, and words in the letter?

Part of the difficulty in reconstructing the historical background of a given epistle is that we are forced to do so with only one half of the “conversation” available to us. This is “much like listening to one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying” (Fee and Stuart). Many times this involves reading between the lines in order to understand precisely what issues are being addressed. This involves reconstructing the historical context to the extent that is possible “based on information from the letter itself, first and foremost, and supplemented by legitimate, relevant information from outside the letter” (Grassmick). Once this is done, each passage in the epistle should then be interpreted in light of this historical background.

D. Resist the temptation to read the epistles as ________________
______________.

Because the New Testament epistles were written to address specific historical circumstances, they should not be read as if they intended to teach systematic theology in a vacuum. As Silva writes: “It’s not as though the apostle, having nothing better to do, thought it might be a good idea to write a theological essay for anyone who might be interested in it! On the contrary. There was always a concrete occasion that motivated him to write these documents.”
The circumstantial nature of the New Testament epistles does not mean that theology is absent from them. But it does mean that the theology contained in the epistles “is pastorally applied to the circumstances faced by those the author addresses” (Grasmick). Recognizing this—and recognizing the gap that exists between his own situation and the situation being addressed in the New Testament epistle—will help interpreter remember that a given passage may not be answering the specific questions he is asking.

As Thomas Schreiner observes, “The danger of reading [the NT epistles] as systematic treatises is that one might conclude too much from reaching only one letter” (Schreiner). This can happen if the interpreter wrongly assumes (a) that the New Testament epistle is addressing an issue that it’s not or (b) that a given passage is a theologically comprehensive treatment of the issue that it does address. It is helpful to keep in mind that, because of their circumstantial nature, New Testament epistles tend to be less comprehensive and “balanced” in their presentation of truth than systematic theologies.

E. Trace the ______________ of the entire epistle and interpret each passage in the context of that overall flow of thought.

The difference between a letter and an epistle is subtle. “Technically a ‘letter’ is a less literary and more personal form of communication that tends to address a specific situation or problem and builds on an established relationship. An ‘epistle’ is more artistic in form and is intended as a self-explanatory treatise to a wider public” (Stein). The New Testament epistles seem to fall somewhere in between. They are “less literary, formal, and artistic than many classical Greek treatises but still generally longer, more carefully structured, and more didactic than typical correspondence” (Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard).

For this reason, New Testament epistles tend to be longer and more sophisticated in their argument and rhetorical features than the average letter written today. This highlights the need to trace the argument of the epistle so that each passage can be interpreted in light of that overall flow of thought. To do so properly, the interpreter will need to be diligent to apply the principles found above in lesson 4 (“Examining the Literary Context”) and lesson 5 (“Grammatical Analysis”). In addition, see chapter 6 (“Tracing the Argument”) in Thomas Schreiner’s Interpreting the Pauline Epistles.

Further Study:
“The Epistles: The Hermeneutical Questions” in Fee/Stuart How to Read the Bible for All its Worth, 71-87.
“Understanding the Nature of Letters” in Thomas R. Schreiner, Interpreting the Pauline Epistles, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 11-38. [since 13 of 27 NT books are attributed to Paul]