

CHAPTER 7

How to Read a Letter

THE MEANING OF THE EPISTLES

Although the epistles included in the New Testament do not consist of “personal correspondence” in the usual sense, we can easily misunderstand them unless we treat them as real, historical letters (rather than textbooks of theology). In practical terms this means, first, that we should read the New Testament letters as wholes; our tendency to treat them as reference books to be read piecemeal distorts our perception of their message. Second, these writings arise out of concrete historical occasions, which means that we must learn to “read between the lines” so as to understand the text in its original context. Third, we must learn to treat the New Testament letters from a literary point of view, that is, recognizing that they are carefully thought-out documents and may reflect rhetorical methods used in antiquity. Fourth, these writings must be read theologically; while being sensitive to the diversity that they represent, we must seek to appreciate their unifying features, especially the authors’ conviction that the last days had arrived with the coming of Christ. Finally, we cannot forget that the epistles of the New Testament are authoritative writings and that therefore their historical character does not undermine their relevance for our lives.

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More than half a century ago, an American philosopher with special interests in the challenges of higher education came to the conclusion that what students needed was help in making sense of books. And what was true of students was just as true of others not enrolled in school. Accordingly, he published a volume entitled *How to Read a Book*.¹ Though some may have wondered how anyone who did not already know how to read a book could read this one, the volume became an instant success.

And not surprisingly. Being able to decipher an alphabet and identify words—and even being able to infer the meaning of sentences and paragraphs—is but a preparatory step to “real” reading. Different kinds of books require different reading strategies, whether or not we are conscious of using such strategies. All of us can improve our skills as we seek to read challenging books more effectively and accurately.

It may be a little surprising, however, to see the title of this chapter. How hard can it be to read personal correspondence? After all, if there is any kind of writing that can be read by just about everyone, even people who have reached only an elementary level of proficiency, it is a letter from a friend. This chapter is needed, however, precisely because most of us don’t read 1 Corinthians or James as though they were letters.

1. Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (1940; rev. ed., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972). The current edition does not carry the subtitle.

To say these things, however, is to raise the question of literary genre. Is it really accurate to suggest that Paul's letters, for example, are just like modern personal letters? The fact that sometimes we refer to them as *epistles* (which suggests relatively long and formal documents) is an indication of the difference. Scholars have discussed this issue extensively. In the past some thought that the letters of Paul should be treated like the epistles of such Latin writers as Cicero and Seneca, that is, like carefully crafted documents intended to be read as published works of literature. This viewpoint has been generally abandoned. We have no good reason to think that Paul had any literary pretensions when he wrote these documents.

It is just as clear, however, that they are not simply "personal" letters. Although a few of Paul's letters were written to individuals (1–2 Timothy, Titus, and esp. Philemon), even these go well beyond personal concerns. As for the other letters, personal comments play a minor role, and the overall tone is solemn. Some of them contain involved argumentation and even display the use of rhetorical techniques. Finally, and most fundamentally, they are written with a note of apostolic authority that gives them a unique character.

These qualifications, however, as important as they are, should not be allowed to obscure the most basic fact about these New Testament documents: they were not originally like modern books published for fairly general audiences—thousands of readers that the author has never met; rather they were genuine letters in which the authors, under divine inspiration, gave direct instruction to a specific church or group of churches. (Even those letters that have a more personal character seem to address the church of which the recipient was a leader.) In God's wisdom and providence, Christians everywhere and at all times may profit from these letters as God's Word to them as well. If we wish to use them responsibly, however, we need to respect their character. As noted in the previous chapter, reading a historical account as though it were poetry (or vice versa) does injustice to the writing and leads to misunderstanding. Similarly, reading one of Paul's letters as though it were a technical book of reference or a seminary textbook of theology can take us down the wrong interpretive path.

Reading the New Testament Letters as Wholes

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of reading a letter is the one that we ignore most easily when we read the epistles of the New Testament. All of us, upon receiving a letter from an acquaintance, proceed to read the whole letter

at one sitting (often we do not even wait to sit down!). Christians, partly because of the chapter-and-verse divisions in our modern Bibles, seldom take the time to read through a whole epistle. Indeed, we may feel we deserve a pat on the back if we manage to finish an entire chapter.

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.

Another way of stating these points is to say that specific sections in a New Testament letter *must be read in context*. As we have seen before, contextual interpretation is one of the most basic principles to keep in mind when we seek to understand what people say and write. Ironically, many readers tend to ignore this principle precisely when they need it the most, that is, when they are trying to make sense of a difficult passage.

A good example is Hebrews 6:4–6, which seems to teach that Christians may fall away from the faith and that, if they do so, they cannot possibly be restored. Focusing on those verses in isolation from the rest of the book, readers have come up with a good number of interpretations, all of which can be defended in one way or another: (1) Christians may indeed lose their salvation permanently; (2) Christians may lose their salvation, but restoration is possible; (3) Christians may lose their rewards but not their salvation; (4) the passage describes people who are only professing Christians, not truly regenerate; (5) the passage is purely hypothetical; (6) the passage does not really deal with personal salvation but with broader Jewish Christian matters. And so on.

Since we wish to illustrate only one principle of interpretation, let's not be concerned for the time being about which of these understandings is correct, but only about how we should approach the problem. It is fair to say that most Christians who are troubled by this passage have only a vague idea of what Hebrews is all about, and even those who have tried to read the book with some care usually end up a little confused. Because its subject matter is not familiar to us, we find Hebrews a difficult epistle to understand. As a result, we try to make sense of 6:4–6—a very difficult passage in a difficult book—by ignoring its context, even though this is just the kind of passage that requires special attention to the context!

We ought to read the whole epistle straight through several times, perhaps with different English translations, until we become quite familiar with its contents, the concerns and apparent purposes of the author, the way the argument is developed, and so forth. One important feature we will discover is that 6:4–6 is not the only passage of its kind in the book. In fact, there are four other so-called “warning passages” in Hebrews (2:1–4; 3:7–15 and continuing through chap. 4; 10:26–31; 12:25–29). When we take the argument of the book as a whole, it seems most unlikely that these five warnings could be dealing with different situations. On the contrary, they provide a cumulative effect. The author is deeply concerned about his readers, and he is carefully trying to achieve his one great aim, that is, preventing them from committing some terrible sin that will bring down God’s severe judgment.

Having recognized this feature of the letter, we will quickly dismiss some interpretations of 6:4–6. For example, the idea that the passage is talking about the losing of rewards simply does not fit the character of the letter as a whole; it is an interpretation that cannot be supported from the context. Similarly, any view that downplays the personal element is also suspect, since the other warnings (esp. 3:12) make clear that what is at stake is one’s individual relationship with God. Again, the view that takes the passage as purely hypothetical makes little sense. What is the point of writing a whole letter, with such emotional and severe warnings, to prevent something that cannot really happen?

Deciding among the remaining options is not easy and requires taking other factors into account. Nevertheless, one can see clearly that the more difficult a passage is, the more attention we need to pay to the context of the whole document.

Reading the New Testament Letters Historically

Every written document should be read “historically”; that is, we ought to take into account that it was written by a particular individual (or group of individuals) in a particular time in history and that it was motivated by some particular occasion. Nevertheless, some types of writing can be understood quite well even when we may know relatively little of their historical setting. Being able to read science textbooks in high school, for example, does not greatly depend on knowing who the authors were or what their historical

situation may have been.² In other words, textbooks are addressed to very broad audiences, to students all across the country whose personal experiences vary enormously.

In contrast, think of a column in a high school newspaper. In this case we have a writing addressed to a much more homogeneous audience. All the students share many important experiences and a base of common knowledge. They belong to a well-defined geographic region. They all know who the principal and most of the teachers are. More important, they share common perceptions about the school, the people who are part of it, and the challenges it offers. The school newspaper, therefore, will be understood by these students in a way that an outsider cannot grasp as easily—even the parents may struggle with it from time to time! Note also that, in contrast to textbooks, editorials in a student paper have a very short life expectancy. What was a “hot topic” in a particular issue of the paper will possibly have no bearing whatever the following year, or even the following month.

What about the New Testament letters? Biblical scholars often refer to these letters as *occasional* writings. This term does not at all suggest that they are trivial or carelessly written documents. What scholars are seeking to emphasize is that Paul, for example, wrote his letters to meet specific historical needs. 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. Usually it was a matter of specific churches experiencing problems that had to be solved; in some cases, as with the Galatians, the need was urgent.

Because Paul’s letters also deal with principles that have permanent validity, it is easy for us to overlook their occasional character. If we wrest 1 Corinthians out of its historical context, the precise message of this document will escape us. Worse, we could misunderstand or misapply its meaning. Take chapter 7, verse 1: “It is good for a man not to marry” (NIV; lit. “not to touch a woman”). Some have inferred from these words that marriage is a bad thing, to be avoided if at all possible. Such an interpretation, however, is hardly consistent with biblical teaching more generally, or even with Paul’s own statements elsewhere (cf. Eph. 5:22–33 and 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:3).

It appears that, among the many issues that divided the Corinthian

2. Even in this case such questions are not completely irrelevant. If an astronomy textbook is four decades old, knowing that fact affects how we read it. If we find out that the author of such a text has a strong ideological motivation (such as the anti-creationist Carl Sagan, or perhaps someone determined to prove that the world was created in six twenty-four-hour days), we will probably want to take that factor into account as we seek to interpret specific statements in the book.

Christians, one of the most significant had to do with differing ideas about sex and marriage. Some individuals in the church took a very loose view. They thought it was defensible for a Christian to be joined to a prostitute, for example (6:15–16). When one in their midst became intimate with his stepmother, these individuals could not bring themselves to condemn him (5:1–2). Another group in the church, however, perhaps in reaction, went to the other extreme. They believed that even in marriage, sex should be avoided (7:3–5), so they might as well not get married at all. In support of their position, they probably appealed to the fact that Paul himself was single.

One can easily see the difficulty facing Paul. Since this stricter group opposed immorality, he wanted to support them as much as possible. Moreover, there are certain advantages in remaining single, and so he did not want to condemn those who, for the right reasons, had chosen not to marry. Marriage, however, is a divine institution to be upheld, and there are also important practical reasons why most people should marry. So, as he starts his discussion in chapter 7, Paul states what may have been some sort of motto among the stricter group, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” By doing so, he acknowledges that there is some truth to this group’s position, but then he proceeds to qualify that statement and correct the abuses.

If, instead of writing a letter, Paul had composed a treatise on Christian ethics, we might reasonably expect a comprehensive chapter on marriage that gave a more “balanced” presentation. Because Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to address specific historical problems, however, chapter 7 must be understood in the light of those problems. Moreover, we need to keep in mind that, as a result, his instructions in that chapter are only a small part of what the Bible as a whole teaches about marriage.

The following very important question may be raised, however: How can we tell what was the historical context of the New Testament letters? The book of Acts gives us some important information about Paul’s ministry and thus provides a basic framework for reading the letters. Unfortunately, many details are missing. Historical documents outside the Bible shed interesting light here and there, but they still leave us with significant gaps. It turns out that, as a rule, we depend on internal evidence, that is, the information that we can get out of the letters themselves. The problem is that this evidence, for the most part, is indirect. Paul does not first describe the situation in Corinth, for example, before he proceeds to deal with that situation. He didn’t have to! The Corinthians were fully aware of the problems. We, in contrast, are forced to *infer* what the problems may have been.

In other words, we have to “read between the lines” so as to reconstruct the historical context. For this reason some people may object to our emphasis on historical interpretation. They will argue that this approach

injects too much subjectivity into the process, since different scholars will come up with different reconstructions.

This kind of objection is used not only by evangelical Christians who wish to guard the authority and clarity of Scripture. There is also a segment of contemporary scholarship that prefers to treat the New Testament letters strictly as literary objects, that is, more or less divorced from their historical context. One scholar sympathetic to this viewpoint complains that other scholars depend too heavily on “mirror-reading.” In his opinion they assume too easily that in the text of Galatians, for example, they can see a reflection of the people who were causing trouble among the churches of Galatia.³

In response, we may readily grant that reading between the lines can be a dangerous exercise and that the method has frequently been abused. We must keep in mind, however, that every reading of every text *requires* some measure of reading between the lines. As we saw in chapter 1, understanding is possible only within the framework of assumed knowledge. Paul’s brief letter to the Galatians would have become a multivolume encyclopedia if the apostle had spelled out every detail that forms part of the total network of knowledge relevant to his message.

So the question is not *whether* we should read between the lines but *how* we should do it. Certainly, the more an interpretation depends on inferences (as opposed to explicit statements in the text), the less persuasive it is. If a historical reconstruction disturbs (rather than reinforces) the apparent meaning of a passage, we should be skeptical of it. In contrast, if a scholar proposes a reconstruction that arises out of the text itself, and if that reconstruction in turn helps to make sense of difficult statements in the text, we need not reject it on the grounds that it is just a theory.

A good criterion for assessing the validity as well as the value that a theory may have for exegesis is to ask this question: Could the interpretation of a particular passage be supported *even if we did not have the theory*? A good interpretation should not depend so heavily on inferences that it cannot stand on its own without the help of a theoretical construct. A theory about the historical situation may help us to become sensitive to certain features of the text that we might otherwise ignore, but it is the text that must be ultimately determinative.

Let us now go back to 1 Corinthians. Did our theory about the historical situation control our reading of the text, or did the text itself suggest the theory? Note that the issue came up because we were aware of a difficulty in the text. That is, at first blush Paul appears to say something that

3. George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding*, SBLDS 73 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), chap. 2.

is inconsistent with other aspects of his teaching. Second, recall that we have clear information from chapters 5–7 about disputes among the Corinthians regarding sexual behavior. In addition, chapter 7 begins with a reference to a letter that the Corinthians sent to Paul, and clearly it was that letter that raised the issue of marriage. We may say, then, that the basic thrust of our interpretation, while it was suggested by certain historical inferences, depends primarily on the text itself, not on fanciful speculation.

Other aspects of our interpretation may be less certain. For example, we mentioned the theory that the statement “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” may have been a saying used by one of the Corinthian factions. There is no way to prove that theory right or wrong. But notice that the theory is not at all essential for the interpretation. Even if those words were original with Paul, our general reading of the passage can still be easily supported.

A good appreciation for the historical setting of a document can help us not only to deal with difficult verses; it can also enhance our understanding of a letter as a whole. Consider Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Most Christians familiar with this book think immediately of Paul’s repeated emphasis on the theme of joy as well as the remarkable “Christ-hymn” in 2:6–11. These features, as well as the apostle’s obvious warmth for his brothers and sisters in Philippi, have suggested to many readers that this church was a model congregation, perhaps without many problems.

A little reading between the lines, however, suggests a different picture. We do have some external evidence regarding this church, which was located in the province of Macedonia. For example, Acts 16 recounts the founding of the congregation by Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Moreover, 2 Corinthians 8:1–5 makes clear that these believers were very poor and that in spite of their poverty they were unusually generous in supporting Paul’s ministry. Paul comments on that very fact in Philippians itself, both at the beginning of the letter (1:5, where the word *partnership* almost surely refers to their financial support) and at the end (4:14–16).

A careful reading of Philippians 4:10–19 gives us the distinct impression that the congregation’s financial troubles had become a growing concern. Paul had just received a gift from this church by the hand of their messenger, Epaphroditus (2:25). While the apostle wants to express his deepest thanks for that gift, he clearly wants to avoid the suggestion that material abundance is the key to his happiness (note esp. 4:11 and 17). He ends the passage by assuring them that God will meet their needs (v. 19).

Having noted these details, other features of the letter begin to fall into place in a new way. For example, Paul’s strong exhortation not to become anxious (4:6–7) should probably be related to their financial worries.

Moreover, it would seem that the numerous references to joy in the letter indicate, not that the Philippians were a joyful bunch, but exactly the opposite. They had lost their Christian contentment, and Paul must urge them to recover it! A key to that recovery is for them to understand that true joy does not depend on what one has: “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (4:11). We are to rejoice *in the Lord* (3:1; 4:4) because we can do all things through him (4:13).

Even more serious, however, was the presence of dissension within the church. Most Bible readers do not think of the Philippians as having that sort of a problem, but they certainly did. The exhortations to unity and humility in 2:1–4 are there for a reason. Some readers seem to assume that Paul simply thought it would be nice to talk about this subject! The introductory comments (v. 1) are full of emotion and reveal the apostle’s deep concern, while the warning against selfishness (v. 4) is closely paralleled to what he had to say to that most divided of the early churches, the Corinthian congregation (see 1 Cor. 10:24). Paul even decides to name names. At the root of the dissension was some serious disagreement between two important members, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2–3).

On the basis of Philippians 2:19–30, moreover, one can reasonably infer what the church said to Paul in the message that accompanied their gift. “We are having serious problems, Paul. We need you here. If you cannot come, please send our dear friend Timothy. You can keep Epaphroditus for assistance.” Of course, the Philippians’ communication has not survived, so this message is speculative (another instance of historical reconstruction) and certainly not essential in understanding those verses. But the passage, and even Philippians as a whole, takes on a fresh meaning and makes much better sense when we read it in that light.

In any case, it is easy to see how our perception of a letter can be significantly enhanced if we make the effort to identify its historical origins. Again, we should remember that the reason we are able to understand contemporary letters sent to us is that we are fully cognizant of their origin and context (and that the reason we sometimes misunderstand those letters is precisely some gap in our knowledge of the context). Note further that to treat the New Testament letters historically is an important method for applying successfully the first section of this chapter, that is, the need to read letters as whole documents. If we do so, not only will we be able to appreciate the total message of the letters; we will also be in a much better position to solve any specific interpretive problems that we may come across.

Reading the New Testament Letters as Literary Documents

One of the reasons the New Testament letters are sometimes referred to as *epistles* is that they seem more formal in character than one expects from typical personal correspondence. We need to strike a balance here. Since Paul wrote these documents as an apostle, one should indeed expect something more than hurriedly written scribbles. The very fact that he used secretaries suggests special care in his writing.⁴

In recent decades, scholars have begun to give greater recognition to the literary qualities of the New Testament letters. It is apparent, for example, that Paul had some awareness of the techniques taught by teachers of rhetoric in the ancient world. Just how great was his knowledge of these techniques is a matter of debate. Similarly, not all scholars agree whether Paul was making conscious use of these techniques. We may continue to insist that Paul did not view his letters primarily as literary works for general publication. There is much to be learned, however, from current studies about the rhetorical character of the biblical documents.

No letter has received more attention in this respect than Paul's epistle to the Christians in Galatia. That fact alone is suggestive. Given the highly emotional and urgent tone of this letter, one would *not* expect it to be a carefully crafted work. Indeed, Galatians has often been used as evidence that Paul could write in a "rough" style. (One of the best-known examples of this roughness is Galatians 2:4–5, which strictly speaking is an incomplete sentence in the Greek.) At the same time, scholars have recognized that the argument of the letter is disciplined and well-thought-out. But just how literary is this work?

We may begin by noting some fairly obvious items about the structure of Galatians. As he does in his other letters, Paul begins this one with a salutation ("Paul to so-and-so: grace and peace . . .") and ends with a benediction (6:18). Moreover, we can identify a longer section as the *introduction* to the letter (1:1–10) and another one as the *conclusion* (6:11–18). Between these two sections we have the *body* of the letter, which in turn is divided into several sections. The first one (1:11–2:21), in which Paul seems to defend his independent authority, has a historical flavor; the second

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one (3:1–4:31) is more argumentative and doctrinal; the third (5:1–6:10) is primarily hortatory, that is, it is characterized by exhortations.⁵

When we receive a letter from a friend, we do not usually try to come up with an outline. Why should we do it with Paul's letters? Part of the answer is that these letters are a little longer (in the case of Romans and 1–2 Corinthians, *much* longer) than the typical personal letter; keeping in mind where the shifts in topic occur helps orient the reader. But there is a more fundamental issue here. Even a friend's casual letter has a certain structure, whether the writer was conscious of it or not. In some cases, to be sure, the argument may be a little incoherent and one could not come up with an intelligible outline. It is always true, however, that our ability to understand a letter (or any other document) is tied to how accurately we perceive its structure. This process of identification is largely unconscious, but if we receive a longer and more complicated letter, we may start asking ourselves structural kinds of questions ("Is the lawyer talking about something else in this paragraph, or am I missing the connection?"). The more explicit we are about these issues, the more sensitive we become to the information that the context provides.

In addition, this kind of study provides the means of comparing the various letters with one another so that we can identify what is distinctive to each of them. For example, as we study the salutations in Paul's letters, we find that most of them are very brief. Only two of them, those in Romans and Galatians, are expanded to include substantive material. In the case of Galatians, this detail may well be additional evidence of the urgency with which Paul wrote this letter. No sooner has he mentioned his title of apostle than he feels the need to deny one of the accusations that prompted the writing of the letter, so he assures us: "an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father."

The second part of the introduction (1:6–10) is even more interesting. At this point in his other letters Paul consistently expresses his thanks (or utters a blessing) to God for the people to whom he is writing. Here, however, instead of beginning with "I thank my God," he exclaims, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ!" Someone familiar with Paul's letters would find this remark completely unexpected, and it is the unexpected that makes the greatest impression on us. More important, for Paul to diverge in this way from his

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practice tells us a great deal about his mood and motivation in writing Galatians.

So far so good. Very few people would object to this kind of discussion or to the outline on which it is based. But is it possible that Paul made greater use of literary techniques? A long time ago it was noticed that in Galatians 4:4–5 the apostle seems to use a *chiasm*, that is, an ordering of clauses in an A-B-B'-A' pattern:

*God sent his Son, born of a woman, {A}
born under the law, {B}
to redeem those under the law {B'
that we might receive the full right of sons. {A'}*

Taking his cue from this passage—as well as from other evidence that chiasms were used frequently in the ancient world—a New Testament scholar in the 1960s believed he detected other and more sophisticated chiasms in Galatians.⁶ Indeed, he proposed that Galatians as a whole was one immense chiasm, composed of secondary chiasms, which in turn were made up of tertiary chiasms, and so on. The notion that Paul, or any other sane person, would invest the time and effort to compose that sort of writing for no apparent benefit (after all, it took twenty centuries for someone to discover it) was too much for contemporary scholars, most of whom have not been persuaded by this theory. The biggest objection to it, however, is that it works only by forcing the evidence. While some of the chiasms proposed by the author are intriguing and may be valid, many others can hardly be considered a natural reading of the text.

More persuasive, though still debatable, is the suggestion that Galatians reflects in its structure the rhetorical principles of ancient Greek and Latin oratory. Particularly influential has been the proposal that Galatians was composed as an “apologetic letter,” with the following sections:

Epistolary prescript, 1:1–5
Exordium (introduction of the facts), 1:6–11
Narratio (statement of the facts), 1:12–2:14
Propositio (summary of legal content of *narratio*), 2:15–21
Probatio (proofs or arguments), 3:1–4:31

6. John Bligh, *Galatians in Greek: A Structural Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, with Notes on the Greek* (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1966). Subsequently he wrote a commentary based on those investigations; see his *Galatians: A Discussion of St. Paul's Epistle*, *Householder Commentaries 1* (London: St. Paul, 1969).

Exhortatio (exhortations), 5:1–6:10
Epistolary postscript, 6:11–18⁷

Some scholars have disputed the precise identification of Galatians as an apologetic letter, others have objected to various details of the outline. Even this careful outline is not able to account for all the facts (e.g., the exhortations do not fit any known pattern in formal letter writing). More fundamental is the objection that for Paul to follow in such detail the rules of oratory seems inconsistent with his disavowal of eloquent speech (1 Cor. 2:1–5; 2 Cor. 11:6; Col. 2:4).

Whatever the problems, there has been a growing recognition of the need to analyze the letters of the New Testament in the light of ancient rhetorical practices. This development in modern scholarship has had some valuable repercussions, not the least of which is a renewed appreciation for the wholeness and coherence of these documents. An interesting example is Paul's letter to the Philippians. In the past, some scholars have argued that Philippians is really made up of two or three different letters. Recent rhetorical studies, however, have shown that this document is a literary whole and that fragmentation theories cannot account for its structure.

Reading the New Testament Letters Theologically

Even after we have made a special effort to understand the epistles as whole documents, inquiring into their historical context and literary structure, we are left with a crucial task— theological interpretation. In the history of modern biblical scholarship, this task has often been minimized, ignored, or even rejected altogether as something that lies outside the responsibility of the interpreter. In recent decades, however, the validity of theological reflection has become widely recognized. Since the New Testament letters, especially Paul's, address theological issues more directly and extensively than other parts of Scripture, discussions of Pauline theology are now more numerous than grains of sand on the seashore.

To be sure, scholars have diverse ideas about what it means to interpret the Bible theologically. For some, it seems to be an exercise in discovering “contradictions” among the biblical authors (e.g., Paul vs. James) or even between two writings by the same author (e.g., Romans vs. Galatians). At the other extreme, some conservative scholars devote so much

7. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 14–25.

of their attention to the common features among the writers of Scripture that the biblical message becomes “flattened.”

Here, as is so often the case, balance is needed. On the one hand, an evangelical commitment to the divine unity of Scripture certainly implies that we must interpret individual books within the total theological context of the Bible, so that the connection between the parts and the whole becomes as clear as possible. On the other hand, sensitivity to the human and historical character of Scripture will lead us to recognize and even emphasize the distinctiveness of each portion. Indeed, one of the most useful hermeneutical guidelines we can use consists in asking of each writing: “Why did God include *this* book in the canon? What is its distinctive contribution to the whole teaching of Scripture? What is its place in the history of revelation?”

When scholars approach the Bible theologically, a very common topic of discussion is whether they can identify a unifying element in a writer’s thought. Accordingly, much ink has been spilled on such subjects as “the center of Pauline theology.” Whether or not we can come up with such a center—that is, with a doctrinal nucleus that accounts for everything else Paul teaches—is a question that we need not trouble ourselves with. It is clear, however, that Paul did pay attention to foundational concepts, and if we wish to interpret his writings responsibly, we need to consider how those basic ideas relate to specific passages.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, theological studies focused on the apostle’s teaching about the individual’s justification by faith and not by works. Nowadays, however, some argue vigorously that this understanding, motivated by Luther’s personal experiences, reflects a distortion of Paul. Such a criticism is surely an extreme overreaction. One can still argue persuasively that the doctrine of justification by faith functions as a kind of conceptual adhesive that helps to make sense of much of Paul’s teaching. Nevertheless, there is some truth in every falsehood, and modern scholars make a significant point when they argue that a broader issue, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, should play a more prominent role in our interpretation of Paul’s teaching.

Even the argument of Galatians 3, so crucial for the doctrine of justification, is motivated and undergirded by a bigger, overarching question, namely, Who are the true descendants of Abraham? One could make a case for the view that the very structure of the epistle to the Romans is motivated by the same question. To ask such a question, however, is to reflect on the nature of redemptive history and thus on the way God has fulfilled his promises. As we saw in our discussion of the Gospels, a central aspect of Jesus’ teaching was precisely the theme of fulfillment. Because his announce-

ment that the kingdom of God had come implied the arrival of the “last days,” we may think of his message as having a basic eschatological character.

Not surprisingly, some scholars have detected a similar emphasis in other parts of the New Testament, especially in Paul’s writings.⁸ Indeed, it is clear that Paul saw the coming of Christ—in particular, his resurrection and exaltation—as the most important turning point in the history of redemption. The eschatological focus of Paul’s teaching is sometimes very explicit, as in 1 Corinthians 10:11, where he says that Christians experience “the fulfillment [lit., the end] of the ages.” Even where it is not spelled out, however, this theme seems to provide the framework for Paul’s theology in general.

This perspective can be very helpful in correcting our understanding of specific passages. For example, in Romans 1:3–4, where Paul appears to summarize the essence of the gospel he preaches, he describes Christ as one who, on the one hand, “was born out of the seed of David according to the flesh,” but on the other hand “was determined Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead” (lit. trans.). Traditionally, this statement was understood as a reference to the two natures of Christ, with the word *flesh* indicating his human nature and the word *spirit* his divine nature. The resulting idea was that, at the resurrection, Jesus’ divinity was demonstrated. This view is partly reflected in the NIV: “who as to his *human nature* was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness *was declared* with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead” (italics added).

Some recent interpreters, however, have argued persuasively that the passage does not refer to the two (coexisting) natures of Christ but rather to the two (successive) stages of his messianic work, that is, his humiliation and his exaltation.⁹ Although Christ was eternally divine, the title *Son of God* here probably refers to what He became at the resurrection, namely, the victorious, exalted Messiah (the verb translated “declared” by the NIV has a much stronger force, such as “determine, set, appoint”). Christ’s two stages, therefore, reflect two different periods in redemptive history: the present evil age of the flesh and the future glorious age of the Spirit. The close

8. One of the earliest writers to make this point was Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930). The most thorough exposition from this perspective is H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). For what follows, cf. the useful discussion in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). Some of the material above comes from Moisés Silva, “Systematic Theology and the Apostle to the Gentiles” (forthcoming in *TJ*).

9. See the extensive discussion in Gaffin, *Centrality*, pp. 98–114, and the literature cited by him.

relationship between the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit is emphasized in other passages, such as Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:44–45; 2 Corinthians 3:17–18.

The marvelous truth encapsulated in Romans 1:3–4 and parallel passages, therefore, is that with Christ's resurrection the future age becomes a reality now, at least in part, for those who are united with Christ in that resurrection. Indeed, in chapter 6 of the same letter, the apostle describes Christians as those who have died with Christ and have also been raised with Him to a new life. Because the Holy Spirit, who is the essence of the age to come, has been given to us as the first installment of our inheritance (cf. Eph. 1:13–14), we have in a very real sense been transported to heaven and sit there with Christ (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1–4; cf. Phil. 3:20).

But isn't the "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4) still with us? Doesn't Paul recognize that Christians continue to live "in the flesh" (Gal. 2:20 lit.; NIV, "in the body")? This is precisely where the significance of the Pauline message becomes apparent. In Jewish thought, "this world" was supposed to end with the inauguration of "the age to come." In contrast, according to Paul (and his view is reflected elsewhere in the New Testament), the new age of the Spirit in effect overlaps the old age of the flesh. Theologians often speak of this perspective as an "already-not yet" tension. While Jesus, with his coming, did bring in the kingdom of God and thus has already conquered the forces of the enemy, yet sin and misery continue to be with us until the consummation.

This truth has far-reaching implications for the way we interpret the New Testament. It is clear, for example, that Paul's difficult statements about the Mosaic law must be related to his understanding of flesh and death. Although the apostle clearly understands that law as divinely given and therefore inherently good—implying that it has relevance for the Christian (Rom. 7:12; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:14)—yet he affirms that, in the weakness of the flesh, it became an instrument of sin and death (cf. Rom. 7:8–10; 8:3; 1 Cor. 15:56; 2 Cor. 3:6–8). The Mosaic covenant was a temporary arrangement, anticipating the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:23–25).

Again, the doctrine of sanctification is greatly illumined by Paul's eschatological approach. The conflict between the flesh and the Spirit experienced by believers (Gal. 5:16–26) reflects a struggle not precisely between two parts of each individual but rather between two forces of cosmic proportions. However, since we have already died to sin and are not under subjection to the law but alive to God, we are assured that sin will not have dominion over us (Rom. 6:14). In the light of this assurance, moreover, the believer's responsibility to lead an obedient life becomes very clear. If sin has been dethroned, we simply have no excuse when we disobey God. The Spirit of Christ has freed us from sin and death. May we learn to "put to death the

misdeeds of the body" as children of God who are led by his Spirit (Rom. 8:13–14).

Reading the New Testament Letters as Authoritative Documents

We must conclude this chapter with a brief but important reminder that the epistles of the New Testament, no less than the rest of Scripture, come to us from God himself and thus bear his authority. As Paul wrote his letters, he did so with the consciousness of speaking the words of God (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13), and he did not hesitate to exercise his apostolic authority when necessary (cf. 2 Thess. 3:6).

This point needs to be made because our emphasis on the letters as historical documents could lead to a downplaying of their significance as Scripture. It is not unusual to hear comments about the *contextualized* character of these books—the implication being that they may have been relevant at one time in a particular historical context, but not now. As with all error, there is a measure of truth in this approach. For example, most Christians today do not believe that it is necessary for women to cover their heads in worship, as 1 Corinthians 11:5 seems to say. The reason normally given is that Paul was probably addressing a cultural practice that is foreign to us. Without question, certain commands and principles in Scripture (not in the letters only!) are difficult to apply in our day; we shall return to this topic in a later chapter.

We must not conclude, however, that this kind of difficulty is typical. Generally speaking, a knowledge of the historical situation helps us to refine our understanding of the commands of Scripture, but it does not remove their validity for us. One must have very persuasive textual reasons to decide that a particular passage in the letters of the New Testament is so historically conditioned that it has no present applicability. After all, the Scripture has been given to us as something "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).