

Introduction to the Interpretation of NT Epistles

The Need for Interpretation

Why do we need to interpret the Bible? We were never taught to interpret the newspaper. If there were only one word to describe the greatest challenge that we face in the science and art of Biblical interpretation, it would be ... distance.

Klein explains¹

Consider first of all the distance of **time** that exists between the ancient texts and our modern world. The writings and events recorded in the Bible span many centuries, but about 1900 years have passed since its last words were written. Simply put, the world has changed in substantial ways over the course of the Bible's composition and completion. Further, most of us lack essential information about the world as it was when the Bible was written. We may be at a loss to understand what a text means because it involves subjects beyond our time span.

Another challenge of distance that must be considered is the **cultural** distance that separates us from the world of the Biblical texts; a world that was basically agrarian, made up of landowners and tenant farmers; machinery that was primitive by our standards; and methods of travel that were slow and wearying. On the pages of the Bible, we encounter customs, beliefs, and practices that make little sense to us. ... Our understanding of ancient customs might be so colored by what we think they mean that we miss their significance. For example, what does "head covering" mean in 1 Cor. 11? (*Another example is 1 Cor. 13:12 concerning the term mirror*). We must not let the grid of our cultural values and priorities inadvertently affect our interpretation and cause us to establish a meaning that may not be in the text at all.

Another challenge to correct Bible interpretation is **geographical** distance. Unless we have had opportunity to visit the places mentioned in the Bible, we lack an element that would aid our understanding of certain events. Even if we could visit all the accessible sites (and many Christians have), few of them retain the look (and none of the culture) they had in biblical times. (*Example of Peters sermon in Acts 2 with 3000+ baptisms in one day*).

The task of biblical interpretation is further challenged with the distance of a **language** gap between the biblical world and our own. The writers of the Bible wrote in the languages of their day—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—languages that are inaccessible to most people today. Even those who speak modern Hebrew or Greek have an incomplete knowledge of the ancient languages. We are also relatively unfamiliar with the literary conventions of the ancient authors.

So how does an interpreter overcome these challenges? The last challenge, the language gap can certainly be filled (mostly) by a good English translation. A Bible dictionary is useful for obtaining the background of the time and culture of the text we are studying. We will look at some of this information concerning Ephesus next week.

The Goal of Biblical Interpretation

The first rule of biblical interpretation is to have the correct purpose. The purpose of biblical interpretation is not uniqueness; we are not trying to come up with an interpretation that no one else has come up with.

Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to 'out clever' the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible is full of deep truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to support a theological bias). Unique interpretations are usually wrong. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a text may not often *seem* unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task.²

What is the ultimate goal of biblical interpretation? It is to obtain the correct meaning of the text. "The most important ingredient one brings to that task is enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text."

¹ Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Word Inc., 1993.

² Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1993.

If common sense is all that is required to obtain the plain meaning of the text, doesn't that just mean we read it? There are two problems we face with this approach; one, we are all interpreters before we begin reading the text ... and two, the nature of the text is divine. We must understand that God has decided to communicate His truth through human agency and yet at the same time the text has been generated exactly how He willed it to be written. He did not wipe away the individual personalities or personal writing styles when He inspired the scriptures.

So, we come to the main point: We must seek to fully understand what the human author's intended meaning for a text is ... because that is also God's intended meaning for that text.

Interpreting Epistles

Raise your hands if you have written someone a letter in the last year. Why did you write it to that person? Why did you tell them what you mentioned in the letter? There was an occasion for your letter.

In the same way ... the NT epistles are primarily occasional documents. They arose out of and were intended for a specific occasion. They were written for a specific purpose to a particular audience from the first century.

Determining that occasion is very helpful in understanding the details of the letter, and is often times the key to interpreting more difficult sections of the epistle. Sometimes it is very simple to determine the occasion of one of Paul's epistles. For example, it is very easy to understand why Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians. He tells us directly in Galatians 1:6 ...

"I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel ..."

The occasion for Paul's letter to the Galatians is that some false teaching has crept into the local church and Paul is writing to correct that false teaching. Often times, Paul sets in place a set of commands after he has outlined his main objectives and arguments and these constitute a more practical appeal to the readers than sections that are more theological. This is true in Galatians when he says ...

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." Gal. 5:1

So how would we set out to determine the occasion of an epistle? By the reading and re-reading of the letter as a whole. Let me ask you a question ... when you get a 10-page letter from your Aunt Matilda, do you read the first page, put it down and then go make some lunch? No. Or do you read the first 2 or 3 pages and then come back to it the next day? Usually not ... you are wanting to understand all that Aunt Matilda is having to say. You may read it and re-read it to make sure you understand everything she is updating you on, but you are likely to read the letter in one continuous sitting.

In the same way, the occasion of Paul's epistles is ascertained by the reading and re-reading in one sitting. Ephesians is a short letter, say, compared to the gospels. You can read it through in about a half hour ... even if you are a slow reader. As you read and re-read, you will begin to get a bigger picture of what Paul is trying to say ... and the purpose for the letter should be available to you in these readings. Yes, sometimes a letter like Romans is very difficult to find the main theme (and it's certainly hard to read it through in one sitting) ... but doing this will pay huge dividends in your study of the book.

This is your assignment for next week. Read Ephesians through in one sitting. Try to do it at least twice during the week, but read it from beginning to end each time. As you are reading, be looking for that purpose statement, theme, or command that summarizes Paul's purpose for Ephesians.

Once we have the main purpose of the letter, we should recognize that everything Paul says in the letter somehow relates to this main purpose. As he is presenting his case, we should be careful to try to follow his thoughts through. This is often called "tracing the argument" of the epistle. Each paragraph that Paul constructs somehow adds to the main theme somehow and we want to be careful to pay attention. We should be looking for marker words that indicate transitions in his thought. Such words as "Therefore ... For, But, So then ... etc." All these connect thoughts in a logical way to previous or subsequent sections in support of his main idea. You will take a significant step in your ability to study NT epistles if you read them in this way.

Next week we will first discuss the occasion of Ephesians
