

Apostle & Epistle

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APOSTLE

Frequency and Usage

In classical Greek the noun *apostolos* occurs infrequently. It is first found in maritime language with the sense of a cargo ship or a fleet sent out. It was later used of the commander of a naval expedition or a band of colonists sent overseas. There are only two known occasions in classical literature where the word is used of a single envoy or emissary and both of these are in Herodotus. Classical Greek generally uses *angelos* (messenger) or *keryx* (herald) rather than *apostolos*. Josephus uses the word for a group sent on a mission. All its usages have two ideas in common:

- An express commission;
- Being sent overseas.

In the LXX, *apostolos* occurs only once in 1 Kings 14:6 in connection with the prophet Ahijah. Here there is no question of sending (the wife of Jeroboam comes to Ahijah); rather the word describes the commissioning and empowering of Ahijah with a hard message for Jeroboam's wife. On the other hand, the corresponding verbs *apostellô* and *exapostellô* occur some 700 times. An examination of the usage reveals:

- The LXX uses *apostellô* to denote the *authorisation* of someone to fulfil a clearly defined task rather than the appointment of someone to an office; and;
- The focus is always on the one who sends rather than the messenger.

By way of contrast, *apostolos* occurs 80 times in the New Testament and, unlike classical Greek usage, can mean a messenger (e.g. 2 Cor 8:23); however, the word still refers to a function, rather than an office, and the emphasis remains on the sender — Paul is an apostle of *Christ* (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Titus 1:1), as is Peter (1 Pet 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1).

Function

This sense of being commissioned and sent by the risen Christ is crucial to the New Testament understanding of an apostle. An apostle was someone who stood in close historical proximity to the resurrection — someone to whom the risen Jesus had *appeared*. The key texts are Acts 1:3-8; 1 Cor 15:5-9. In the Acts account, the



risen Jesus appeared over a period of forty days. Paul records specific appearances in this period — to Peter, to the Twelve, to more than five hundred at the same time, to James and to all the apostles. 1 Corinthians 15 distinguishes between apostles and others who had seen the risen Jesus. Paul does not call the five hundred plus apostles — to be an apostle required both seeing the risen Christ and being commissioned by him.

Paul's list distinguishes three groups of apostles:

- Peter and the Twelve;
- James and all the apostles;
- Paul as the last and least of the apostles.

Included in the second group would be Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junia, a woman (Rom 16:7), and possibly the two men who accompanied Titus in connection with the collection for Christians in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:16-24) and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25).¹ We do not know how large this group was.

Paul includes himself as the last of all the apostles; his was the last resurrection appearance of Jesus. Paul makes it clear that his Damascus road experience was not merely a vision — it was of the same kind as the previous resurrection appearances (Paul uses the same Greek verb “was seen” throughout). However, Paul describes himself as “one untimely born” because this appearance was some considerable period after all the other resurrection appearances.

Those who had personally seen the resurrected Jesus thus founded the initial generation of churches. The church is built upon the unshakable, eyewitness testimony to the resurrection of Jesus (Eph 2:20).

Signs of an Apostle

In 2 Corinthians, Paul has to defend his apostolic credentials to the Corinthian Christians who are impressed by the apostolic claims of some itinerant, Jewish visionaries and miracle-workers. The Corinthians are inclined to think of this latter group as “super-apostles” (2 Cor 11:5), whereas Paul brands them as “false apostles” (2 Cor 11:13). Nevertheless, this group has made such inroads into the community that Paul has to compete with them, in one sense, on the same terms. They claim to be visionaries — Paul has had exceptional revelation (2 Cor 12:1-10); they claim to be miracle-workers — the Corinthians have seen the signs of a true

¹ However, in the last two instances *apostolos* may simply be being used in the sense of “messenger on behalf of the churches” rather than in the technical sense above which defines an “apostle of Christ”.



apostle in Paul: signs, wonders and mighty works (2 Cor 12:11-12). However, there is one crucial difference; for Paul, true apostleship involves suffering for Christ's sake and carrying genuine concern for all the churches (2 Cor 11:21-29).

Paul recognises the importance of signs and wonders in his apostolic ministry (2 Cor 12:12; 1 Cor 2:1-5; Gal 3:1-5; cf. Acts 19:11-12), however these signs of a true apostle occur in the context of the concerns of a true apostle — the growth and maturity of the church (see especially Col 1:24 – 2:7).

Apostle as Gift to the Church

These apostles are among the gifts of the exalted Christ to the church to equip Christians for the work of service (Eph 4:11-12). However, with the death of the last of the apostles the church no longer has direct access to apostolic testimony. How then can the apostles continue to be a gift to the church? The answer lies in the New Testament canon:

Directly implicit in this once-for-all character of their function is the fact that the rank and authority of the apostolate are restricted to the first 'apostolic' generation, and can be neither continued nor renewed once this has come to an end. The Resurrection is a unique event set in historical time, the certainty of which is not (as might be quite conceivable in the abstract) confirmed and kept alive by constantly repeated manifestations of Christ. Instead, once experienced and attested, it has simply to be handed on, 'safeguarded' and 'believed'. It is true that the temptation to extend the apostolate beyond the apostolic generation was not entirely avoided; here and there attempts were made to turn the title of 'apostle' into a kind of professional designation for missionaries and for ascetic men of the Spirit. In the long run, however, all these attempts proved abortive. The holders of the 'apostolic' office of bishop, who ultimately secured the government of the Church, did not describe themselves as apostles; they are simply the successors, or at most the representatives, of the apostles, and as such they too remain bound by the original apostolic word and witness, which finds its definitive form in the New Testament canon.²

EPISTLE

Epistle as Apostolic Presence

In the letters of Paul we have a primary source of apostolic testimony. His letters clearly function as a substitute for his actual presence with the congregations or

² Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), pp. 23-24.



individuals addressed and express his desire, or intention, to visit (Rom 1: 8-15; 15:14-33; 1 Cor 4:14-21; 2 Cor 12:14 - 13:13; Gal 4:12-20; Phil 2:19-24; Col 2:1-5; 1 Thess 2:17 – 3:13; Phlm 21-22). Consequently, when his letters were read aloud in the congregations, it was as though Paul himself were addressing them in person. We are now privileged to overhear this address. However, the privilege also presents a problem: by their very nature letters are occasional documents so, although we overhear Paul's address, say, to the Christians in Rome, those words were not addressed to us in the first place. To what extent, therefore, can we apply those words to our context?

Hermeneutical Model

In order to interpret the New Testament epistles we must first keep in mind the basic hermeneutical model which applies to all written texts :

An author intends to convey meaning through the text to a reader.

Thus any responsible interpretation involves an interaction between the world of the author, the world of the text and the world of the reader. In the words of Tate:

“... meaning results from a conversation between the world of the text and the world of the reader, a conversation informed by the world of the author.”³

With the epistles, therefore, we need to pay attention to the following:

- Background material on the first century Graeco-Roman and Jewish worlds (obtainable from good introductions to the New Testament and commentaries);
- The literary form of a letter (which we will concentrate on in this session);
- The presuppositions, beliefs and attitudes that inform us as readers as we come to the text. We need to be aware that we will tend to read a text in a particular way because our reading is constrained by the interpretive communities to which we belong. That is why we need to be informed about alternative interpretations. The history of interpretation thus plays a crucial role in the model.

THE LETTER IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

Distinction Between Letter and Epistle?

We are fortunate in that thousands of ancient Greek papyrus letters have been discovered among the rubbish heaps and archives of sand-covered towns in Egypt. These have added considerably to our knowledge of letter writing in antiquity. On

³ W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*² (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), p. xxiv.



the basis of these Adolf Deissmann, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, drew a distinction between the letter and epistle form which many scholars (including Fee and Stuart) still follow. Deissmann concluded that letters were non-literary, occasional documents intended only for a particular individual or audience, whereas epistles were artistic, literary documents intended for public consumption. Deissmann regarded 2 Peter, 1 John and James as epistles and all the Pauline epistles, as well as 2 and 3 John, as letters.

This distinction highlights the occasional and specific nature of all of Paul's letters, for example. However, the neatness of this distinction has been rightly criticised:

- The papyri, coming from Egypt, inevitably provide only a partial view of Graeco-Roman letter writing. They significantly highlight the life and culture of some small provincial towns in Egypt but tell us nothing about the cities in which Christian communities to whom Paul wrote lived;
- The distinction between private letters and public epistles is more appropriate to modernity than antiquity. Politics was based on friendship and family, for example. Many ancient letters, which were either originally written or subsequently edited for publication, have a considerable "private" character;
- The distinction between literary and non-literary types is misleading. All letters are, in some sense, literature and even the common papyrus letters follow highly stylised letter-writing conventions.

Most contemporary New Testament scholars, therefore, recognise that we have to deal both with the occasional nature of the letters and the fact that they were probably copied and circulated to other Christian communities even before Paul's death. We certainly have evidence for this by the time of 2 Peter (2 Pet 3:15-16). Thus the early church quickly realised that Paul's letters were more than occasional documents written to specific churches or individuals.

Form

The form of the Greek letter remained relatively unchanged from the third century BCE to the third century CE. The following elements are usually present:

Salutation

From A to B (many) greetings (*polla chairein*); often included additional greetings and/or wish for good health.

Thanksgiving

On occasions the writer gives thanks (*eucharistô*) to the gods and this is followed by reasons for the thanksgiving. This is usually because the gods have saved the sender or the recipient from some catastrophe.



Body

Introduced with characteristic formulae such as:

“When I found someone ...”

“I want you to know ...”

“When I arrived ...”

The body of the letter is usually split into two parts; the first part giving information about the sender and the second asking about the recipient.

Conclusion

- Greetings
- Wish for good health of recipient
- Farewell
- Date

Here is an example of a typical letter:⁴

<i>Salutation</i>	Apion to his father and Lord Epimachus, very many greetings
<i>Health wish</i>	Before all else I pray for your health and continual well-being and good fortune, together with my sister and her daughter and my brother
<i>Thanksgiving</i>	I give thanks to the Lord Sarapis because he saved me immediately when I was in danger at sea
<i>Body (Part 1)</i>	When I arrived at Misenum, I received travelling expenses of three gold pieces from Caesar, and I am fine
<i>Body (Part 2)</i>	Therefore, I request you, my father, write me a little letter, first about your welfare, secondly about the welfare of my brother and sister and thirdly so that I may make my obeisance before your hand, because you educated me well and because of this I hope to make speedy progress, the gods willing

Conclusion

⁴ Adapted from John L. White, *Light From Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). The Greek has been translated as literally as possible.



- *Greetings* Greet Kapitón a lot and my brothers and Serenilla and my friends. I sent you my portrait through Euktemon ...
- *health wish* I pray that you are well ...

Form of Pauline Letters

Paul's letters function within the broad framework above; however, Paul modifies the form in the following ways (although not everything listed here is found in every one of his letters):

Salutation

Paul elaborates on the standard "X to Y (*polla*) *chairein*". He includes some self-description here and often mentions co-workers. Most significantly he changes *chairein* to *charis* (grace) and adds *eirene* (peace) from the standard greeting for Jewish letters: *shalom*. This is true of every letter in the Pauline corpus (1 and 2 Timothy add "mercy"), it is also true of 1 and 2 Peter and 2 John (again with "mercy" added). Hebrews reads much more like an essay in letter form (it has no salutation), as does 1 John (no salutation or closing greetings). James has the standard Greek salutation and Jude has "mercy, peace and love".

Thanksgiving

Paul begins this section either with some form of *eucharistô* (give thanks) or with *eulogetos* (worthy of praise, 2 Cor 1:3). This section tends to function for Paul as an indicator of the main theme(s) of the letter.

Body

Formal Opening

- I urge/appeal (1 Cor 1:10; Phlm 8-9)
- I want you to know/do not want you to be unaware/you yourselves know (Rom 1:13; 2 Cor 1:10; Phil 1:12; 1 Thess 2:1)
- I am amazed (Gal 1:6)

Main Body

This section includes Paul's intention or desire to visit mentioned above in connection with apostolic presence.

Conclusion

- Peace wish



- Greetings
- Holy kiss
- Benediction

Knowing the overall form of Paul's letters is particularly useful when he departs from it. For example, there is no thanksgiving section in Galatians. Paul is so angry that the Galatian Christians are being duped by a distortion of the gospel that he rushes straight into the main body of the letter.

Grace and Peace

Every letter begins with the greeting "grace and peace" and, apart from Romans,⁵ ends with a benediction concerning grace. Furthermore, a peace wish, echoing the Jewish practice of concluding a letter with *shalom*, is found in Rom 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor 13:11; Gal 6:16; Eph 6:23; Phil 4:7-9; Col 3:15; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Thess 3:16. It is fundamental for Paul that the church should be characterised by grace and peace. This is summed up in 2 Cor 11:13 "live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you". In other words, the presence of God is promised to those who embrace and practise *shalom*.

Paul thus takes the Graeco-Roman letter form and, in typical Jewish-Christian fashion, transforms it by making the letter itself a vehicle of *shalom*.

RHETORICAL FUNCTION

Most books or articles on Paul's letters add a section after the main body, and before the conclusion, which is usually entitled "paraenesis" or "ethical exhortation". This fundamentally confuses the letter form with its rhetorical function. Identifying the letter form has been useful primarily for analysis of the opening, closing and particularly the thanksgiving sections of Paul's letters. However, it has not proved very useful for analysing the main body of the letters, except in broad terms. Ancient letter-writing theory did not concentrate on the letter form but rather on the typical purpose that a letter writer hoped to accomplish. The rhetorical function was thus of primary concern and this was accomplished in the main body of the letter.

Graeco-Roman rhetoricians divided rhetoric into three main species:

- Judicial (forensic) — the rhetoric of the courtroom. This primarily concerned issues of justice;
- Deliberative (advisory) — the rhetoric of the governing assembly. This concerned what course of action would be useful or expedient;

⁵ The manuscript tradition for the ending of Romans is confused. Some manuscripts end with "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. Amen."



- Epideictic (panegyric) — the rhetoric of praise and blame. This type was designed for particular occasions such as victory celebrations, weddings and funerals.

Most rhetoric in antiquity was judicial. Epideictic rhetoric was the most neglected in the rhetorical handbooks and became a catch-all classification for everything that was neither judicial nor deliberative. These rhetorical classifications are sometimes found in commentaries on the New Testament letters. However, the classification only partly works; the Graeco-Roman letter-writing tradition in fact developed independently of rhetorical theory. The letter-writing tradition developed primarily in the area of moral philosophy as a means of exhortation (paraenesis). It is for this reason quite wrong to regard paraenesis as part of a letter's form. Paraenesis is rather a particular type of letter.

Letter Types

The primary sources for Graeco-Roman letter types are the epistolary handbooks of Demetrius (probably first century BCE in its present form) and Libanius (fourth century CE). Demetrius lists twenty-one types and Libanius forty-one. The following types are relevant for New Testament letters:

Friendly Letter

The epistolary tradition regarded the maintenance of friendship as the primary function of the letter. The friendly letter was seen as a substitute for actual companionship. There is usually an assertion that separation is in body only. In this type of letter there is a stress on mutual reciprocity, and friendship forms the basis for a specific request in the letter.

Although there are no examples of the friendly letter type in the New Testament, elements are found in 2 Cor 1:16; Col 2:5; 1 Thess 2:17; 3:6-10; Phlm 22; 2 John 12; 3 John 14.

Family Letter

This was for the purpose of maintaining the affection and social relationships of the household. Characteristically, the writer is away from home and reports back concerning their situation and their concern and affection for the family. Paul, in particular, uses the language of familial relations to describe the Christian community and his letters thus bear the characteristics of the family letter.

Letter of Praise

This and the next type correspond closely to the pure type of epideictic rhetoric. In the letter of praise a person is encouraged and approval is expressed of the



person's actions or virtues. The thanksgiving sections of Paul's letters correspond closely to such letters of praise.

Letter of Blame

This is the negative version of the letter of praise and is subdivided into the following subtypes:

- Admonition — the mildest form of blame. The purpose of admonition is to instil sense into a person and teach them what should and should not be done. Paul uses admonition very consciously in his letters and encourages Christians to practise admonition (Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:14)
- Rebuke. This uses the device of shame to seek to stop the misbehaviour of the one rebuked. The language of rebuke is found particularly in Galatians (e.g., 1:6-10; 3:1-5; 4:8-11)
- Reproach — the harshest form of blame. Such letters were typically written by wronged benefactors and involved a harsh criticism of the recipient's character. The New Testament, significantly, does not use this type of letter

Paraenetic Letter

In the paraenetic letter recipients are urged to pursue some things and avoid others. Paraenesis is thus divided into two parts: encouragement and dissuasion. In actual letters this positive and negative exhortation may vary widely in the amount of space given to each and in the way the two parts are accomplished. Sometimes paraenesis consists of a series of antithetical statements: "Do this, but don't do that". At other times there may be distinct positive and negative sections. Paraenetic letters are often quite complex in structure but essentially consist of both encouragement and dissuasion.

Paraenesis plays a major role in most of the New Testament letters. 1 Thessalonians is a prime example of a paraenetic letter through and through. A number of scholars also regard the Pastoral Epistles as paraenetic letters.

Letter of Advice

This is very often difficult to distinguish from the paraenetic letter. In this letter, advice is specific and occasional, and such advice is given by a writer who is older, wiser or more experienced than the recipient. The advice is given in order to persuade or dissuade the recipient with regard to a particular course of action. 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians particularly mix paraenesis, advice and rebuke.



Protrepitic Letter

This is a letter which specifically exhorts the recipient to take up a particular way of life. The genre is dominated by the various philosophical schools which urged readers to convert to their way of life, join a school and/or accept a set of teachings as normative. In genuine protrepitic discourse readers are made to realise their plight, cast aside self-conceit, come to themselves and recognise their need for a teacher. Romans is widely regarded as a protrepitic letter.

Letter of Consolation

Consolation consists of two parts:

- Lament expressing grief over the death or misfortune of a person and acknowledging their accomplishments and character;
- Consolation proper consisting of quotes, examples, precepts and arguments against excessive grief.

In the New Testament, 1 Thess 4:13-18 contains a consolatory section within an overall paraenetic letter.

Letter of Mediation

In this type of letter one person makes a request to another on behalf of a third party. A particularly important subtype was the letter of introduction or recommendation. Such letters are mentioned in Acts 9:2; 18:27; 1 Cor 16:3; 2 Cor 3:1-2. Philemon is the prime New Testament example of a letter of mediation.

Summary

Examples of each of the above types of letter can be found within the letters of the New Testament. The New Testament letters, however, are complex and generally combine a mixture of the various types. The authors of the epistolary handbooks recognised that their classifications represented ideal types rather than what actually occurred in practice. Libanius goes so far as to provide the “mixed letter” as his final ideal type in which he combines the letter of praise and blame. Nevertheless, identifying the particular type represented by the section of the letter being studied is an essential part of grasping the overall purpose and argument of that particular section.

Rhetorical Criticism

As well as identifying the various letter types present in the New Testament, scholars in recent years have recognised that a prime function of the letters is to persuade the readers to adopt the writer’s point of view and/or way of life. Classical



rhetoric was concerned with the art of persuasion and the means of argumentation. Elementary exercises in rhetoric were taught at the secondary stage of education in the Graeco-Roman world and formal rhetorical training took place at the tertiary stage. Whether Paul had such formal training is debatable, nevertheless his letters demonstrate a good knowledge of rhetorical technique and the study of at least his more complex letters from the perspective of rhetorical criticism serves to highlight the flow of his argument. Rhetorical criticism has also been usefully employed to demonstrate the unity of a letter such as Philippians which has been regarded as a composite document by some scholars.

The classical rhetorical handbooks divide a speech into six parts:

- *Exordium* (introduction) which introduces the central issue to be addressed and defines the character of the speaker;
- *Narratio* (narration) which provides background information key to the central issue;
- *Propositio* (proposition) which sets out the central theses to be proved;
- *Probatio* (confirmation) which sets out the logical arguments for the theses;
- *Refutatio* (refutation) which refutes opposing arguments;
- *Peroratio* (conclusion) which summarises the main points and evokes a response embracing both reason and the emotions.

The Latin terms have been retained above as these are sometimes found (without explanation) in the more advanced and more recent commentaries. There were variations on this theme as the rhetorical analysis of Romans below will demonstrate.

In addition to the form of argumentation above, the classical rhetoricians emphasised *style* which included the choice of words, composition and arrangement of words. In examining the New Testament letters, therefore, attention should be paid to, for example:

- Figures of speech – simile, metaphor, hyperbole, irony, metonymy (the substitution of one noun for another closely associated with it, e.g. “key” for authority), synecdoche (substituting a part for the whole or vice-versa, e.g. “body” to represent the whole person), etc;
- Antitheses – e.g. contrasts between flesh and Spirit, Adam and Christ, light and darkness, etc;
- Repetition – word (e.g. Eph 4:4-6), structural pattern (e.g. Romans 6-7), thoughts or ideas (e.g. Gal 5:1, 13);
- Inclusion – this is where the author returns at the end of a section to a point or phrase made at the beginning of the section and is very useful for determining textual units (e.g. 1 Cor 12:31; 14:1);
- Chiasm – this is a two part structure in which the second half is a mirror image of the first so that the first term occurs last and the last first; e.g. ABCDCBA. This



both serves to mark off a textual unit and to indicate where the emphasis falls (the central element, in the above example “D”). Examples of chiasmic structures in the New Testament letters are:-

Gal 4:1-7

- A The *heir* remains a *child* and a *slave*
- B Until the time appointed by the *father*
- C When that time came, *God* sent his *Son*
- D Born under the *law*
- D To redeem those under the *law*
- C Because you are children, *God* has sent the Spirit of his *Son*
- B Crying, “Abba! *Father!*”
- A So you are no longer a *slave* but a *child* and an *heir*.

1 Tim 2:11-12

- A Let a woman learn in *quietness*
- B With *full submission*
- C I do not permit a woman to teach
- B Or *exercise authority over* a man
- A But to be in *quietness*.

ROMANS AS AN EXAMPLE

Letter Form

Salutation

Sender	1:1-6
Recipient	1:7a
Greeting	1:7b

Thanksgiving 1:8-17

Body 1:18 – 15:32; 16:17-19 (including travel plans
15:22-32)



Conclusion

Peace wish	15:33; 16:20
Greetings	16:1-15
Holy kiss	16:16
Benediction	16:25-27

Rhetorical Structure

Exordium (Introduction) **1:1-12**

Narratio (Narration) **1:13-15**

In this section of the discourse the writer would rehearse something that has happened in the past to reinforce the argument. Here Paul describes the background of his missionary project to come to Rome.

Propositio (Statement of main thesis) **1:16-17**

Paul states the major contention of the letter concerning the gospel as the powerful embodiment of the righteousness of God for both Jew and Gentile.

Probatio (Proof of thesis) **1:18 – 15:13**

Paul proves that the righteousness of God, rightly understood, has transforming and unifying implications for the Roman house churches and their participation in world mission. In Romans, the probatio is complex and can be broken down into four distinct sections:

1 *Confirmatio (Confirmation)* **1:18 – 4:25**

Paul confirms his thesis by showing that his gospel is impartial — it provides the righteousness of God for both Jew and Gentile alike, by faith. In 1:18 – 3:20 Jews have temporal priority but ultimately Jews and Gentiles are equal in sin and its condemnation. In 3:21-31 Jews and Gentiles are equal in the reception of God's righteousness in the gospel. In 4:1-25 Abraham is shown to be the father of all who believe — both Jew and Gentile.

2 *Exornatio (Elaboration)* **5:1 – 8:39**

Paul elaborates on his proof by dealing with a series of implications and objections to his gospel. Here the focus is on one aspect of Hab 2:4 — what it means by “shall live ...”. In chapter 5 Adam and Christ both stand for “all”. Chapter 6 is designed to deal with Jewish Christian objections to Paul's law-free gospel. The discussion in chapter 7 concerning freedom from the law is of obvious concern to Jewish Christians. In chapter 8 Paul contends that all who have the Spirit are children and



heirs of the inheritance which was previously the exclusive possession of Israel. All who believe now share that privilege.

3 *Comparatio (Comparison)*

9:1 – 11:36

Paul uses the present historical example of Israel's unbelief. These chapters are no digression in Paul's argument but central to it. Jews and Gentiles are interwoven in Paul's gospel. Gentiles have no grounds for arrogance with regard to Israel. Rather there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all. When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in all Israel will be saved. God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

4 *Exhortatio (Exhortation)*

12:1 – 15:13

Here Paul lays out ethical guidelines for living righteously. The question is: "How does one who is righteous live by faith righteously?" The basic issue is living in harmony with one another.

Peroratio (Conclusion)

15:14 – 16:27

In this section the speaker drives home the point by making a personal appeal to the audience. Here Paul makes a personal appeal to his readers in the Roman house churches to join with him in his missionary concerns for Jerusalem, their own situation in Rome and his proposed journey to Spain. The goal of the harmony of Jews and Gentiles in Rome will further Paul's missionary goals for they will then be in a position to send him on to Spain with their undivided support.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETATION

Interaction between the World of the Text and our World

The above analysis has focused on understanding the world of the text. The third part of the hermeneutical model concerns bringing the text into conversation with our contemporary world. Fee and Stuart rightly emphasise the importance of good exegesis as a prerequisite for this conversation to take place. Some guidelines to aid the conversation are presented below:

- If we share similar specific life situations with those addressed in the letters then we can directly apply the passage to our situation. It is this aspect that so often gives us a sense of immediacy with the letters.
- When there are comparable particulars and contexts today it is illegitimate to extend the application to other contexts.
- When the particulars are not comparable it is important to look for analogies. Try to decide the central issue with which the passage is concerned and then decide



whether genuinely comparable issues are still relevant today. For example, 1 Thess 4:11-12 affirms the dignity of manual labour in a context where such labour was despised and encourages such work as a means of financial independence. In our context we can find similar analogies and can apply this text in creative ways to address a culture of wrong dependence.

- It may be possible to redefine specific issues in a genuinely comparable way. For example, we do not have groups insisting on circumcision today like the Judaizers encountered in Galatians. Nevertheless, the principle that any perversion of the gospel should be robustly resisted in the way advocated by Paul in Galatians can be reapplied.
- Where the text is clearly limited to its cultural context we need to ask: “Of what principle is this a culturally conditioned expression?” For example, women dressing appropriately, not having their hair braided and not wearing gold, pearls or expensive clothes was the cultural way of expressing decency and modesty in 1 Tim 2:9. In our context, therefore, 1 Tim 2:9 exhorts us to find culturally relevant ways of behaving “modestly and decently”.
- The hermeneutical model outlined above takes the reader seriously in the interpretation process. It is important to recognise that we are predisposed to read the letters, as with other biblical texts, in a particular way due to being embedded in an interpretive community. To test our reading, therefore, it is vital that we pay attention to the history of interpretation to see how communities, either from a very different contemporary perspective to ours or from another period of church history, interpret the text in view. This, unfortunately, is a very neglected area within many commentaries.⁶
- Paul writes, “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). New Testament scholars tend to give priority to Paul over against the gospels due to the fact that his letters were written before them. However, Paul is clearly aware of the Jesus story (1 Cor 7:10; 15:3) and seeks to live by Jesus’ example. The letters must, therefore, be interpreted in the light of Jesus’ story, as Paul himself would insist.

Task Theology

The final point above leads to the question of what Fee and Stuart call “task theology”. They see this as a problem in epistle interpretation but it should be viewed rather as an exciting challenge. The New Testament letters present theology, not in a systematic way but in the service of a specific task. Paul, for

⁶ For an excellent example of a commentary which takes seriously the history of interpretation see Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus* (London: SCM, 1974).



example, immersed in the Jesus story, has to reapply that story in the various contexts in which he finds himself. It is interesting to note how he goes about this:

- Sometimes there is a specific word from Jesus concerning the issue and Paul directly applies it to the situation at hand (e.g. 1 Cor 7:10);
- At other times there is nothing specific in the Jesus story to address the situation. Paul deals with this by offering his own judgment as one who has the Spirit (e.g. 1 Cor 7:25-40). This is not an arbitrary judgment but arises out of deep sensitivity to the Spirit and a thorough knowledge of the Jesus story;
- Interestingly, even where there is a specific word from Jesus, Paul does not automatically assume that this must apply in exactly the same way in every situation. In 1 Cor 9:14 he refers to a command of Jesus concerning remuneration for those who proclaim the gospel. Nevertheless, he disregards this command as far as the Corinthians are concerned and proclaims the gospel free of charge (1 Cor 9:18). He is well aware that the command of Jesus does give him the right to receive some material reward (1 Cor 9:4-12a); it is not the case that Paul deliberately disobeys a clear command of Jesus. Nevertheless, for Paul, what was highly appropriate in the context of the Palestinian mission of Jesus was not necessarily appropriate in the very different context of mission to the Hellenistic cities of the Mediterranean world where, for example, such practice may have led to the conclusion that Paul was some sort of Cynic philosopher.⁷

In other words, the letters themselves demonstrate that the application of Jesus' example and teaching require prophetic imagination born out of a thorough knowledge of the Jesus story, deep sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and in depth understanding of the contemporary culture.

QUESTIONS

1. One writer, commenting on 2 Cor 13:11 states: "So although the peace wish is a part of the closing bracket of the letter, Paul's mind rushes on beyond this ending to the new possibilities which lie ahead". To what extent does your church emphasise "living in peace" as the way to open fresh possibilities?
2. If grace and peace are so significant in the New Testament letters why do you think peace is not emphasised nearly as much as grace in most evangelical churches?

⁷ The Cynics were well known in antiquity for seeking to gain a living from their speaking. The following quote from Dio Chrysostom (*Discourses* 32.9-10) is typical: "As for the Cynics ... they must make a living ... These Cynics, posting themselves at street-corners, in alley-ways and at temple gates pass round the hat and play upon the credulity of lads and sailors and crowds of that sort ... if it is in the guise of philosophers that they do these things with a view to their own profit and reputation ... that indeed is shocking".



READING AND RESOURCES

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- Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context* (Fourth Edition: Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998)
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