

Hermeneutics 9 – How do we interpret epistles?

Epistle – from the Greek *epistello*, “to send out/send a letter”

Epistles are important. The entire NT is epistles, except for the four gospels, Acts, and Revelation.

Much of the epistles are straightforward in their meaning. We have seen this in 1 John as we've worked through that little book. The proper interpretation is often lying on the surface. That is because the epistles were letters written to early churches to encourage them in their Christian duties, warn them of spiritual enemies, and give updates on the ministry of the apostolic author. There is seldom any mystical language, cryptic imagery, or figurative speech we must deconstruct. The truth of these letters was meant by God to be instructive for His church in every age. There is a sense of urgency on the writer's part. Lives of godly men, with much experience and practice, are summed up and applied for the reader. Epistles carry some of the final words of God to His people before He returns.

Interpretation of the epistles is extremely important for at least these two reasons:

- A. The epistles are in one sense, a commentary and summary of the rest of Scripture. The nature of the apostle's writing is in itself a model of good hermeneutics (as he expounds and applied the Scriptures).
- B. The epistles are often direct commands to the new covenant church, of which we are a part.

For this reason, epistles carry some of the strongest force in making a point of doctrine. The epistles are laden with rich theological terms that demand more than a passing glance at the underlying Greek.

One major difficulty we have is sorting out what is the didactic message of the text that is often culturally conditioned.

To do this, as in other books, we need to do some reconstruction of the historical background. As in 1 John, knowledge of the prevailing Gnostic error of Docetism made sense of why John wrote his opening chapter the way he did. Also, the questions of 1 Corinthians: the question of abstinence from physical touch, the question concerning food offered to idols in chaps. 8-10, and head coverings in chap. 11. Such divisions we want to note. Sometimes the author will stay on one subject the whole letter through (Jude, Hebrews), but oftentimes the author treats several

subjects and topics in a letter (1 Corinthians, Philippians). Tracking an author's logic and development of a point or argument is crucial.

Commenting on the cultural conditions of the epistles, Gordon Fee and Mark Stuart write [as a basic rule]: "A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author and the readers."

If we came up with what we believed was the meaning of a text, and if we could tell it to the original first-century church, and they had no idea what we were talking about, you can be sure that we did not interpret the text correctly.

Lets take the meat-sacrificed-to-false-idols case of 1 Cor. 8. Some Christians were stumbling over buying and eating meat in the marketplace that had been involved in a sacrifice to a pagan idol. Paul's point was that it was not sin to buy and eat the meat, because an idol is nothing and the meat belongs to God. But the principle teaching from that text (and also Romans 14) is that we should not do anything (even if it is not sin to us) if it is going to lead a brother or sister to do what *is* sin to them. Since we don't have the same system of worship for false deities today, the purchase of meat is not considered in the same way as it was in Corinth in the 1st century. But our brothers and sisters in Corinth would understand if we told them about the certain things we do not do because we don't want our brothers and sisters around us to stumble. When they're around, we don't watch or listen to certain things, eat and drink certain foods or beverages, go to certain places, or even wear certain clothes. For a Christian to do some of these things in private may be fine, but to do them in the presence of a brother or sister with a weaker conscience could be spiritually devastating. So, any discussion about meat from 1 Cor. 8 has to include the reason Paul brought it up – to teach the stronger Christians how to relate to the weaker ones and love them and not destroy them.

Conclusion:

1. Epistles are largely didactic – teaching, making points of clarification on major theological themes
2. As much as possible, know the background and occasion of the author's letter, as similar situations arise today you can go to the epistle and see what was said.
3. Distinguish the reader's questions and the author's cultural language, from the point the author tries to make – this point is what you will need to reinforce when a similar situation happens.