

how to read the Bible for all its worth

Siôn Glaze teaches us to read the Epistles



the epistles: learning to think contextually

This series is summarised from Fee G, Stuart D. *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* (3rd ed). Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

Taking a patient's history can be daunting. You think you know how to get all the information and how to ask the awkward questions, but the nerves set in when the patient is in front of you. And you realise how much you missed out when you speak to your consultant afterwards! We can do exactly the same with the epistles. We read them confidently and think we understand the entire message, but we rarely do.

The epistles are all the books of the New Testament minus the four Gospels, Acts and Revelation. They are split into 'real letters' and 'epistles'. 'Real letters' are those that were written specifically for the recipient (eg Hebrews). Conversely, the 'epistles' were

intended for the general public (eg James). However, the distinction is not always clear, and in this article, 'epistles' will refer to both. The epistles were written in the first century and they were all occasional ('arising out of and intended for a specific occasion'),¹ so context is key.

form an impression

When you meet a patient you instantly form an impression of him. For example, does he look ill? This is even before you find out about his symptoms. Do the same with the epistles. Reading through your chosen epistle in one sitting is important to see the big picture. Try making notes on the following:

1. Who are the recipients?
2. Attitudes of the author

3. Hints about the occasional nature of the letter (eg specific events)
4. Logical divisions between sections

Taking 1 Corinthians as an example, here are a few points you could pick out:

1. Most of them were Gentiles (12:2)
2. Paul is rebuking them (5:2)
3. Paul has been informed by Chloe's household about quarrels happening (1:10-12)
4. Some sections are more obvious, eg sexual immorality (6:12-20). Look for clues, such as the repeated phrase 'now about' (7:25, 8:1)

presenting complaints

The next step is to consider each of your patient's symptoms in turn. You need to find out as much as you can; simply knowing that he has pain is not enough! Similarly, the epistles were written for a reason. They often addressed specific issues important to the recipients, like the symptoms of a patient.

Pick one of the divisions you identified: read it then re-read it in a different translation if possible. Make notes, paying attention to key words and phrases. Themes emerging from the section on

sexual immorality mentioned above (1 Cor 6:12-20) include: your body is for more than just sex, it is a part of Christ's body.

drug, family, and social history

These aspects of a medical history place everything they have told you into context. We also need to form an 'informed reconstruction'² of the cultural context of the epistles.

Finding out about medication the patient is currently taking will help you pick up on medical conditions that have been missed. Drug side effects may play a role in the presenting complaint. In the epistles, what false doctrines can you see being fed to the Christians? How are they in conflict with the teachings of Christ and what effects are they having on the local church? In 1 Corinthians 6:12, for example, some were advocating that there were no sexual boundaries.

A family history gives invaluable information about potential genetic linkages. Likewise, what is the heritage of the recipients of the epistle? Were they formerly Jews or Gentiles? How might this affect their interpretation of the gospel?

A social history provides a more holistic perspective of the impact of the symptoms on the patient's day-to-day life. How are we to make sense of the 'symptoms' in the epistles unless we understand the day-to-day lives of the people in the churches described? Encouraging monogamy in a sexually immoral church is very different in a society that sees nothing wrong with promiscuity compared to a society where monogamy is celebrated. A Bible dictionary or the introduction in a commentary will help you put the epistle into context.

treatment plan

After taking their 'patients' histories', the authors of the epistles understood their 'patients' diseases'. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they were able to give treatment. The question is why they prescribed what they did. Consider each *paragraph* of a section in turn to appreciate the *literary context*. Thinking in *paragraphs* is fundamental 'to understanding the argument in the various epistles'³. For each paragraph summarise two things as concisely as you can:

1. What is being said
2. Why you think the author has said this, at this point in time

You should now have a clearer understanding of the epistle's intended message. For example, in 1 Corinthians 6:12-17, Paul states that sex is more than just a physical act for pleasure, and that we must use our bodies appropriately. Paul says this to rebuke those who were saying random sex was permissible.

conclusion

We must not neglect asking the Holy Spirit for guidance when reading the Bible. But having a formula at hand, as you read one of the epistles, will help you really to get to grips with its messages. This formula reveals 'God's Word to *them*' (exegesis) - those who originally read the epistles. The next step is to understand 'God's Word to *us*'⁴ (hermeneutics). That is what we will consider in the next instalment of the series.

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REFERENCES

1. Fee G, Stuart D. *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth (3rd ed)*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003:58
2. *Ibid*:59
3. *Ibid*:64,65
4. *Ibid*:70