

How to Read the Epistles **by Bob Young**

General questions

1. What am I reading? Genre—magazine, newspaper, fiction, non-fiction, etc. In the Bible, possible answers include history, narrative, specialized history, gospel, poem, saga, wisdom literature, apocalyptic, prophecy, letter, sermon, etc.
2. What is the purpose of this material—why was it written? Who is writing? To whom? When? How—literal, figurative, etc.? Figures of speech, argumentation styles, etc.
3. What is the background information? (Read thoughtfully.)
4. Why are you reading? Orientation, systematically, searching, preparation for teaching, personal application, etc.
5. Scan the material; get an overview before reading in detail.

Introduction

Curiosity questions: Why did Paul write so much to Corinth, so little to Laodicea? Why were the very short one-chapter letters included?

What is an epistle?

The Nature of Epistles

- Greek form—writer, recipient, salutation, prayer, (theme), body, farewell.
- The letters are “teaching” material.
- The letters are persuasion and admonition.
- The letters appear to be easy to interpret and understand.
- Much of the division in Christendom today comes from the letters rather than from other sections of the Bible.
- Many of the questions that trouble churches of Christ today also find their origin or major support in the letters.

The letters

Important for the Christian faith

Significant for their illustration of hermeneutical/interpretive principles

Reading the letters

- The general context—who is writing, to whom, why?, under what circumstances...
- The historical context—what is happening in the world at this time, in the local church....
- The literary context—what are unique features of this book, vocabulary, structure, construction
- The “occasional” context

Basics of understanding what you read

- Continuity of meaning—what it meant and what it means
- Continuity of experience—what circumstances today are similar
- Continuity of intent--identifying the intention of the author
- Discontinuous applications--extending the application, finding parallel or valid applications
- Discontinuous comparison--comparing items not parallel, but in some sense similar
- Discontinuous cultures—the danger of cultural comparisons

Conclusion

Varied approaches—systematic vs. biblical theology