

Consequently, letters were normally presented orally for the benefit of the group. We get a glimpse of this in the book of Revelation, where a blessing is pronounced on the person who reads (aloud) the words of the prophecy to the listening congregation (see Revelation 1:3).

How to Interpret New Testament Letters

To interpret a New Testament letter, we return to the four steps of the Interpretive Journey discussed in chapter 1.

Step 1: Grasp the text in their town. What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

You need to get a feel for the whole letter, and the best way to do this is by reading the letter in one sitting. Both ancient and contemporary letters were meant to be read from start to finish. Don't let the chapter-and-verse divisions in your Bible tempt you to skip around and read only small sections of the letter in isolation.

Since letters are occasional or situational, the next step in discovering what the text meant to the biblical audience is to reconstruct the historical-cultural context of the biblical writer and his audience. Use a good study Bible, along with Bible dictionaries and commentaries, to find out about the author, the audience, and their circumstances, along with the purpose of the letter. Summarize your reconstruction of the situation in a paragraph or two.

After you have an idea about the situation of the author and the recipients, you need to identify the literary context of the specific passage you are studying. In the case of New Testament letters, remember to *think paragraphs!*¹⁶ Summarize the main point of the paragraph that comes before your passage, the one that contains your passage, and the one that comes right after your passage. Find out how these paragraphs link together to communicate the author's message. Use your observation skills to read the text carefully (remember what you learned in chapters 2 and 3). Look for details. Notice important connections. Finally, write out a statement of what the passage meant to the first-century audience.

Step 2: Measure the width of the river to cross. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

In New Testament letters, the river of differences is not usually wide. Nevertheless, even in these letters the river can sometimes present a challenge. Although they were written to Christians like us, they sometimes dealt with situations foreign to us. After examining your passage, write a paragraph describing the differences that define the width of the river you need to cross.

Step 3: Cross the principlizing bridge. What theological principles are in this text?

Here we are looking for theological principles reflected in the meaning of the text you identified in Step 1. God not only gives specific expressions of meaning to biblical audiences, he also sends a broader, theological message through these same texts to all of his people. In light of how our situation compares to and differs from the situation of the biblical audience, try to identify the theological principles reflected in the text. Write out the principle (or principles) in a sentence or two, using present-tense verbs.

In his book *Applying the Bible*, Jack Kuhatschek mentions three questions that can help us locate theological principles in a passage.¹⁷ (1) Does the author state a principle? Often in New Testament letters the author will state his message in the form of a theological principle (e.g., Eph. 6:1: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord").

(2) Does the broader context reveal a theological principle? Sometimes the author will supply a theological principle in the surrounding context. For example, in Ephesians 5:21 Paul writes, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." He follows this general principle with specific examples of how people in the ancient household should submit to each other (wives/husbands, children/fathers, slaves/masters).

(3) We should ask why a particular command or instruction was given. Sometimes when you locate the reason behind the command or instruction, you will also find the theological principle. In Galatians 5:2 Paul writes, "I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all." When we ask why the apostle warns the Galatians against circumcision, we find the theological principle that people cannot achieve God's acceptance by keeping the law or by human effort alone (symbolized by circumcision). God's grace is given as a gift.

Journey into God's Word

After you have written out your principle or principles in one or two sentences using present-tense verbs, ask the following questions to determine whether you have truly discovered a theological principle:

- Is the principle reflected in the biblical text?
- Is the principle timeless rather than tied to a specific situation?
- Is the principle culturally bound?¹⁸
- Is the principle consistent with the teaching of the rest of Scripture?
- Is the principle relevant to both the biblical and the contemporary audience?

Theological principles provide a bridge across the river of historical and cultural differences that separate the ancient text and the contemporary audience.

Step 4: Grasp the text in our town. How should individual Christians today apply the theological principles in their lives?

In the last phase of interpreting a New Testament letter, we apply the theological principle or principles to Christians today. Remember that while these principles are determined by the meaning of the text, they may be applied in a number of different ways today. There are three steps.

(1) We observe how the theological principles in the biblical text address the original situation. We identify the key elements that are present in the intersection between the principle and the situation.

(2) We search for a situation in our lives or our world that contains all the key elements. When we find such parallel contemporary situations, we can be confident that we are applying the meaning of the biblical text.

(3) We need to make our applications specific by creating real-world scenarios that are both faithful to the meaning of the text and relevant to the contemporary audience. Remember, in order to truly journey into God's Word, we need to obey what we learn.

Conclusion

Life would not be the same without letters. We use them to communicate our deepest thoughts and feelings, some of which can be quite “mushy.” When we turn to the twenty-one letters of the New Testament, we catch a

glimpse of the practical, frontline work of early Christian disciple-makers. These letters served as authoritative substitutes for leaders who could not always minister in person. They were written to address specific situations and meet the practical needs of their readers.

When you approach a New Testament letter, remember that it is a letter and not a telephone book. Letters are meant to be read from beginning to end, the same way you read a personal letter today. Take the historical-cultural situation seriously and place a high priority on tracing the author's flow of thought (i.e., the literary context). Then use the principled bridge to cross the river of differences and apply the meaning of the biblical text to your life.

The letters of the New Testament offer a window into the struggles and victories of the early church. They provide inspired instruction and advice for living a godly life, for which we can be forever grateful. We close this chapter with a typical closing from a New Testament letter: “Grace be with you. Amen.”

Discussion Questions

1. How does knowing the situational nature of New Testament letters help you avoid misinterpretation?
2. Can you think of an example where chapter or verse divisions have actually led to common misinterpretation of Scripture?
3. Determining whether you have truly discovered a theological principle is an extremely significant step. What is the difference between a theological principle and a practical application?