

## **PREACHING THE EPISTLES<sup>1</sup>**

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### INTRODUCTION

I have heard sermons preached from passages in epistles in which the preachers interpreted and then preached from the passages as though they were independent paragraphs with no connection to the argument of the entire epistles. In fact, the preachers did not mention any arguments for the epistles. They did not mention any arguments in the passage itself. They paid no attention to the structure of the passages. They paid no attention to the main propositions, minor propositions and the conjunctions which joined the propositions to each other. Instead, the preachers focused on “principles” in the passages which were selective, subjective, and syntactically uneven,<sup>2</sup> rather than on propositions. By doing this they completely disregarded the authors’ logical argument. Also, they made no reference to the function of the theology which the author included in the passage. Is this a satisfactory way to preach from epistles? I think not. I want to propose a different way than this to preach epistles which conveys the authors’ intended arguments, both in the entire epistle and in the individual paragraphs, more effectively.

### PURPOSE

How then should we preach from someone else’s mail? This is an appropriate question when one considers preaching from an epistle<sup>3</sup> (whether Pauline or Non-Pauline) since epistles are actually someone else’s mail. They were not addressed to present-day readers. Rather, epistles were sent to historical churches and individuals who existed many years ago. Paul’s letters were communication designed to accomplish his apostolic goals in absentia and make his presence felt among the recipients.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Please do not copy or distribute this paper as it is an “evolving” document in content and in form. It is handed out to help the reader follow the presentation.

<sup>2</sup> The preachers made parallel “principles” from sentences, clauses, phrases, and words although they have different syntactic function and value in the paragraph structure.

<sup>3</sup> This paper assumes that “epistle” and “letter” are interchangeable terms for the same NT documents.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Eerdmans: 2004), 75.

As a result letters are one half of a dialogue.<sup>5</sup> They contain answers to questions which present-day readers do not have. This does not mean that epistles are not important. They are God's eternal word. Even though epistles were written in historical particularity, they have a continuing relevance. Paul expected his letters to be read aloud in the churches so that he might instruct the lives of the hearers, and epistles continue to tell readers what to believe and how to behave.

## PREPARATION

Since preparation precedes (or at least should precede) preaching, this paper focuses on preparation for preaching epistles. Since preparation is concerned with discovering the message of an epistle which one then preaches, this paper suggests an exegetical procedure which will help one discover the message which the author intended to communicate in his epistle.<sup>6</sup> It will also help one to convey the authors' arguments clearly by reflecting the authors' main points and modifying points in his sermon. This procedure is proposed for any who have opportunity to preach epistles. The procedure is not unique. Therefore, some of you may be familiar with the procedure (or a similar one) and are presently preparing to preach accordingly. However, many are following other procedures which do not enable them to convey the authors' intended meaning effectively. This procedure does assume that the goal of exegesis (and an exegetical procedure) is to discover the author's intended meaning as expressed in the text of an epistle. The author was a thinking person who consciously willed to write a text for the purpose of communicating something meaningful to a reader.<sup>7</sup> The preacher needs to communicate that message to his congregation. This paper will give examples of this procedure from Paul's letters to the Thessalonians.

## EPISTLES ARE OCCASIONAL DOCUMENTS

The crucial thing to note when reading and interpreting epistles is that they are technically *occasional documents*.<sup>8</sup> This means that they arise out of and are intended for specific situations. There

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<sup>5</sup> James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Westminster John Knox: 1992), 36.

<sup>6</sup> This exegetical procedure assumes that the preacher is preaching through an entire epistle and not preaching topically from an epistle.

<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 2d edition (Baker: 2011), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3d edition (Zondervan: 2003), 58.

was some need in the church at Thessalonica which prompted Paul to write to it. The readers were confused and concerned about believers who died and the day of the Lord, and Paul writes to instruct them in these areas. Epistles were not written as general treatises on some theological topic intended for all time.<sup>9</sup> They are not abstract philosophical or theological essays that explain the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> Rather, they were occasioned by some circumstance from the readers' side. The letters were written to help the readers as they face everyday life. The readers had some kind of behavior which needed changed, or a doctrinal error which needed correcting, or a misunderstanding which needed clarifying. An epistle is a "word on target as the author addresses the specific circumstance."<sup>11</sup> The writers wrote their various epistles to address specifically the needs which were present in the churches to whom they were writing.

The contemporary reader does this by repeatedly reading the epistle. He tries to discover the readers' situation which the author is addressing from the content of the epistle. For example, when Paul tells his readers that he does not want them to be ignorant about those Thessalonians who have fallen asleep (1 Thes. 4:13), he is most likely to some situation related to the death of believers. When Paul asks the Thessalonian believer the rhetorical question, "What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? ( 1 Thes. 2:19)"; he is alluding to the charge that he abandoned them. One can also get information about the occasion from Paul's opening prayers. When Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians' work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope (1 Thes. 1:2-3), he gives information about their response to the missionaries' ministry.

#### EPISTLES HAVE A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because epistles are occasional, it is helpful to reconstruct the historical situation which caused the author to write his letter. The nature of letters demands that the reader seek to understand the situation, community, and circumstances being addressed.<sup>12</sup> Epistles were not written in

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<sup>9</sup> Some interpreters consider Romans and Ephesians to be theological treatises. However, there is good reason to regard them as occasional.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "Reading the Epistles," in Wayne Grudem, C. John Collins, Thomas R. Schreiner, Editors, *Understanding the Big Picture of the Bible* (Crossway: 2012), 131.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (John Knox: 1998),

<sup>12</sup> James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Westminster/John Knox: 1992), 29.

a time-space vacuum. Rather, they were written by historical persons to historical churches and individuals in a particular historical period. The responses to the circumstances determine the content of the letter.<sup>13</sup> Each epistle has its own “epistolary situation” which requires one to investigate the specific historical context of the author and his readers.<sup>14</sup> The life-setting of epistles is important for proper interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

Reading epistles is like listening to one side of a phone conversation without the benefit of hearing what the person on the other end is saying.<sup>16</sup> The means one needs (as much as possible) to reconstruct the other end of the conversation. He or she needs to understand the historical context of what the author writes.

How does one reconstruct the historical situation which occasioned a letter? The Book of Acts may provide some information for Paul’s letters to churches which he visited. The reader learns from Acts 17 that the city authorities forced Paul and Silas to leave Thessalonica after the Jews agitated the crowd (Acts 17:5-10). In fact, the magistrates took security from Jason which required him to make Paul leave and made Jason responsible for seeing that Paul did not return to the city.<sup>17</sup>

One also gets information from the author’s explicit statements which he gives in his letter. Paul writes that the Thessalonians welcomed Paul’s message and turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thes. 1:5-10). They are experiencing persecution as he writes (1 Thes. 3:1-5) to such a degree that they thought that the Day of the Lord had come (2 Thes. 2:2). This situation is serious enough to prompt some of the readers to stop working (2 Thes. 3:6-13). Paul is writing to a group of believers who are experiencing persecution, who think they are in the Day of the Lord, and some of whom have stopped working and become a burden to other believers. These details help the reader understand Paul’s encouragement and exhortations. Understanding the situational nature of epistolary correspondence is the heart of the exegetical task.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Revised and Expanded (IVP: 2006), 38.

<sup>14</sup> John D. Grassmick, “Reading Ancient Letters,” in Darrell L. Bock, Buist Fanning, Editors, *Interpreting the new Testament Text* (Crossway: 2006), 237

<sup>15</sup> Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 2d edition, ECNT (Baker: 2005), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC (Eerdmans: 1980), 280.

<sup>18</sup> Bailey and Vander Broek, *Literary Forms*, 29.

Finally, one also gets information about the historical situation from the text itself by practicing “mirror reading.” Mirror reading is the determination that each command or argument (or some commands or arguments) of a letter is tied to a specific problem being experienced by the audience of the letter.<sup>19</sup> As a mirror reflects, so the content of epistles reflect something of the historical situation. In this way mirror reading provides clues about the situation from the text itself. For example, according to mirror reading Paul’s defense of his ministry (1 Thes. 2:1-12) reflects opponents’ accusations concerning his ministry. Paul is responding to his opponents’ accusations.

Mirror reading can be an effective method for reconstructing the historical situation behind a letter, but it can also overconstruct the situation. The reader needs to use it with discretion and the realization that it is open to circular reasoning and subject to abuse.<sup>20</sup> He needs to discover (as much as possible) the circumstances in the historical situation and circumstances which occasioned the letter. What are the theological and pastoral issues which the author is addressing?

#### EPISTLES HAVE AN ARGUMENT

After one reconstructs the historical situation in which an epistle is embedded and the circumstances which prompted the author to write, he needs to trace the argument of the epistle. For example, in 1 Thessalonians Paul begins with thanksgiving (1:1-10), moves to an autobiographical section (2:1-3:10), continues with a transitional prayer (3:11-13), follows with an encouragement and exhortation concerning the Lord’s coming (4:13-11), gives specific exhortations which deal with their situation (5:12-22), and closes with another prayer (5:22-24). The argument is the logical development of the author’s response to the issues which occasioned the letter. There are two aspects which comprise the process of tracing the author’s argument: 1) studying the whole book to analyze the author’s basic argumentation and 2) studying the each paragraph intensively to detect the author’s detailed argumentation.<sup>21</sup> The synthetic method is one way to trace the basic argumentation<sup>22</sup> and

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<sup>19</sup> Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication* (Baker: 2007), 154.

<sup>20</sup> For further information on the use and abuse of mirror reading see J. M. G. Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case,” *JSN* 31 (1987): 73-93 and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 2d edition (Baker: 2011), 33-38.

<sup>21</sup> Osborne, *Spiral*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> For information on the synthetic method see Merrill C. Tenney, *Galatians the Charter of Christian Liberty* (Wm. B. Eerdmans: 1971), 25-35.

diagramming is one way to trace the detailed argumentation.

### Synthesis

The synthetic method is the analysis of the basic argument of an epistle by repeatedly reading an epistle and then integrating its results.<sup>23</sup> This method practices inspectional reading which skims a book to discover its basic structure and major ideas.<sup>24</sup> The synthetic method provides one with the context of the entire epistle. This context then becomes the basic unit of meaning for the epistle since interpretation should move from the largest context to smaller ones.<sup>25</sup>

It is helpful to “think paragraphs” when doing inspectional reading through an epistle. This means one reads through the book paragraph by paragraph and gives “content-titles” to the paragraphs as he reads them.<sup>26</sup> The paragraph is the key to the thought development of epistles. The functions of the conjunctions which connect the paragraphs contribute much to understanding the argument of epistles. As one reads each paragraph, he should continually ask the question, *What’s the point?* As one answers this question, he should state the *content* of each paragraph in a compact way.<sup>27</sup> When reading this way, it is important simply to skim each paragraph and summarize its content. One should not get bogged down on details of the paragraph at this stage.

### Chart

After he gives content-titles to the paragraphs, one should make a chart<sup>28</sup> of the epistle which shows the structure of the author’s argument.<sup>29</sup> This chart helps one see the author’s progression of thought. After one charts the book, he should look for patterns of thought in the progression of the paragraphs. He should look for breaks of thought between paragraphs and then indicate on the chart the paragraph-sections which these paragraph breaks make.<sup>30</sup> Finally, one looks for major thought pattern breaks and note the sections they form on the chart.<sup>31</sup> These breaks form the major sections of

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<sup>23</sup> This definition is adapted from Tenney’s definition; *Galatians*, 25-26.

<sup>24</sup> Osborne, *Spiral*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Hermeneutics*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> For an example of “content-titles” see Tenney, *Galatians*, 32. See also John D. Grassmick, *Principles and Practice of Exegesis* (Dallas Theological Seminary: 1976), 41.

<sup>27</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Study the Bible*, 65.

<sup>28</sup> For information on charting a book see Grant R. Osborne and Stephen B. Woodward, *Handbook for Bible Study*, (Baker: 1979), 24-32.

<sup>29</sup> See Tenney’s paragraph chart; *Galatians*, 32.

the epistles and include one or more paragraph sections. The goal of this charting is to grasp the flow of the argument as concretely as possible and to produce an outline that shows how all these parts relate to one another.<sup>32</sup> These major sections then form a (tentative) integrated outline of an epistle from which one may preach.<sup>33</sup>

## EPISTLES HAVE A CENTRAL MESSAGE

The paragraph chart also helps us see the epistle as a whole and grasp its central message<sup>34</sup> or purpose. Purpose refers the broad intentions and reasons for writing. For instance, Paul writes to the Thessalonians to defend his ministry with them (1 Thes. 2:1-16), to tell them his desire to see them (1 Thes. 2:17-3:10), and to instruct them concerning the Lord's coming for believers (1 Thes. 4:13-5:11). Knowledge of a book's purpose helps a good deal in determining the contextual boundaries for an epistle's smaller units.<sup>35</sup> It provides one with a direction in which to look.<sup>36</sup>

Reading and charting provides a recognition of the overall sense of an epistle, an awareness of the sense of the whole letter which comes from the individual parts of the epistle.<sup>37</sup> Seeing the whole picture protects one from distorting (by isolating) the parts which make up the whole. If one would understand the parts, his wisest course is to get to know the whole. Once he sees the main outlines of the author's thoughts and have grasped his general point of view, one is able to see the meaning of everything else.<sup>38</sup> The understanding of what the author is saying is conditioned by the sense of the whole that "conditions" the meaning of each part.<sup>39</sup> There is no greater aid in interpreting individual sections of a letter than a good understanding of the whole book.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Osborne's Chart of Philippians; *Spiral*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Principles for Preaching and Teaching* (Baker: 1981), 71-72 lists eight "clues" for discovering "seams" between units of thought.

<sup>32</sup> Moises Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 2d edition (Baker: 2001), 95.

<sup>33</sup> See Tenney's outline; *Galatians*, 35. Osborne reminds us that that this is a preliminary rather than a final outline since it represents our viewpoint. Further study may reveal the author's intended plan: *Spiral*, 45.

<sup>34</sup> See Tenney, *Galatians*, 26 and Grassmick, *Principles*, 45. Grassmick gives a provisional controlling purpose, but it is more accurately a suggested central theme.

<sup>35</sup> Richard J. Erickson, *A Beginner's Guide to New Testament Exegesis* (Eerdmans: 2005), 63.

<sup>36</sup> For instance Titus 3:8 –those who believe in God need to be careful to do good work—points to Paul's emphasis on good works throughout the epistle.

<sup>37</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Zondervan: 1990), 81.

<sup>38</sup> J. I. Packer, "Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics and Inerrancy," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Presbyterian and Reformed: 1971), 144-145.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Hermeneutics*, 74.

## Synopsis

Once one has a working knowledge of the central idea and the argument it is helpful to prepare a synopsis of the argument of the epistle. A synopsis is a concise written statement of the essential thoughts of the epistle. A synopsis is not a commentary but a summary which gives a comprehensive view of the whole epistle. The synopsis should reflect the structure of the epistle and the relationship of the paragraphs to each other. Writing a synopsis helps crystallize the thought flow in the interpreter's thinking.<sup>41</sup> A synopsis can be helpful when preaching as it gives the preacher a familiarity with the entire epistle.<sup>42</sup> Understanding and expressing the central idea and argument of the epistle in a synopsis is the beginning of interpretation. The preacher is now ready to move from the essential meaning of the whole epistle to the exegetical meaning of the individual paragraphs. He is ready to move from the discovery of the argument to the details of the argument.

## Paragraphs

Epistles are letters with an overall argument. Each writer is pursuing a line of thought in his epistle as a whole. The paragraphs contribute to the argument of epistles. Each paragraph contains its own argument which contributes to the author's overall argument. The paragraphs are connected and make up the overall argument. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the details and structure of the paragraph-argument in order to follow better the overall argument. A helpful way to discover the structure of the paragraph is by diagramming<sup>43</sup> the paragraph.

A diagram is a graphic portrayal of a sentence which shows the interrelationships of its parts.<sup>44</sup> The complexity of the syntax of sentences in epistles makes it useful for one to diagram in order to see the relationship of its constituent parts.<sup>45</sup> The advantage of diagramming is that it forces one to identify grammatically every word in the sentence. It is difficult for one to comprehend the meaning of

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<sup>40</sup> Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Kregel: 2010), 286.

<sup>41</sup> Grassmick, *Principles*, 61.

<sup>42</sup> For an illustration of a synopsis see Grassmick, *Principles*, 62.

<sup>43</sup> For information on diagramming see Jay E. Smith, "Sentence Diagramming, Clausal Layouts, and Exegetical Outlining," in Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning, Editors, *Interpreting the New Testament Text* (Crossway: 2006), 73-134 and Schreiner, *Interpreting*, 69-96.

<sup>44</sup> Grassmick, *Principles*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 3d edition (Westminster John Knox: 2002) 41-58 suggests doing a sentence flow which helps one to visualize the whole paragraph.



a paragraph unless he understands the syntax of the text. And it is difficult for one can claim to comprehend the syntax of a passage unless he is *able* to diagram the passage.<sup>46</sup> Diagramming

will enable the pupil to present directly and vividly to the eye the exact function of every clause in the sentence, of every phrase in the clause, and of every word in the phrase--to picture the the complete analysis of the sentence, with principal and subordinate parts in their proper relations. The diagram drives the pupil to the most searching examination of the sentence, brings him face to face with every difficulty, and compels a decision on every point.<sup>47</sup>

Diagramming compels the interpreter to slow down and to think carefully about every element of the text. Diagramming also provides the preacher with an outline that reflects the structure of the paragraph. The main propositions become the main points of the outline and the modifying propositions become the sub-points of the outline.

Once the preacher diagrams the paragraph, he needs to trace the argument of the passage. Diagramming precedes this step, because one will have difficulty following the author's argument apart from a diagram which displays the syntax of the passage. Tracing the structure of the argument in epistles is the most important step in the exegetical process. One needs to trace the argument in each paragraph,<sup>48</sup> and then explain how each paragraph relates to preceding and following paragraphs.<sup>49</sup>

The key to tracing the argument in epistles is to understand the relationship between different propositions in the text.<sup>50</sup> Propositions contain the building blocks of the author's argument which reveal his line of reasoning. A proposition is an assertion or statement about something which has a subject and a predicate.<sup>51</sup> Propositions are either main statements (independent clauses) or modifying statements (dependent clauses). Main statements/clauses form the foundation of the author's

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 2d edition (Baker: 2011), 69 writes that *no one* (italics mine) can claim to comprehend the syntax unless he or she can diagram the passage.

<sup>47</sup> Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg, *Higher Lessons in English: A Work on English Grammar and Composition*. (Charles E. Merrill: 1913), 8 as quoted in Smith, "Sentence Diagramming," 75.

<sup>48</sup> Identifying the roles or functions which the paragraph constituents play as shown by the diagram is helpful in tracing the argument; see George H. Guthrie, "Discourse Analysis," in David Alan Black & David S. Dockery, Editors, *Interpreting the New Testament* (B&H: 2001), 257-58.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> Discourse analysis is quite helpful for tracing the argument in epistles. The major objective of discourse analysis is to understand the organization of material as related to a given context; Guthrie, "Discourse," 253-55.

paragraph-argument while the modifying statements/clauses add additional circumstantial details. The authors used conjunctions to indicate the relationship between propositions.

Conjunctions are words that connect words, clauses sentences, or paragraphs. Most of the sentences in Greek New Testament begin with a conjunction.<sup>52</sup> The author of an epistle is developing an argument, and he connects everything in the paragraph with conjunctions. Consequently, identifying conjunctions and their functions is important in tracing the argument in a paragraph.<sup>53</sup> Conjunctions introduce semantic nuances (i.e. nuances of meaning) within a clause or to the relationship between clauses.<sup>54</sup> Conjunctions indicate both coordinate and subordinate relationships. Coordinate relationships occur between main clauses; subordinate relationships occur between main clauses and modifying clauses. The relationship of clauses forms the structure of the argument.<sup>55</sup>

#### EPISTLES CONTAIN TASK THEOLOGY

The occasional nature of epistles means that they are not theological treatises.<sup>56</sup> They contain theology, but it is always “task theology.” Task theology is theology which the author writes for or brings to bear on the “task” at hand.<sup>57</sup> The task at hand relates to the occasion –behavior problem, doctrinal error, or misunderstanding—which prompted the author to write his epistle. “Task-oriented” theology results from the author’s sense of mission.<sup>58</sup> Epistles were not written simply to expound theology. They contain theology, but the theology is directed to a particular need. For example, Paul writes about the coming of Christ and the rapture of the church (1 Thes. 4:13-18) because of the Thessalonians’ confusion concerning believers who have died. He writes so that they might comfort one another. The authors apply theology to specific issues facing the churches or individuals. This use of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>52</sup> Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek* (B&H: 1994), 179. Since many sentences in English translations do not begin with conjunctions, it is beneficial when interpreting a passage to look at the Greek text to see where conjunctions occur.

<sup>53</sup> When words, clauses, sentences are not joined with conjunctions it is asyndeton (“not bound together”). In such cases the relationship between units is implied from the literary context; See Wallace, *Grammar*, 658 and Young, *Intermediate*, 180.

<sup>54</sup> Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2d edition (Sheffield: 1994), 204.

<sup>55</sup> Prepositional phrases also help form the structure of the argument and provide details related to it. Wallace, *Grammar*, 357 writes that a proper understanding of prepositions is vital to exegesis.

<sup>56</sup> The danger of reading letters as theological treatises is that one might draw unwarranted conclusions from reading only one letter. See Schreiner, *Understanding*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Erickson, *Guide*, 118.

theology comes out of the author's concern for the ongoing spiritual formation of his readers. His goal is to guide his readers toward a way of life.<sup>59</sup> The specific contexts which the authors are addressing shape the theology which they include in their letters. Consequently, one needs to uncover to what problem the author is directing the theology and how the he applies that theology to his readers.

#### EPISTLES CONTAIN RHETORIC

Rhetoric is the art of effective communication.<sup>60</sup> It is the craft of effective communication, especially argumentation and the art of persuasion.<sup>61</sup> Rhetoric is a stylistic method for getting across a message.<sup>62</sup> Rhetoric relates to how the author put his epistle together. It reminds us that Epistles are carefully structured. Although we may question whether authors actually structured letters in accordance with rhetorical handbooks,<sup>63</sup> it seems obvious that they employed rhetoric to convey their intended message. The authors attempted to persuade or dissuade their readers concerning certain attitudes and actions. Consequently, one should be aware of what the author is attempting to persuade his readers to think or do or not to think or do and how he structures his argument to accomplish this. His preaching should then follow the same goal and means of persuasion .

#### EPISTLES HAVE PARENESIS

The authors employ rhetoric in the parenetic sections of their epistles (Rom. 12:1-15; Gal. 5:1-6:10; 1 Thes. 4:1-5:22; Col. 3:1-4:6; 1 Pet. 4:12-5:11) where they attempt to persuade readers to behave a certain way. Parenesis is ethical exhortation, instruction concerning how or how not to live.<sup>64</sup> It is characterized by verbs in the imperative mood. A parenetic section of a letter has a series of instructions, commands and exhortations to live a certain way.<sup>65</sup> It is an integral part of most NT letters.<sup>66</sup> In light of the persecution they are experiencing, Paul tells the Thessalonians how they need to

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<sup>59</sup> For the view that Paul's letters were "pastoral letters" see Michael J; Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Eerdmans: 204), 77.

<sup>60</sup> Patrick Gray, *Opening Paul's Letters* (Baker: 2012), 85.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek* (IVP: 2001), 109.

<sup>62</sup> Osborne, *Spiral*, 51.

<sup>63</sup> See Richard R. Melick, Jr. "Literary Criticism of the New Testament," in David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Matthews, Robert B. Sloan, *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation* (B&H: 1994), 445-57.

<sup>64</sup> Bailey and Vander Broek, *Literary Forms*, 62.

<sup>65</sup> E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Writing* (IVP: 2004), 136.

continue to walk pleasing to God (1 Thes. 4:1). He then follows with moral, ethical, and practical teaching in the remainder of the epistle.

Parenesis seeks to influence behavior, either by persuasion or dissuasion.<sup>67</sup> These ethical sections provide practical guidance.<sup>68</sup> The occasional nature of epistles seems to require that parenesis contains concrete pastoral advice for epistolary situations.<sup>69</sup> Paul was especially adept at tailoring general ethics material to specific situations.<sup>70</sup> However, some think that some exhortations are general and could be applied in various situations.<sup>71</sup> Often the parenetic material was a key—if not the key--thrust of Paul's letter.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the preacher must identify the parenetic sections and exhortations, discern what behavior the author is persuading or dissuading through these exhortations, and correctly apply the exhortations to his hearer

## PREACHING

When the preacher has finished his preparation and discovered the author's intended meaning (as much as he is able), he is ready to communicate that meaning to his congregation. This paper proposes that preachers concentrate on expository preaching.<sup>73</sup> Expository preaching is "Bible-centered preaching." It is handling the text "in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular biblical writer and as it exists in the light of the over--all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers."<sup>74</sup> Expository preaching describes what is involved in biblical preaching, namely, the exposition of a biblical passage.<sup>75</sup> Expository preaching can also be defined in this way: "To expound Scripture is to open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and his people obey him."<sup>76</sup> Expository

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<sup>66</sup> There is a distinction between *epistolary paraenesis* which is found in concluding sections of some NT letters, and *paraenetic style*, which permeates some letters (1 Thessalonians); see David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity 8 (Westminster: 1987), 191.

<sup>67</sup> Gray, *Opening*, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Westminster John Knox: 1998), 60.

<sup>69</sup> See Roetzel, *Letters*, 75-76.

<sup>70</sup> W. Randolph Tate, *Interpreting the Bible* (Hendrickson: 2006), 122.

<sup>71</sup> John D. Grassmick, "Epistolary Genre," in Darrell L. Bock, Buist M. Fanning, Editors, *Interpreting the New Testament Text* (Crossway: 2006), 236.

<sup>72</sup> Richards, *Letter Writing*, 137.

<sup>73</sup> For a defense of expository preaching see Stanley Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Preacher* (Eerdmans: 1988), 12-16 and Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition* (Zondervan: 1984), 7-13

<sup>74</sup> Merrill Unger, *Principles of Expository Preaching* (Zondervan: 1955), 33.

<sup>75</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Eerdmans: 1988), 11.

preaching is explanatory preaching and engaging preaching. It is preaching which explains the meaning of a text (in the context of an entire book) to an audience for the purpose of engagement. Expository preaching aims at spiritual formation.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, Biblical preaching must be applied. Application is not incidental to expository preaching: it is essential.<sup>78</sup> Epistles (and the entire Bible) provide information as a means to spiritual formation. There can be no true spiritual transforming apart from the true meaning of the biblical text,<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the preacher must encourage his hearers to respond to the significance<sup>80</sup> of the meaning of the passage.

This paper offers the following suggestions based on the character and nature of epistles which may help the preacher communicate the author's intended meaning in a more accurate way<sup>81</sup> so that he might help his help his congregation see the significance of the meaning so that they might apply it to their lives in a more accurate way.

1. One might preach a message on the historical background of an epistle (if known). For example, If one were preaching through Philippians, he could preach through Acts 16. If he were preaching through 1 & 2 Thessalonians, he could preach from Acts 17:1-9. He can do this by identifying the background passage. This will provide the congregation with an insight into the historical situation of the original readers to which Paul addresses his letter.
2. One might preach a message on the entire epistle focusing on the author's main idea, his relationship between sections, and his basic argument structure. He can do this by using his synthetic outline and synopsis. This will provide the congregation with an initial understanding of the epistle.
3. One might outline each passage and consequent message according to the structure of each paragraph. He can do this from his diagram. This means he will make the main propositions the main points of the outline and will not make the modifying clauses and phrases main points. This will help the congregation understand the basic structure of the paragraph.

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<sup>76</sup> John Stott, "A Definition of Biblical Preaching," in Haddon Robinson. Craig Brian Larson, General Editors, *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Zondervan: 2005), 24.

<sup>77</sup> Robertson McQuilkin, "Spiritual Formation Through Preaching," in Robinson and Larson, *Biblical Preaching*, 48-53.

<sup>78</sup> Haddon Robinson, "My Theory of Homiletics," in Robinson and Larson, *Biblical Preaching*, 58-9.

<sup>79</sup> Walt Russel, *Playing With Fire* (Navpress: 2000), 43.

<sup>80</sup> Significance deals with the relation of the meaning to the reader. It involves a person's toward the meaning of a text and its implications. See Stein, *Basic Guide*, 38-43.

<sup>81</sup> It is not the purpose of this section to rehearse various homiletic principles since there many good books on homiletics which focus on those principles. Rather, it is to present some specific principles for preaching epistles.

4. One might preach each paragraph as a contributing part to the argument of the entire epistle. He can do this by constantly referring to the main idea of the epistle and relating the main point of the paragraph to it. This will help the congregation learn to study an epistle as a cohesive document.
5. One might indicate the relationships between the main propositions in his outline. He can do this identifying the conjunctions and the function in the structure of the paragraph. This will help the congregation understand better the structural argument.
6. One might identify the theology in each paragraph and the task which it addresses. He can do this by studying the context in which the theology appears. He can then tell the congregation how the theology applies to their life situation. This will help the congregation see the life-affecting value of theology.
7. One might pay close attention to the parenetic passages and their relationship to the occasion of the epistle. He might point out what behavior the author is persuading or dissuading. He might also point out how the parenthesis is related to the theology of the epistle. He can do this by noting the commands in the passage. This will help the congregation how to behave in situations similar to the epistles' recipients.
8. One might avoid finding "principles" in the text, making them outline points, and then preaching them in the sermon. (This happens when the preacher says something like, "There are four principles in this passage.") The principles are selective and subjective and disregard the structure of the author's argument. He can avoid this by paying attention to the author's main propositions and conjunctions. This will help the congregation follow the author's argument through the paragraph.

These suggestions have helped people preach epistles effectively. I propose them for your consideration to see whether they might help you effectively preach epistles. May God form you spiritually as you prepare to preach an epistle. May He form your congregation spiritually as you preach an epistle. May God bless you both as you preach epistles.