

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE: EPISTLES

DESERT SPRINGS CHURCH

Charles Simeon (1759-1836), an English evangelical clergyman, is known in his teachings and writings for the principle that “the point of the text should be the point of the sermon.” By text, of course, he meant the Bible. We could equally say that, for all Christians, “the point of the text should be the point of application.” The point of the text should also be the point of discipleship, as we seek to encourage, warn, build up, and counsel others.

If the point of the text is the starting place for everything, then finding out the point of the text is of first importance. And since this is not subjective, with each person determining the text’s meaning in a different manner, there are rules and principles to follow. And there are various tools and techniques to help us in following the principles. That’s what this seminar is all about: the point of the text, and how to get there.

Here’s one more quote from Charles Simeon:

“My endeavor is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.”

GOALS OF THIS SEMINAR

- ◆ To see what is unique about New Testament letters.
- ◆ To become introduced to the idea of a melodic line in a biblical book.
- ◆ To understand the importance of asking questions of a biblical text.
- ◆ To value the tool of tracing in New Testament letters.

LESSON 1

BASICS, GENRE, MELODIC LINE, and RESOURCES

Ryan Kelly

1.1 WHY “STUDY” THE BIBLE? SHOULD EVERY CHRISTIAN “STUDY” THE BIBLE?

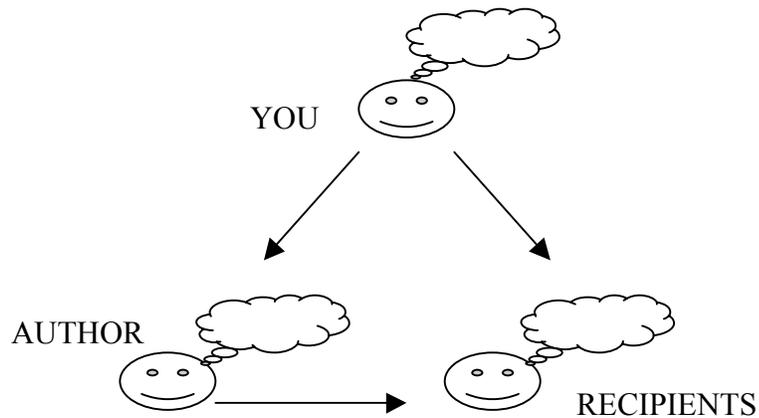
There are different levels or kinds of Bible intake

All Christians are called to grow in understanding Scripture

The goal of all Bible-intake: heat and light

1.2 SOME BASICS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A passage means what the author intended for the people to whom he wrote.



Interpreting the Bible requires layers of analysis:

The meaning of a word

The meaning of words together in a phrase or sentence

The meaning of multiple sentences together (paragraph)

Tracing the argument, the flow of thought

*What is the message of the book?

*What is the genre of the book? What kind of literature is it?

In what era of redemptive history does this occur? (God's revelation is progressive)

How do we fit all of this together? (i.e., theology)

Biblical theology = themes as they developed in Scripture

Systematic theology = topics considered from all we know

1.3 UNDERSTANDING GENRE (OR KINDS OF LITERATURE) – e.g., NT EPISTLES

The Bible utilizes several genres

What's unique about NT Epistles?

Why did the Apostles write these letters? What do epistles “do”? Why were they needed?

1.4 THE “MELODIC LINE” (OR MAJOR THEME) OF PHILIPPIANS

What is a “melodic line”?

How might we determine what a piece of literature is about?

As for Philippians, what are some possibilities for its melodic line?

So, how should we summarize Philippians in a phrase or sentence? What is the melodic line?

1.5 RESOURCES TO AID INTERPRETATION

Hard Copy Resources for Purchase

Westminster Bookstore (fairly selective collection, thorough descriptions and recommendations)

www.wtsbooks.com

DSC's Book Recommendations (100s of great books, by subject, with links to Amazon)

www.desertspringschurch.org/resources/

The Bible Speaks Today commentary series

Search WTSbooks or Amazon for *The Message of _____ (Bible Speaks Today)*

Overview Books

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* and *Message of the New Testament*

Paul Benware, *Survey of the Old Testament* and *Survey of the New Testament*

Gordon Fee & Doug Stewart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*

Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture*

Free Online Resources

BIBLE

ESV Study Bible (online version is free with the purchase of a hardcopy ESVSB)

www.esvbible.org

Blue Letter Bible (maybe the best single website for Bible study; start with the help/FAQ page)

www.blueletterbible.org/help.cfm

Bible Gateway (also excellent for advanced searches of the Bible)

www.biblegateway.com/keyword

Bible Study Tools (maybe the best place to compare translations)

www.biblestudytools.com/compare-translations/

COMMENTARY

Blue Letter Bible (commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and hundreds of other study tools)

www.blueletterbible.org

Bible.org (commentary, sermons, and introductions for each book of the Bible)

www.bible.org/passage

Bible Study Tools (lots of classic commentaries and some good Bible dictionaries)

www.biblestudytools.com/library

Dr. Constable's Expository Notes

www.soniclight.com/constable/notes.htm

LESSON 2

ASKING QUESTIONS OF A TEXT

Ronald Giese

2.1 DON'T START WITH ANSWERS, START WITH QUESTIONS

... we must relentlessly query the text. ... Asking questions is the key to understanding.

...

Insight or understanding is the product of intensive, headache-producing meditation on two or three propositions and how they fit together. This kind of reflection and rumination is provoked by asking questions of the text. And you cannot do it if you hurry. Therefore, we must resist the deceptive urge to carve notches in our bibliographic gun. Take two hours to ask ten questions of Galatians 2:20, and you will gain one hundred times the insight you would have attained by quickly reading thirty pages of the New Testament or any other book. Query. Ponder. Chew.¹

2.2 WHAT COMES FIRST, MICRO OR MACRO?

What comes first when we meet a person, macro or micro?

When we meet a person do we have a list of questions, or is it organic/informal?

¹ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), pp. 93-94.

Inductive Questions:

- ◆ Very common (in everyday relationships, and in Bible study).
- ◆ Moves from particular to general (particular observations to conclusions).
- ◆ We often revise conclusions, so it's fine to "hold them loosely."
- ◆ Looking for a pattern/trend, and then making a general or summary statement. Then test it (i.e., will trend continue?).

2.3 SAMPLE TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

What questions can we ask of the greeting (1:1-2)?

- ◆ How is this different, if it is, from other openings of Paul's letters?

What questions can we ask of the thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-11)?

- ◆ Are there any words or ideas that are repeated?

2.4 ONE MORE SAMPLE: PHILIPPIANS 2:19-30

2.5 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beginning books on Studying the Bible in general

Fee, Gordon D.; and Stuart, Douglas.

2003 *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

This is a beginner-level introduction to the various genres of the Bible. It actually has two chapters on New Testament epistles, with other chapters on genres such as Old Testament narrative, gospels, psalms, wisdom literature, and the prophets.

Adler, Mortimer J.

1972 *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*. New York: Simon and Schuster (originally published in 1940).

This is not written from a Christian point of view but rather was intended (and used for decades) as a textbook on reading a book—any book. There are plenty (sometimes you’ll feel like too many) rules and principles here to read about.

Books on Studying Paul’s Letters

Gray, Patrick.

2012 *Opening Paul’s Letters: A Reader’s Guide to Genre and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

This book is on the intermediate (not beginner) level for interpreting Paul’s letters. Patrick covers historical background (the cultural and socio-economical context of Paul’s letters), the genre of his letters, the structure of the letters, how Paul handles the Old Testament when he interacts with it, and miscellaneous issues like pseudonymity (liberal scholarship claims that some of what we know as Paul’s letters were actually not written by him but by people or schools that viewed themselves as writing in Paul’s “tradition,” and therefore they ascribed their letters to Paul).

Schreiner, Thomas R.

2011 *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

This book is on the intermediate (not beginner) level for interpreting Paul's letters. This book goes over the basics of Pauline letters, such as genre, historical setting, and structure. The real heart of the book, perhaps over half the pages, is a solid introduction to diagramming sentences and then tracing the flow of thoughts and argument in a letter.

LESSON 3

TRACING

Trent Hunter

3.1 WHAT IS TRACING?

An Illustration

A Definition

Tracing is a tool to help you more faithfully _____,
by following the _____ in a text.

The Rationale

Tracing is super.

It helps us to hear what God is saying by discerning his thoughts.

It protects us from false teaching by setting every verse in context.

It helps us to obey God's Word, by making plain the agenda and emphasis of Scripture.

And it helps us to communicate God's Word by helping us explain what is there.

And all of this to the end that we might know and love God better.

3.2 HOW THOUGHTS RELATE TO THOUGHTS

I. Coordinate Relationships

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| 1. Series (S) | <i>and, moreover, furthermore, likewise</i> |
| 2. Progression (P) | <i>then, and moreover, furthermore</i> |
| 3. Alternative (A) | <i>but, while, or, on the other hand</i> |

II. Subordinate Relationships

A. Support by Restatement

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Action-Manner (Ac-Mn) | <i>by, in that</i> |
| 2. Comparison (Cf) | <i>as, just as, even as, as...so, so also, like</i> |
| 3. Negative-Positive (-/+) | <i>but, not...but, though, although</i> |
| 4. Idea-Explanation (Id/Exp) | <i>that is, for (often no key word)</i> |
| 5. Question-Answer (Q/A) | <i>Question words: what, when, how, etc.</i> |

B. Support by Distinct Statement

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. Ground (G) | <i>because, for, since</i> |
| 2. Conclusion (Cnc) | <i>therefore, thus, wherefore, consequently</i> |
| 3. Action-Result (Ac-Res) | <i>so that, that, with the result that</i> |
| 4. Action-Purpose (Ac-Pur) | <i>in order that, that, lest, to the end that</i> |
| 5. Conditional (If/Th) | <i>if...then, if, except</i> |
| 6. Time (T) | <i>when, whenever, after, before</i> |
| 7. Location (L) | <i>where, wherever, etc.</i> |

C. Support by Contrary Statement

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Concessive (Csv) | <i>although, yet, nevertheless, but, however</i> |
| 2. Situation-Response (Sit-R) | <i>*No specific key words</i> |

3.3 TEST CASE: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

- 1a So if there is any encouragement in Christ,
- 1b any comfort from love,
- 1c any participation in the Spirit,
- 1d any affection and sympathy,
- 2a complete my joy
- 2b by being of the same mind,
- 2c having the same love,
- 2d being in full accord and of one mind.

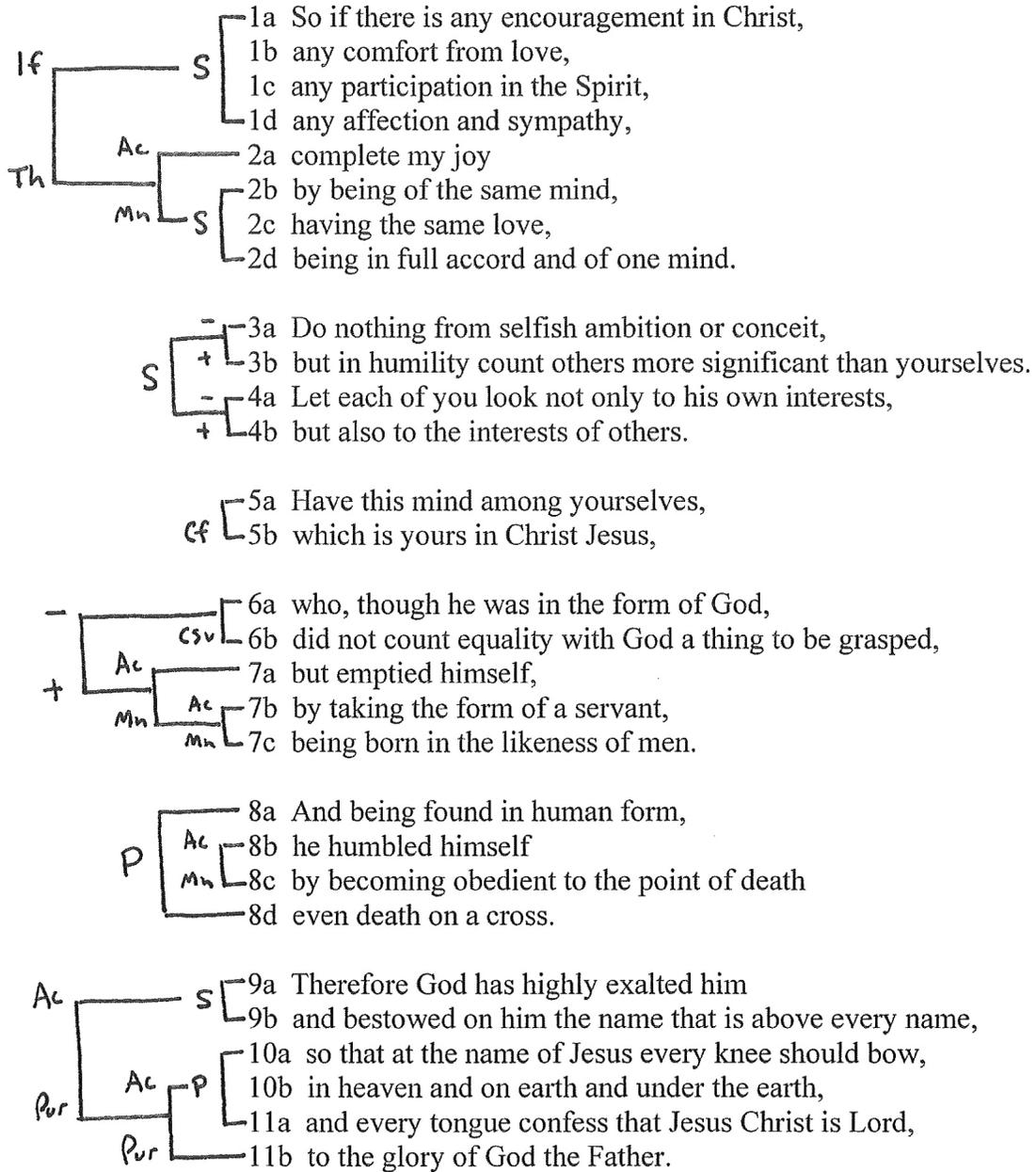
- 3a Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
- 3b but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.
- 4a Let each of you look not only to his own interests,
- 4b but also to the interests of others.

- 5a Have this mind among yourselves,
- 5b which is yours in Christ Jesus,
- 6a who, though he was in the form of God,
- 6b did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
- 7a but emptied himself,
- 7b by taking the form of a servant,
- 7c being born in the likeness of men.

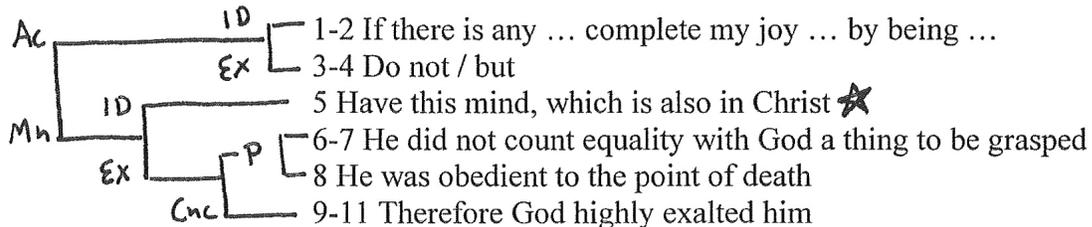
- 8a And being found in human form,
- 8b he humbled himself
- 8c by becoming obedient to the point of death,
- 8d even death on a cross.

- 9a Therefore God has highly exalted him
- 9b and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
- 10a so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
- 10b in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
- 11a and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
- 11b to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:1-11



Summary



3.4 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Schreiner, Thomas R.

2011 *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker.

This book is an excellent resource for learning how to read and study New Testament letters, but specifically, Paul's letters. The book includes a number of chapters that will be of interest mostly to the more serious student of theology, some chapters even interacting with New Testament Greek. But much of the book is accessible and an entire chapter is devoted to the method of tracing explained in today's Saturday Seminar. Tom Schreiner is a Pauline scholar and professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

A Pdf copy of Schreiner's chapter, "Tracing the Argument," is available for free online at www.sbts.edu/theology/faculty/thomas-schreiner/

Overview of Philippians

Getting Acquainted

Paul wrote to the Philippian church to thank them for their support and prayers, and to give updates on the welfare of Epaphroditus, Timothy, and himself (matters which we will return to in the Date and Historical Background section).

But Philippians is not just a letter of thanks and updates. Ever the teacher, Paul also writes to encourage their faith and growth. More specifically:

- to spur them on to progress in their Christian growth (2:12; 3:12-17)
- to reiterate the true gospel and encourage them to hold tight to it (3:3-11)
- to warn of those who proclaim another gospel (3:2, 18-19)
- to encourage their unity and confront any lack of unity (2:1-4; 4:2-3)
- to call them to joy and thankfulness and peace (2:18; 3:1; 4:4-7)
- to plead with them to keep their eyes on Christ and the hope of heaven (3:20-21)

Thus, Philippians is an amazingly *practical* letter—sort of a “101” on Christian living. But it is also an importantly *doctrinal* letter. In Philippians 2:5-11 we find some of the most clear and important teaching on Christ and the incarnation in the Bible. And yet, the primary purpose of this section of the letter is to show them a model of humility and selfless service that they might be further unified and Christ-like. So the doctrinal and practical elements are inseparable in Philippians—as they always should be.

Placing It in the Larger Story

By the time Paul writes Philippians, the events recorded in the book of Acts have all come to pass. Of course, that means that the Messiah has come: living righteously, dying sacrificially, and rising victoriously. In so doing he has ushered in a New Covenant for his people (Jer. 31:31-34). He has sent his followers into the world to proclaim the gospel, to make disciples, and to plant churches. The book of Acts records just that—30 or so years of the gospel spreading and churches forming. The kingdom is *now*. But it is also *not yet*. Christians are redeemed, but must press on: they must persevere in the faith, resist false teachers, face persecution, and struggle to live out Christ’s love and humility with each other.

Paul wrote several biblical letters to churches and individuals (Romans – Philemon). From one angle, they all share a general purpose to encourage and equip Christians for the *advance of the gospel* (1:12) and *progress in the faith* (1:25). But, from another angle, each letter has its own

unique purpose, context, background, and emphases. One of the things that makes Philippians somewhat unique is its emphasis on *partnership* or *sharing*. The Philippian Christians share the gospel and the gospel mission with the Apostle, as they do among themselves as a church. This has important and far reaching implications. (See 1:5, 7, 14-19, 27; 2:1-8, 22, 25, 30; 3:16-17; 4:1-3, 10-16.)

Key Verse

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Date and Historical Background

Paul had a long history with the Philippian Christians, beginning with the conversion of Lydia’s family, a demon possessed girl, and the Philippian jailor (see Acts 16:14-40). Paul returned to Philippi at least twice more, but mutual care and communication between the Apostle and the Philippian church seem to have been regular. He prayed regularly for them with much thankfulness and affection (1:3-11). The Philippians stood with Paul, financially and otherwise, when others did not (1:7; 4:14-16). In concern for Paul’s present imprisonment (1:12-19) they sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, to bring financial support and to minister to Paul’s needs (2:25).

While imprisoned in Rome, in roughly A.D. 62, Paul pens this letter we know as Philippians. He writes to thank them for their care and support; to assure them that despite his imprisonment, the gospel is spreading (1:12-18) and he is well cared for (4:18). He relays that Epaphroditus, their messenger, is also well after becoming ill on his journey to Paul (2:26-30). And Epaphroditus is now returning to the Philippians with Paul’s letter. Timothy, another worthy servant and Paul’s “right hand man” may be coming in due course (2:19).

Outline

- I. Greeting and Prayer (1:1–11)
 - A. Salutation from Paul and Timothy (1:1–2)
 - B. Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer for the Philippians (1:3–11)
- II. Encouragement About Paul’s Imprisonment (1:12–30)
 - A. His imprisonment has meant progress for the gospel (1:12–18)
 - B. Christ will be magnified in life or death (1:19–26)
 - C. Exhortation to walk worthy of the gospel (1:27–30)
- III. Exhortation to Humble Service (2:1–30)
 - A. A call to unity, humility, and service to one another (2:1–4)

- B. Christ's example of humble service (2:5–11)
 - C. Living as lights in the world (2:12–18)
 - D. Timothy as an example of faithful service (2:19–24)
 - E. Epaphroditus as an example of sacrificial service (2:25–30)
- IV. Warning about Distortions of the Gospel (3:1–21)
- A. A call to rejoice in the Lord (3:1)
 - B. Contrast between false teachers and the true people of God (3:2–3)
 - C. Contrast between self-righteousness and receiving Christ's righteousness (3:4–11)
 - D. Paul's progress in the pursuit of Christ (3:12–16)
 - E. Contrast between earthly-mindedness and heavenly-mindedness (3:17–21)
- V. Concluding Exhortations and Thanksgiving (4:1–23)
- A. A call to unity (4:1–3)
 - B. A call to rejoice, trust, pray, and think rightly (4:4–9)
 - C. Thanksgiving for the Philippians' gift; Paul's contentment in God (4:10–20)
 - D. Greetings (4:21–22)
 - E. Benediction (4:23)

* The above is taken from:

Ryan Kelly, *Philippians: A 12-Week Study*, Knowing the Bible series (Crossway, forthcoming mid-2014)