

NT Genres (Part 4)

Epistolary Literature Genre:

Is the Text a Letter?

THE STRUCTURE OF EPISTLES

Most of the NT letters follow the format of most Greco-Roman letters of their day, containing the *opening*, the *body*, and the *closing*.

1. Opening

- a. Sender (e.g. "Paul," "Peter"; sometimes a co-sender)
- b. Recipients (e.g. "to the Thessalonians")
- c. Greeting (e.g. "grace and peace")
- d. Prayer ("I thank God")

2. Body

- a. Mostly "linear"
- b. Occasionally "circular"

3. Closing

- a. Travel plans or personal situation
- b. Prayer
- c. Commendation of fellow workers
- d. Prayer requests
- e. Greetings
- f. Final instructions and exhortations
- g. Holy kiss
- h. Autographed greeting
- i. A grace benediction/doxology

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 28

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EPISTLES

1. The diatribe

“The characteristic feature of the diatribe is its conversational nature. The teacher (or writer) anticipates a possible objection or response to his argument, puts the question or objection in the student’s words, and responds to it” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*, 25).

Romans 3:1–2—“So what advantage does the Jew have? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? 2 Considerable in every way . . .”

Romans 6:1–2—“What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply? 2 Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

Romans 9:19–20—You will say to me, therefore, “Why then does he still find fault? For who resists his will?” 20 On the contrary, who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Will what is formed say to the one who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”

2. Paraenesis (exhortations)

1 Thessalonians 4:3–8—“For this is God’s will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, 4 that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don’t know God. 6 This means one must not transgress against and take advantage of a brother or sister in this manner, because the Lord is an avenger of all these offenses, as we also previously told and warned you. 7 For God has not called us to impurity but to live in holiness. 8 Consequently, anyone who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

3. Hymns and confessional statements (Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26)

1 Timothy 3:16—“And most certainly, the mystery of godliness is great:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels,
preached among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.”

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HOW TO READ THE EPISTLES WELL

1. The NT letters are often written in carefully structured grammatical arguments.

- a. Begin by reading the whole letter in one sitting.
- b. Reconstruct the historical-cultural situation.
- c. Trace the author's flow of thought (think paragraphs!).

2. The NT letters are occasional in nature.

- a. To churches
- b. To individuals (e.g. 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 2–3 John)
- c. Implications:
 - i. These are not systematic treatises, but pastoral works in which the apostles apply their theology to specific situations in the churches.
 - ii. These are not comprehensive treatises, so we cannot fully unpack Paul, Peter, or John's total theology from one letter.
 - iii. The more one knows about the culture, history, and literature of the NT times, the greater will be the ability to put oneself into the shoes of the original readers.
 - iv. Use mirror reading with caution.

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Lesson 28 Homework:

In this class, we will encourage growth in this discipline by committing ourselves to reading thoughtfully and prayerfully some assigned Scripture passage. At the beginning of each class, we will share our personal reflections on the passage for that week, particularly focusing on how our lives and ministries have been (or need to be) challenged by the truths we have thought so much about.

As the class progresses, each week's homework assignment will seek to apply the previous lesson content to the passage at hand. This will allow us to reinforce what we learn as we go, so that we may have our "powers of discernment trained by constant practice" (Heb 5:14, ESV).

Our assignment this week is to meditate on Colossians 3:1–17. As you read this passage, ask yourself the following questions:

Context

What can you learn about the person or situation to which the letter is written?

What clues are there about the author and his circumstances?

What was the main point of the passage immediately before this one? Are there logical or thematic connections to the passage you are reading?

Observation

Are there any major sub-sections or breaks in the text? Are there key connecting words (for, therefore, but, because) that indicate the logical flow of the passage?

What is the main point or points? What supporting points does the author make?

What surprises are there in the flow of the argument?

Meaning

How does this text relate to other parts of the book?

How does the passage relate to Jesus?

What does this teach you about God?

How could you sum up the meaning of this passage in your own words?

Application

How does this passage challenge (or confirm) your understanding?

Is there some attitude you need to change?

How does this passage call on you to change the way you live?

Come prepared to discuss your reflections on this passage at the beginning of next class.