

Letters from God: The Authority and Relevance of the New Testament Letters

The New Testament letters are one of the most highly relevant and directly applicable parts of Holy Scripture for today's Christian. They speak directly and authoritatively to most of today's hotly debated topics in the church and the world. It is hardly possible to be a Christian, walking under the guidance of God, without knowing the teaching of the New Testament letters. Yet today, for different reasons, they are largely neglected, both in personal and in church use. There is a lot of talk today in some Christian circles about God speaking to individuals, and we hear many Christians say: "The Lord told me this." But in the New Testament letters we really hear Christ's word to us directly through his chosen apostles. In this workshop, we will consider the authority, interpretation and application of the New Testament letters.

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I. The place and importance of the New Testament letters in the whole Biblical canon

II. The authority of the New Testament letters

A. The words of Paul are the words of God

"Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. **2** For you know what instructions we gave you through (*Greek "dia" = "through/on behalf of"*) the Lord Jesus... **8** Therefore **whoever disregards this** (*the apostolic teaching*), **disregards** not man but **God** (*because the apostolic teaching is the teaching of God himself through the apostles*), who gives his Holy Spirit to you." (1 Thess. 4:1)

B. The whole New Testament – including the letters – is God's authoritative word to us

C. The revelation in words that we have from God himself comes from God through Jesus to the apostles, and from the apostles (in the New Testament letters) to us

D. Jesus speaks with the mouth of God – the apostles speak on behalf of Jesus

“Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And *the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's* who sent me.” (Jesus speaking in John 14:24)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” (Jesus speaking in John 13:20)

“The one who hears you [apostles] hears me [Jesus], and the one who rejects you [apostles] rejects me [Jesus], and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me [God the Father].” (Jesus speaking in Luke 10:16)

1. The Apostles passed on sayings of the Lord

“For this we declare to you *by a word from the Lord*, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Thess 4: 15)

2. The Apostles wrote commands of the Lord

“If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that *the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord*. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Cor 14: 37-38)

3. The Apostles’ teaching has final authority

“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; *avoid them*.” (Romans 16:17)

4. The Apostles are giving binding commands: Do not forward false teaching

“*If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting*, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.” (2 John: 10-11)

5. The Apostles are giving binding commands: Do forward good teaching

“For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore *we ought to support people like these*, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.” (3 John 7-8)

III. The structure and interpretation of the New Testament letters: Guidelines for the interpretation of the New Testament letters

A. Find out the structure of the letter

1. Opening

- a. **Name of sender** (“Paul”)
- b. Title of sender (“apostle of Jesus Christ”)
- c. Characterization of sender (“by the will of God”)
- d. Co-senders (“and Sostenes”)
- e. **Receiver** (“Timothy”)
- f. Characterization of receiver (“my dear son in the faith”)
- g. **Greeting** (“Grace to you and Peace”)
- h. Receiver (“to you”)
- i. Divine source (“from God our Father”)

2. Thanksgiving

- a. Summary of thanksgiving (“First, I thank my God”)
- b. Way of thanksgiving (“I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers...”)
- c. Reason for thanksgiving (“because your faith is proclaimed in all the world...”)
- d. Explanation of thanksgiving (“For God is my witness, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers”)
- e. Report of prayer (“asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you”)

3. Teaching (main part of the letter)

- a. Changing structure:
“Concerning the things...”
 - 1) “I want you to know...”
- b. The readers are often motivated by:
 - 1) What Christ has done (“I **therefore**... urge you”, Eph. 4:1)
 - 2) By the fact that Christ is coming (“**The end** of all things **is at hand**; **therefore** be self-controlled and sober-minded”, 1 Peter 4:7)

4. Ending of the letter

- a. Greeting of peace
- b. Divine Source (“The God of peace...”)
- c. Wish (“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”)
- d. Receiver (“you”)

- B. Try to find out everything you can about the writer of the letter, the situation of writing, and the reason for writing

- C. Find out what we know about the historical and social situation, and about culture and language of writing (meaning of words)
 - 1. Attention: Is your source trustworthy?

- D. Take notice of the argumentation of the writer
 - 1. Reasons he gives for his teaching. Grammatical, structural, and rhetorical analyses.

- E. Study each individual teaching in its larger context
 - 1. What is the relationship of this particular teaching to the message of the letter as a whole?
 - 2. What is the relationship of this particular teaching to the message of the Bible as a whole?

- F. Try to differentiate between a particular time-bound case or example (holy kiss, long hair, washing of feet) AND a general timeless principle, teaching, or command (Holy Communion, teaching on marriage, etc.)
 - 1. Often the difference can be seen in the motivation/grounding of the particular teaching (is this a command of the Lord?)

Suggested Readings:

Jeffrey A.D. Weima. *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer: An Introduction to Epistolary Analysis*.
Thomas R. Schreiner. *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*.
E. Randolph Richards. *Paul and the First Century Letter Writing*.