

INTRODUCTION TO NT EPISTLES

Wann Fanwar

1st century Roman World

- Pax Romana
- Network of highways
- Postal system
- Roman citizenship: birth – special service – purchase – adoption of slaves – army service
- Roman society (class divided): senatorial – equestrian – plebeians – slaves – freedmen – men-women & patron-client relationships
- Religion: traditional with pantheon – healing cults (Asclepius) – mystery religions (Mithra, Isis) – spiritist practices (astrology, magic) – Judaism (monotheistic) – Christianity
- Philosophy: Cynics – Stoics – Epicureans
- Jewish society: men-women divide – Pharisees – Sadducees – Essenes – Zealots and Sicarii
- Jewish religion: synagogue – temple

Letters

- Followed fairly fixed conventions
- Format: Opening → sender – recipient – greeting – health-wish; Thanksgiving; Body; Closing → greetings – health-wish
- NT Letters: e.g. 1 Corinthians
Opening (1:1-3): sender – recipients – greeting – wish
Thanksgiving (1:4-9)
Body (1:10-16:18)
Closing (16:19-22): greetings – wish (doxology)
- NT letters do not always follow this format
- Example of contextualisation

Various Authors

- Paul: Roman citizen – from Tarsus – educated under Gamaliel in Jerusalem – Pharisee – persecutor turned apostle to Gentiles – tent-maker
- Peter: one of the original 12 – from Bethsaida and Capernaum – Palestinian Jew – fisherman by trade
- John: one of the original 12 – from Bethsaida and Capernaum – last living apostle – fisherman by trade
- James and Jude (Judas): brothers of Jesus – probably from Nazareth – unknown trade (carpenters?) – James known as leader of the Jewish Christianity and Jerusalem church

Importance of the Epistles

1. Canonical

- Form the bulk of NT – 35%
- Involve largest number of authors
- Written by authors with apostolic authority

2. Historical

- Aided formation and establishment of early Christian church
- Interpreted the Gospels
- Encapsulated beliefs of early Christian church
- Impacted countless lives of Christians: Romans led to Augustine's final conversion; Romans inspired Martin Luther to become reformer; Romans led Karl Barth to become eminent theologian of the 20th century; Ephesians inspired the writings of Watchman Nee

3. Theological

- Held by Christians as fulfilment of OT
- Believed to be theological counterpart to Gospels
- Embody the theology of the church
- Capture the essence of Christian faith: Romans & salvation by grace; Hebrews & Jesus as antitype of OT; 1 John & love; Thessalonians and Peter & end times; Corinthians & church discipline; James & practical Christianity; Galatians & Christian liberty

Hermeneutics (Interpretation) of the Epistles

Two Tasks

- Understand what the letter was saying to the original readers
- Apprehend what the letter may be saying to today's readers

Textual Problems

- MSS variant
- Later-audience syndrome
- Cultural barriers
- Opaque sayings

Text and Today Text exists in vacuum

- Text is time-bound
 - Text requires reinterpretation
 - Text is application-driven
- #### Contemporary Hermeneutical Approaches
- Ultra conservative approach – literalist view – everything Paul said is still applicable literally today
 - Ultra liberal approach – rejectionist view – nothing Paul said is applicable today – reject Paul's authority – cast him in negative light
 - Moderate approach – adoptionist or revisionist view – possibility of reinterpreting Paul – attempts not to upset today's attitudes and behaviours – tries to fit text to contemporary mood
 - Pragmatic approach – advocates the relevance of Paul's teachings today – argues for the principles behind the specific practices – practical application is driven by contemporary situations

THEOLOGICAL THEMES IN NT EPISTLES

SOTERIOLOGY

Images of Salvation: Death, resurrection, new life (Rom 6; Eph 2)
 Remarriage (Rom 7)
 Adoption and sonship (Rom 8; Gal 4)
 New creation and divine workmanship (1 Cor 5; Gal 6; Eph 2)

Pauline Concept of Justification by Faith

Galatians: Defence of justification by faith – the heart of the letter – 3:1-4:31

a. Vindication of justification by faith (3:1-18)

- i. Experience of the Galatians – received Spirit by faith (3:1-5)
- ii. Example of Abraham (3:6-14)
- iii. Permanence of the promise (3:15-18) – law came later – law cannot invalidate promise

b. Purpose of law (3:19-4:7)

Qs: Why was law given?

Temporary in nature (3:19-25)

Inferior status (3:26-4:7)

Ans: To point Israel to its need for Messiah (deliverance)

c. Appeal (4:8-31) – their return to bondage? (4:8-11) – their loss of joy? (4:12-20)

Romans: Paul's clearest and most expansive treatise on salvation

1. Human Predicament: SIN – 1:18-2:29
 - a. Gentiles (1:18ff) – replaced creator God – God is revealed – without excuse
 - b. Jews (2:17ff) – moral hypocrisy – law breakers
 - c. Consequence of sin: *Judgement* (2:1ff) – Why? Human obstinacy (2:5) – Purpose? Reward (2:6f) – When? Day of judgement (2:16)
2. Divine Solution: RIGHTEOUSNESS (Chs 3-5) [GRACE (Eph 2:8-10)]
 - a. God's faithfulness (3:1ff) – not nullified by human unfaithfulness – not nullified by human sin
 - b. God's righteousness (3:21ff) – revealed apart from law – testified to by prophets – embodied in Christ – produces redemption
 - c. How is this righteousness received? By FAITH! (4:1ff) – example of Abraham – faith is hope-filled (4:18) – faith is realistic assessment of situation (4:19) – faith is unwavering allegiance (4:20) – faith is convicted action (4:21)
 - d. Result of righteousness (5:1ff) – peace with God (5:1) – justification (5:9f) – eternal life (5:21)
3. Believer's experience of salvation (Chs 6-8)
 - a. New life in Christ (6:4, 11, etc)
 - b. New "slavery" (6:18, 22)
 - c. Struggle with sin (7:14ff)
 - d. Victory in Spirit (8:1ff) – no condemnation (8:1) – spirit control (8:9f; 8:26) – victory is guaranteed because of God's work (8:28), God's presence (8:31), and God's inseparableness (8:37-39)

Structure of Romans

2 parts:	Chs 1-11 → theoretical theology – ends in doxology Chs 12-16 → practical theology – ends in doxology
1:1-17	Introduction: gospel defined
1:18-2:29	Human predicament: sin – Gentile & Jew – inexcusable
3:1-5:21	Divine solution: righteousness – faith – new relationship with God
6:1-8:39	Experiential salvation: believer's experience – new life in Christ – faith struggle – Spirit victory
9:1-11:36	Divine predicament: Israel – in the past – in the present – in the future
12:1-15:33	Practical implications of salvation: in relationship to others in the church, to secular authorities, to weaker members
16:1-27	Epilogue

ECCLESIOLOGY

Definition of "Church":

The English word "church" comes from a late Greek word *kyriakon* which means the "Lord's house" – in the NT the word used is *ekklēsia* – in secular Greek the word *ekklēsia* designates a public meeting place – in the Hebrew OT the word *qāhāl* designates the assembly of God's people – the LXX translates this Hebrew word with *ekklēsia* and *synagōgē* – in the NT the word *ekklēsia* designates the church in two ways: (1) the local church and (2) the universal church – among the Gospels, only Matthew uses the word "church"

Images of Church:

About 96 images in NT – very diverse images – e.g. salt of the earth, light of the world, letter form Christ, branches of the vine, the elect lady, bride of Christ, exiles, ambassadors, chosen race, holy temple, priesthood, new creation, army of God, friends, children of God, household of God, spiritual body, etc.

1 Corinthians

1. Divisions in the Church (1:10-4:21)
 - a. Cause → loyalty to persons, not fidelity to truth (1:10-17)
 - b. Wrong perception of the message (1:18-2:16)
 - c. Wrong perception of the messengers (3:1-4:21)
2. Disorders in the Church (Chs 5-6; 10-11)
 - a. Failure to discipline a member (5:1-13)
 - b. Failure to settle disputes internally (6:1-11)
 - c. Failure at sexual purity (6:12-21)
 - d. Failure at freedom (10:23-11:33) – food offered to idols – gender relations – worship issues
3. Church Unity (Chs 12-14)
 - a. The analogy of the human body (12) – unity & diversity – singularity & plurality (12:12) – giftedness of the parts (12:7-11) – interdependence of the parts (12:14ff)
 - b. The necessity of love (13) – the fuel of Church unity
 - c. The practice of worship (14) – the sparkplug of Church unity – wrong and correct uses of spiritual gifts (14:1-25) – orderliness in worship (14:26-40)

Ephesians

1. God's work
 - a. Individual reconciliation (2:1-10)
 - b. Creation of a new community (2:11-22) called Church
2. The Church
 - a. Unity & diversity (4:1-6) – analogy of the Godhead
 - b. Church's giftedness (4:7-16)
 - c. New person in Christ (4:17-5:2) – put off old self, put on new self (4:20-24) – get rid of all negativity (4:25-32) – imitate God (5:1-2)
3. Church and World
 - a. Do not conform to the world (5:3-7)
 - b. Confront the world with the gospel (5:8-14)
4. Church and Church
 - a. Be filled with Spirit (5:15-6:9) – member-member; husband-wife; parent-child; master-slave
 - b. Live as though at war (6:10-20)

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Here, pastoral theology refers to the NT instructions for pastors (ministers). More specifically it refers to Paul's testimony and reflection about his own ministry. The material for this discussion is largely confined to Paul's self-portrait in 2 Corinthians and his instructions in 1 Timothy and Titus.

2 Corinthians

Portrait of a minister (2:14-7:16)

1. The glory of ministry (2:14-4:6)
 - a. The triumph of Christ (2:14ff)

- b. Results of ministry (3:1-3)
- c. Superiority of apostolic ministry (3:7ff)
- d. The light of Christ (4:1-6)
- 2. The frailty of ministers (4:7-5:10)
 - a. Vessels of clay (4:7-15)
 - b. Unseen glory (4:16-18)
 - c. Earthly tent (5:1-10)
- 3. The ministry of reconciliation (5:11-6:10)
 - a. Compelled by Christ's love (5:14)
 - b. Radical change of perception (5:16-19)
 - c. Christ's ambassadors (5:20)
 - d. Christ's servants (6:4-10)
 - e. Defensibility of ministry (6:3; 7:2-4)
 - f. Comfort of ministry (7:5ff)

1 Timothy

Characteristics of a minister

- 1. The Presbyter/Overseer/Bishop/Elder/Pastor (3:1-7)
 - a. A noble task (3:1)
 - b. Personal traits (3:2-4) – above reproach – monogamous – temperate – self-controlled – gentle – non-materialistic
 - c. Administrative traits (3:2-6) – able to teach – able to manage his family – not a recent convert – able to work with people outside the church
- 2. The Deacon (3:8-13)
 - a. Personal traits – worthy of respect – sincere – temperate – honest – strong in faith monogamous
 - b. Administrative traits – testable – able to manage family – willing to serve
- 3. Instructions to *one* minister, Timothy (4:1-15)
 - a. Point out false teachers (4:6)
 - b. Avoid gossip (4:7)
 - c. Live a godly life (4:8)
 - d. Teach and preach the word (4:11, 13)
 - e. Model the truth (4:12)
 - f. Utilise the given spiritual gifts (4:14)
 - g. Be diligent and watchful (4:15-16)

CHRISTOLOGY

Christology is the study of the nature of Christ. In this respect, the most significant letters are Hebrew, Colossians, and Philippians.

Hebrews: This letter works out of the premise that Christ is “greater than . . .” It employs a comparative approach.

1:1-3

Christ is greater than the prophets: prophets were God's mouthpiece – Jesus is Son, heir, creator, God

1:4-14; 2:5

Christ is greater than angels: angels are ministering spirits, God's servants – Jesus has a superior name; he is God's son; he is worshipped; he is king, creator, and co-regent with God

3:1-6

Christ is greater than Moses: Jesus has greater – builder v building – Son v servant

4:6-11

Christ is greater than Joshua: gives greater rest

5:1-10; 7:26-8:2

Christ is greater than the High Priest: high priest is called, Christ is called – Aaron's order v Melchizedek's order – human priest v holy high priest – continual sacrifice v permanent sacrifice – mortal priests v perfect high priest

6:20-7:25

Christ is greater than the levitical priesthood: imperfect priesthood v perfect priesthood – Levite priests v Levite priest – priest by ancestry v priest by innate power – mortal priests v immortal priest

7:1-10

Christ is greater than Abraham: Christ is like Melchizedek – Abraham tithed to Melchizedek – Levi tithed to Melchizedek through Abraham

8:3-6; 9:1-28

Christ is greater than the tabernacle ministry: superior ministry – superior promises – heavenly sanctuary v copy and shadow – new order v old order – not man-made v man-made – own blood v animal blood – new covenant v old covenant – better sacrifices v sacrifices – permanent sacrifice v repeated sacrifices

8:7-13

Christ is greater than the old covenant (Sinai): faulty v perfect – old v new – broken v unbreakable – obsolete v real

10:1-14

Christ is greater than OT sacrifices: shadow v reality – non-salvific v salvific – repeated v once for all

12:14-29

Christ offers a greater experience: Mt Sinai v Mt Zion – earth shaken v heaven and earth shaken

Colossians

1. The supremacy of Christ
 - a. He is God (1:15, 19; 2:9)
 - b. He is creator (1:16)
 - c. He is cosmic sustainer (1:17)
 - d. He is head of the church (1:18)
 - e. He is saviour (1:20f; 2:11ff)
 - f. He is full incarnation (1:22)
 - g. He is divine mystery (2:2)
2. Gospel work is to present the fulness of Christ (1:24-29)
3. Christian life
 - a. Lordship of Christ (2:6-7)
 - b. Freedom in Christ (2:16ff)
 - c. New life in Christ (3:1ff) – put to death old self – put on new self

Philippians

Christology is expressed in 2:5-11 and consists of the following: full divinity of Christ; the emptying of Christ; the incarnation of Christ; the humiliation of Christ; the sacrificial death of Christ; the exaltation of Christ; the Lordship of Christ.

ESCHATOLOGY

Eschatology is the study of last things. In Christian terminology, this usually refers to the end of history, the end of the world, and the second coming of Jesus.

Thessalonians

1. Uses of *parousia* = coming, presence and includes
 - a. Examination of believers before God (1, 2:19; 3:13; 5:23) – “presence/coming”

- b. Christ's return (1, 4:15; 2, 2:1) – "coming"
 - c. Christ's conquest of "lawless one" (2, 2:8) – "coming"
- 2. Manner of coming
 - a. Awesome (1, 4:16-17)
 - b. Sudden and unexpected (1, 5:1-3)
 - c. Antichrist revealed (2, 2:1-10)
- 3. *Parousia* and judgement
 - a. Part of the "day of the Lord" – God's wrath (1, 1:10; 2:16; 5:9) – God's vengeance (2, 1:8)
 - b. Fate of believers (1, 4:16-17) – resurrection – translation
 - c. Fate of unbelievers (2,1:8-9) – eternal damnation

2 Peter 3

- 1. Day of the Lord – last days
- 2. Appearance of scoffers
- 3. Day of judgement and destruction
- 4. God's word is sure and his intention is singular
- 5. Suddenness of the day
- 6. Awesome phenomena
- 7. Day of hope

Jude

- 1. Great Day – day of judgement – for fallen angels and humans
- 2. Great perversions – Sodom and Gomorrah