

I. HOW TO INTERPRET ACTS.

- A. We seldom think of the OT histories as setting Biblical precedents for our own lives. On the other hand, this is the normal way for Christians to read Acts. It not only tells us the history of the early church, but it serves as the normative model for the church for all times.
- B. Acts as History.
1. The history found in Acts was not written to keep records or to chronicle the past. Rather it was written both to encourage and entertain (i.e., to be good reading) and to inform, moralize, or offer an apologetic.
There are several things that Luke does not tell us in the book of Acts which tells us that his account is not to be church history per se. First, Luke has no interest in the “lives,” that is, biographies of the apostles. And he only deals with James, Peter and Paul (what happened in the ministries of the others?).
 2. Second, Luke has but little interest in church organization. He seems to only mention elders, preachers, etc., in passing. In Ac. 6, the men called to serve are not called deacons.
 3. Third, there is no word about other geographical expansions of the gospel, other than from Jerusalem to Rome. There is no mention of Crete (Ti. 1:5), Illyricum (Rom. 15:19--modern day Croatia) or in Pontus, Cappadocia and Bithynia (1Pet. 1:1).
 4. But, Acts is intended by Luke to serve as a model. This model is seen in the specifics Luke does write about and the general overall picture.
- C. Bible Instruction.
1. Basically speaking the Bible instructs in four ways:
 - a. Facts (see Gen. 1:1-26).
 - b. Commands (Mt. 28:18-20).
And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. **19** Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
 - c. Examples (Ac. 20:7 of Mt. 26:26-30).
(Mt 26:26-30) While they were eating, Jesus took *some* bread, and after a blessing, He broke *it* and gave *it* to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” **27** And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave *it* to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; **28** for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. **29** But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”
30 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.
(Ac 20:7) On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.
 - d. Necessary Inference or Historical Precedent (Ac. 6:1-6).
Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of food*. **2** So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. **3** Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” **5** The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. **6** And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

2. Only as examples and precedents illustrate commands, are they binding parts of the NT pattern. For a Biblical precedent to justify a present action, the principle of the action must be taught elsewhere, where it is the primary intent so to teach.
3. In matters of Christian experience, and even more so of Christian practice, Biblical precedents may be regarded as repeatable patterns.

II. HOW TO INTERPRET THE EPISTLES.

- A. The Epistles are not as easy to interpret as it often thought.
 1. A letter is a private document usually written to one individual.
 2. An epistle is a public document meant to be read by many.
- B. There are different authors but the epistles fall into the following parts:
 1. Name of the writer.
 2. Name(s) of the recipient(s).
 3. The greeting.
 4. Prayer wish or thanksgiving.
 5. The body.
 6. Final greeting and farewell.
- C. There is one thing that all of the Epistles have in common, and this is the crucial thing to note in reading and interpreting them: they are all what are technically called occasional documents (i.e., arising out of and intended for a specific occasion), and they are from the first century.
- D. Hermeneutical Rules.
 1. We must do our exegesis with particular care so that we hear what God's Word to the original recipients really was. In most such cases a clear principle has been articulated, which usually will transcend the historical particularity to which it was being applied.
 2. The important point is that the "principle" does not necessarily become timeless, as to be applied at random to any and every kind of situation. We would argue that it must be applied to genuinely comparable situations.
 3. A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers. Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., similar specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God's Word is to us, the same as His Word was to them.
 4. With the Epistles, it is important to form a tentative but informed reconstruction of the situation that the author is speaking to. To do this you will need a Bible dictionary or Bible encyclopedia.
 5. For study purposes, develop the habit of reading the whole letter through in one sitting. Read and reread.
- E. The Literary Context.
 1. We simply cannot stress enough the importance of your learning to think paragraphs, and not just as natural units of thought, but as the absolutely necessary key to understanding the argument in the various Epistles.
 2. Even if one cannot have full certainty about some of the details, very often the point of the whole passage is still within one's grasp.
 3. Try to distinguish between that which is a principle, and that which is specific application.
 4. One must keep alert to possible cultural differences between the first and twentieth centuries that are sometimes not immediately obvious.
 5. One must exercise Christian charity at this point. Because of the Epistles occasional nature, we must be content at times with some limitations to our theological understanding. Sometimes our theological problems with the Epistles derive from the fact that we are asking our 20th century questions of texts, that by their occasional nature are answering only first century questions.