CHAPTER 3

The Epistles: Learning to Think Contextually

We start our discussion of the various biblical genres by looking at the New Testament Epistles. Our reasons for doing this are twofold: First, along with the Gospels they are the most familiar portions of the Bible for most people, and second, for many readers they appear to be generally easy to interpret. After all, who needs special help to understand that "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23), that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23), and that "by grace you have been saved, through faith" (Eph 2:8), or the imperatives "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16) and "walk in the way of love" (Eph 5:2)?

On the other hand, the "ease" of interpreting Epistles can be quite deceptive. This is especially so at the level of hermeneutics. One might try leading a group of Christians through 1 Corinthians, for example, and see how many are the difficulties. "How is Paul's opinion about 'virgins' at the beginning of his long discussion of 'the married' and 'the not

yet, or unmarried' in 1 Corinthians (7:25 – 40) to be taken as God's Word?" some will ask, especially when they personally dislike some of the implications of this opinion. And the questions continue. How does the excommunication of the brother earlier in the letter (ch. 5) relate to the contemporary church, especially when he can simply go down the street to another church? What is the point of the corrections of the abuses of Spirit-gifting (chs. 12 – 14), if one is in a local church where the gifts of the Spirit mentioned here are not accepted as valid for the twenty-first century? How do we get around the implication that women should wear a head covering when praying and prophesying (11:2 – 16) — or the clear implication that they do in fact pray and prophesy in the community gathered to worship?

It becomes clear that Epistles are *not* as easy to interpret as is often thought. Thus, because of their importance to the Christian faith and because so many of the important hermeneutical issues are raised here, we are going to let them serve as models for the exegetical and hermeneutical questions we want to raise throughout the book.

THE NATURE OF THE EPISTLES

Before we look specifically at 1 Corinthians as a model for exegeting Epistles, some general words are in order about the whole collection of Epistles (all the New Testament except the four gospels, Acts, and Revelation).

First, it is necessary to note that the Epistles themselves are not a homogeneous lot. Many years ago Adolf Deissmann, on the basis of the vast papyrus discoveries, made a distinction between letters and epistles. The former, the "real

letters," as he called them, were nonliterary, that is, they were not written for the public and posterity but were intended only for the person or persons to whom they were addressed. In contrast to the letter, the epistle was an artistic literary form or a species of literature that was intended for the public. Deissmann himself considered all the Pauline Epistles as well as 2 and 3 John to be "real letters." Although some other scholars have cautioned that one should not reduce all the letters of the New Testament to one or the other of these categories — in some instances it seems to be a question of more or less — the distinction is nevertheless a valid one. Romans and Philemon differ from one another not only in content but also to the degree that one is far more personal than the other. And in contrast to any of Paul's letters, 2 Peter and 1 John are far more like epistles.

The validity of this distinction may be seen by noting the *form* of ancient letters. Just as there is a standard form to our letters (date, salutation, body, closing, and signature), so there was for theirs. Thousands of ancient letters have been found, and most of them have a form exactly like those in the New Testament (cf. the letter of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:23 – 29). The form consists of six parts:

1. name of the writer (e.g., Paul)
2. name of the recipient (e.g., to the church of God in Corinth)
3. greeting (e.g., Grace to you and peace from God our Father . . .)
4. prayer wish or thanksgiving (e.g., I always thank God for you . . .)

5. body

6. final greeting and farewell (e.g., The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.)

The one variable element in this form is number 4, which in most of the ancient letters either takes the form of a prayer wish (almost exactly like 3 John 2), or else is missing altogether (as in Galatians, 1 Timothy, Titus), although at times one finds a thanksgiving and prayer (as often in Paul's letters). In three of the New Testament Epistles this thanksgiving turns into a doxology (2 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 Peter; cf. Rev 1:5 – 6).

It will be noted that New Testament Epistles that lack either formal elements 1 – 3 or 6 are those that fail to be true letters, although they are partially epistolary in form. Hebrews, for example, which has been described as three parts tract and one part letter, was indeed sent to a specific group of people, as two passages (10:32 – 34 and 13:1 – 25) make clear. Note especially the letter form at the end (13:22 – 25). Yet the first ten chapters are little like a letter; indeed, they are in fact an eloquent homily in which the argument as to Christ's total superiority to all that has preceded is interspersed with urgent words of exhortation that the readers hold fast to their faith in Christ (2:1 – 4; 3:7 – 19; 5:11 – 6:20; 10:19 – 25). In fact, at the end, the author himself calls it his "word of exhortation" (13:22).

The apostle John's first letter is similar in some ways, except that it has *none* of the formal elements of a letter. Nonetheless, it was clearly written for a specific group of

people (e.g., 2:7, 12 – 14, 19, 26) and looks very much like the body of a letter with all the formal elements shorn off. In any case this suggests that it is not simply a theological treatise for the church at large.

James and 2 Peter, on the other hand, are both addressed as letters, but they lack the familiar final greeting and farewell, not to mention lacking specific addressees, as well as any personal notations by the writers. These are the closest writings in the New Testament to "epistles" (that is, tracts for the whole church), although 2 Peter seems to have been called forth by some who were denying Christ's second coming (3:1 – 7). James, on the other hand, so completely lacks an overall argument that it looks more like a collection of "sermon notes" on a variety of ethical topics than a letter.

Despite this variety of kinds, however, there is one item that all of the Epistles have in common, and this is *the* crucial item 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 *all* from the *first century.* Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors — that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century — that make their interpretation difficult at times.

Above all else, their *occasional* nature must be taken seriously. This means that they were occasioned, or called forth, by some specific circumstance, either from the reader's side or the author's. Almost all of the New Testament letters were occasioned from the reader's side (Philemon and probably James and Romans appear to be exceptions). Usually the

occasion was some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.

Most of our problems in interpreting the Epistles are due to this fact of their being occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were — or even if there was a problem. It is much like hearing one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying (an experience from life for one of the authors; when informed, everything made "perfectly good sense"!). Yet in many cases it is especially important for us to try to hear "the other end" so that we know to what our passage is a response.

One further point here: The occasional nature of the Epistles also means that they are *not* first of all theological treatises, nor are they summaries of Paul's or Peter's theology. There is theology implied, but it is always "task theology" — theology being written for or brought to bear on the task at hand. This is true even of Romans, which is a fuller and more systematic statement of Paul's theology than one finds elsewhere. But it is only *some* of his theology; in this case it is theology born out of his own special task as apostle to the Gentiles. It is his special struggle for Jew and Gentile to become one people of God, based on grace alone and apart from the law, that causes the discussion to take the special form it does in Romans and that causes "justification" to be used there as the primary metaphor for salvation. After all, the word "justify," which predominates in Romans (fifteen times) and Galatians (eight times), occurs only two other times in all of Paul's other letters (1 Cor 6:11; Titus 3:7).

Thus one will go to the Epistles again and again for

Christian theology; they are loaded with it. But one must always keep in mind that they were not primarily written to expound Christian theology. It is always theology applied to or directed toward a particular need. We will note the implications of this for hermeneutics in our next chapter.

Given these important preliminaries, how then does one go about the exegesis, or an informed exegetical reading, of an epistle? From here on, we will proceed with a case study of 1 Corinthians. We are well aware that not every epistle will be like this one, but nearly all the questions one needs to ask of any epistle are raised here.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first thing one must try to do with any of the Epistles is to form a tentative but informed reconstruction of the situation to which the author is speaking. What was going on in Corinth that caused Paul to write 1 Corinthians? How does he come to learn of their situation? What kind of relationship and former contacts has he had with them? What attitudes do they and he reflect in this letter? These are the kinds of questions to which you want answers. So what do you do?

First, you need to consult your Bible dictionary or the introduction to your commentary to find out as much as possible about Corinth and its people. Among other important things, you should note that by ancient standards it was a relatively young city — only ninety-four years old when Paul first visited it. Yet because of its strategic location for commerce, it was cosmopolitan, wealthy, a patron of the arts, religious (at least twenty-six temples and shrines), and well-known for its sensuality. With a little reading and imagination

one can see that it was a bit of New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, all wrapped up in one place. Therefore, it will hardly be a letter to the community church in Rural Corners, USA. All of this will need to be kept in mind as you read in order to note how it will affect your understanding on nearly every page.

Second, and now especially for study purposes, you need to develop the habit of reading the whole letter through in one sitting, and preferably aloud, so that mouth and ear join the eye. You may well be surprised by how much more you retain when you learn to read this way. You will need to block out an hour or more to do this, but nothing can ever substitute for reading the whole letter through at one time. It is the way one reads every other letter. A letter in the Bible should be no different. There are some things you should be looking for as you read, but you are not, at this point, trying to grasp the meaning of every word or sentence. It is the big view that counts first.

We cannot stress enough the importance of reading and rereading. Once you have divided the letter into its logical parts or sections, you will want to begin the study of every section precisely the same way. Read and reread; and keep your eyes open! And again, learn to read aloud whenever you can — to hear as well as see the Word of God.

As you read through the whole letter, you may find it helpful to jot down a few *very brief* notes with references if you have a hard time making mental notes. What things should you note as you read for the big picture? Remember, the purpose here is first of all to reconstruct the problem. Thus we suggest four kinds of notes:

1. what you notice about the recipients themselves (e.g.,

whether Jew or Greek, whether wealthy or slave; their problems, attitudes, etc.)

2. Paul's attitudes
3. any specific things mentioned as to the specific occasion of the letter
4. the letter's natural, logical divisions

If all of this is too much for one sitting and causes you to lose the value of reading it through, then read first and afterwards quickly go back through the letter with a skim reading to pick up these items. Here are the kinds of things you may have noticed, grouped according to the four suggested categories:

1. The Corinthian believers are chiefly Gentiles, although there are also some Jews (see 6:9 – 11; 8:10; 12:2, 13). They obviously love wisdom and knowledge (1:18 – 2:5; 4:10; 8:1 – 13; hence the irony in 6:5); they are proud and arrogant (4:18; 5:2, 6) even to the point of judging Paul (4:1 – 5; 9:1 – 18), yet they have a large number of internal problems.

2. Paul's response to all of this fluctuates between rebuke (4:8 – 21; 5:2; 6:1 – 8), appeal (4:14 – 17; 16:10 – 11), and exhortation (6:18 – 20; 16:12 – 14).

3. Concerning the occasion of the letter, you may have noted that early on (1:10 – 12) Paul says he has been *informed* by people from Chloe's household; the beginning of the next major section (5:1) also refers to reported information. About a third of the way through he says, "Now for the matters you wrote about" (7:1), which means he has also received a letter from the church. Did you also notice the repetition of "now about" in what follows (7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; and 16:12)?

Probably these all refer to items from their letter that he is taking up one at a time. One further observation: Did you notice the "arrival" of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus at the end (16:17)? Since Stephanas is to be "submitted to" (v. 16), it is certain that these men (or Stephanas, at least) are leaders in the church. Probably they brought the letter to Paul as a kind of official delegation.

If you did not catch all of these things, do not give up. We have gone over this material a lot of times, and it is all familiar turf. The important step is to learn to read with your eyes open to picking up these kinds of clues.

4. We come now to the important matter of having a working outline of the letter. This is especially important for 1 Corinthians because it is easier to study or read the letter in convenient "pack-ages." Not all of Paul's letters are made up of so many separate items, but such a working outline is nonetheless always useful.

The place to begin is with the obvious major divisions. In this case, the beginning of chapter 7 is the big clue. Since here Paul first mentions their letter to him, and since earlier on (1:10 – 12 and 5:1) he mentions items reported to him, we may initially assume that the matters that have preceded (chs. 1 – 6) are all responses to what has been reported to him. Introductory phrases and subject matter are the clues to all other divisions in the letter. There are four in the first six chapters:

- the problem of division in the church (1:10 – 4:21)
- the problem of the incestuous man (5:1 – 13)
- the problem of lawsuits among believers (6:1 – 11)

• the problem of sexual immorality (6:12 – 20)

We have already noted the clues to dividing most of chapters 7 – 16 on the basis of the introductory formula "now about." The items not introduced by this formula are three: 11:2 – 16; 11:17 – 34; and 15:1 – 58. Probably the items in chapter 11 (at least 11:17 – 34) were also reported to him but are included here because everything from chapters 8 to 14 deals with worship in some way or another. It is difficult to know whether chapter 15 is a response to the report or to the letter. The phrase "how can some of you say" in verse 12 does not help much because Paul could be quoting either a report or their letter. In any case the rest of Paul's letter can easily be outlined:

• about behavior within marriage (7:1 – 24)
• about virgins (7:25 – 40)
• about food sacrificed to idols (8:1 – 11:1)
• the covering of women's heads in worship (11:2 – 16)
• an abuse of the Lord's Supper (11:17 – 34)
• about spiritual gifts (12 – 14)
• the bodily resurrection of believers (15:1 – 58)
• about the collection (16:1 – 11)
• about the return of Apollos (16:12)
• concluding exhortations and greetings (16:13 – 24)

It may be that by following the headings in the NIV you divided chapters 1 – 4, 8 – 10, and 12 – 14 into smaller groupings. But do you also see that these are complete units? For example, note how thoroughly chapter 13 belongs to the

whole argument of chapters 12 to 14 by the mention of specific giftings of the Spirit (vv. 1 – 2 and 8).

Before we go on, you should note carefully two things. (1) The only other place in Paul's letters where he takes up a succession of independent items like this is his first letter to the Thessalonians (chs. 4 – 5). For the most part, the other letters basically form one long argument — although sometimes the argument has several distinct parts to it. (2) This is only a tentative outline. We know what occasioned the letter only at the surface — a report and a letter. But what we really want to know is *the precise nature of each of the problems in Corinth* that called forth each specific response from Paul. For our purposes here, therefore, we will spend the rest of our time zeroing in on only the first item — the problem of division within the church (chs. 1 – 4).

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 1 – 4

As you approach each of the smaller sections of the letter, you will need to repeat much of what we have just done. If we were giving you an assignment for each lesson, it would look like this: (1) Read 1 Corinthians 1 – 4 through at least two times (preferably in two different translations). Again, you are reading to get the big picture, to get a "feel" for the whole argument. After you have read it through the second time (or even the third or fourth if you want to read it in each of your translations), go back and (2) list in a notebook everything you can find that tells you something about the recipients and their problem. Try to be thorough here and list everything, even if after a closer look you want to go back and scratch off some

items as not entirely relevant. (3) Then make another list of key words and repeated phrases that indicate the subject matter of Paul's answer.

One of the reasons for choosing this section as a model is not only because it is so crucial to much of 1 Corinthians but also, frankly, because it is a difficult one. If you have read the whole section with care and with an eye for the problem, you may have noted — or even been frustrated by — the fact that, although Paul begins by specifically spelling out the problem (1:10 – 12), the beginning of his answer (1:18 – 3:4) does not seem to speak to the problem at all. In fact, one may initially think these opening sections to be a digression, except that Paul does not argue as a man off on a tangent. Moreover, in the conclusion (3:18 – 23) "wisdom" and "foolishness" (key ideas in 1:18 – 3:4) are joined with "boasting about human leaders" and references to Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. The crucial matter for discovering the issue at hand, then, is to see how all this may fit together.

The place to begin is by making note of what Paul specifically says. At the outset (1:10 – 12) he says they are divided in the name of their leaders (cf. 3:4 – 9; 3:21 – 22; 4:6). But did you also notice that the division is not merely a matter of differences of opinion among them? They are in fact quarreling (1:12; 3:3) and "puffed up in being a follower of one of us *over against* the other" (4:6, emphasis added; cf. 3:21).

All of this seems clear enough. But a careful reading with an eye for the problem should cause two other things to surface.

1. There appears to be some bad blood between the church and Paul himself. This becomes especially clear at the

beginning and end of our chapter 4 (vv.1 – 5 and 18 – 21). With that in mind, one may legitimately see the quarreling and division to be not simply a matter of some of them *preferring* Apollos to Paul but of their actually being *opposed to* Paul.

2. One of the key words in this section is "wisdom" or "wise" (twenty-six times in chs. 1 – 3, and only eighteen more times in all of Paul's letters!). In this case it is also clear that this is more often a pejorative term than a favorable one. God is out to set aside the wisdom of this world (1:18 – 22, 27 – 28; 3:18 – 20), having done so in three ways: by the cross (1:18 – 25), by his choice of the Corinthian believers (1:26 – 31), and by the weakness of Paul's preaching (2:1 – 5). Christ, through the cross, has "become for us wisdom from God" (1:30), and *this* wisdom is revealed *by* the Spirit to those who *have* the Spirit (2:10 – 16). The use of "wisdom" in this way in Paul's argument makes it almost certain that this, too, is a part of the problem of division. But how? At the least, we can suspect that they are carrying on their division over leaders and their opposition to Paul in the name of wisdom, whatever form that may have taken for them.

Anything we say beyond this will lie in the area of speculation, or educated guessing. Since the term "wisdom" is a semitechnical one for philosophy as well, and since itinerant philosophers of all kinds abounded in the Greek world of Paul's time, we suggest that the Corinthian believers were beginning to think of their new Christian faith as a new "divine wisdom," which in turn caused them to evaluate their leaders in merely human terms as they might any of the itinerant philosophers. But note, as helpful as this "guess" may be, it goes beyond what can be said for certain according to what Paul actually describes here.

On the basis of his response here, three important items can be said with the highest level of certainty: (1) On the basis of 3:5 – 23 it is clear that the Corinthians have seriously misunderstood the nature and function of leadership in the church. (2) Similarly, on the basis of what precedes (1:18 – 3:4) they seem also to have misunderstood the basic nature of the gospel. (3) It is clear at the end (4:1 – 21) that they also are wrong in their judgments on Paul and need to reevaluate their relationship to him. You will notice that with this we have also begun to move to an analysis of Paul's answer.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT

The next step in studying the letter is to learn to trace Paul's argument as an answer to the problem of division tentatively set out above. You will recall from chapter 1 that this, too, is something you can do without initial dependence on scholars.

If we were to give you an assignment for this part of the lesson, it would look like this: Trace the argument of 1 Corinthians 1:10 – 4:21, paragraph by paragraph, and in a sentence or two explain the point of each paragraph for the argument as a whole — or explain how it functions as a part of Paul's response to the problem of division.

We simply cannot stress enough the importance of 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. You will recall that the one question you need to learn to ask over and again is *what's the point?* Therefore, you want to be able to do two things: (1) In a compact way state the *content* of each paragraph. *What* does Paul say in this paragraph? (2) In another sentence or two try

to explain *why* you think Paul says this right at this point. How does this content contribute to the argument?

Since we cannot do this here for all of this passage, let us go into some detail with the three crucial paragraphs in the second part of Paul's answer: 3:5 – 17. Up to this point Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, has responded to inadequate understanding of the gospel by pointing out that the heart of the gospel — a crucified Messiah — stands in contradiction to human wisdom (1:18 – 25), as does God's choice of those who make up the new people of God (1:26 – 31) — as though Paul had said to them, "So you think the gospel is a new kind of wisdom, do you? How can this be so? Who in the name of wisdom would have chosen *you* to become the new people of God?" Paul's own preaching also serves as an illustration of the divine contradiction (2:1 – 5). Now all of this is indeed wisdom, Paul goes on to assure them (2:6 – 16), but it is wisdom revealed by the Spirit to God's new people — those who have the Spirit. Since the Corinthians *do* have the Spirit, he continues now by way of transition, they should stop acting like those who do *not* (3:1 – 4). That they are still acting "like mere human beings" is evidenced by their quarreling over Paul and Apollos.

How, then, do the next three paragraphs function in this argument? First, note how the content of the first paragraph (vv. 5 – 9) deals with the nature and function of the leaders over whom they are quarreling. Paul emphasizes that they are merely servants, not lords, as the Corinthian slogans seem to be making them. Next (vv. 6 – 9), by means of an analogy from agriculture, he makes two points about his and Apollos's servant status, both of which are crucial to the Corinthian misunderstanding: (1) Both he and Apollos are one in a

common cause, even though their tasks differ and each will receive his own "pay." (2) Everything and everyone belongs to God — the church, the servants, the growth.

Notice how crucial these two points are to the problem. They are dividing the church on the basis of its leaders. But these leaders are not *lords* to whom one belongs. They are servants who, even though they have differing ministries, are one in the same cause. And these servants belong to God, just as the Corinthians themselves do.

The following paragraph (3:10 – 15) has especially been wrongly interpreted because of the failure to think in paragraphs. Note two things: (1) At the end of the preceding paragraph (v. 9) Paul shifts the metaphor from agriculture to architecture, which will be the metaphor used from here on. (2) The particulars in both metaphors are the same (Paul plants/lays the foundation; Apollos waters/builds on the foundation; the Corinthian church is the field/building; God owns the field/building). However, the *point* of each paragraph differs. The point now is clearly expressed at the beginning (v. 10), "But each one should build with care." And it is also clear from Paul's elaboration of the metaphor that one can build well or poorly, with differing final results. Note that what is being built throughout is the church; there is not even a hint that Paul is referring to how each individual Christian builds his or her life on Christ, which, in fact, is totally irrelevant to the argument. What Paul does here is to turn the argument slightly, to warn those who lead the church that they must do so with great care because a day of testing is coming. Building the church with human wisdom or eloquent speech that circumvents the cross is building with wood, hay, and straw.

The question that begins the following paragraph (3:16 –

17) has also frequently been misapplied, partly because many are well aware that a little later (6:19) Paul calls the Christian's body "the temple of the Holy Spirit." Thus the direct confrontation in 3:5 – 17, too, has been individualized to refer to one's abuse of the body or to the neglect of one's spiritual life. Elsewhere, however, Paul uses the temple metaphor in a collective sense to refer to the church as God's temple (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19 – 22). This is surely his intention here, which the NIV tries to bring out by rendering it "you yourselves are God's temple."

What, then, is Paul's point in this context? The Corinthian church was to be *God's* temple in Corinth — over against all the other temples in the city. To put it in our words, they were God's people in Corinth, his alternative to the Corinthian lifestyle. What made them God's temple was the presence of the Spirit in their midst. But by their divisions they were destroying God's temple. Those responsible for so destroying the church, Paul says, will themselves be destroyed by God, because the church in Corinth was precious (i.e., sacred) to him.

Paul's argument has now come full circle. He began by exposing the Corinthians' inadequate understanding of the gospel, a gospel that is in no way based on human wisdom but in every way stands as the contradiction to it. Then he turns to expose their inadequate understanding of leadership in the church and at the same time warns both the leaders and the church itself of God's judgment on those who promote division. At the end of the chapter (3:18 – 23) he brings these two themes together in a concluding statement. Human wisdom is folly; therefore, "no more boasting about human leaders!"

Notice as we summarize this analysis: (1) the exegesis is

self-contained; that is, we have not once had to go outside the text to understand what Paul is getting at; (2) there is nothing in the paragraph that does not fit into the argument; and (3) all of this makes perfectly good sense of everything. This, then, is what exegesis is all about. This was God's word *to them.* You may have further questions about specific points of content, for which you can consult your commentary. *But all of what we have done here, you can do*. It may take practice — in some cases even some hard work of thinking — but you can do it, and the rewards are great.

ONE MORE TIME

Before we conclude this chapter, let us go through the process of exegesis one more time for practice, and this time in a somewhat easier passage in a later letter, but one that also deals with internal tensions in the church, namely, Philippians 1:27 – 2:18.

Read Philippians 1:12 – 2:18 several times. Note that Paul's argument to this point has gone something like this: *The occasion* is that Paul is in prison (1:13, 17) and the Philippian church has sent him a gift through a member named Epaphroditus (see 2:25, 30; 4:14 – 18). Apparently Epaphroditus contracted an illness that ordinarily ended in death, and the church had heard of it and was saddened (2:26). But God spared him, so now Paul is sending him back (2:25 – 30) with this letter in order to (1) tell them how things are with him (1:12 – 26), (2) thank them for their gift (4:10, 14 – 19), and (3) exhort them on a couple of matters: to live in harmony (1:27 – 2:18; 4:2 – 3) and to avoid the Judaizing heresy (3:1 – 4:1).

Paul has just completed the section (1:12 – 26) where he

has told them how he is getting along in his imprisonment. The new section (1:27 – 2:18), where our interest lies, is the first part of the exhortation. Notice, for example, how he is no longer talking about himself, as before (vv. 12 – 26). Did you notice the clear shift from I/me/my to you/your at the beginning of the next paragraph (verse 27)?

What, then, is the point of each paragraph in this section?

The first paragraph, 1:27 – 30, begins the exhortation. The point seems to be what we read at the outset, that they should "stand firm in the one Spirit." This is (1) an exhortation to unity, especially because (2) in Philippi they are facing opposition. (Note: If we decide that v. 27 is really the point of the paragraph, then we have to ask, what is the point of vv. 28 – 30 and the emphasis on opposition and suffering? Notice how he tried to answer this.)

How then does what follows (2:1 – 4) relate to unity? First, Paul repeats the exhortation (vv. 1 – 2, which now makes us sure we were right about the first paragraph). But the point now is that humility is the proper attitude for the believers to have unity.

Now you try it with the next paragraph (2:5 – 11). What is the point? Why this appeal to the humiliation and exaltation of Christ Jesus? Your answer does not have to be in our words but surely should include the following: Jesus in his incarnation and death is the supreme example of the humility Paul wants them to have. (You will notice that when you ask the questions this way, the point of the paragraph is *not* to teach us something new about Christ. Rather, Paul is appealing to these great truths about Christ to get the Philippians to *have the same mind-set Christ had,* not simply to *know about him.*)

Go on to the next paragraph (vv. 12 – 13). Now what is the point? Notice how "therefore" clearly signals that this is the conclusion. Given Christ's example, they are now to obey Paul; but, in what? Surely it is in having unity, which also requires humility.

Finally, ask yourself how what follows (vv. 14 – 18) fits into this argument, and how it relates to the problem as noted above: disharmony in the church while they are facing opposition in Philippi.

At the end, you might note, from the way Paul deals here with the problem of disunity, that the similar problem in Corinth was surely of a much more serious and complex nature. This should further help to confirm our reconstruction of the problem there.

THE PROBLEM PASSAGES

We have purposely led you through two passages where we are convinced you could have done most of this kind of exegesis on your own, given that you have learned to think in paragraphs and to ask the right historical and contextual questions. But we are well aware that there are all those other texts — the kinds of texts the authors are repeatedly asked about: the meaning of "because of the angels" in 1 Corinthians 11:10, or "baptized for the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29, or Christ's preaching to the "imprisoned spirits" in 1 Peter 3:19, or "the man of lawlessness" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. In short, how do we go about finding the meaning of the problem passages?

Here are some guidelines:

1. In many cases the reason the problem passages are so difficult for us is that, frankly, they were not written to us. That

is, the original author and his readers are on a similar wavelength that allows the inspired author to assume a great deal on the part of his readers. Thus, for example, when Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are to recall that he "used to tell [them] these things," and therefore "you know what is holding him back" (2 Thess 2:5 – 6), we may need to learn to be content with our lack of knowledge. What he had told them orally they could now fit into what he was saying by letter. Our lack of the oral communication makes the written one especially difficult. But we take it as a truism: What God wants us to know has been communicated to us; what God has not told us may still hold our interest, but our uncertainty at these points should make us hesitant about being dogmatic.

2. Despite some uncertainty as to some of the precise details, one needs to learn to ask what can be said for certain about a given passage and what is merely possible but not certain. Look, for an example, at the puzzling words in the rhetorical question that begins a new phase of Paul's argument with the Corinthian believers regarding the *bodily* resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:29). What can be said for certain? Some of the Corinthians really were being "baptized for the dead," whether we like to admit it or not. Moreover, Paul neither condemns nor condones their practice; he simply refers to it — for a totally different reason from the actual practice itself. But we do not know and probably never will know *who* was doing it, *for whom* they were doing it, and *why* they were doing it. The details and the meaning of the practice, therefore, are probably forever lost to us.

3. Nonetheless, as we have suggested before, 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.

Whatever it was the Corinthians were doing in baptizing for the dead, we do know why Paul referred to this practice of theirs. Their own action was a kind of "proof from experience" that they were not consistent in their rejecting a future *bodily* resurrection of believers.

4. On such passages as this one you will need to consult a good commentary. As we point out in the appendix, it is the handling of just such a passage that separates the better commentaries from all the others. The good ones will list and at least briefly discuss the various options that have been suggested as solutions, including the reasons for and against. You may not always go along with the individual commentator's choices, but you do need to be informed about the variety of options — and the better commentaries will do this for you.

Finally, we suggest that even scholars do not have all the answers. You can more or less count on it that, where there are four to fourteen viable options as to what a given passage meant, even the scholars are guessing! Texts like 1 Corinthians 15:29 (on which there are at least forty different guesses) should serve to give us proper humility.

What we have done in this chapter is only half the task. It is the essential first half, but now we want to go on to ask how these various texts apply to *us*. We have learned to hear God's word to *them*. What about his word to *us*? This is the concern of the next chapter.