



# Good Eats for the soul

August 7, 2022 - **Lesson 7**  
*Understanding NT Genres, part 2:*  
*Epistles*

I. **Introduction:** *Learning (or not learning) from Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse*

## II. Class Discussion & Activity

A. Letter writing (3 scenarios)

B. Letter deciphering

1. Who is the author, and what can you know about him/her from this letter?
2. Who is/are the recipient(s) of the correspondence, and what can you know about him/her/them?
3. What problem, situation, or issue is being addressed?
4. What is the reader of the correspondence encouraged to do?

## III. Epistles

A. Definition:

1. A formal letter or correspondence.
2. Etymology: from Latin, *to send news*
3. NT Epistles:
  - a. Personal letters written to Believers in a committed gathering (church).
  - b. Personal letters written to specific Believers but still intended to be read and received by the church.
  - c. Written with a note of apostolic authority that gives them a unique character<sup>1</sup>
  - d. Not originally like modern books published for fairly general audiences—thousands of readers that the author has never met; rather they were genuine letters in which the authors, under divine inspiration, gave direct instruction to a specific church or group of churches.<sup>2</sup>

B. Timeless applicability (2 Tim. 3:16-17)<sup>3</sup>

C. Proper reading

1. Read as a whole
  - a. Whole context
  - b. Flow of thought

## Overview

Although the epistles included in the New Testament do not consist of “personal correspondence” in the usual sense, we can easily misunderstand them unless we treat them as real, historical letters (rather than textbooks of theology).

In practical terms this means, first, that we should read the New Testament letters as wholes; our tendency to treat them as reference books to be read piecemeal distorts our perception of their message.

Second, these writings arise out of concrete historical occasions, which means that we must learn to “read between the lines” so as to understand the text in its original context.

Third, we must learn to treat the New Testament letters from a literary point of view, that is, recognizing that they are carefully thought-out documents and may reflect rhetorical methods used in antiquity.

Fourth, these writings must be read theologically; while being sensitive to the diversity that they represent, we must seek to appreciate their unifying features, especially the authors’ conviction that the last days had arrived with the coming of Christ.

Finally, we cannot forget that the epistles of the New Testament are authoritative writings and that therefore their historical character does not undermine their relevance for our lives.

—Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*

<sup>1</sup> Kaiser & Silva. *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. © 1994. Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16-17: All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

<sup>4</sup> For example: braided hair with jewelry (1 Pet. 3:3) or meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corin. 8).

2. Read in context
  - a. What can we know about when the letter was written?
  - b. What can we know about the culture<sup>4</sup> when this letter was written?
  - c. What history does the author have with his recipients (remember, these were real life people seeking to live the Christian life just as we are)?

#### IV. Toward a proper hermeneutic

##### A. *Objective* questions to ask

1. Who is the author, and what can you know about him from this letter?
  
2. Who is/are the recipient(s) of the correspondence, and what can you know about him/her/them?
  
3. What problem, situation, challenge, or issue is being addressed?
  
4. What is/are the reader(s) of the correspondence encouraged to do?

##### B. *Subjective* questions to ask

1. Despite being separated by time, technology, and culture—how can I relate to the recipients of this letter...
  - a. as an individual?
  
  - b. as the church?
  
  - c. Why is it important to consider both?
  
2. Looking at the sins, struggles, issues, and challenges the recipients were facing, how does the same issue manifest itself in me (and in the church)?
  
3. What was the answer, remedy, solution given by the writer of Scripture and how does it apply to me (and to the church)?