

Keys to Understanding Paul's Letters

*A Brief Introduction to
Special Hermeneutics*

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Hermeneutics

“Don’t give me your interpretations, just tell me what the Bible says”

- Interpretation is inevitable
 - Sign: *No Football Coaches Allowed*
- Interpreting what we read is not always easy, so...
 - **How** will you interpret the Bible ?
 - **How** will you decide between competing interpretations?

The Nature of Paul's Letters

Historical Documents

- God has chosen to reveal Himself in history
- Letters address the circumstances of the sender and the recipients
- Letters make sense in the context of the recipients' lives
- Letters are normally a slice of an ongoing conversation
- Letters follow common conventions and use language in conventional ways

Reading historical documents requires recognizing **the gap** between the modern reader and the historical text

Text

A black L-shaped line forming a bracket on the left side of the slide, with a horizontal top bar and a vertical line extending downwards.

Reader

A black L-shaped line forming a bracket on the right side of the slide, with a horizontal top bar and a vertical line extending downwards.

What causes the Gap?

Text



The diagram consists of two L-shaped brackets. The left bracket is positioned under the word 'Text' and the right bracket is positioned under the word 'Reader'. Both brackets have a horizontal top bar and a vertical stem extending downwards. The space between the two vertical stems contains a list of three red, italicized words: 'Time', 'culture', and 'language'.

Reader

Time
culture
language

Why does spanning the gap matter?

Text

Reader

*Time
Culture
Language*

Why should the modern reader care about an ancient text? What serves as the motivation and the basis for our efforts to understand it? What connects us to it?

Why span the gap?

Scripture

Reader

*Time
Culture
Language*

Divine Consistency – Common Humanity – Scriptural Authority

Knowing **Why** does not explain **How**

- *Divine consistency, common humanity, and an affirmation of the authority of scripture **validate your interest** in interpretation...*
- ***Recognizing the gap** highlights the challenges of interpretation...*
- *But **these do not tell you how** to span the gap.*
- *You do so by answering a series of key historical and literary questions.*
- *These questions assume that interpretation is a search for "**authorial intent**."*

Key Question # 1

What did the author(s) write?

(establish the text you will interpret)

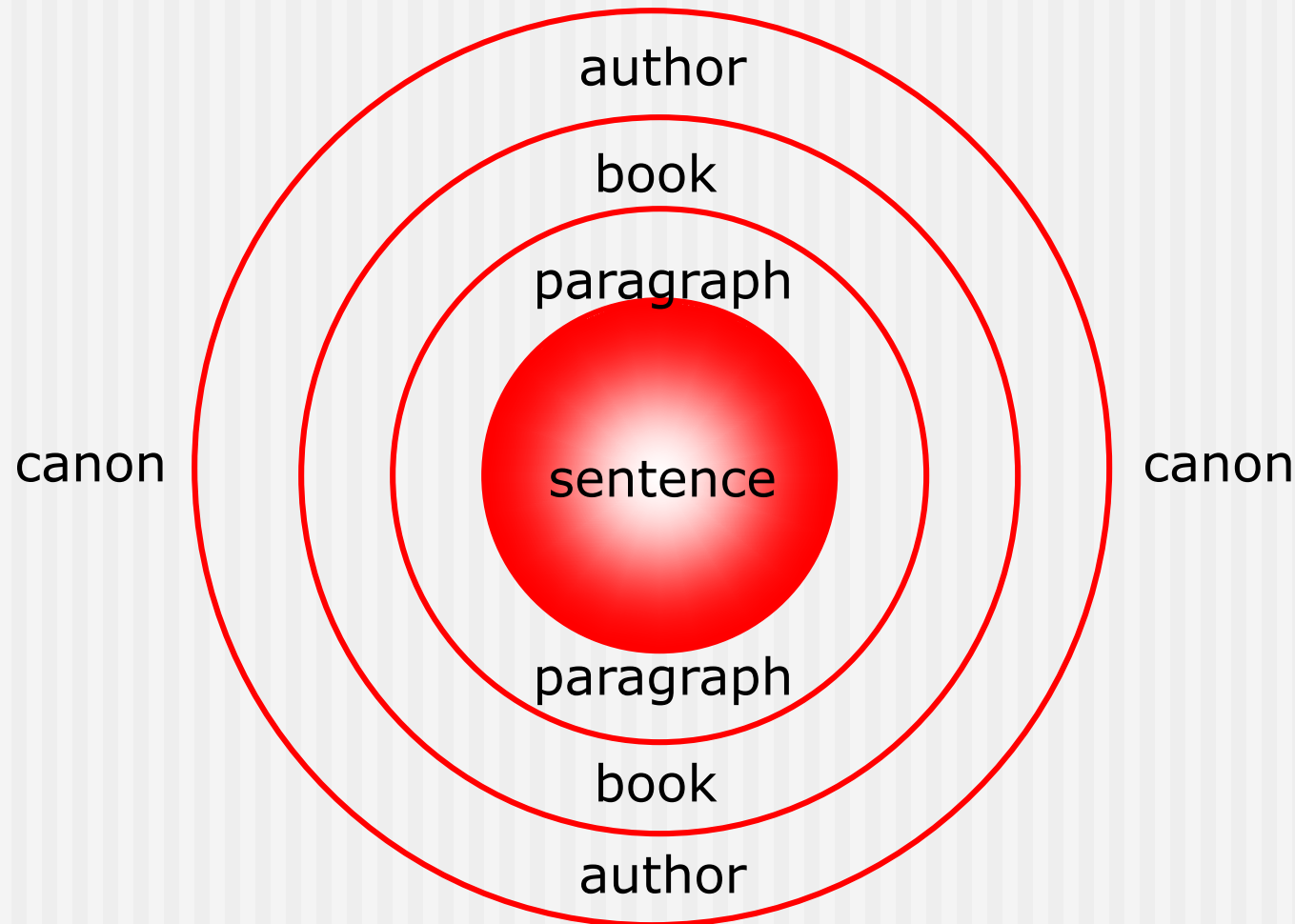
1. Compare modern translations (literal, dynamic, paraphrase – use wisely)
2. Consult critical commentaries (not devotional until later)
3. Mark places where these differ significantly as requiring more study (but not necessarily more emphasis).

Key Question # 2

Which interpretation best fits the literary context?

- Words have meaning as part of sentences, and sentences have meaning as part of paragraphs,...
- Understanding the intent of a larger passage will help you understand the meaning of words and sentences (*1 Cor. 12:31 - And I will show you a still more excellent way*)

Concentric Circles of Context



Key Question # 3

Which interpretation best fits the historical context?

- *Knowledge of the author his recipients of a letter, and*
- *Knowledge of the larger society in which he functioned will enhance the reader's ability to understand the author's intent.*

Sifting Interpretations

A

B

C

D

E



B

D

E



B

Historical-Literary Study

- *The result of a careful, critical use of historical and literary tools should be a high level of certainty regarding the intent of the author of a document.*
- *You will discover what the text **meant**.*
- *But what does the text **mean** for readers today?*

Key Question #4

How should we apply the text today?

- *The result of a careful, historical and literary study should be a high level of certainty regarding Paul's intent.*
- *You will discover what the text **meant**.*
- *But what does the text **mean** for readers today?*

Historical literary study is not the last step in spanning the gap

Scripture

*historical
and
literary tools
discern
authorial
intent*

*Time
Culture
Language
Gap*

Reader

*But do they
tell us what
significance
the text has
for modern
readers?*

Divine Consistency – Common Humanity – Scriptural Authority

Key Question # 5

Is Direct Transfer Best?

(Does the text simply "mean what it meant")

1. Works when the gap is minimal
2. Makes some texts obsolete
3. Fails to address some modern needs
4. Leaves narrative material in the past
5. Not always simple - consider the commands to greet one another with a holy kiss. (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26)

Key Question #6

Is Application by Analogy Best?

(Application based on comparability)

1. Based on authorial intent
2. Seeks principle behind the text
3. Draws generalization from the text
4. Seeks meaning applicable in any time
5. Open to divine guidance
6. Seeks nuanced understanding applicable to modern situation and need

Process of Interpreting Paul's Letters

Scripture

*historical
and
literary
tools
Used to discern
**authorial
intent***

*Time
Culture
Language
Gap*

Reader

*Direct transfer
or
Analogy
Used to discern
**present
significance***

Divine Consistency – Common Humanity – Scriptural Authority

Interpretation – Not a “one and done” activity

Interpretation involves a recurring cycle in which an interpreter moves through

1. An **encounter** with the text
 - *Bringing pre-understandings and preoccupations*
2. An **investigation** of the text
 - *The search for authorial intent*
3. The **application** of the text
 - *Based on convictions that the text is true and inspired*

Actualization

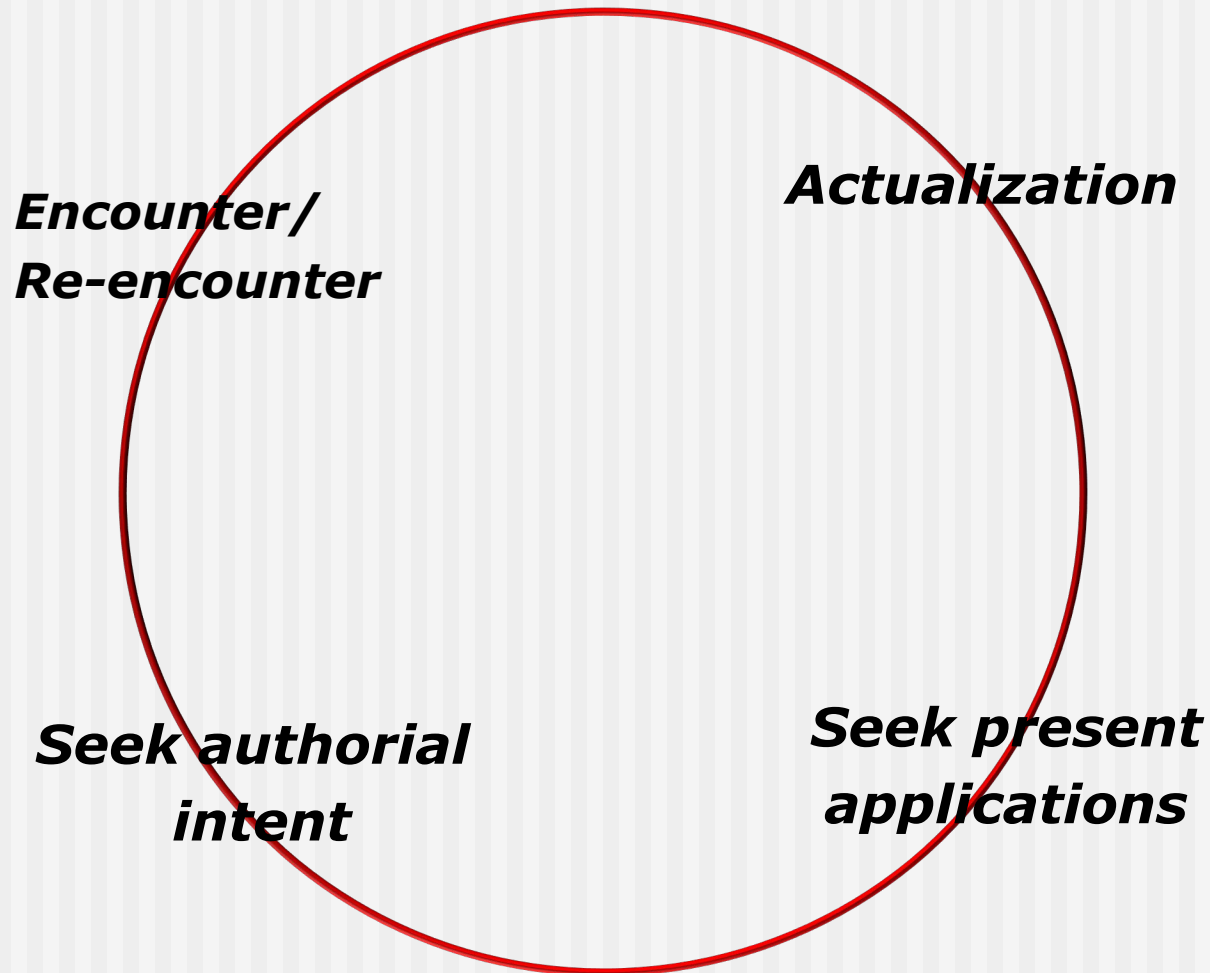
*When understanding the text leads to implementing the teachings of the text in the lives of the **readers** they **are changed by the process.***

They see and interact with their world (including with their scriptures) differently than before.

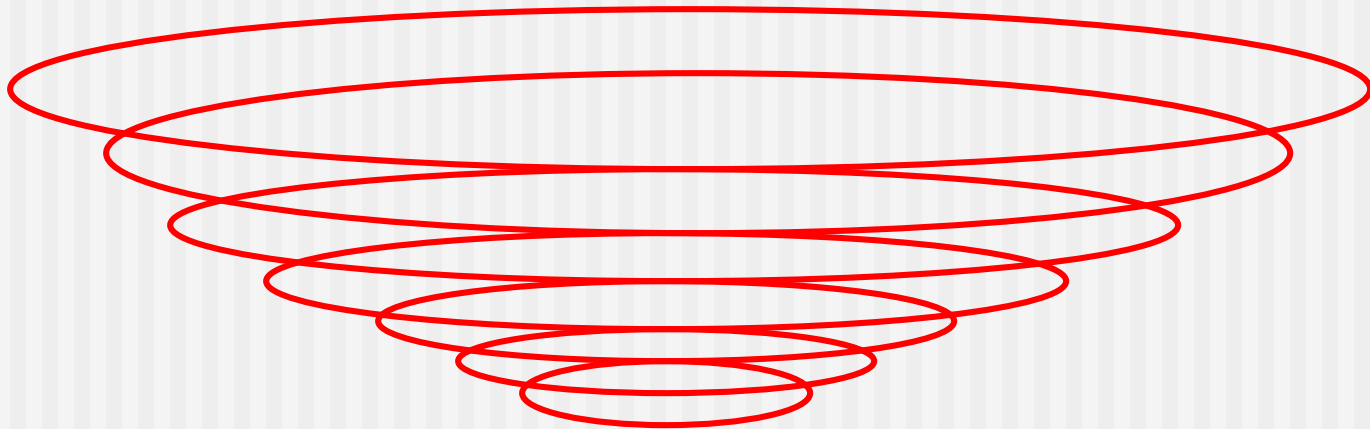
Re-Encounter with the Text

- *Persons transformed by the text may return to it and*
- *Find in the same text new insight*
- *Not because the **text** has changed*
- *But because **they** have changed.*

Interpretation: a Recurring Cycle



Interpretation: An Upward Spiral



*Of growing understanding
and of growing godliness*