

Session 9 Study Guide- Philippians and Philemon and Pastoral Epistles

This session has a 2 part study guide, one section just for Philippians and Philemon and one for the Pastoral Epistles. A course facilitator will need to decide whether to use all or parts of these guides. One option would be to use Session 9 as two sessions instead of one.

Study Guide for Paul's Letters to the Philippians and Philemon

Approaching the Letter to the Philippians and Philemon: Initial Reflections

Assigned Reading: Philippians, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapter 18
Philemon, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapter 23

After you listened to the lecture, and have done the reading in Powell, the study guide has a twofold purpose:

- 1) To facilitate continued reflection and integration of the material by appropriating in the reading of select themes and passages in Philippians and Philemon.
- 2) To provide focus questions for group discussion of Philippians and Philemon in the light of the lecture and the reading.

Before you work through the study guide do the following:

- Make a brief list of the ideas and insights you encountered in the lecture and the textbook that challenged your working assumptions about Paul, his letters, and Philippians and Philemon in particular.
- Make a list of questions you would like to investigate further or discuss with others engaged in the class.

One important goal for interpreting Paul's letters to the Philippians, to Philemon, or any letter is to get a sense of the letter's content and argument as a whole. Read through both Philemon and Philippians again in one sitting and do the following:

- Summarize in your own words the issues Paul is addressing and how he relates the gospel to the situation in the community he is addressing.
- Make a list of important themes in the letters and some of the ways your own understanding these two letters is different from what you heard in the lecture and read in Powell. Identify important questions the lecture and reading raised for you, and select key ideas and passages you would like to revisit.

Deeper Engagement with Philippians and Philemon

Paul's letters to the Philippians and to the ekklesia that met in Philemon's house illustrate well Paul's commitment to the establishment of a network of communities of Jesus-believers drawn from "the nations," that is, from among the Gentiles. In both letters the dearth of references to the scriptures of Israel (our "Old Testament") is noteworthy. In both letters the absence of language about righteousness and setting right, or justification and justifying, is noteworthy. These two letters have as their primary emphasis the call to re-shape one's life, body, mind and spirit, to be like that of Christ rather than to live by the standards of the world. "Have the same mind among you" as Christ had is the theme woven specifically throughout Philippians and illustrated by Paul's description of Christ's way of being. It is a way of being that Paul uses his own life to illustrate, as well as that of Timothy and Epaphroditus. He calls upon Euodia and Syntyche to manifest this same deep mutuality. Christians, filled with the Spirit's power, are to be for one another, even to the point of relinquishing their own claims, rights, and desires for the sake of the well-being of each other and the community as a whole.

Philemon does not use the same language of "have this same mind among you," but illustrates the same calling. Philemon is asked to relinquish his rights over Onesimus for the sake of Onesimus, Paul, and the ministry of the gospel. In order to make clear how different life is for those "in Christ," Paul uses the familiar language of family in a way that subverts the hierarchies of family life as it had been traditionally structured. Philemon as head of a household had power over the lives of those in his household, including children, slaves, and those who owed him allegiance. But Paul indicates that all who are "in Christ" are now related as siblings in his body and are not in power relationships over one another. Instead, they are called upon for the sake of the family to assist one another in whatever way possible. To underline this ethos that is quite different from anything in the culture of the day, Paul

relinquishes any right he might have to command Philemon and seeks his voluntary assent to the pardoning and/or freeing of Onesimus.

In both letters, then, Paul understands that the life of Jesus in which he gave up the powers of intimate connection with God for the sake of obedience among humans, an obedience that led to his death but our life, is the sort of life we are called to live with and for each other. Paul offers himself as a kind of example of what this life might look like. Remember as you read this that these believers had no scriptural basis for understanding the work of God. Their experience of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of Paul, both in word and example, was all these little communities had to go on as they tried to work out what life “in Christ” might look like for them and how it differed from the life they had lived in their contexts.

An Exercise in the Practice of Interpretation

Part of Paul’s genius is that he is a pastoral theologian who is always interpreting the different contexts in which believers lived out their faith so that he can relate the gospel of Christ to the particular circumstances and issues they were dealing with. That is why each one of Paul’s letters is so different from the others, and why it is so difficult to synthesize his theology. In the following exercise, you will read each letter on its own terms with a view to ascertaining the particular story of the community implied in the letter and the distinctive way Paul relates the story of Christ to the situation he was addressing. Then you will compare and contrast the two letters as preparation for group discussion.

Philippians

- Write a brief paragraph or two telling the story of the assembly of Christ in Philippi based on what Paul tells us in the letter. What does the letter disclose about the specific issues in the community Paul was addressing?
- Briefly summarize the story of Christ Paul tells in Philippians. What are the characteristics of the way of life in Christ Paul models and exhorts believers to adopt? What is counter-cultural about this pattern of life in Christ in the context of the Greco-Roman city of Philippi? How does Paul’s presentation of the gospel message in Philippi serve as the basis for the new way of life in Christ he urges believers to embrace?
- If you have time, notice how Paul tells the story of Christ and of the Philippians incorporation into that story. For instance, Paul does not start at the beginning of Jesus’ story and move through it and the story of the Philippians in chronological order. He tells the story in an dramatic or rhetorical order that emphasizes certain points. How does Paul arrange his version of the story of God at work in the world through Christ to make certain points? What points are emphasized?

Philemon

- Write a brief paragraph or two telling the story of the assembly of Christ in Philemon’s household based on what Paul says in the letter. Identify passages that disclose information about the specific issue(s) Paul was addressing in that community? Notice to whom the letter is addressed. What might the addressees tell you about the community to whom the letter is written?
- Paul writes his letter to Philemon and the gathering in his house as a request from a person in a lower social position to a person in a higher position. What strategies does Paul use in this letter to undermine the social difference and at the same time allow Philemon to save face? Might Paul’s strategies be instructive for us?
- If Paul had been writing to persons of Jewish descent, what Bible stories might he have used to strengthen his request?

Discussion Question

In both Philippians and Philemon Paul writes to shape the identities and practices of believers in accordance with the gospel of Christ. However, the tone and content of the two letters is very different because the context and situation Paul was addressing was different.

- Paul does not write to Philemon about Christ’s self-emptying. Instead he speaks of generosity, assistance, love and partnership. In fact, Paul writes very little about Christ at all! What difference does Paul’s choice of image’s make?
- In Philemon 9, the same Greek word can be translated as old man, elder, or ambassador. Which translation do you think might best express what Paul is trying to say and do in this letter? Why?
- What is your best understanding of the relationship between Philippians 2:12 and 13? How are we called upon to work out our salvation even as we acknowledge that God is at work among and within us?

- Paul instructs the Philippians in a number of places (1:9-11; 2:15) to continue their good practices and be found blameless at the day of Jesus Christ. He also indicates that his work will be weighed by their flourishing as a community of loving Christians (1:20; 2:16). What do you think of this instruction? Are we too weighed in relation to our individual callings?

Study Guide for the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus)

Approaching the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus): Initial Reflections

Assigned Reading: The Pastoral Epistles, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapters 17, 19, 22.

After you listened to the lecture, and have done the reading in Powell, the study guide has a twofold purpose:

- 3) To facilitate continued reflection and integration of the material by appropriating in the reading of select themes and passages in the Pastoral Epistles.
- 4) To provide focus questions for group discussion of the Pastoral Epistles in the light of the lecture and the reading.

Before you work through the study guide do the following:

- Make a brief list of the ideas and insights you encountered in the lecture and the textbook that challenged your working assumptions about the Pastoral Epistles, particularly in regard to their authorship.
- Make a list of questions you would like to investigate further or discuss with others engaged in the class.

One important goal for interpreting any ancient letter, including each of the Pastoral Epistles, is to get a sense of the letter's content and argument as a whole. Read through 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus again in one sitting and do the following:

- Summarize in your own words the issues being addressed. How does the author relate the story of God's work through Jesus Christ to the situation in the community he is addressing?
- Make a list of important themes in the letters and some of the ways your own understanding of these letters is different from what you heard in the lecture and read in Powell. Identify important questions the lecture and reading raised for you, and select key ideas and passages you would like to revisit.

Deeper Engagement with 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus

These three letters that come to us as part of our New Testament are seldom read or thought about by most contemporary Christians. Like all New Testament documents, these letters are noticeably historical; they come from a different time and place than our own. How shall we read these letters written by, to and for our forebears in faith in our own time? Is there anything they have to teach us?

The very first thing these letters teach us is that all the texts of the Bible are historical documents. Perhaps we spot the distance between us and the original recipients of the letters more easily in the Pastoral epistles than in the "usual suspects," the Gospels and the seven authentic Pauline letters. Because we read Paul as a theologian and because we assume we understand the stories and parables of Jesus, it is easy to forget what a different culture the ancient Mediterranean was from our own. But in a series of letters where the author is not hesitant to lay down rules for behavior and voice cautions about what is happening in early Christian communities, we become more deeply aware that these communities are not identical with our own. The conviction, for example, that widows ought to remarry if they are relatively young is not one that we find persuasive in a day when women are able to support themselves or receive benefits from a government service. We could multiply these examples. Surely the idea that women should not instruct men is a relic of a by-gone era.

Yet among Christians it was not always so and indeed, in some religious groups in our time, the words sent to Timothy continue to be understood as also commands for us. Given that some of our sisters and brothers among Christians read the Pastoral epistles differently from the way we do, the second thing these letters do is press upon us the need to consider how and why we make the decisions we do about what in the Bible is binding for us and what is merely informative. How does the Bible function as a "norming norm" (Lutheran language!) for Christian life in some cases and not in all? We can not read these letters without considering the question.

Finally, these letters remind us of the need to dig deeply for meaning given the age of our documents. Things are assumed in all the biblical documents that we simply miss given our distance from the culture. These kinds of questions are abundant in the Pastoral epistles. Why, for instance, the instructions about widows in 1 Timothy 5:3-16? Why the emphasis on control of family as a sign of administrative excellence in 1 Timothy 3:4-5? Why no plaiting of the hair or wearing of gold jewelry in a worship service in 1 Timothy 2:9? What is it about women that led the fathers in the faith to limit their public leadership roles 1 Timothy 2:11-12? Why did this have to be specified in a letter? Consider this. If the women were not already teaching in public and even teaching men (recall Priscilla and Aquila teaching Apollos in Acts) there would be no need to specify that they ought not do so.

Yet, there is still much to be learned from these letters, both about how Christian communities were organized in ways that allowed them to grow and endure and about some of the values that Christianity brought to bear in the lives of ordinary people. The ancients could hardly imagine that a hard-working man or woman who had to work to survive would have the capacity for virtuous, orderly behavior. Such virtue, it was believed, had to be cultivated and disciplined; it required the leisure to learn to read, to read, reflect, and engage one's friends in conversation to be able to shape a life of virtue and peace. But Christian communities expected that all their members would be able to live in such a way with each other's help and trust in the teaching of their leaders and elders. High expectations of communal life that tried to create a group in which all might thrive made these communities attractive to many. In such a community trust and support of leadership whose duties included much teaching, was of high importance. Both the community and the leaders were called upon to live in the real world in such a way that their virtue, order, and harmony were praiseworthy also to those who were not Christians.

An Exercise in the Practice of Interpretation

By his choice of the matters to address and even more so by things that are forbidden, our letter writer suggests to us some of the things that were causing concern. In preparation for class discussion:

- Go through one of these letters and list what the writer addresses and forbids. You might also list what he encourages and recommends. What might you learn from this list?
- Find on-line information, a good Bible dictionary (like *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, for instance), or a good, up-to-date commentary on 1 Timothy and learn what you can about 1 Timothy 2:9-10. The question you are pondering is, "Why would these things deserve special mention?"

Discussion Question

Share your work from the investigation above. What have you learned about this letter and the values upheld in it? Think about writing such a letter to your congregation or another that you know well. What issues would you highlight and why? What recommendations would you make to the leaders of the congregation in regard to what ought to be done? How would you offer words of advice, encouragement, and warning? What values would underlie your concerns?

As you have shared some of your insights about needs in contemporary life in Christian communities, consider how you might go about implementing some of your recommendations. Do your concerns individually or as a group call for conversation with leaders or elders (the pastors, council members?)? Perhaps you would like to talk with someone on an education committee or worship committee. Perhaps you would simply like to write a letter of thanks for the good work that has gone on, the faithful teaching that continues, expressing your awareness of the difficulties of good leadership. Consider acting on the insights you have gained.