

## **Contextualizing Paul's Writings in Ministry: Proposed Guiding Principles**

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*ABSTRACT—The writings of Apostle Paul provide Christian missionaries and pastors with readily available tools for spreading the Gospel of the kingdom of Christ and nurturing new believers in Christ all over the world. This is traceable to the fact that Paul is the author of most of the extant New Testament documents. It is obvious that Paul's letters were addressed to specific people, in specific places, who lived under specific and peculiar circumstances in their time. However, as Christian missionaries and pastors utilize Paul's writings in preaching Christ and nurturing believers in Christ, the tendency is to apply every detail of Paul's instructions to people who live in places, time, and circumstances that are remarkably different from those of Paul's original audience. When this happens, Paul's writings are subjected to severe misapplication and sometimes misinterpretation. In response to this, this study utilizes the contextual approach to suggest seven guiding principles for interpreting and contextualizing Paul's writings in doing ministry, especially among people who live in places, time, and circumstances that are far removed from those of Paul's time. While not purporting to provide all the answers to the questions surrounding Paul's writings, this study seeks as much as possible to help the modern reader hear or read Paul as though he or she was part of his original audience. It is by doing this that Paul's writings can effectively speak to the life and experiences of the modern Christian.*

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## **I. Introduction**

In spite of a lack of consensus among biblical scholars, Paul is accepted as the author of thirteen books of the New Testament (NT). Since this study assumes Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews (for details, see for example, Carson & Moo, 2005, pp. 600-604; Akpa, 2004, p. 137; Lane, 1991, xlix-li; Bruce, 1990, pp. 14-22; Carter, 1977, pp. 10-12; Hawthorne, 1969, pp. 533-534), Paul is the author of fourteen out of the twenty-seven books of the NT. This has some far-reaching implications to the modern reader and student of the NT. First, Paul is the author of more than half of the entire NT. Second, by natural process, he is the most widely read and cited author in the NT. Third, and most importantly, since most of Paul's writings deal with the life and mission of Christians and the Christian Church, they provide the minister and missionary with the handiest materials for doing ministry and missions, formulating Christian doctrines, and teaching on most issues of life.

However, it is obvious that among the books of the NT, those attributed to Apostle Paul as the author are usually the most difficult to understand and interpret. Apostle Peter, in spite of his close association with the Lord Jesus Christ, recognized the special wisdom given to Apostle Paul with which he wrote his epistles (2 Peter 3:15). Peter also pointed out that the epistles of Paul "contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16, except otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version). This lends credence to the fact that Paul's epistles are the most vulnerable in the NT in terms of being misinterpreted, misapplied, misquoted, or even abused by pastors, missionaries, and church members, especially if they do not have adequate theological training.

In light of the various gaps that exist between Paul's original audience and the modern reader of his epistles (Carson & Moo, 2005, pp. 23-31; Mulzac, 2002, pp. 25-42), two pertinent questions emerge: (1) What did Paul seek to communicate to his original audience in the various Christian churches he wrote to? (2) How should the content of Paul's epistles be interpreted, understood, and applied by pastors

and missionaries in the present era, who seek to take the gospel to audiences that are alien to and different from the time of Paul?

Taking these probing but relevant questions into account, this paper, utilizing the contextual approach, proposes seven principles that may guide pastors, missionaries and modern reader of Paul's epistles who seek to appropriately understand, interpret, and apply the contents of the epistles, avoiding the pitfalls identified by Apostle Peter. This study intentionally interacts more with the biblical texts in the generally accepted order and arrangement of the NT books more than with scholars so as to avoid being distracted by divergent and almost never-agreeing scholarly arguments on the NT text, characterized by the "thoroughly mixed nature and, . . . mutually contradictory content" (Carson & Moo, 2005, p. 23) of such arguments.

## **II. An Overview of the Backgrounds to the Pauline Epistles**

After Paul's conversion to Christianity on the way to Damascus to persecute and kill Christian believers, God appointed him an apostle to the Gentiles or non-Jewish people (Acts 13:47; 22:20-21; Eph 3:7-8). As part of the plan to accomplish his mission and commission, Paul undertook several missionary journeys with his companions. The accounts of these missionary journeys are well documented in the book of Acts, especially Acts 13:1–28:31. Through these missionary journeys, Paul and his associates established several churches in various places, especially in the then Asia regions.

Sometime after the first missionary journey, Paul said to his companions, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing" (Acts 15:36). This gave rise to subsequent missionary journeys. However, following Paul's journey back to Jerusalem from Ephesus (Acts 20:17–21:17), he was arrested by the Jews, tried, and handed over to the Roman authorities in Judea (Acts 21:27–26:32). During one of such trials, taking advantage of his Roman citizenship, Paul appealed to be tried by Caesar himself (Acts 25:10-12; 26:32). According to provisions in the Roman judicial system, Roman citizens, living outside the city of Rome, who were accused of serious offences especially offences related with Christianity were taken to Rome for trial (see the letter of Pliny the younger, Governor of

Bithynia and Pontus, to Emperor Trajan (Harrington, 1993, p. 9). Reporting to Trajan, Pliny wrote:

For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial (Radice, pp. 285-287).

In response to his appeal to Caesar, Paul was taken to Rome in the company of other prisoners, surviving a serious storm at sea that resulted in a terrible shipwreck (Acts 27:1–28:15).

Following his trial in Rome, Paul was restricted from leaving Rome and was thereby unable to continue with his missionary journeys. However, he was allowed to rent a house where he lived and received visitors and from where he preached the word of God unhindered (Acts 28:30-31). Such restricted lifestyle (as in the case of a previous imprisonment of Paul in Acts 24:27) led Paul to resort to much of letter writing as the most effective and efficient means of keeping in touch with believing Christians in the numerous churches that he had established. This gave rise to such epistles as were written to the Ephesians, Colossians, Corinthians, Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Timothy, and Titus. However, a few of Paul's epistles were written in anticipation of planned and intended journeys to some cities, for example, Rom 1:13; 15:23-29; 2 Cor 1:15–2:11 and Phlm 1:17-22. In essence, each of Paul's epistles was necessitated by precise circumstances and conditions and Paul responded to such circumstances and conditions in his epistles.

In view of the above, one would readily notice that Paul, as a pastor, wrote to address pastoral issues that arose in those churches and in the process, left specific instructions and lines of actions which the various churches were to take to solve their problems. Such instructions and lines of actions have survived today in our hands in the form of doctrines. This therefore underscores the need to establish principles to guide the modern reader of Paul's epistles toward a

faithful and careful interpretation and application of the content of the epistles.

### **III. Principles for Contextualizing Paul's Writings in Ministry**

The main thrust of this study is to propose basic principles that are intended to guide the modern reader of Pauline epistles in his/her attempt to interpret, understand, and apply the content of the epistles to his/her contemporary situation. Recognizing the limitations to being exhaustive in achieving its aims, this study, using the contextual approach, proposes seven key principles that are considered fundamental in any attempt to interpret and apply Pauline epistles to the contemporary Christian audience.

#### **A. Read Paul's Epistles through the Eyes of Paul and His Original Audience**

Paul's epistles were not written to just anybody on the street. On the contrary, Paul wrote his epistles to Christian believers in the various cities where the Gospel of Jesus Christ had taken root and given birth to a Christian community, the Church, especially in the first century AD. Although they were believers in Christ, the Christians to whom Paul wrote his epistles had their struggles which were personal, congregational, relational, ideological, and cultural in nature. Acknowledging with humility the fact that the 21st century Christian was not Paul's original target audience in his epistles written in the first century AD would open a window through which a pastor, missionary or reader of Paul in modern times will handle Paul's epistles with diligence and caution.

Thus, the modern reader of Paul's epistles needs to answer some fundamental questions while trying to interpret and apply Paul's epistles to the modern Christian audience. These questions and possible options that attempt to provide answers to them are presented below.

**1. Who was Paul?** A reconstruction of the man Paul, his background, life, conversion, commission, and mission can be obtained by a parallel reading of the accounts of his missionary journeys with his companions in the book of Acts and the epistles

written by Paul himself to the various Christian communities in the first century AD and what Paul discussed about himself in such epistles as Gal 1:11–2:14; 2 Cor 10:1-11; 11:16–12:10.

**2. Besides the accounts about Paul in the book of Acts, Who did Paul write his epistle to: a group or an individual?** Apart from Paul's letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon (which were addressed to individuals), the rest were addressed to the congregation of believers (churches) in various cities.

**3. What was the relationship between Paul and the original recipients of his epistles?** With the exception of the Church in Rome, Paul and his associates established the rest of the Christian churches in the cities he later wrote to. Thus, Paul and the believers in these churches are well acquainted with each other. They are fellow believers in and servants of Christ. Titus and Timothy were Paul's young associates whom he delegated the responsibilities of nurturing the churches in Asia Minor following his imprisonment. Philemon was Paul's personal friend at Colossae. He was the earthly master of the runaway slave, Onesimus, who Paul met at Rome. Thus, Paul's epistle to Philemon was a letter of reconciliation and recommendation for Onesimus who he sent back to his master at Colossae.

**4. What were the peculiarities of the people, places, events, and circumstances addressed in the epistle?** Each of the churches Paul wrote to was unique. Most of the churches, if not all, were located in the heart of the cities. The churches had a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, males and females, slaves and masters, parents and children, etc. Some cities were more notorious than the others for one reason or the other and this resulted in their notoriety creeping into the church. For instance, Corinth as a Greco-Roman city was notorious for gross sexual immorality. With the presence, activities and impact of about "one thousand 'sacred prostitutes' at the temple of Aphrodite at Corinth" (Ferguson, 1987, p. 52), it is not surprising that the Church at Corinth was plagued with gross sexual immorality, to the extent of incest (1 Cor 5:1-13; 6:9-20).

**5. Is the Pauline epistle in view proactive (paving the way for something) or is it reactive (responding to something) or both?** Numerous examples abound in Pauline epistles to clarify this question. Paul's epistle to the Romans was to a great extent proactive

in the sense that he wrote the epistle in anticipation of visiting the Church in Rome on his way to Spain (Rom 1:13; 15:23-29). In contrast, Paul's epistle to the Galatians was more reactive than proactive. In his epistle to the Galatians, he reacted to the activities of the Jewish teachers who were teaching that Gentile believers in Christ are saved through circumcision instead of salvation by faith in Christ (Gal 2:11-6:15). This was a situation similar to that at Antioch that led to the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-2). Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians offers a good blend of a proactive and reactive epistle. Paul reacted to the oral reports he got about the church (1 Cor 1:10-12) as well as responded to the written requests from the church on some crucial issues (1 Cor 7:1). At the end, his epistle still paved the way for him to solicit for relief for the believers in Judea who were victims of severe famine (1 Cor 16:1; compare with Acts 11:25-28).

**6. What were the issues that Paul's original audience was dealing or struggling with?** Timothy and Titus were young pastors who were sent by Paul to take charge of and nurture some of the churches established in Asia Minor. Timothy had his ministerial base at Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3) while Titus had his ministerial base at Crete (Titus 1:4-5). They had to deal with pastoral issues that concerned nurturing church members and defending the *kerygma*. Consequently, Paul's letters to these two young pastors could rightly be viewed as the Pastor's Manual.

The Christian believers in Galatia were struggling with Jewish teachers who invaded the city with teachings bordering on observing the OT and Jewish rites of circumcision as the means of obtaining salvation by Gentile believers in Christ as against salvation by faith in Christ (Gal 2:11-6:15).

The believers in Christ at Corinth were struggling with series of issues extensively addressed by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians as follows: division in the church (1:10–4:21); lawsuits among church members (6:1-8); gross sexual immorality in the church (6:9-20); marital relationships (7:1-40); the freedom of the believer versus his conscience (8:1–11:1); decorum in worship—with emphasis on women (11:2-16); decorum at the lord's supper (11:17-34); use and abuse of spiritual gifts (12:1–14:40); resurrection of the dead (15:1-58).

**7. How did Paul's original audience understand and respond to Paul's instructions?** Two examples will suffice to clarify this

question. The first example concerns responses to Paul's communications with the Corinthians. Indications in 2 Corinthians reveal a mixture of reactions to Paul's communication: some church members were aggrieved by Paul's previous letter (2 Cor 2:1-11). Some of Paul's detractors at Corinth ridiculed his previous epistle, pointing out a mismatch between the harsh tone of the epistle and the unimpressive personality of the writer of the epistle (2 Cor 10:1-11).

The second example concerns responses to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul discussed the resurrection of the dead with such passion and conviction that he included himself among those who will be alive until the coming of the Lord (1 Thess 4:13-18; compare with 1 Cor 15:1-58). With the passage of time, more believers were dying and the dead were not being raised. To make the matter worse, some people began to circulate the news, purported to be from Paul, that the *parousia* had already taken place (see 2 Thess 2:2). This caused serious disillusion, disappointment, and consternation among the believers in Thessalonica. In response to this reaction, Paul wrote a second epistle to the Thessalonians to put the issue straight and outline events that will precede the coming of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead (2 Thess 2:1-17). He also solicited the prayers of the Thessalonians and gave specific instructions to the believers concerning how they should live their lives (2 Thess 3:1-16). Guthrie (1990, pp. 602-603), holds a similar view on the purpose of 2 Thessalonians. However, Carson and Moo (2005, p. 546), believes that 2 Thessalonians was occasioned by a fresh outbreak of persecution on the believers.

Providing satisfactory answers to the above questions calls for a painstaking cursory study of each of the Pauline epistles. In as much as this is time and energy consuming, the result is worth the time, energy, and other resources invested in the exercise.

### **B. Discover and Establish the Key Principle(s) Advanced by Paul in Each of His Epistles**

If the modern reader of Pauline epistles does not discover and establish the key principle(s) advanced by Paul in each epistle, he/she is prone to reading his/her own ideas and concepts into Paul's writings. The end result will not benefit the modern reader and his contemporary audience.



In order to discover and establish the key principle(s) advanced in each of Paul's epistles, the modern reader should, of necessity, attempt to read through each epistle several times and in one sitting each time, if possible. This, in fact, is the first step recommended for a faithful interpretation of any Bible text. According to Fee, "The first step always is to read the entire document through. You need a provisional sense of the whole before analyzing any of its parts, and you gain such a sense by reading it through" (Fee, 2002, p. 9).

Doing such careful reading of a Pauline epistle (and in fact any other epistle) will help the modern reader place himself in a similar position as the original audience of Paul who may have read each epistle addressed to them in one sitting, either during a church gathering (in the case of epistles addressed to congregations) or at home (in the case of epistles addressed to individuals). It becomes necessary here to point out that while the present chapter and verse division of each book of the Bible helps the reader quickly locate portions of the Bible, it does not always help the reader to identify the key principle(s) advanced in each book. It has been argued that the present chapter and verse divisions of the Bible "are not original and are often completely misleading" (Douglas, 2001, pp. 5-6). It is therefore safer for the reader to read each book of the Bible as a whole in order to understand what the author is saying.

It is pertinent at this juncture to demonstrate how this principle operates and the attending results. Only three Pauline epistles are selected for this exercise. Two of such, Romans and Galatians, are epistles addressed to Christian churches in Paul's time while the other, Philemon, is an epistle addressed to an individual believer in Christ in Paul's time. Due to constrain of space, only a summary for each selected epistle is presented.

### **1. Paul's Epistle to the Romans**

Paul wrote to the Christian believers in Rome in anticipation of his planned visit to Rome on his way to Spain (Rom 15:23-28; compare with Rom 1:13). There are variegated views on Paul's actual purpose of writing such a strong and long theological treatise to the believers in Rome. Scholars favor a multiplex purpose for writing the Epistle, including the impending crisis in Jerusalem, the previous battles in Corinth and Galatia, securing a missionary base in Spain, uniting the divided Christian community (Carson & Moo, 2005, pp. 403-407; Guthrie, 1990, pp. 408-412). Whatever the purpose, Paul's appeal for tolerance and spirit of unity among the Christian believers at Rome

(Rom 14:1-15:7) is a strong indicator that there was intolerance and disunity among the believers, possibly among Jew-Gentile line of dichotomy, especially in view of Rom 1:16-3:24.

Paul demonstrated that the Gentiles have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, in spite of the self revelation which God gave them through nature (Rom 1:18–2:16). In a similar way, Paul demonstrated that the Jews have also sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, in spite of the self revelation which God gave them through the Old Testament, referred to as “the law” (Rom 2:17–3:20).

Paul, therefore, concludes that “all [Jews and Gentiles, in context here in Romans] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24). He goes on to present faith in Jesus Christ as the only solution to the fallen nature of humanity, whether Jew or Gentile (Rom 3:21–8:39), affirming that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). Paul warns that God’s special election of Israel should not be taken for granted by the Jews, neither should the Gentiles puff up because God has graciously grafted them into the commonwealth of faith through Christ, giving rise to the new or remnant Israel (Rom 9:1–11:36).

Based on this, Paul calls on the Christian believers to offer themselves to God as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable and show love for one another (Rom 12). He urges them to submit themselves to governing authorities, supporting the government by being law abiding and paying their taxes and revenues (Rom 13).

Paul makes a strong case against the intolerance that characterized the Christian Church in Rome (Rom 14:1–15:13). The tolerance among Jewish and Gentile believers which Paul advocates is to manifest in such divisive areas of their co-existence as food (Rom 14:2-4), observance of holy days and fasting (Rom 14:5-8), and ceremonial cleanness or uncleanness (Rom 14:13-23). He affirmed the need for the weak in faith to tolerate the strong in faith and for the strong in faith to tolerate the weak in faith (Rom 15:1-13). This is the essence of Paul’s doctrines to the Christian believers in Rome in his letter to the Romans.

## **2. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians**

After the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), Paul and his companions worked at Galatia during their missionary journeys (Acts 16:6). As a result, Christian churches were planted there (see 1 Cor 16:1), which

Paul and his companions later visited to strengthen the disciples and believers there (Acts 18:23).

Paul's letter to the believers in Galatia was occasioned by the report he heard that some Jews at Galatia were teaching strange doctrines to the believers and were confusing them from following the gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul and his companions had earlier taught them (Gal 1:6-7; 3:1). The gravity of the perceived deception is attested to by the strong language employed by Paul in refuting whatever anyone else, even an angel, would teach the believers in Galatia by invoking a curse on such an individual (Gal 1:8-9).

Paul gave a detailed account of his previous life in Judaism, his persecution of Christians, his conversion on the road to Damascus, and his commission by Jesus Christ to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:10–2:14). From Paul's discussion in Gal 2:15ff, it is evident that the controversy in Galatia had to do with observing or not observing the OT requirements as a means of salvation for the Gentile believers in Christ versus justification which is found only in Jesus Christ.

That Paul called the Galatian believers "foolish" (Gal 3:1) is of no little consequence. It affirms the gravity of the deception and confusion that had taken over the Church. The bottom line of Paul's teaching as indicated in his letter to the Galatians is that no one is saved by a legal observance of the laws and regulations of the OT, especially circumcision (Gal 5:1-6; 6:13-15), as was taught by the Judaizers in Galatia. Instead, salvation is found only in Christ Jesus.

Paul contrasts the works of the flesh such as "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (Gal 5:17-21) with the fruit of the Spirit such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). He affirms that those who engage in the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:21). On the contrary, there is no law against the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). He concludes by affirming the law of retribution which states that one reaps what one sows (Gal 6:7-8).

### **3. Paul's Epistle to Philemon**

This last example in the series features a personal letter addressed from Paul to a single individual—Philemon—a rich and prominent church member in Colossae. The occasion to the letter was in

connection with Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul met while in prison (Phlm 10).

Paul described Onesimus as formerly "useless" or with little moral value to Philemon. But to Paul, he became very useful or with much moral value (Phlm 11). Consequently, Paul, using his good office as a pastor and an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, pleaded with Philemon to accept Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as a brother (Phlm 16). Paul pleaded with Philemon to charge him for whatever damages or losses Onesimus' running away must have cost him and accept him back (Phlm 18-19).

Although slavery was very rampant in the NT era to the point that "it is estimated that one in five of the residents in Rome were slaves" (Ferguson, 1987, p. 46), Paul did not set out to write a doctrinal treatise on slavery or on the relationship between a slave and a master in his letter to Philemon. Instead, he used his good office as a pastor to reconcile a runaway slave with his justifiably aggrieved master. In spite of his awareness of the depraved legal and social status of slaves in the NT era (Ferguson, 1987, pp. 45-47), Paul, in his epistles to the believers in Ephesus and Colossae, did not fight against slavery. Instead, he regulated the relationship between slaves and their masters, outlining how the slave who is now a believer in Christ should serve his earthly master and how a master who is now a believer in Christ should treat his slaves, bearing in mind that earthly slaves and their earthly masters are responsible to one heavenly Master—Jesus Christ (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1).

### **C. Establish Clear Parallels between Paul's Original Audience and the Contemporary Reader of Paul's Epistles**

It is imperative for the modern reader of Pauline epistles to establish those issues and settings in life between Paul's time and the modern time that are clearly parallel with one another. This is a very important step in the process of attempting to contextualize Paul's epistles by a modern reader. Note that even the NT writers utilized similar principles in contextualizing the OT in their writings (Muchee, 2003, pp. 83-91).

Put in another way, this principle involves asking and answering the questions: If Paul was alive today, would he address Christians in Nigeria, Thailand, or South Korea, for instance, the same way he addressed his audience in the first century AD on the issues raised in his epistles? In what areas are the Christians in Ghana, Kenya, China

or the Philippines in the twenty-first century AD similar with the Greco-Roman Christians of the first century AD? In what areas are they different? Providing sincere answers to these probing questions provides ample basis for contextualizing Paul's writings to the modern audience without violating either Paul's intended message or the sanity of the modern reader.

#### **D. Apply only Those Principles that Are Clearly Parallel between the Settings of Paul's Original Audience and the Contemporary Reader of Paul's Epistles**

In light of the principles in (III. C) above, it is obligatory that only those principles and settings in life that are parallel between Paul's original audience and the contemporary reader of Paul's epistles should be applied by the modern reader. Neglecting this principle is analogous to putting square pegs in round holes or yoking unequal cows—any of this leads to theological and missiological disasters and problems. Interestingly, it is common to observe modern Christians, irrespective of denominational persuasion, struggling to understand, interpret and apply statements and teachings in Paul's epistles while paying little or no attention to this very important principle. Preachers today copiously quote from Pauline epistles to emphasize their points usually without paying much attention to this principle. This has given rise to unending debate over what a believer in Christ can do or cannot do in this modern era.

Paying close attention to the parallels in contexts between Paul's time and ours will reduce the raging debates on what Paul means to a bearable level. Considering the fact that contextualization of the Bible "is a must in our modern world" (Muchee, 2003, p. 91), the modern reader, while seeking to apply the principles in Paul's writings, should bear in mind that while the principles advanced in Paul's writings and the entire Scripture are absolute and supracultural, the various ways they are applicable are relative and may be colored by time, culture and circumstance (Luna, 2010, p. 145).

#### **E. Do not Be Dogmatic over Paul's Writings**

There is the need for the modern reader of Pauline epistles to exercise caution not to be dogmatic about what Paul means in his epistles. In the first place, the modern reader of Paul is a third party to his epistles (Paul being the first party and his original audience being

the second party). This principle is a step up of the first principle (III. A) above. None of the present day reader qualifies for the original audience of Paul. We are separated by about two millennia from Paul's original audience (Carson & Moo, 2005, p. 23). Therefore, one should not insist, with every amount of certainty, on what Paul actually meant in his epistles to the point of drawing blood.

What is obvious here is that much of what can be gathered from Paul's epistles is a reconstruction of what transpired between him and his original audience. One must therefore accept the lack of first hand information on most of the issues that Paul addressed in his epistles. Two examples will suffice here. First, the epistle that the Christian Church at Corinth wrote to Paul (1 Cor 7:1) is not extant today. This robs the modern reader of the opportunity to ascertain with certainty what issues the Church requested guidelines from Paul. It is only through the responses that Paul gave in 1 Cor 7:1–15:58 that the modern reader can reconstruct what the issues may have been.

The second example touches on the conduct of women at sacred gatherings. The Corinthian women had problem with gender distinction at sacred gatherings, especially highlighted in the issue of head covering at such gatherings (1 Cor 11:2-16). Scholarly opinion tends to favor the woman covering her head with a veil (for example, Drane, 1999, p. 329; Nichol, 1980, 755-759).

However, further study of 1 Cor 11:2-16 reveals that Paul's recommendation is that the Corinthian woman should keep her ἐξουσία, "authority" (1 Cor 11:10). It is explicitly stated that the Corinthian woman's κόμη, "long hair" is her δόξα, "glory" or "honor" (1 Cor 11:15) whereas it is ἀτιμία, "a disgrace" for the Corinthian man to have long hair (1 Cor 11:14). It is therefore clear that the Corinthian woman loses her authority if she shaves her long hair since it is a major mark of distinction between her and the Corinthian man. But if the Corinthian woman keeps her long hair, she preserves her glory and authority. Thus, the Corinthian woman does not necessarily need to wear a veil in order to keep her authority since her long hair is given to her as a covering for her head (1 Cor 11:15).

The concept of wearing a veil is obviously a late reading into the passage. Analysis of the textual variants in the Greek text of 1 Cor 11:10 hints that during the later period of the church fathers, κάλυμμα, "a veil" had replaced κόμη, "long hair" as the ἐξουσία, "authority" of the woman in the writings of such Church Fathers as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine (Mertzger, 2002, p. 495; Aland, et al, 1993, p. 592). This reading indicates that it is possible for what

constitutes the ἐξουσία, “authority” to vary according to era and setting. Thus, by the time of the Church Fathers, a veil was accepted as the authority for the woman instead of or in addition to the long hair. This confirms that gender distinction at sacred gatherings is paramount in 1 Cor 11:2-16.

In practical terms, although the Nigerian woman’s hair is naturally longer than the Nigerian man’s hair (but by far shorter than the Corinthian woman’s hair), a major gender distinction between the man and woman at sacred and social gatherings in the Nigerian setting is more noticeable in the dress code than in the length of the hair. A complete dress code for especially a responsible married woman in Nigeria includes a head gear or scarf which serves a similar function as the veil. Therefore, Paul’s recommendation to the Corinthian believers applies to any situation and setting where the principle of gender distinction at sacred gatherings is at stake.

Based on the principle in Paul’s recommendation, it is necessary for Christian women in every era and cultural setting to abide by what constitute acceptable distinctions between men and women, males and females at sacred gatherings. This, of course should include the wearing of a veil or scarf on the head by the woman, irrespective of the length of the hair, where such a practice constitutes a prominent and significant distinction between males and females, as is the case in Nigeria and most other African cultures.

There are numerous other seemingly “controversial” issues in Paul’s epistles that call for cautious interpretation and application from a perspective that is less dogmatic. It is obvious that there is no need for the modern reader to be dogmatic in applying such a passage where Paul clearly indicates that his instructions are from his own perspective and not a revelation from God (1 Cor 7:12). The modern reader therefore, recognizing his/her limitations, needs to be open-minded (guarded and guided by the Holy Spirit of course) while seeking to understand, interpret and apply the content of Paul’s epistles to his/her contemporary audience.

## **F. Avoid Reading Personal Ideas and Biases into Paul’s Epistles**

None of the modern readers approaches Paul’s epistles from a *tabula rasa*, “blank slate” perspective. Every modern reader approaches Paul’s epistles with a certain degree of pre-conceived ideas, cultural orientations, and personal biases. In the end, what one perceives Paul as saying in his epistles tends to be colored by these

idiosyncrasies. This attitude is capable of beclouding the actual messages that Paul passed to his original audience who clearly understood him. Consequently, there is the need for the modern reader of Paul's epistles to do whatever is possible to strip himself/herself of personal ideas, conceptions, and biases and attempt to listen to Paul as though he/she was in the original congregations that received and read the epistles.

Holding to one's personal opinions and biases certainly leads one to be dogmatic about what Paul meant in his epistles. These idiosyncrasies emerge whenever the modern reader appeals more to his/her prevalent contemporary cultural, social, economic, moral, ethical, and religious value systems (different from those of Paul's original audience) in his/her attempt to understand, interpret and apply Paul's epistles to the contemporary situations in life.

A very good antidote to control and limit the chances of idiosyncrasy in interpreting and applying Paul's epistles for the modern reader is to subject his/her personal opinions and understanding of what Paul means in his epistles to the scrutiny of other trusted believers and Bible scholars. This is where consulting the works of other Bible scholars who believe in the efficacy of the Bible is helpful. The wise man rightly observes that there is safety in multitude of counselors or advisers (Prov 24:6).

### **G. Patiently and Prayerfully Seek Divine Guidance on Issues in Paul's Epistles that are not clear enough**

The ultimate aim of the reader and interpreter of Paul's epistles (and the entire Bible) is to become "one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). Consequently, the modern reader of Paul's epistles is under obligation to recognize and accept difficulties and issues that are not clear enough in Paul's epistles. When all other principles and methods have been exhausted and the difficulties and ambiguities persist, the modern reader should patiently and prayerfully seek divine guidance on such issues.

Three dangers would be avoided if this principle is followed. The first is rationalization of issues. When one confronts a difficult situation or issue, it is natural to rationalize it and subsequently diminish its importance. The second is avoidance of the issues. An interpreter who has come to the end of his/her wit in an attempt to understand and interpret an issue is faced with the danger of avoiding



discussing such an issue in the future to forestall further frustration. This should not be the case with studying the word of God. The third and perhaps, the deadliest, is advancing personally informed interpretations on the issues. This ultimately leads to dogmatism. In the end, especially if the interpreter is ego conscious, he/she may experience great difficulty in changing his/her mind even if impressed upon to do so by trusted peers and the Holy Spirit.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

From the discussion so far, some vital conclusions could be drawn regarding the interpretation and application of Paul's epistles by the modern reader. First, Paul wrote most of his letters due to his inability to be physically present in the churches to which they were addressed, either due to imprisonment or separation by distance. Second, most of the letters which Paul wrote were occasioned by either the conditions prevailing in the churches which he learnt about or he wrote in response to requests made by such churches. Third, the key ideas advanced in Paul's epistles are best determined by the content and context of each letter he wrote, especially when read and interpreted from the backdrop of his original audience. Fourth, while it is not inappropriate to utilize Paul's letters in formulating doctrines in contemporary churches today, care should be exercised to ascertain to what extent the modern contexts and settings match those of Paul's immediate audience in his letters. This hermeneutical guideline will prove invaluable in guarding against misinterpreting, misapplying, or even twisting Paul's intentions, especially in view of Peter's warning earlier mentioned in this discussion. To facilitate this, this paper has proposed seven principles to guide the modern reader of Paul's epistles in his/her attempt to interpret, understand and apply the messages which Paul addressed to his first century AD audience to the contemporary audience.

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