

Using The Standard Properly: Understanding Bible Genres

Franklin Church of Christ
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December 7, 2003
AM Worship

Introduction:

As we begin, I want to share with you the opening paragraph of a book entitled **Murder at Cory Mansion**.

“A few minutes of stillness lingered at the Cory Mansion, when the night sounds were shattered by a woman’s scream and an infant’s cry. A few minutes later, as the clock in the hall struck 2:30, a man, carrying a black leather handbag, slipped quickly from the house, glanced up and down the street, and walked briskly away through the early morning mist.”

What happened? Someone was clearly robbed and murdered in the middle of the night. Sadly, this someone probably had an infant. We certainly hope the sleuth in this mystery catches the bad guy.

I now have a confession to make. I made the book and its opening paragraph up (which certainly explains the poor writing) to illustrate a point to you. Look again at the same paragraph. But now read it as the opening paragraph to a book entitled **The Life and Times of Richard Cory**. With that title, the opening paragraph has a completely different meaning. Instead of being a picture of murder, it is the picture of a new life being born. Instead of a murderer fleeing the crime scene, we see a doctor leaving a wealthy patient’s home, hurrying to get some rest before having to go to work the next morning.

What changed? We read the exact same paragraph in both situations. But in each case, we interpreted the paragraph’s meaning differently. Why? In each case, we were reading a different kind of book. We took into account the genre of writing. One was a mystery, the other a biographical narrative.

This illustrates the point of this sermon. In previous lessons, we have noted that the Bible is our proper standard for the work of this church and for our individual Christian lives. However, we have also learned that it is not enough to use the proper standard. We must also use the standard properly (**II Timothy 2:15**). Several weeks ago we learned that if we want to use the standard properly, we must rightly divide between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In today’s lesson, we will learn to rightly divide the genres God used in the Bible.

Discussion:

- I. The entire Bible is not written in the same way, God used different genres.
 - A. A genre is simply a kind of writing that uses specific styles and forms. If we read every part of the Bible in the same way, we are going to misunderstand and misapply the scriptures.
 - B. A very cursory look at scripture reveals that God used different styles. The **Psalms** are not the same as **Isaiah**, which is not the same as **Matthew**. We do not learn from the story of the Sower in **Matthew 13** in the same way we learn from the story of Noah in **Genesis 6**.
 - C. But many people have a problem with this aspect of rightly dividing the word. As such, they have come up with misguided Bible study rules like “Take a passage literally unless absurd.” That may sound feasible on the surface. However, to follow a rule like this, we have to believe everything in the Bible can be interpreted in the same way. That is just not the case. Genres that are to be taken literally should be taken literally. Genres that use symbolic and figurative language should be taken figuratively—even if a literal interpretation is not an absurdity.
 - D. This lesson is not intended to explain every genre fully or to explain exactly how to read each one. Rather, my purpose is to demonstrate that God used different kinds of writing to convey His unified message and provide a jumping off place for our personal study as we strive to rightly divide His Word.
- II. What genres did God use and how should we read them?
 - A. *Prose*: We are most used to reading this normal, matter of fact and straightforward genre. With prose, the author typically means what he says and says what he means. While prose contains figures of speech, they rarely cause us any problems because they are obvious. When Paul wrote in **Ephesians 4:28** to “let him who stole steal no longer...”, we do not look for hidden or symbolic meaning. We take it at face value—we are not supposed to steal. That is prose.
 - B. *Narrative*: This form of prose tells a story, describing the actions, events and circumstances in the lives of people. Narrative, as a form of prose, is straightforward. We do not look for hidden and symbolic meanings. However, we must work harder than just reading the information on the

page. For instance, when we read about Cain and Abel in **Genesis 4:1-8**, we do not wonder what Cain and Abel represent, nor do we question what the sheep and the vegetables symbolize. Cain represents Cain and his vegetables are just that, vegetables. The same is true for Abel and his sheep. But we want to learn more than just the information. We discern lessons for how we should live from how these men lived. We learn that we must do things God's way. We learn that we must not get angry when God is displeased with us. We learn that we must not murder. If we read this story just like the prose of **Ephesians 4:28**, we would learn what happened between Cain and Abel, but we would not learn what God wanted us to learn. We must take the genre into account.

- C. *Poetry*: This is where things begin to get a little tricky for us. Hebrew poetry did not necessarily rely on rhyming sounds and metrical reading, as does our modern poetry. Rather, Hebrew poetry often relied on what some have called rhyming thoughts. Consider **Psalms 140:4-5**, the words do not rhyme but the content is parallel. The problem we have with poetry is that it is highly figurative and symbolic. When we read it, we know full well that we may not be able to take it at face value. We have to consider a deeper meaning than what is just on the surface. For instance, when David asked God in **Psalms 51:7-8** to "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice." We know he is not saying that all he needs is for God to rub a hyssop branch over him. David is using the imagery of the priest making a defiled house clean by using the hyssop branch dipped in the blood of a sacrifice, to express his need to be cleansed of sin's defilement. We also know David is not saying that God actually broke his bones. Instead, David is expressing his guilt in very expressive and painful terms. If we read poetry the same way we read Prose or Narrative, or vice versa, we would be in trouble.
- D. *Proverb*: Of course, this genre is used mostly in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. However, there are proverbs in other places (*i.e.* **Ezekiel 18:2**). Proverbs are often poetical, using couplets and rhyming ideas to make their point. But the reason we need to view these as a separate genre is because proverbs are rarely to be read as absolutes. Typically, they are maxims, general truths that contain weighty advice. Thus, while **Proverbs 15:1** said a soft answer turns away wrath, we do not accuse God of lying when we are dealing with someone who is a real jerk and constantly angry at us no matter how softly we speak to him.
- E. *Parables*: This form of writing tells a story like Narrative. However, while Narrative is simply about whatever is written, Parables convey spiritual meaning beyond what is actually written. When we read Narrative, we do not have to wonder what objects and people represent. In Parables, we do. Because we have heard so many sermons and had so many classes on this genre, it rarely gives us any trouble. We know the example of the Parable of the Sower in **Matthew 13:3-9**. While Jesus was telling what appeared to be a Narrative of a man seeding a field, we are to recognize that He is actually illustrating a spiritual point about growing in God's word, as He explained in **Matthew 13:18-23**. Sometimes the Bible explains the parables in detail; sometimes we simply read the parables and through study have to figure out what they represent and mean, *e.g.* **Luke 16:1-12**. If we read Parables just like Narratives, we would be left wondering, "What does this have to do with anything?" If we read Narratives like Parables, we would spiritualize everything and come up with crazy teachings.
- F. *Prophecy*: For the purpose of this lesson, I am using the term Prophecy to refer to writing about something that has not happened yet. Certainly, some prophecies are written in a very straightforward manner. They tell us that something is going to happen later and then tells us what it will be. For instance, **Joel 2:28-29**. However, prophecy is often very symbolic, using past events and iconic images to describe future spiritual events. As an example, consider **Isaiah 2:2-3**, which uses the imagery of the temple mount to describe the coming church and kingdom of the Lord, which occurred over 700 years later. Or notice Jesus' prophecy in **John 2:19** in which He used the image of the temple to foretell His own death and resurrection. Another device often used in Prophecy is what some call Prophetic Certainty. God, wanting His people to know how certain His promises for the future were, sometimes spoke of them as if they had already occurred. **Isaiah 53** spoke of the Messiah as if He had already lived, died and been resurrected. However, this was written 700 years before Christ. No doubt, we could spend several sermons just on the devices and details of prophecy. But for our purposes in this lesson,

we need simply to realize that we do not read prophecy like we read Narrative, Prose, Poetry or Parable. If we do, we are going to misunderstand and misapply the scripture.

- G. *Apocalyptic*: While we are very unfamiliar with this kind of writing, the ancient Hebrews and Christians were very familiar with it. They did not have as much trouble as we do with books like **Ezekiel**, **Zechariah** and **Revelation** because they had read other books written with the same style. Apocalypse was always written during a time of great stress and duress. For the Jews during the Old Testament and the Christians under the New, Apocalypse was a highly symbolic and exciting way to explain that in the end, God was going to win and win big. That is the main point behind every Apocalyptic book—no matter how bad things look, God wins and you want to be on His side. A friend of mine once described reading Apocalyptic literature as being like watching a movie. For instance, when we watch an old Western, we see a guy in a white hat and we know he is a good guy. The point of nearly all Westerns is that you want to be a good guy, because in the end, the good guys win. But we do not spend our time wondering what the horses mean or why tumbleweeds blew across the road in front of him. We do not wonder why he fired 10 shots from a 6 shot pistol. We take the picture in as a whole. We do not break it down into its tiny parts and figure out a meaning for all of them. Thus, when Ezekiel had his Apocalyptic vision by the River Chebar in **Ezekiel 1**, we do not have to wonder what each of the living beings mean, what each of their faces and wings mean, what each of the wheels mean or all of the colors mentioned. Instead, we are simply to understand the point that God is amazing, powerful and glorious as stated in **Ezekiel 1:28**. One other point to note before we move on is that Apocalyptic literature uses numbers in a highly symbolic way. Certainly some numbers may be literal in Apocalyptic writing, but most are used figuratively. In **Daniel 9:24-27**, when Gabriel told Daniel about 70 weeks in which God was going to accomplish several amazing parts of his plan, we do not expect 70 literal weeks. Nor do we have to come up with some arbitrary “a day equals a year theory” to make the number seem literal. Instead, we note that 70 is the combination of two numbers that represent fullness and completeness (7 and 10). Thus, Gabriel was just letting Daniel know that God would accomplish all these things when the time was right. Obviously, we do not have time to go over every aspect of the symbolism of Apocalyptic literature, but what we can see is that we cannot read these writings in the same way that we read Poetry, Parable or Prose. We need to read it as Apocalyptic literature, otherwise we are going to misunderstand it and misapply it.

Conclusion:

Paul told us to rightly divide the word of truth in **II Timothy 2:15**. We are not allowed to just read the Bible however we want. Instead, we need to read the Bible as God meant it. That means taking into account the genre or style of writing God used to convey His message. If we do not, we will make mistakes, we will misunderstand and we will misapply. But, if we take the time to rightly divide the word of truth, then as Paul said in **Acts 20:32**, it will build us up and give us an inheritance with the saints.