

# REAPPROACHING THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE BIBLE IS NOT A JIGSAW PUZZLE

**“In handling the subject of ministry in the New Testament it is essential to remember the order in which the books of the New Testament were written. If we assume, as the order in which the books of the New Testament are now presented would lead us to assume, that the Gospels were written first, and then Acts and then the letters of Paul, beginning with Romans and ending with the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy to Titus and the Letter to Philemon, we shall never be able to understand the development of the institutions and the thought of the early church.”**

—RICHARD HANSON, TWENTIETH-CENTURY PATRISTIC SCHOLAR

**“In the last 50 or 100 years New Testament research has unremittingly and successfully addressed itself to the task of elucidating for us what was known as the ‘Ecclesia’ in primitive Christianity—so very different from what is to-day called the church both in Roman and**

221

**Protestant camps. . . . This insight—which an unprejudiced study of the New Testament and the crying need of the church have helped us to reach—may be expressed as follows: the New Testament ‘Ecclesia,’ the fellowship of Jesus Christ, is a pure communion of persons and has nothing to do with the character of an institution about it; it is therefore misleading to identify any single one of the historically developed churches, which are all marked by an institutional character, with the true Christian communion.”**

—EMIL BRUNNER, TWENTIETH-CENTURY SWISS THEOLOGIAN

WHY IS IT THAT WE CHRISTIANS can follow the same rituals every Sunday without ever noticing that they are at odds with the New Testament?<sup>1</sup> The incredible power of tradition has something to do with it. As we have seen, the church has often been influenced by the surrounding culture, seemingly unaware of its negative effects. At other times, it has, quite properly, recognized overt threats—such as heretical teachings about the person and divinity of Jesus Christ. But in an effort to combat those threats, it has moved away from the organic structure that God wrote into the church’s DNA.

But there is something else—something more fundamental that most Christians are completely unaware of. It concerns our New Testament. The problem is not in what the New Testament says. The problem is in how we approach it.

The approach most commonly used among contemporary Christians when studying the Bible is called “proof texting.” The origin of proof texting goes back to the late 1590s. A group of men called Protestant scholastics took the teachings of the Reformers and systematized them according to the rules of Aristotelian logic.<sup>2</sup>

The Protestant scholastics held that not only is the Scripture the Word of God, but every part of it is the Word of God in and of

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on a message Frank Viola delivered at a house church conference at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia, on July 29, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on Protestant scholasticism, see Walter Elwell’s *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 984–985. Francisurretin (Reformed) and Martin Chemnitz (Lutheran) were the two main shakers among the Protestant scholastics (Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1116 and 209 respectively).

itself—irrespective of context. This set the stage for the idea that if we lift a verse out of the Bible, it is true in its own right and can be used to prove a doctrine or a practice.

When John Nelson Darby emerged in the mid-1800s, he built a theology based on this approach. Darby raised proof texting to an art form. In fact, it was Darby who gave fundamentalist and evangelical Christians a good deal of their presently accepted teachings.<sup>3</sup> All of them are built on the proof-texting method. Proof texting, then, became the common way that we contemporary Christians approach the Bible.

As a result, we Christians rarely, if ever, get to see the New Testament as a whole. Rather, we are served up a dish of fragmented thoughts that are drawn together by means of fallen human logic. The fruit of this approach is that we have strayed far afield from the principles of the New Testament church. Yet we still believe we are being biblical. Allow us to illustrate the problem with a fictitious story.

### MEET MARVIN SNURDLY

Marvin Snurdly is a world-renowned marital counselor. In his twenty-year career as a marriage therapist, Marvin has counseled thousands of troubled couples. He has an Internet presence. Each day hundreds of couples write letters to Marvin about their marital sob stories. The letters come from all over the globe. And Marvin answers them all.

A hundred years pass, and Marvin Snurdly is resting peacefully in his grave. He has a great-great-grandson named Fielding Melish. Fielding decides to recover the lost letters of his great great grandfather. But Fielding can find only thirteen of Marvin's letters. Out of the thousands of letters that Marvin wrote in his lifetime, just thirteen have survived! Nine were written to couples in marital crisis. Four were written to individual spouses.

<sup>3</sup> Dispensationalism and the pretribulation rapture are just two of them. The very successful *Left Behind* series is built upon these teachings (see *Time*, July 1, 2002, 41–48). For the fascinating origin of Darby's pretribulation doctrine, see MacPherson, *Incredible Cover-Up*.

These letters were all written within a twenty-year time frame: from 1980 to 2000. Fielding Melish plans to compile these letters into a volume. But there is something interesting about the way Marvin wrote his letters that makes Fielding's task somewhat difficult.

First, Marvin had an annoying habit of never dating his letters. No days, months, or years appear on any of the thirteen letters. Second, the letters only portray half the conversation. The initial letters written to Marvin that provoked his responses no longer exist. Consequently, the only way to understand the backdrop of each of Marvin's letters is by reconstructing the marital situation from Marvin's response.

Each letter was written at a different time, to people in a different culture, about a different problem. For example, in 1985, Marvin wrote a letter to Paul and Sally from Virginia, who were experiencing sexual problems early in their marriage. In 1990, Marvin wrote a letter to Jethro and Matilda from Australia, who were having problems with their children. In 1995, Marvin wrote a letter to a wife from Mexico who was experiencing a midlife crisis. Unfortunately, Fielding has no way of knowing when the letters were written.

Take note: twenty years—thirteen letters—all written to different people at different times in different cultures—all experiencing different problems.

It is Fielding Melish's desire to put these thirteen letters in chronological order. But without the dates, he cannot do this. So Fielding puts them in the order of descending length. That is, he takes the longest letter that Marvin wrote and puts it first. He puts Marvin's second longest letter after that. He takes the third longest and puts it third. The compilation ends with the shortest letter that Marvin penned. The thirteen letters are arranged, not chronologically, but by their length.

The volume hits the presses and becomes an overnight best seller.

One hundred years pass, and *The Collected Works of Marvin Snurdly*

compiled by Fielding Melish stands the test of time. The work is still very popular. Another one hundred years pass, and this volume is being used copiously throughout the Western world.

The book is translated into dozens of languages. Marriage counselors quote it left and right. Universities employ it in their sociology classes. It is so widely used that someone gets a bright idea on how to make the volume easier to quote and handle.

What is that idea? It is to divide Marvin's letters into chapters and numbered sentences (or verses). So chapters and verses are added to *The Collected Works of Marvin Snurdly*.

But by adding chapter and verse to these once living letters, something changes that goes unnoticed. The letters lose their personal touch. Instead, they take on the texture of a manual.

Different sociologists begin writing books about marriage and the family. Their main source? *The Collected Works of Marvin Snurdly*. Pick up any book in the twenty-fourth century on the subject of marriage, and you will find the author quoting chapters and verses from Marvin's letters.

It usually looks like this: In making a particular point, an author will quote a verse from Marvin's letter written to Paul and Sally. The author will then lift another verse from the letter written to Jethro and Matilda. He will extract another verse from another letter. Then he will sew these three verses together and upon them he will build his particular marital philosophy.

Virtually every sociologist and marital therapist that authors a book on marriage does the same thing. Yet the irony is this: Each of these authors frequently contradicts the others, even though they are all using the same source!

But that is not all. Not only have Marvin's letters been turned into cold prose when they were originally living, breathing epistles to real people in real places, they have become a weapon in the hands of agenda-driven men. Not a few authors on marriage begin employing isolated proof texts from Marvin's work to hammer away at those who disagree with their marital philosophy.

How is this possible? How are all of these sociologists contradicting each other when they are using the exact same source? It is because the letters have been lifted out of their historical context. Each letter has been plucked from its chronological sequence and removed from its real-life setting.

Put another way, the letters of Marvin Snurdly have been transformed into a series of isolated, disjointed, fragmented sentences—so anyone can lift one sentence from one letter, another sentence from another letter, and then paste them together to create the marital philosophy of his or her choice.

An amazing story, is it not? Well, here is the punch line. Whether you realize it or not, this is a description of your New Testament!

### THE ORDER OF PAUL'S LETTERS

The New Testament is made up mostly of the apostle Paul's letters; in fact, he wrote two-thirds of it. He penned thirteen letters in about a twenty-year time span. Nine letters were written to churches in different cultures, at different times, experiencing different problems. Four letters were written to individual Christians. The people who received those letters were also dealing with different issues at different times.

Take note: twenty years—thirteen letters—all written to different people at different times in different cultures—all experiencing different problems.<sup>4</sup>

In the early second century, someone began to take the letters of Paul and compile them into a volume. The technical term for this volume is “canon.”<sup>5</sup> Scholars refer to this compiled volume as “the Pauline canon.” The New Testament is essentially this compilation with a few letters added after it, the four Gospels and Acts placed before it, and Revelation tacked on the very end.

At the time, no one knew when Paul's letters were written.

<sup>4</sup> See Donald Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction*, revised edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990). For a good discussion on how we got our Bible, see *Christian History* 13, no. 3, and Ronald Youngblood, “The Process: How We Got Our Bible,” *Christianity Today* (February 5, 1988), 23–38.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 465. Scholars refer to Paul's canon as the “Pauline corpus.” To learn about the history of the New Testament canon, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), ch. 8–23.

Even if they had, it would not have mattered. There was no precedent for alphabetical or chronological ordering. The first-century Greco-Roman world ordered its literature according to decreasing length.<sup>6</sup>

Look at how your New Testament is arranged. What do you find? Paul's longest letter appears first.<sup>7</sup> It is Romans. First Corinthians is the second longest letter, so it follows Romans. Second Corinthians is the third longest letter. Your New Testament follows this pattern until you come to that tiny little book called Philemon.<sup>8</sup>

In 1864, Thomas D. Bernard delivered a series of talks as part of the Bampton Lectures. These lectures were published in 1872 in a book entitled *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*. In the book, Bernard argued that the present order of Paul's letters in the New Testament was divinely inspired and commended. This book became very popular among Bible teachers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result, virtually every theological text, exegetical text, or biblical commentary written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries follows the present chaotic order, which blinds us from seeing the entire panoramic view of the New Testament. Canonical criticism is big among seminarians. This is the study of the canon as a unit in order to acquire an overall biblical theology. What is needed today is a theology built, not on the present canon and its misarrangement, but on the chronological narrative of the New Testament church.

Here is the present order as it appears in your New Testament. The books are arranged according to descending length:

Romans  
1 Corinthians  
2 Corinthians  
Galatians

<sup>6</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 121, 120. This practice is known as stichometry.

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion on the order of the Pauline canon, see Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer*, ch. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews does not appear to be Pauline, so it was not part of the Pauline corpus.

Ephesians<sup>9</sup>  
 Philippians  
 Colossians  
 1 Thessalonians  
 2 Thessalonians  
 1 Timothy  
 2 Timothy  
 Titus  
 Philemon

What, then, is the proper chronological order of these letters? According to the best available scholarship, here is the order in which they were written:<sup>10</sup>

Galatians  
 1 Thessalonians  
 2 Thessalonians  
 1 Corinthians  
 2 Corinthians  
 Romans  
 Colossians  
 Philemon  
 Ephesians  
 Philippians  
 1 Timothy  
 Titus  
 2 Timothy

### THE ADDITION OF CHAPTERS AND VERSES

In the year 1227, a professor at the University of Paris named Stephen Langton added chapters to all the books of the Bible. Then

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians is actually a hair longer than Galatians, but the books were misarranged due to a scribal gloss. This is not surprising since the difference in length is so slight (Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer*, 124).

<sup>10</sup> See Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction*, revised edition; F. F. Bruce's *The Letters of Paul: An Expanded Paraphrase* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); F. F. Bruce's *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*.



in 1551, a printer named Robert Stephanus (sometimes called Robert Estienne) numbered the sentences in all the books of the New Testament.<sup>11</sup>

According to Stephanus's son, the verse divisions that his father created do not do service to the sense of the text. Stephanus did not use any consistent method. While riding on horseback from Paris to Lyons, he versified the entire New Testament within Langton's chapter divisions.<sup>12</sup>

So verses were born in the pages of holy writ in the year 1551.<sup>13</sup> And since that time God's people have approached the New Testament with scissors and glue, cutting and pasting isolated, disjointed sentences from different letters, lifting them out of their real-life setting, lashing them together to build floatable doctrines, and then calling it "the Word of God."

Seminarians and Bible college students alike are rarely if ever given a panoramic view of the free-flowing story of the early church with the New Testament books arranged in chronological order.<sup>14</sup> As a result, most Christians are completely out of touch with the social and historical events that lay behind each of the New Testament letters. Instead, they have turned the New Testament into a manual that can be wielded to prove any point. Chopping the Bible up into fragments makes this relatively easy to pull off.

## HOW WE APPROACH THE NEW TESTAMENT

We Christians have been taught to approach the Bible in one of eight ways:

<sup>11</sup> Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction of the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 340–341, 451; Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 79.

<sup>12</sup> H. von Soden, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck, 1912), 1, 484; Connolly, *The Indestructible Book*, 154. One Bible historian made this remark about Stephanus's versification of the New Testament: "I think it had been better done on his knees in a closet."

<sup>13</sup> The versification of the Hebrew Bible occurred in 1571. Theodore Beza put Stephanus's verses in his version of the Textus Receptus (1565), which gave them the preeminent place that they have today. Kurt Galling, ed., *Die Religion in der Geschichte und der Gegenwart*, 3rd ed (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1957), 3:114.

<sup>14</sup> In many seminaries and Bible colleges, the story of the early church is taught in a "church history" class while the books of the New Testament are taught in an "NT studies" class. And rarely do the twain meet. If you do not believe me, try this: The next time you meet a seminary student (or graduate), ask him or her to rehearse for you the entire chronological series of events from Paul's writing of Galatians to his writing of Romans.

- \* You look for verses that inspire you. Upon finding such verses, you either highlight, memorize, meditate upon, or put them on your refrigerator door.
- \* You look for verses that tell you what God has promised so that you can confess it in faith and thereby obligate the Lord to do what you want.
- \* You look for verses that tell you what God commands you to do.
- \* You look for verses that you can quote to scare the devil out of his wits or resist him in the hour of temptation.
- \* You look for verses that will prove your particular doctrine so that you can slice-and-dice your theological sparring partner into biblical ribbons. (Because of the proof-texting method, a vast wasteland of Christianity behaves as if the mere citation of some random, decontextualized verse of Scripture ends all discussion on virtually any subject.)
- \* You look for verses in the Bible to control and/or correct others.
- \* You look for verses that “preach” well and make good sermon material. (This is an ongoing addiction for many who preach and teach.)
- \* You sometimes close your eyes, flip open the Bible randomly, stick your finger on a page, read what the text says, and then take what you have read as a personal “word” from the Lord.

Ypagan christianity?

Now look at this list again. Which of these approaches have you used? Look again: Notice how each is highly individualistic. All of them put you, the individual Christian, at the center. Each approach ignores the fact that most of the New Testament was written to corporate bodies of people (churches), not to individuals.

But that is not all. Each of these approaches is built on isolated proof texting. Each treats the New Testament like a manual and blinds us to its real message. It is no wonder that we can approvingly

nod our heads at paid pastors, the Sunday morning order of worship, sermons, church buildings, religious dress, choirs, worship teams, seminaries, and a passive priesthood—all without wincing.

We have been taught to approach the Bible like a jigsaw puzzle. Most of us have never been told the entire story that lies behind the letters that Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude wrote. We have been taught chapters and verses, not the historical context.<sup>15</sup>

For instance, have you ever been given the story behind Paul's letter to the Galatians? Before nodding, see if you can answer these questions off the top of your head: Who were the Galatians? What were their issues? When and why did Paul write to them? What happened just before Paul penned his Galatian treatise? Where was he when he wrote it? What provoked him to write the letter? And where in Acts do you find the historical context for this letter? All of these background matters are indispensable for understanding what our New Testament is about. Without them, we simply cannot understand the Bible clearly or properly.<sup>16</sup>

One scholar put it this way, "The arrangement of the letters of Paul in the New Testament is in general that of their length. When we rearrange them into their chronological order, fitting them as far as possible into their life-setting within the record of the Acts of the Apostles, they begin to yield up more of their treasure; they become self-explanatory, to a greater extent than when this background is ignored."<sup>17</sup>

Another writes, "If future editions [of the New Testament] want to aid rather than hinder a reader's understanding of the New Testament, it should be realized that the time is ripe to cause both the verse and chapter divisions to disappear from the text and to be put on the margin in as inconspicuous a place as possible. Every effort must be made to print the text in a way which makes it possible

<sup>15</sup> Some of us have been taught a little about the historical background of the Bible. But it is just enough to inoculate us from searching further and getting the whole story.

<sup>16</sup> F. F. Bruce, ed., *The New International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1095.

<sup>17</sup> G. C. D. Howley in "The Letters of Paul," *New International Bible Commentary*, 1095.

for the units which the author himself had in mind to become apparent.”<sup>18</sup>

You could call our method of studying the New Testament the “clipboard approach.” If you are familiar with computers, you are aware of the clipboard component. If you happen to be in a word processor, you may cut and paste a piece of text via the clipboard. The clipboard allows you to cut a sentence from one document and paste it into another.

Pastors, seminarians, and laymen alike have been conditioned by the clipboard approach when studying the Bible. This is how we justify our man-made, encased traditions and pass them off as biblical. It is why we routinely miss what the early church was like whenever we open up our New Testaments. We see verses. We do not see the whole picture.

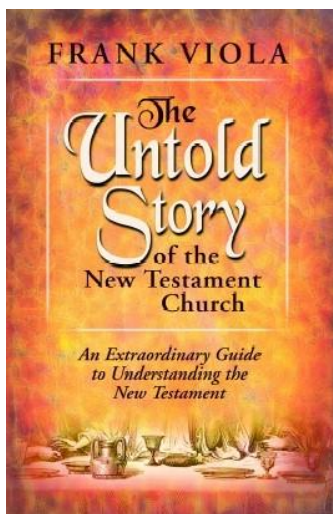
This approach is still alive and well today, not only in institutional churches but in house churches as well. Let me use another illustration to show how easily anyone can fall into it—and the harmful effects it can have.

---

The above is an excerpt from Chapter 11 of [Pagan Christianity](#) by Frank Viola and George Barna.

For a detailed retelling of the New Testament narrative in chronological order, see

[The Untold Story of the New Testament Church](#) by Frank Viola (Destiny Image, 2005).



*Watch the New Testament come alive. Understand God's Word like never before.*

Introducing . . . a fully documented piece of scholarship that brings you back into the first century and shows you what really happened.

Let's face it. The New Testament is often hard to understand. A major reason is because it is not arranged in chronological order. Paul's letters, for example, are arranged by size rather than chronologically. This makes the New Testament a bit like a Chinese puzzle. For this reason, one famous Bible scholar said that reading the New Testament letters is like hearing one end of a phone conversation. The book you hold in your hands reconstructs the other end so that you can understand virtually every word.

*The Untold Story of the New Testament Church* is a unique Bible handbook that weaves Acts and the Epistles together chronologically . . . creating one fluid story. This epic volume gives readers a first-hand account of the New Testament drama that is riveting and enlightening. It includes dates, maps, and background

information about the people, the cities, and the events of the first-century church using a "you-are-there" approach.

Get up-close and personal with apostles Paul, Peter, James and John and learn of their personal struggles. Understand the circumstances behind each inspired letter they penned. Watch the chaotic swirl of first-century people and events fall into place before your very eyes. Discover what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" really was. Learn what happened to all the apostles after the book of Acts was finished. Be ushered into the living, breathing atmosphere of the first century and uncover the hidden riches found in God's Word.

The book includes the following:

- The entire background, including the historical setting and sociological context, that lies behind each New Testament letter. You will learn what caused the New Testament authors to write their letters, when they wrote them, who they wrote them to, and what they were specifically addressing.
- Dates and times of all of the major events that occurred in the New Testament, including when each letter was written and where it was written from.
- Dates and times of the major historical events of secular history interwoven with the New Testament story.
- Maps of all four of Paul's church planting trips and his journey to Rome.
- An explanation of all of the major cities where each church was planted, a sociological profile of what the people were like in each city and what they experienced in their daily lives.
- A user-friendly guide to take you through each New Testament book after you have learned the entire historical setting for each one. This will help you to understand each New Testament letter in a brand new way.
- Endnotes containing Scripture and historical details plus an extensive bibliography so that you can reconstruct the entire story for yourself.

*Frank Viola has produced a useful and engaging account of the New Testament Church, helpfully setting people and events within their first-century cultural context. While not everyone will agree with every detail of the author's reconstruction or theological interpretation, for any such retelling unavoidably involves some interpretation, still this account helps contemporary believers more fully appreciate the remarkable dynamism of our earliest Christian forebears.*

**Howard A. Snyder, New Testament scholar and author of *The Community of the King, Liberating the Laity, A Kingdom Manifesto, and Decoding the Church***