

THE MYSTERY IN THE DIVINE ARRANGEMENT OF PAUL'S EPISTLES

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A. CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER and B. NEW TESTAMENT ORDER: One of the great mysteries of the New Testament is that Paul's epistles are placed *out of the order in which they were written* (compare Columns **A** and **B**). Reading the epistles in the sequences shown by **Columns A and B** gives one a very different understanding of Paul's message; as the sequence of Column **B** gives us a far more systematic and logical unfolding of the Gospel of Grace than the sequence of Column **A**. However, Christians studying their Bibles have come to the conclusion that this mystery is solved by believing that the Holy Spirit guided the men who placed the epistles in their present order. The proof of this conclusion is the logical grouping that these epistles naturally manifest. The chart describes highlights of the profound teaching contained in the very arrangement of Paul's epistles.

Three major insights provide keys to the arrangement and understanding of Paul's epistles: **1** The epistles may be classified in an order of 6 natural groups (see the groupings formed by the 6 sets of brackets between Columns **B** and **C**). **2** The first 3 groups of epistles form a category of Church epistles; the 4th and the 5th groups comprise the ministerial epistles; Hebrews proclaims a message to the Hebrew people. **3** A logical development of Christian doctrine can be observed by examining the 6 groups of epistles in the light of their **NAMES AND THEMES** (Column **C**), **AUDIENCES** (Column **D**), **SPECIAL EMPHASES** (Column **E**), and **PROGRESS OF DOCTRINE** (Column **F**).

C. NAMES AND THEMES: The names of these groups are the names given by Bible scholars or by the author in the last 2 groups. The themes are the dominant or recurring thoughts in the epistles—the messages Paul was seeking to impress on his readers.

D. AUDIENCES: Like the Lord Jesus, Paul's ministry had its times of popularity when he was the great Church builder, and it had its times of rejection when he was suffering persecution.

E. SPECIAL EMPHASES: Paul is the great teacher in the doctrinal group of epistles, emphasizing the foundational—truth of the gospel—justification and a "by-faith righteousness." In the PRISON EPISTLES he inspires his followers to love and worship of the Lord, but also emphasizes the sanctified walk of the believer. In the PROPHETIC EPISTLES, the hope of Christ's 2nd Coming is emphasized in every chapter. In the PASTORAL EPISTLES, the ministry of the church focuses on Christian instruction and warfare. In the book of Hebrews, the Hebrew people, halting in their decision, to go forward and embrace Christianity or to return to Judaism, needed the emphasis on the certainty of Christianity.

F. PROGRESS OF DOCTRINE: There is a progress of doctrine from the simple truths to the more profound truths in these epistles. Truths in the first epistles are for those new in the faith, while the truths in the last epistles are for the mature in the faith. There is a marvelous advancement in doctrine from the first epistle through each succeeding epistle.

What do these truths mean to you and me today? Primarily, they can lead us to a full growth in Christian character. The DOCTRINAL EPISTLES firmly establish our *faith* in the basic truths of the Gospel of Grace. The PRISON EPISTLES produce in us a devout *love* for the One **who** has blessed us with all spiritual blessings. The PROPHETIC EPISTLES stir the fires of *hope* in our hearts for the **2nd Coming** of Christ. The PASTORAL EPISTLES inspire a holy desire to fight the good fight of faith against all enemies of the Gospel. The PERSONAL EPISTLE melts our hearts with a compassion for the unfortunate around us. The PRIESTLY EPISTLE gives us a heart of intercession for all of God's people and enables us to give offerings of praise and thanksgiving to our God.

The Christian who patiently studies **the Apostle** Paul's epistles progresses from a learner of the basic doctrines of grace, first to a worshipper, then someone who patiently waits for the coming of Christ, then to a spiritual warrior of the faith, then to a compassionate brother and sister in Christ, and finally to a consecrated priest in the house of God. In sum, the person progresses to being a *fully grown Christian in Christ Jesus!*

A. CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER		B. NEW TESTAMENT ORDER		C. NAMES & THEMES		D. AUDIENCES		E. SPECIAL EMPHASES		F. PROGRESS OF DOCTRINE	
1 Thessalonians 1 Thessalonians 1 Thessalonians	(A.D.54) (A.D.54) (A.D.58)	Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians	}	Church Epistles	DOCTRINAL EPISTLES Full Redemption	}	Church Doctrine	CHURCHES AT: 1. Rome 2. Corinth 3. Galatia	TEACHING Justification Faith	After declaring the great doctrinal problems which had arisen in The Church, Paul conclusively answers them in order to establish the basic foundation of Church doctrine. All the prophetic, ministerial, and priestly truths that follow rests on this foundation.	
1 Corinthians 1 Corinthians Romans	(A.D.59) (A.D.60) (A.D.60)	Ephesians Philippians Colossians			PRISON EPISTLES Full Blessing			4. Ephesus 5. Philippi 6. Colosse	WORSHIP Sanctification Love	Next, Paul helps believers who had accepted basic Christian doctrine to (a) learn about their place, wealth, privileges and unity in Christ, (b) understand the divinity of Christ's person and the significance of His work, and (c) understand the truth of the "race course" of believers.	
Ephesians Colossians Philemon Philippians	(A.D.64) (A.D.64) (A.D.64) (A.D.64)	1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians			PROPHETIC EPISTLES Full Hope			7. Thessalonica	PROPHECY Glorification Hope	Climaxing these Church epistles, Paul unfolds to Christians the doctrines of Christ's 2 nd Coming, the rapture and resurrection of believers, The Tribulation coming upon the world, and the appearing of the Antichrist.	
Hebrews 1 Timothy Titus	(A.D.64-68 ¹) (A.D.65) (A.D.65)	1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus	}	Ministerial Epistles	PASTORAL EPISTLES Spiritual Warfare	}	Ministerial Guidelines	MINISTERS: 1. Timothy 2. Titus	CHRISTIAN SERVICE Faithfulness	First, Paul expounds on doctrines of church order: qualifications and responsibilities of bishops and deacons, and ways of dealing with apostasy within and outside the church. Then Paul explains ministerial succession in. the early Church Age and beyond.	
2 Timothy	(A.D.66)	Philemon			PERSONAL EPISTLE Problem Solving			Philemon	CHRISTIAN COURTESY Compassion	Paul uses a personal letter to emphasize the Christian need of forgiveness of all men, even to restore a slave to full equality with his fellow ministers.	
		Hebrews	}	Universal Epistle	PRIESTLY EPISTLE New Testament Authority	}	Universal Truth	To HEBREW NATION	CERTAINTY Confidence	Finally, Paul places a capstone on his epistles by settling Christian doctrine concerning the authority of the New Testament. e.g., Christ's high priestly ministry, the " <i>typical</i> " meaning of the Levitical service, the gospel faith of even Old Testament saints, and the absolute permanence of Christ's Kingdom.	

¹ Scholars uncertain of date written.