

Finding the central ministry purpose of a book of the Bible

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1. Central ministry purpose

We should always try to find the central ministry purpose of a book of the Bible. The central ministry purpose of the book is its ministry aim, its pastoral intention. It is the answer to the question that we could ask of the author of the book 'In one sentence, why did you write this book?' Or the answer to the question we could ask of God 'Why did you cause this book to be written?' It should include what the readers should do, and why they should do it. It regards the book as an extended speech-act, and seeks to clarify what the author wants to happen as the result of people reading the book. The central ministry purpose is more than the central theme, because it includes what the author wants the readers to do as a result of that central theme. It does not focus on topics, but on actions. It is not the language of analysis, but of action.

Here are some examples of 'central ministry purpose':

John

Johns' gospel is an obvious example, because he tells us so plainly what is his central ministry purpose:

'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' [20:30,31].

This quotation not only points to the central evangelistic and pastoral ministry purpose, but also alerts us to the significance of Jesus' signs to achieve that purpose. So then each 'sign' will serve the central ministry purpose, and illuminate it in some way. When preaching through the book, our purpose then is to show how each sign contributes to the central ministry purpose.

2 Chronicles

'The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy.' [36:15-17]

Proverbs

'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Hear your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching.' [1:7,8]

Colossians

'As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.' [2: 6,7]

1 Timothy

'I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.'
[3:14-15]

Notice these features:

- i. The central ministry purpose should express both content and application, theology and implementation, the indicative and the imperative of the book of the Bible.
- ii. It should be a quotation from the text of the book in its own words, so that people can easily identify it and connect it with the text of the Bible.
- iii. It should reflect the truths of all the main sections of the book.
- iv. It will help you to understand teach or preach each of the main sections of the book.
- v. It will bring make your sermon series purpose-driven! [with the purpose coming out of the book itself].
- vi. We should expect to find the central ministry purpose clearly expressed in the book, so that when we find it then it is immediately obvious that this is the case. [This does not mean that it is always easy to find it!]
- vii. In some cases you may have to combine words from several verses to get a clear central ministry purpose.
- viii. If you are preaching a series on the book, it might be good to preach a sermon on the verses that are the central ministry purpose to introduce the series.

We need to find the central ministry purpose of a book of the Bible if we want to preach through the book. We also need to find the central ministry purpose of a book if we want to preach any verse, paragraph or chapter of it.

It is possible that a book of the Bible may have more than one ministry purpose, but it is worth trying to find it, as this will help us find out what is in the book, and to see how each part of the book contributes to the whole.

We focus on the books of the Bible, because the Bible is made up of 66 units of verbal revelation, and because God respects the intentions of the human author of each book, so the book has a particular historical and theological setting, and a particular ministry outcome and purpose.

I do not think that absolutely everything in a book of the Bible will serve just one theme or purpose, but looking for the central ministry purpose will help us see the contours of the book, and how the main sections of the book serve a common end.

It is like seeing not only the bricks that are used to build a house, but also looking at the design and plan of the house. Each brick is important, but more important is the shape of the house. It is like noticing the song, not just the individual words and notes; or looking at the performance of a team, not just of individual players.

Let me now give the example of the letter of Jude, to show the benefits of this exercise.

Jude

This is a good example, because it is a short book, and because he explains clearly why he wrote the book.

I write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. [Jude 3].

The instruction to ‘contend for the faith’ includes these elements:

- ▶ It is addressed to the people of the church [not just the leaders].
- ▶ ‘The faith’ has been entrusted to the people.
- ▶ It is the apostolic faith, ‘once for all entrusted.’

Once we have the central ministry purpose, we can then see more easily how each main section serves that central ministry purpose. For this example, even though it is a short book, I will use a number of ‘main sections’ to show how this process helps us understand the structure of the letter.

In Jude:

v. 4 explains the reason why the people have to contend.

vv. 5-13 encourage the contenders, because there have been enemies of God in every generation of God’s people, and yet God has always brought those enemies to judgement. These verses also show the similarities between the enemies of the past and the enemies of the present.

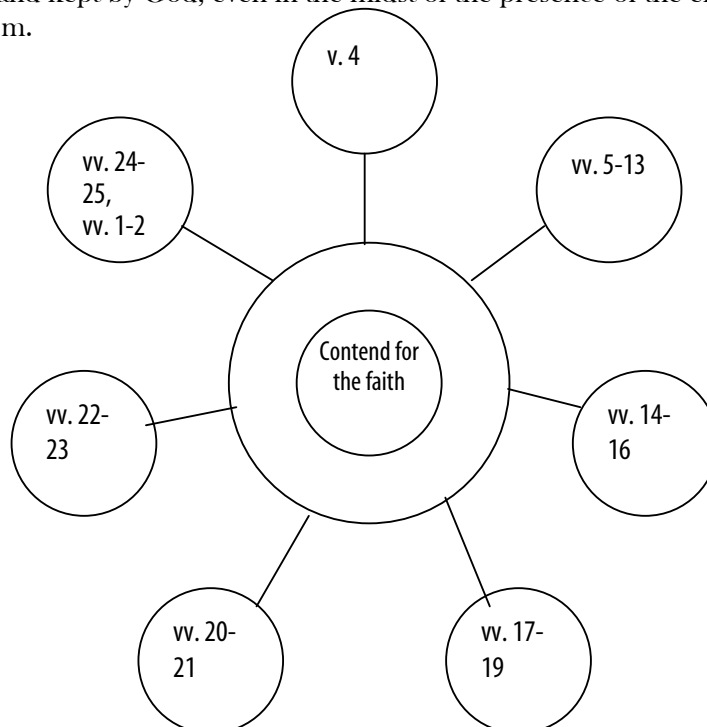
vv. 14-16 use the prophecy of Enoch to show that the presence of these enemies is not unexpected, but that they will certainly be judged by God., and also help to identify them.

vv. 17-19 make the same points from the prophecy of the apostles.

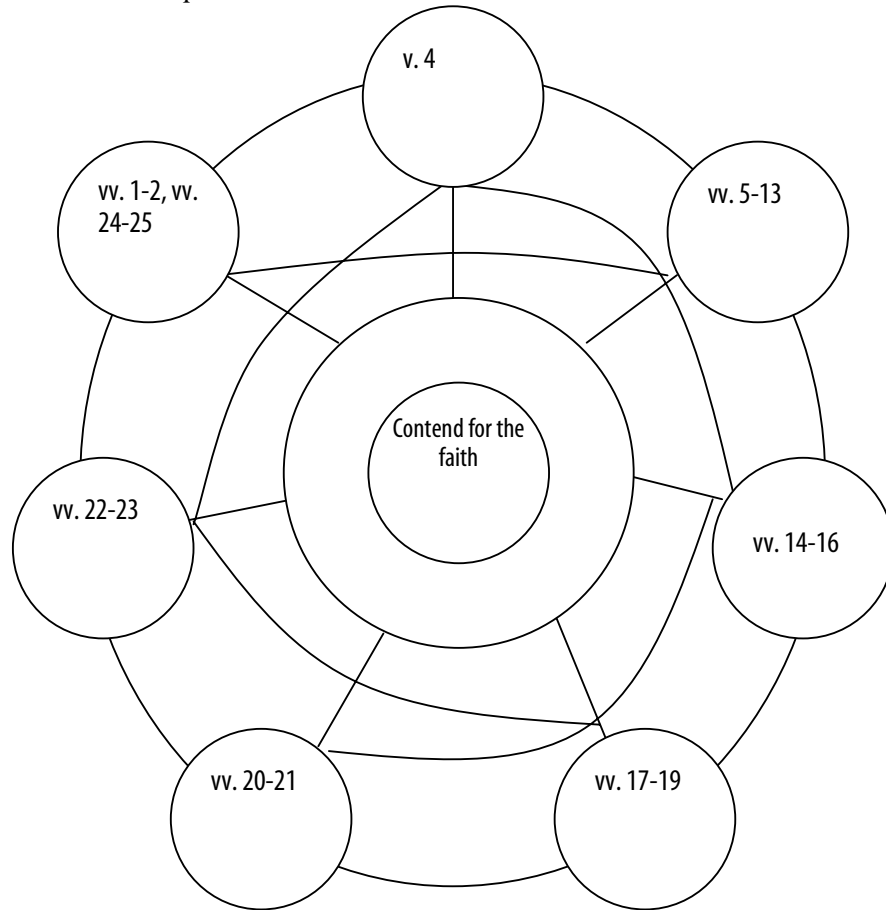
vv. 20-21 tell the people how to care for themselves as they counteract the evil.

vv. 22-23 tell them how to contend, not by winning arguments, but by winning people, and not in a spirit of judgement, but with mercy.

vv. 24-25 and vv. 1-2 reassure the people that they are loved by God, and will be protected and kept by God, even in the midst of the presence of the enemies of God among them.



This helps us see the connection between each section of the book and its central ministry purpose, how the central ministry purpose is illuminated by each section, and how each section contributes to the central ministry purpose. It also enables us to see the relationships between each of the sections of the book, and so be more aware of its overall dramatic shape.



2. What approaches will help to find the central ministry purpose of a book?

You need to use a variety of approaches, and if more than one apply, then you are more likely to have arrived at your target!

The best way to achieve this is to read through the book carefully, looking for the following features:

- i. the **pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic purpose**,
- ii. the **main sections of meaning**,
- iii. the **key words, phrases and themes**.
- iv. the **natural climax or statement of purpose**,

Your aim is to find the verses or paragraph of the book that are the **natural climax or stated purpose** of the book, that summarise the **pastoral purpose** of the book and all its **main sections of meaning**, using the **key words, phrases or themes** of the book, using of course the language of the book.

You need to use all four approaches, though they may vary in immediate usefulness. Ultimately, each should corroborate and support the others.

i. What is the **pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic** purpose of the book?

If you ask the question ‘Why was this book written?’ of a book of the Bible, the answer given may be in terms of a *technical* purpose, a *substantial purpose*, or a *pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic* purpose.

It is amazing how often commentaries limit themselves to merely *technical* answers to the question, ‘Why did Paul write this letter?’ ‘Why did Mark write his gospel?’ ‘Why did someone write Ecclesiastes?’ Answers like, ‘To tackle some problems’ or, ‘To answer some questions’ or ‘To correct some wrong ideas’ may be true, but they are grossly inadequate. The question, ‘Why did Paul write this letter?’ may be answered *technically*, but this is insufficient for real understanding.

The question may also be answered *substantially*, and this is what some of the better commentaries do. They summarise the theology of the letter, a summary of its theological substance. But even this is not good enough, because it separates the theology of the letter from the *pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic* ministry purpose of the letter.

You need to find the *pastoral* intention of the letter, that is, its specific purposes in *edifying*, or building up the hearers, how it rebukes, corrects, or encourages, or how it evangelises its hearers. This answer will include the *pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic* goal or intention of the letter, and also the theological and motivational and rhetorical means used to achieve that purpose. This answer to the ‘Why?’ question is essential if we are to use the letter for the same purpose. We must focus on the ‘Why?’ question in terms of *pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic* purpose.

Sometimes we preachers fail to help people see the wood or forest, because there is too much focus on each individual tree, branch, or leaf. [This may happen because we use the intensive approach that works when used for the dense theology of the some of the epistles, but which is too detailed when applied to broad-brush books like narrative and apocalyptic, such as Genesis, Deuteronomy, Daniel, or Revelation.] When we do this, we give too much information, and do not people feel the inner logic or drama of the whole. To help them do this, we need to know the central ministry purpose or the big picture of the book, and also how each section of the book serves that purpose.

ii. What are the **main sections** of the book?

You need to know what are the main sections of the book so that you can make sure that what you think is the central ministry purpose of the book is found in each section, and so you can see how each section of the book contributes to that central ministry purpose.

It is more useful to think of main sections of meaning of a book, rather than chapters or verses. For chapters and verses are artificial technical categories, not categories of meaning or substance. When I read through a book of the Bible, I am always looking for the major sections [say 3-8 of them], the major building blocks of the book. These are the main sections of meaning, each one of which is crucial to the meaning of the whole book.

What I am trying to do with a book of the Bible is like what we do with a sentence. We do not talk about ‘word 1,’ then ‘word 2,’ then ‘word 3,’ then ‘word 4.’ Instead we look at the meaning of the whole sentence, and see how each section of the sentence serves the meaning of the whole. What we naturally do with a sentence, we should also do with a book.

We want to avoid that kind of exposition which works through a book of the Bible by merely technical steps: ‘And now we come to verse 5’, or, ‘And so we come to chapter 6.’ This approach misses the overall coherence of the book and loses its dramatic shape, logic, excitement, and so misses the big challenge of the book. Finding the main sections of the book will help you see its overall shape, and therefore point us towards its central ministry purpose. Understanding the sections of the book help you to identify the edificatory purpose or central ministry purpose, and the central ministry purpose helps you see the pastoral and edificatory significance of each section.

iii. What are the key words or phrases or themes of the book?

Make a list of the key words, and of all their occurrences, and then look of the places in the text where most or all of them are present in a paragraph or few verses. Read through the book and list the important themes, including which section of the book in which they occur. Look for the presence of all the key words of the book in one verse or paragraph, the verses from the book that bring together most if not all of those important themes. So, for example:

- ▶ John 20: 30-31 includes the centrality of Christ, faith in Christ, and signs, all important themes.
- ▶ Colossians 2:6,7 includes the centrality of Christ, the need to stand firm, and the theme of thanksgiving, all important in Colossians.

Your aim here is to find the central focus ministry purpose of the book, its *pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic* purpose expressed in the language of the book.

iv. What is the statement of purpose or natural climax of the book?

It seems right to assume that the author of a Bible book has a purpose in writing the book, and that the author will express that purpose. Imagine yourself asking the author, ‘Why did you write this book?’ and then read the book looking for the answer. Look for language that indicates the central ministry purpose, or the natural climax of the book. For example:

- ▶ ‘I am writing this...’ [John and 1 Timothy above]
- ▶ ‘I write and appeal...’ [Jude 4].
- ▶ ‘The main point of what we are saying...’ [Hebrews 8:1].
- ▶ A kind of central ministry purpose paragraph [Colossians 2:6-7 in the context of 2:1-5].

This is normally language of purpose, which clarifies both the author’s purpose and what he wants his readers to do. The natural climax of the book might not be in the place we would naturally expect. In Jude, it is at the beginning; in John, at the end; and in 1 Timothy, Hebrews, and Colossians, in the middle.

In the natural climax or statement of purpose you expect to find the central focus or purpose of the book, its *pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic* purpose, and the main themes of the book.

Here is another example, that of 1 Peter.

We now apply this to 1 Peter.

- i. The **pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic purpose.**

To whom is Peter writing?
Churches in Asia Minor.

What does he want them to do as the result of reaching his letter?

The purpose of the book is not to correct heresy, or serious moral disobedience. There seems to be little new information. The mood is more that of wanting the churches to continue with their current faith, and to put it into practice in conscientious faith and obedience, and despite suffering. He wants them to be formed by the gospel of Christ, and to have a firm hope on Christ's return.

- ii. The **main sections of meaning.**

Here is one short outline:

Here is another:

Identity	1:1 - 2: 10	God's people
Responsibilities of the people	2:11 - 4:11	Living as exiles
Responsibilities of the elders	4:12 - 5:14	Suffering to glory

Another:

Another:

God's new people	1:1 - 2: 10	Salvation	1:1 - 2: 10
God's people in the world	2:11 - 3:8	Submission	2:11 - 3:12
Who will harm you?	3:9 - 4:6	Suffering and persecution	3:13 - 5:11
Stand firm: The end is near	4:7 - 5:11	Final words	5:12-14
Final greetings	5:12-14		

A different approach:

Who you are	What you should do
[Indicative]	Imperative
1:1 - 12	1:13 - 2:2
2:4 - 10	2: 11 - 5:14

[I find One Volume Bible Commentaries very helpful here, such as IVP, both 1954 and 1994, and *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gæbelein, Regency/Zondervan.]

iii. The **key words, phrases and themes.**

I found 'grace' in 1:2,10,13, 2:19,20, 3:7 4:10, 5:5,10,12.

I also found both suffering and glory, used both about Christ and about believers.

So 'suffering' and 'glories' in 1:11, 4:13, 5:1,10; 'suffering' in 2:19,20,21, 3:14,17,18, 4:1², 15,19, 5:9; and 'glory' in 1:7,8,21,24, 2:12, 4:11,14,16, 5:4.

Furthermore 'grace' 'sufferings' and 'glory' are linked twice in 1:6-13, and once in 5:10-12. Note that these words cover all the main sections of the book, including both indicative and imperative.

	grace	suffering	glory	suffering/glory	grace/suffering/ glory
1:1 - 2:10	1;2,10,13		1:7,8,21,24,	1:11	1:6-10, 1:11-13
2:11 - 3:12	2:19,20	2:19, 20, 21	2:12		
3:13 - 4:6	3:7	3:14,17,18, 4:1 ² ,			
4:7 - 5:11	4:10, 5:5,10,12	4:15, 19, 5:9	4:11,14,16,16, 5:4	4:13, 5:1,10	5:10-12

So I think that the central expression of this **grace** in 1 Peter is the **sufferings and glory of Christ and so of believers.**

iv. The **natural climax or statement of purpose.**

'With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.' 5:12.

This seems to me the natural climax of the book. Peter has testified to the true grace of God, and encouraged his churches with that true grace. He now instructs them to stand fast in it.

Useful resources:

Barnett, Paul, *1 Peter: Living Hope*, Reading the Bible Today Series, Aquila Press, 2006.

Clowney, Edmund P., *The Message of 1 Peter: the way of the cross*, BST, IVP, 1988.

Grudem, Wayne, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC, IVP/ Eerdmans, 1988.

Jobes, Karen H., *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Baker Academic, 2005.

Leighton, Robert, *Commentary on First Peter*, Kregel Reprints, 1972.

Macleay, Angus, *Teaching 1 Peter: Unlocking the book of 1 Peter for the Bible Teacher*, PT Media/Christian Focus, 2008.

Stibbs, Alan, M., *The First Epistle General of Peter*, TNTC, Tyndale Press, 1959.

'This is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.'

Peter's passion for the churches.

Encouraging you

Testifying that this is the true grace of God

Stand fast in it. Not a dramatic call, but an essential and constant challenge.

Grace in 1 Peter

1:10,	1:13,	2:19, 20	3:7
4:10	5:5		

Grace suffering and glory

1:6-13 [twice]

5:10-12

Suffering...glory: for Christ...and for us

For us in the 21st Century...the pressures of social ostracism and persecution.

Both

Suffering now, glory then.

More demanding...more rewarding

Standing fast in Gods grace

Stand fast

Individuals, ministers, churches, Christian agencies, associations, colleges, denominations...