

It is easy to see that in general the books of the New Testament are arranged in a definite order. It begins with the four Gospels which describe the earthly life of Christ, and these are followed by the book of Acts which tells how the disciples began to spread the message of salvation. Next come the epistles of Paul and of other apostles, presenting the great doctrines of Christianity. Each epistle has its own special message for God's people. Finally there is the book of Revelation, with its picture of God's plan for the consummation of the ages.

Paul's epistles make up a large part of the New Testament. These epistles are not arranged in the Bible in the order in which they were originally written. It is generally believed that 1 Thessalonians, which comes near the end of this group of letters, was actually the first epistle that he wrote; and that Romans, which is placed first, was written much later.

Thus the order of these letters is not chronological. Nor is it geographical. The first is to a city in Italy; the next two are to a city in Greece; the fourth, fifth, and seventh are to Christians in Asia Minor; while the sixth is to a city in Macedonia; and the eighth and ninth are to another city in Greece.

Although the order of Paul's epistles is neither chronological nor geographical, one should not call it haphazard, since they are always printed in the same order. As we examine them more closely we find good reason to believe that in the providence of God they were so arranged as to present His truth in logical progression. While they deal with various subjects, each has a predominant emphasis. An idea of their progression may be gained by the statement of Paul to Timothy that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

The last of these four phrases, "instruction in righteousness," is a general summary of the first three. "Doctrine" suggests a straightforward presentation of divinely revealed truth. "Reproof" suggests a rebuke to those who are erring in some particular way, in order to bring their actions back to the right path. "Correction" is a less personal word, dealing not so much with actions as with errors of thought.

A number of epistles of Paul seem to have been arranged in accordance with these purposes. Thus Romans presents the great central doctrines of justification and salvation through Christ. While it touches on many important subjects, its fundamental purpose is to show what Christianity is and what is necessary that a man be justified and sanctified.

In the two epistles to the Corinthians the fundamental matters of the Christian faith are again in view. Here, however, the emphasis is on reproof. The Corinthians had allowed such sins to enter into their practice as should never be found among those who are justified through Christ. Their lives fell far short of the standard that would be proper for those who understand the great doctrines expounded in Romans. In the Corinthian epistles these doctrines are reemphasized; but the emphasis is on showing the people where they had been wrong, reproving them for their error, and trying to bring them back to the correct path.