

PAUL AND HIS LETTERS; AN OVERVIEW

[Seminar: Chelmsford 1 February 2009]

Paul loved to write letters

Paul was a great letter writer. Of the 27 ‘books’ in the NT, 13 are letters from Paul. Although the Christian faith was not invented by Paul, it was Paul who more than anybody else developed the Christian faith – and he did so not least through his letter writing.

Paul was renowned for his letters. Even his opponents begrudgingly recognized that **“his letters are weighty and strong”** (2 Cor 10.10 NRSV).

His friends struggled with his letters, saying **“there are some difficult things in his letters which ignorant and unstable people explain falsely, as they do with other passages of Scripture. So they bring on their own destruction”** (2 Pet 3.16)

John Donne, the great English cleric and poet, later remarked that whenever he opened one of Paul’s letters he found *“thunder – a thunder that resounded throughout the earth”*

Paul wrote lengthy letters

Compared to other ancient letters, Paul’s letters are quite extraordinary.

They are extraordinary because of their length.

Most ancient letters are short and to the point. They are just business letters.

For instance, around the time Paul was writing to the church at Corinth, a certain Mysterion wrote a letter: *“Mysterion to his own Stoetis: Greetings. I have sent you my Blastus to get forked sticks for my olive gardens. See that he does not loiter, for you know I need him every hour. Farewell”*.

Even Paul’s letter to Philemon is much longer than your average letter in 1C.

Paul in effect created a new literary genre.

His letters were not business letters. For the most part they were sermons written down.

Paul wrote letters for churches

They were not personal letters, but letters to churches.

Even his letter to Philemon, which was very personal, was written not just to Philemon but also **“the church that meets in your house”** (Philemon 2).

Paul’s letters were public letters, written for reading out to a congregation.

So in Col 4.16 Paul writes: **“After you read this letter, make sure that it is read in the church at Laodicea. At the same time you are to read the letter that the brothers and sisters in Laodicea will send you”**. [NB a reminder that in the NT we have only some of Paul’s letters – others, alas, have got lost]

Paul’s letters were intended to be read out during a service of worship.

So e.g. 1 Corinthians begins with a prayer (1 Cor 1.4-9), ends with a benediction (16.23), and includes a command to his readers to greet one another with a holy kiss – what we would call the giving of the ‘The Peace’.

Just imagine having to sit through all 16 chapters of 1 Corinthians – and probably that worship service included a fellowship meal and the Lord’s Supper. A one-hour service is a modern invention!

Paul’s letters were part of a two-way conversation.

Unfortunately we are not able to listen in to the other half of the conversation. What is clear, however, is that time and again Paul is responding to a previous letter. We see that, for instance, in 1 Corinthians:

- So when dealing with the subject of marriage, Paul writes: “**Now to deal with the matters you wrote about. You say that a man does well not to marry**” (GNB note: 1 Cor 7.1).
- A little later: “**Now concerning what you wrote about unmarried people**” (1 Cor 7.25).
- The following chapter begins with Paul saying: “**Now concerning what you wrote about food offered to idols**” (1 Cor 8.1).
- In chapter 12: “**Now concerning what you wrote about the gifts from the Holy Spirit**” (1 Cor 12.1).

Similarly 1 & 2 Thessalonians were clearly written in response to a number of pastoral problems which had arisen in the church.

Precisely what those problems were, we cannot be sure.

The Methodist minister Colin Morris imagined Paul receiving the following letter from one of Paul’s recent converts in Thessalonica:

My dear Paul: The followers of Jesus in this city are in receipt of your letter which was read out to the church a month ago and which appears to confirm a widely held view here that our Lord will be returning in glory at any moment to take believers such as my humble self back with him to heaven. Being a hard-headed business man I took your words with utmost seriousness. To prepare myself and my family for the Day of the Lord, I sold my business at a knock-down price and gave the proceeds to the poor – and that let me add was a tidy sum, but I assume I won’t need cash in heaven! So here I am with my bags packed, my property disposed of and myself, my wife, and my children taking it in shifts to scan the skies for something unusual to appear. In fact, every time I hear a trumpet, I nearly jump out of my skin! And what has happened? Nothing”.

And so the writer goes on. Was it that kind of letter to which Paul was responding when he was writing 1 & 2 Thessalonians?

Paul’s letters were always a joint effort

Paul undoubtedly was a great and creative theologian.

However, Paul was never alone when he wrote his letters.

There were always other church leaders present in the room when he was writing.

- Although in our NT 1 Corinthians is headed as ‘Paul’s First Letter To The Corinthians’, in fact Paul begins his letter: **“From Paul... and from our brother Sosthenes – to the church of God which is in Corinth”** (1 Cor 1.1).
- He begins 2 Cor in a similar fashion: **“From Paul.. and from our brother Timothy – to the church of God in Corinth”** (2 Cor 1.1).
- Philippians, Colossians & Philemon are also from Paul & Timothy.
- 1 & 2 Thess are from Paul, Silas & Timothy.

Let me quote to you from a book entitled *Paul and First Century Letter Writing*:
“Recent sociological studies suggest that modern Western values such as privacy and individualism not only colour our reconstructions but also have no real equivalent in Paul’s world. Paul’s world was group-oriented; they thought in group terms and not as independent individuals, and Paul presented himself in this way. Paul saw himself as articulating the values and views of his group. As modern Western writers we articulate our individualistic values and views when we write, and for this reason we need privacy. Why would Paul want to separate himself from his group in order to write? He was writing their values” (E. Randolph Richards).

I.e. although Paul might have had a clear outline in his mind of what he wanted to say, indeed he might well have made a draft of his letter, as he wrote, he would have talked through the content of his letter with his team.

But in addition to his missionary colleagues, there would have been another person present, viz. his secretary. Paul never wrote letters himself. He always used a secretary. For writing was a very special art.

Whereas in the modern world, literacy is about ‘reading and writing’, in the ancient world literacy was about ‘reading’. Ancient writing was a craft that required skills. Secretaries had to cut their own paper into sheets, measure and score lines, mix their own ink, cut their own reed pens, and write on the rough fibrous paper (papyrus) of antiquity. Furthermore, people then valued beautiful handwriting – what we could call ‘calligraphy’. While the sender of a letter might be able to scratch out the lines, he or she would not want to send an ugly letter. So almost everybody used a secretary to write a letter. And Paul was no exception.

- So we read in Rom 16.22: **“I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, send you Christian greetings”**
- 1 Cor 16.21: **“With my own hand I write this: Greetings from Paul”** – the implication being that the rest of the letter was written by someone else
- 2 Thess 3.17: **“With my own hand I write this: ‘Greetings from Paul’**. This is the way I sign every letter; this is how I write” – a comment necessitated by his concern in 2.2 that a fictitious letter in his name had been circulating in the Thessalonian church.
- Gal 6.11: **“See what big letters I make as I write to you now with my own hand”** – by comparison with the writing of his secretary, Paul’s handwriting looked clumsy
- Col 4.18: **“With my own hand I write this: ‘Greetings from Paul’**.

Just as today, so then, there were various ways in which you could write a letter.

‘Miss Smith’, a business executive might say, ‘Write a letter to the bank and tell them we want a loan’. Miss Smith would have almost total freedom in how that letter was framed.

Now Paul’s secretaries undoubtedly didn’t have that kind of freedom. There is no doubt that Paul was dictating to his secretary.

However, the presence of a secretary could account for some changes in style which are to be found in Paul’s letters. For instance

- Colossians & Ephesians are somewhat different in style from his earlier letters, with the result that some have speculated that Paul used Tychicus (Col 4.7) to write this letter, and in doing so gave him considerable leeway.
- Paul’s letters to Timothy & Titus are markedly different in style from Paul’s letters – so different, in fact, that some have assumed that they were not written by Paul at all. In view of the fact that there are great similarities in style, vocabulary & syntax between the Pastorals and Luke, scholars have often wondered whether Luke, who we know from 2 Tim 4.11 was allowed to visit and be with Paul in prison, actually wrote these letters on Paul’s behalf, based on what Paul had said to him shortly before he was executed.

One thing for certain, using a secretary meant that writing letters was a costly business. In a book published some five years ago, the writer estimates on the basis of the number of lines, Romans would have cost in today’s American dollars \$2,275; 1 Cor \$2,108, and even Philemon, the shortest, \$101 dollars.

Paul’s letters and the post

Having invested so much time and money in writing a letter, Paul then had to consider how the letter was to be sent. For although the Romans had set up an imperial postal service, it was only used for official government business. Paul would not have had access to it.

Like everyone else, Paul had two choices of letter carrier

- The so-called ‘happenstance’ carrier: i.e. someone who ‘happened’ to be travelling to where the recipients of Paul’s letter lived
- The private carrier.

Probably Paul used ‘happenstance’ carriers for his earlier letters, such as Galatians and 1 & 2 Thess. However, Paul seems to have used private carriers for his later letters. For instance, Titus carried his so-called 2nd letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 7.5-16), and Tychicus carried his letter to the Colossians (Col 4.7-8).

The advantage of a private carrier was that you could brief them so that they could share additional information: e.g. **“Our dear brother Tychicus... will give you all the news about me. That is why I am sending him to you, in order to cheer you up by telling you how all of us are getting on”**

Needless to say, there was no such thing as next day delivery.

Ancient travellers averaged 20 miles per day, but unpredictable factors such as bad weather could easily add on more time.

Furthermore, you couldn't send letters at any time. The travelling season was generally from March to November, because winter provided too many dangers at sea and on the road.

Paul therefore had to choose his time carefully as to when he sent a letter.

Paul's letters: when were they written?

When did Paul write his letters? In what order did Paul write his letters? In this respect the New Testament as it is printed in our Bibles today is a very misleading document. For looking at the New Testament, you might assume that Paul's first letter was written to the Romans, and that his last letter was written to Philemon. But in fact the only reason that Romans is placed first is that it is Paul's longest letter, and Philemon comes at the end because it is Paul's shortest letter. So let's engage in creating a chronology.

- AD 30: The crucifixion of Jesus
- AD 31-34 Paul's persecution of the church: at Stephen's stoning, he is said to be 'a young man' (Acts 7.58)
- AD 34 Paul's conversion
- AD 34-37 Paul preaches in Arabia & Damascus (Gal 1.17)
- AD 37 Paul visits Peter in Jerusalem (Gal 1.18)
- AD 47 Barnabas finds Paul in Tarsus & brings him to Antioch (Acts 11.25-26)
- AD 48 Paul visits the leaders of the Jerusalem church, who recognise Paul's call to be an apostle to the Gentiles
- AD 48-49 Paul's 1st missionary journey to Cyprus & southern Galatia (Acts 13-14)
- AD 49 Back in Antioch, Paul writes a fiery letter to *Galatians* for abandoning the Gospel (Gal 1.6)
- AD 50-52 Paul's 2nd missionary journey. He revisits Galatia – establishes churches in Macedonia & Achaia (Acts 15.36-18.21)
While staying 18 months he Corinth writes *1 Thess* (1 Thess 1.7-8) commending their faithfulness, and then *2 Thess*
- AD 53-56 Paul's 3rd missionary journey. He revisits churches.
While staying over 2 years in Ephesus he writes '*1 Cor*'.
While staying in Macedonia he writes *2 Cor*
While staying in Corinth he writes *Romans*
- AD 57 Paul goes to Jerusalem with the collection (Rom 15.25: see 2 Cor 8-9)
- AD 57-59 Paul arrested & imprisoned, first in Jerusalem, and then moved to Caesarea for 2 years. With the appointment of a new governor, Paul appeals to Rome (Acts 21.27-26.32)
- AD 59 Paul sails for Rome, but shipwrecked in Malta (Acts 27.1-28.10)
- AD 60-62 Paul arrives in Rome & spends 2 years in house arrest (Acts 28.10-31)
Paul writes *Philemon*, *Colossians*, *Ephesians* & *Philippians* [the Captivity Epistles']
- AD 62-64? Released from imprisonment, Paul travels west. He writes *Titus* & *1 Timothy* [the Pastorals]
- AD 64 A catastrophic fire in Rome causes Nero to persecute the church
- AD 65 Paul arrested & imprisoned again. He writes *2 Timothy*
- AD 66-68? Paul beheaded during Nero's reign.

Paul's letters: a variety of themes

Paul's letters are very varied in content, because they were written to very different situations:

Galatians:	'Christian Freedom'
1 & 2 Thess	'Jitters in Salonica' – concerns re death & second coming
1 Corinthians	'The Church of God in Vanity Fair'
2 Corinthians	'The Trials & Triumphs of an Apostle'
Romans	'The Gospel according to Paul'
Philemon	Your runaway slave is your brother! NB life was pretty tough for slaves. Tacitus tells of how when a Roman official was assassinated by one of his slaves, not only was the perpetrator executed, but all the other 399 slaves in the household too!
Colossians	'The Cosmic Christ'
Ephesians	'The Glory of the Church'
Philippians	'The Letter of Joy'
The Pastorals	Instructions to two pastors

Paul's letters reveal the heart of a pastor

Paul's letters are clear testimony to his pastoral heart. For through his letters Paul exercised a pastoral role toward the churches, which he or his converts had founded. Paul was no academic theologian, far removed from the realities of church life; rather it was his concern for the churches, which proved to be the springboard for this theology. Nor was Paul a one-eyed evangelist, intent only on winning people for Jesus Christ; rather it was his concern to remain in relationship with the churches he planted

Perhaps strangely, Paul never uses the term 'pastor' of himself.

Rather his preferred image for the pastor task is found in the parent-child relationship. To the Corinthians Paul declared: "**For even if you have 10,000 guardians in your Christian life, you have only one father. For in your life in union with Christ Jesus I became your father by bringing the good news to you**" (1 Cor 4,15). Paul regarded himself as the founding father of not only the church in Corinth (see also 2 Cor 6.13; 12.14), but also of the churches in Philippi (Phil 2.22) and Thessalonica (1 Thess 2.11).

Paul saw himself also as a spiritual father to individuals, & not just of churches:

- he had become the "**father**" of Onesimus during his imprisonment (Philemon 10);
- Timothy he describes as "**my own dear and faithful son**" (1 Cor 4.17);
- and Titus too he describes as "my true son" (Tit 1.4).

He even applied the metaphor of a mother to describe his relationship with his churches (1 Cor 3.1-2; Gal 4.19; 1 Thess 2.7). However, when writing to Rome and to Colossae, churches he had not founded, – he carefully avoids the parental tone

Along with his care for churches, we also see his care for the well-being of individuals. People counted for Paul.

- Hence in Rom 16 Paul takes the trouble of greeting over 27 people by name.
- In 1 Thess 2.11 Paul declared: “**you know that we treated each one of you just as a father treats his own children**”, implying that he had concerned himself with his converts on an individual basis.
- Similarly Paul emphasised the personal character of his work in Col 1.28: “**With all possible wisdom we warn and teach... in order to bring each one into God’s presence as a mature individual in union with Christ**”.

All this is in line with Luke’s account of Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders, which suggests that his normal practice was to combine preaching to the church at large together with the visiting of individual church members (Acts 20.20).

Significantly Paul commended this kind of pastoral care to the Thessalonians: their mutual care for one another was to take place on an individual basis (1 Thess 5.11: “**So encourage one another and help one another, just as you are now doing**”)

Paul was a forceful character, who expected obedience from the churches in his care (2 Cor 10.6; Phil 2.12; Philem 2).

His letters are full of instructions on how his readers are to live their lives together: e.g. he told the Corinthians: “**In the following instructions, I do not praise you... As for the other matters, I will settle them when I come**”: 1 Cor 11.17, 34: see also 1 Thess 4.2; 2 Thess 3.6-15).

As far as he was concerned, he had been given “**authority**” by the Lord himself for “**building up the church**” (2 Cor 10.8). However, Paul put limits upon his authority. Time and again he “**appeals**” rather than “**commands**”: i.e. he preferred not to impose his own will upon the churches, but rather sought to encourage them to make their own decisions. Hence he told the Corinthians that he did not seek to “**dictate to you what you believe**” (2 Cor 1.24); and reminds the Galatians: “**you were called to freedom**” (Gal 5.13).

The churches he founded may have been his spiritual children, but they were no longer babes in Christ. In this respect Paul’s model is the parent-adult child, and not the parent-infant child. Thus although he was clear about the form of discipline which should be exercised at Corinth towards the man committing incest, he wanted it to be the church itself that exercised the discipline (1 Cor 5). Paul did not want his children to be overly dependent upon him

Paul was a true pastor of his flock.