

An Introduction to Letters (Epistles) in the New Testament

35% of the New Testament is comprised of letters.

Today, if you want to communicate with a friend, work colleague or government department, you can use one of many channels – you could

- pick up the phone and speak to them or text them;
- video message them, if you have an iPad or similar;
- email them or send a message via Facebook; or
- hand-write a letter (perish the thought!).

In the ancient world of the New Testament, the only option available was to write a letter. However, we mustn't assume that letter writing 2,000 years ago was anything like writing a letter today.

Consider this painting – the Apostle Paul is shown sitting at a desk with a quill in his hand and sheets of *paper* in front of him. In addition, there's an open Bible on the table, ready to be consulted – no doubt it contains the New Testament – it's certainly thick enough! And is that a deck of cards that I see on the table?

It is INACCURATE

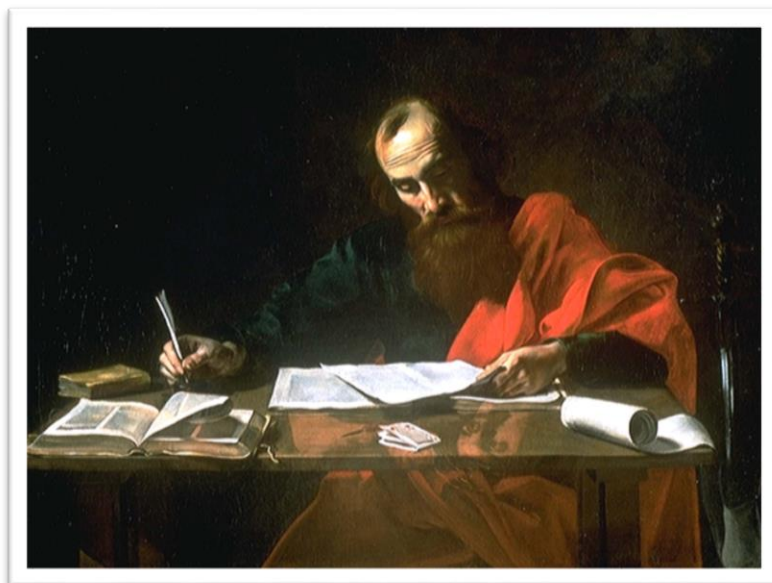
Paper wasn't invented in China until well after 100 A.D., by which time all of the New Testament had been written.

The painter has drawn from the way in which letters were written in his day to construct this portrait, but he has made some clear mistakes.

Hence, the obvious [first question](#) to be asked is –

how *were* the New Testament letters produced? A number of points need to be made:

1. **SCRIBES**. The normal practice was for the author to dictate the letter's contents to a scribe – a professional skilled in the use of the writing materials in use at that time (cf. Rom. 16:22 & 1Co 16:21). The speediest way of copying the spoken word involved the use of wax tablets and a steel tipped stylus. Once the author was finished dictating, the scribe would then copy the message onto papyrusⁱ or parchmentⁱⁱ scrolls, not sheets of paper;
2. **TIME CONSUMING and COSTLY**. Have you ever tried to read right through one of the Epistles of Paul, such as 1 or 2 Corinthians? Even reading the letter takes some considerable time. Imagine how long it would have taken to dictate it, waiting every so often for the scribe to catch up. Then try to imagine how long it took the scribe to copy from the wax tablet onto the scroll. The whole process was long and expensive. For this reason, it was rare to have multiple copies made;
3. **SITUATIONAL**. Most New Testament letters were written to address specific problems or situations. Often, one of the churches that an Apostle was responsible for, sent him a series of questions or pleas for help. Alternatively, the author would be made aware of issues by those who had been to visit the area and then brought back a report. The resulting letter was constructed to carefully critique or comment upon the situation and provide solutions;
4. **COOPERATIVE EFFORT**. To 21st century Christians, the idea that an Apostle didn't necessarily come up with every idea found in his letters, seems wrong. But that's a modern viewpoint; 1st century letter writing was a social event. Scholars believe that the NT authors dictated many of their letters in the company of their trusted associates. No doubt they would have discussed the topics to be included in the letter in much the



*Saint Paul Writing His Epistles (1620) by Valentin de Boulogne.
In public domain.*

same way that eldership teams talk about problems today. In some of the NT letters there are frequent and sudden changes in the flow of the narrative. This suggests one of three things:

- a. that there were short breaks in between dictation sessions. Perhaps what we would call a “comfort break”;
- b. that due to the length of time the whole process took, the author might lose track of what he was saying, or digress in much the same way that preachers have a habit of doing today;
- c. that while the author was speaking, one of his friends would remind him not to forget to insert something they had previously discussed.

However, it must be stressed that in ALL of this, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was at work. The words that we find in the books of the New Testament are “God-breathed” no matter how they were arrived at. In some cases (Philemon, James and Revelation for example), one, single author dictated the contents. In others, although Paul or Peter was the only one coming up with the words written by the scribe, comments “from the floor”, might influence the narrative flow;

John Smith
123 Broadway
City, State 12345

5. **FORM and STYLE.** When we write letters we make use of the forms of address and styles of letter writing (“templates” in other words) that are in common use today. The one shown here is a template for a formal, business letter; for a personal letter, we might omit the company address at the left side and use “Yours truly” at the end.

John Smith, 123 Broadway, City, State 12345

Director
Corporation
123 Pleasant Lane
City, State 12345

December 8, 2012

Dear Sir or Madam,

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Nullam aliquet tellus vel justo porta et semper libero rutrum. Duis vestibulum sagittis aliquam. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Phasellus ac velit eu dolor lobortis fringilla. Quisque imperdiet porta ante in pretium. Maecenas facilisis varius metus et blandit. Proin rheneus arcu non ante elementum non vehicula sem varius. Morbi feugiat, elit eget tristique posuere, urna eros vestibulum alib, at tempus neque justo nec enim.

Carabitur id est enim. Suspendisse potenti. Fusce eleifend sodales tortor, a interdum tortor sollicitudin vel. Morbi vel tellus enim, eget hendrerit ligula. Proin molestie suscipit erat, eget consectetur orci convallis at. Ut vestibulum, odio vitae blandit dignissim, dui magna auctor leo, sit molestie augue magna sed nisi. Phasellus ipsum magna, fringilla id tempor id, tristique vitae mauris. Maecenas sed orci vel eros consectetur ultrices.

Mauris enim velit, feugiat at venenatis eu, scelerisque vitae mauris. Nullam accumsan facilisis mauris sagittis iaculis. Mauris condimentum dictum libero. Vestibulum ante ipsum primis in faucibus orci luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae; Nullam consequat malesuada feugiat. Vestibulum tempor commodo turpis id gravida.

Sincerely,

John Smith

Attached: Copyright permission form

The Apostles who wrote (dictated) the letters we have in the New Testament also used the letter forms that were common in their day. There are normally four or five segments to a 1st century, New Testament letterⁱⁱⁱ:

- 1st. Opening (sender and any co-senders, addressee[s], greeting);
- 2nd. Thanksgiving (often including an intercessory prayer and possibly a reference to the end-times and our hope in Christ);
- 3rd. Body of the letter (formal opening, background, followed by the reason for writing the letter and often some Theological explanations of the principles needed to address it);
- 4th. Paraenesis, i.e., exhortation and/or admonition, correction and disciplinary pronouncements;
- 5th. Closing (greetings, sometimes with the author’s own hand being added, doxology and benediction)

The 3rd and 4th segments are sometimes repeated, so that a letter might look like this: 1 – 2 – 3a – 4a – 3b – 4b – 3c – 4c – 5. Alternatively, especially in Paul’s letters, repetitions of segments 3 & 4 may be interwoven so that the boundaries between them are almost impossible to discern;

6. **POSTAL ARRANGEMENTS.** There was no Postal Service in the 1st century. Instead the author would have to arrange for the letter to be sent with a traveller who was going in the right direction. Payment would then be made by the recipient to that traveller – in effect, paying them for taking their time and effort in bringing it. In the case of Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon, Paul commissioned his friend Tychicus to take the letters with him as he made a visit to the area (cf. Col. 4:7; Eph. 6:21; Philemon lived in Colossae);
7. **TRANSMISSION of CONTENTS.** Because 1st century letters sent to churches were so expensive, they could not be loaned out to individual members. Hence, the normal practice was for the letter to be read aloud at a church meeting. In any case, not all 1st century Christians could read. In addition, since it was so time consuming and expensive to make copies, the letter would be passed from congregation to congregation. Some copies *were* made however, as the churches expanded or as the need to spread the contents over a larger area was necessary;
8. **COMBINATION and EDITING.** In some cases, such as Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians, a number of smaller letters have been combined into one. We cannot be sure why this was done, but we can make some educated guesses. Over time, churches began to recognise that these letters were Holy Spirit inspired and

needed to be preserved – they began to wear out through overuse. It may be that the cost of making copies suggested to church leaders that it would be better to combine small letters together. There is also evidence that an editing process took place in some cases, though not to change the message in any way. Rather, as time went on, some older terms and references needed to be explained if they were to be understood by the current generation.

The **second question** to be asked is - who wrote all of these letters?

Paul	John	Peter	James	Jude	??
1 Thessalonians - 50-51 A.D.	1 John - early 90s AD	1 Peter - early 60s A.D.	James - 60s A.D.	Jude - 64-68 A.D.	Hebrews - 64-68 A.D.
2 Thessalonians - 52-53	2 John - early 90s AD	2 Peter - 63-65			
Galatians - 53-55	3 John - early 90s AD				
1 Corinthians - 54					
2 Corinthians - 55-56					
Romans - 57-58					
Philippians - 60-62					
Colossians - 60-61					
Philemon - 60-61					
Ephesians - 60-61					
1 Timothy - 60-62					
Titus - 62-64					
2 Timothy - 64-67					

The above table lists the letters of the New Testament beneath the name of the person generally credited by evangelicals with writing the letter. The dates of writing, (shown thus - 55) are uncertain, but these are the best estimates as shown in the Zondervan Study Bible.

The **final question** that needs to be answered has to do with how we may best understand them in our modern context. I suggest the following strategy as a “starter for 10”^{iv}:

- *Read the entire letter in one sitting.* Then continue doing so over a few days to allow it to “sink in”
- *Reconstruct the historical context.* (see below)
- *Identify the literary context.* (see below)
- *Read the text again – more carefully. Observe!!! Pray!!! Observe!!! Make notes!!! Pray!!! Apply!!!*

Reconstructing the historical context

Ask yourself some of the following questions – use a good Study Bible, commentaries and Bible dictionaries to get some of the answers

- *Who was the author?*
 - *What was his background?*
 - *When did he write this letter?*
 - *What was the nature of his ministry?*
 - *What kind of relationship did he have with the audience?*
 - *Why was he writing?*

- *Who was the biblical audience?*
 - *What were their circumstances?*
 - *How was their relationship with God?*
 - *What about their relationship to the author? each other?*
- *What was happening at the time the book was written?*
- *Are there any historical-cultural factors that might shed light on the book?*

As you reconstruct the historical context, read the letter carefully collecting bits of information that you can use to reconstruct the situation.

Literary Context:

There is no shortcut to analyzing the letter paragraph by paragraph and topic by topic. It will assist you if you can find a simple, overall structure, though you should bear in mind that the 1st century writers probably didn't think in this way. Most good study Bibles give structures for each book of the bible. But you can often find simple ones on the internet, and I would suggest the ones devised by the "truth saves" organization^v as good starting place. You may also find the diagrammatic outlines given by the "Church of Christ in Grapevine"^{vi} useful.

In the case of New Testament letters, summarize the main point of the paragraphs and passages that come before and after the passage you are most interested in – context is everything. Only then should you attempt to summarize your passage. Next, determine how these paragraphs flow together.

You may find the following questions help you in understanding the author's intention:

- *What is the mood of the passage? Is it sad, serious, stern, strict, excited, pleased, passionate, puzzled, or even angry?*
- *Does the author state a general principle? If he does, try to summarize it in your own words.*
- *Does the broader context reveal a theological principle?*
- *Why was a particular command or instruction given? Ask why and under what circumstances it was given.*

An Example:

Heb 12:1-2 NIV Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, (2) fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Historical Context

- *Written to Jewish converts who live near Rome, just prior to a period of intense persecution. Many were tempted to turn away from Christianity and back to their Jewish religion – it was "approved" of by Rome, but Christianity was not!*
- *Written to encourage these believers to persevere and not give up or give in.*

Literary Context

- *Tone is serious*
- *"Therefore" indicates passage closely tied to previous chapter.*
- *In the following verses we read the analogy of parental love for a child to explain why believers should embrace hardships as expressions of God's love.*

Observations

- *"great cloud of witnesses"*
- *"throw off"*
- *"run with perseverance"*
- *"fixing our eyes on Jesus"*

The author of Hebrews uses the image of a long-distance race to challenge his audience to persevere in their commitment to Christ in spite of opposition.

Think about what this text meant to the original audience. Think about differences between the original audience and us.

What's the general principle?

The Christian life is like a difficult long-distance race, which requires both effort and endurance.

Key Elements

- *Runners are Christians and the race is life itself.*
- *The race is difficult and we are tempted to take the easier course or quit.*
- *Running successfully requires both effort and endurance.*

An example of good theological principles to draw from these verses.

The saints who have gone before supply us (see Chapter 11; and past generations of Christians of the modern era) with valuable examples of endurance. We should look to them for inspiration and encouragement.

To run the race successfully, we need to reject things in life that hinder our progress and, most importantly, focus on Jesus and our relationship with him.

Summary?

The Christian life is like a difficult long-distance race, which requires both effort and endurance.

Discuss

ⁱ "Papyrus is made from the stem of the papyrus plant, *Cyperus papyrus*. The outer rind is first removed, and the sticky fibrous inner pith is cut lengthwise into thin strips of about 40 cm (16 in) long. The strips are then placed side by side on a hard surface with their edges slightly overlapping, and then another layer of strips is laid on top at a right angle. ... While still moist, the two layers are hammered together, mashing the layers into a single sheet. The sheet is then dried under pressure. After drying, the sheet is polished with some rounded object, possibly a stone or seashell or round hardwood. Sheets could be cut to fit the obligatory size or glued together to create a longer roll. A wooden stick would be attached to the last sheet in a roll, making it easier to handle." Taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus>, accessed on 2 March 2017

ⁱⁱ "Parchment is a material made from processed animal skin and ... is most commonly made of calfskin, sheepskin, or goatskin. ... The word parchment evolved (via the Latin pergamenum and the French parchemin) from the name of the city of Pergamon which was a thriving centre of parchment production during the Hellenistic period" – taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parchment>, accessed on 2 March 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ See chapter 7 - "The Ancient Letter Genre" of *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (2nd Edition), by Charles B. Puskas and C. Michael Robbins, published by The Lutterworth Press in December 2013, ISBN: 9780718840877, pp 134-143. A pdf version can be found at <http://www.lutterworth.com/pub/introduction%20to%20new%20testament%20ch7.pdf>, accessed on 3 March 2017

^{iv} Taken from *Grasping God's Word* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, published by Zondervan in May 2012, ISBN-13: 978-0310492573

^v <http://truthsaves.org/>

^{vi} <http://www.churchofchristgrapevine.org/charts-of-the-books-of-the-bible.html>