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READING THE LETTERS

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LETTERS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

A modern reader first coming to the NT might think it strange that twenty-one of its twenty-seven books are letters, or something very much like letters, and that these make up 35% of the text. Why this particular form?

At least four factors should be borne in mind. First, we sometimes forget how blaseé we are about the sheer wealth of options we have today in the field of communications, almost none of which was open to the first-century church. Letters (we shall see) were established means of both private and public communication; there were not many others. There were ancient equivalents to town criers, some book publication (but no printing), plays, many speeches—but most of these were not realistic options for the kinds of messages the first Christian leaders needed to send.

Secondly, the rapid growth of the Christian church in the first decades of its life required a flexible, inexpensive and prompt means of keeping in touch with believers scattered around the empire. It is difficult to imagine a better alternative from the options available at the time.

Thirdly, as the Christian church grew, it confronted more questions than it could easily cope with. Some of these arose from its own growth out of the religion of the old covenant; some of them stemmed from its confrontation with the paganism of the Graeco-Roman world. Rapid growth and far-flung geography thus combined with kaleidoscopic agendas. In the providence of God, these diverse topics became the means by which the first

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generation of believers, led by the Spirit, learned to express and defend the faith in extraordinarily rich expressions of the truth. These pressures were often most conveniently addressed by letters; it is not surprising that such letters became under God the church's charter documents.

Finally, letters were an established means in the ancient world of establishing 'presence'. We would perhaps speak of 'keeping in touch', of 'maintaining friendship', in some organizations of 'preserving lines of authority'. To achieve such ends in the western world we might turn first to telephone and 'fax'. In the Roman Empire the same ends were achieved through letters, doubtless valued all the more for the delays that frequently separated one missive from the next. Certainly there is evidence that on numerous occasions the NT writers wanted to establish their 'presence' for various reasons (*e.g.* 1 Cor. 5:3–5; Gal. 4:19–20; 1 Thes. 5:27), even though nothing could entirely close the gap in communication opened up by distance (1 Thes. 2:17–3:8; 2 Jn. 12).

Types of letters

About a hundred years ago it was argued that ancient Graeco-Roman missives could be divided into two kinds: (i) epistles, *i.e.* literary productions that somewhat superficially took the form of letters but were meant for universal publication and wide readership; and (ii) letters, occasional writings (*i.e.* letters occasioned by concrete circumstances) designed to be read by an individual or defined group. Paul's letters, it was argued, all belong in the latter category. But this simple division is now universally abandoned. It is too simple: far more types of letters have been classified. It is also too rigid, for there is ample evidence that at least some letters addressed to concrete situations were nevertheless treated as having normative interest and significance beyond the original addressee (*e.g.* Col. 4:16). Moreover, the sheer diversity of NT letters (compare, say,

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Philemon and 3 John with Romans) calls out for more suitable categories.

One group of scholars has classified ancient letters into ten categories (though these overlap somewhat). What is clear is that ancient letters varied from private, personal communications (such as a letter home asking for money) to formal treatises or tractates that aimed for the widest possible circulation. In between there were shorter public letters (something akin to a modern 'Letter to the Editor' without the newspaper!). The NT letters cover a large part of this range, but not all of it. Romans and Hebrews, for instance, stand closer to the tractate end of the spectrum, but even so they remain occasional letters (see Rom. 15:17–22; Heb. 10:32–39; 13:22–24). Philemon, Titus and 3 John stand closer to the other end, but their inclusion in the canon shows they were perceived to have wider authority and relevance than the needs of their first readers might have dictated.

The contents of a letter

Most letters in the ancient world comprised three parts: an opening made up of address and greeting, the main body and a closing. The opening was usually very short: 'X to Y, Greetings [*chairein*]'. In the NT, this simple form is preserved in the letter sent by the apostolic council (Acts 15:23), in the letter of Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26), and in James (1:1). Two NT letters (Hebrews, 1 John) include no such opening at all, raising questions about their genre (see below); but most of them expand the opening, sometimes quite a bit (*e.g.* Rom. 1:1–7), and change the traditional *chairein* ('greetings') to *charis* ('grace'), doubtless under the influence of Christian experience of the grace of God in the gospel (so all of Paul's letters, 1 and 2 Peter and 2 John).

Some ancient letters included a health-wish or some blessing. Here the NT letters display considerable diversity. The closest thing to a health-wish is 3 John 2, where,

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remarkably, it is Gaius's *spiritual* health that sets the standard for his general well-being. NT letter writers customarily open with thanksgiving to God (all of Paul's letters except Galatians, 2 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Titus do); some begin with a paean of praise (2 Corinthians, Ephesians and 1 Peter). Ancient letters tended to close with greetings of various kinds; the NT writers follow the same practice, often adding a doxology or a benediction. Romans is extraordinary for the space it devotes to a sketch of Paul's travel plans (15:22–29), a request for prayer (15:30–32) and a prayer-wish (as third-person prayers are called; 15:33), a long list of commendations and greetings (16:1–16), and final greetings from co-workers and the concluding grace and benediction (16:20–27). Although some have seen ch.16 as a later editorial edition, the considerable space Paul devotes to this closing is probably because he had no prior involvement with the church as a whole, and so he was concerned to establish the best possible relations with them in view of his proposed stay with them while heading for Spain.

In the main body, the form of letters from late antiquity differed widely. Some modern scholars have attempted to identify typical forms and sequences, typical transitions from the opening to the body, and so forth. So far these efforts have not commanded wide assent. It seems best simply to respect the diversity, acknowledging that Christian writers could be as creative as others (Paul's letters are particularly creative and eclectic), and that some peculiarities of NT letters probably owe something to the heritage of Jewish influence that characterized the early church.

Some special considerations

Four additional comments of a general nature are in order. First, NT letters tend to be a little longer than their secular counterparts. Commonly the letters of Seneca and Cicero are compared with those of Paul. The 124 letters of Seneca

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vary in length from 149 words to 4134; the 776 letters of Cicero range from 22 words to 2530. Paul's letters average 1300 words in length, but Romans has 7114 words.

Secondly, independent evidence attests how common it was for writers to use 'amanuenses', trained scribes who did the actual writing at their dictation. Doubtless many amanuenses were slaves hired to help a scarcely literate master in business and correspondence; others worked as free agents for their wages. Rom. 16:22 shows how Tertius was the amanuensis who 'wrote down' what Paul dictated in that letter. It was common for those doing the dictation to attest the authenticity of the finished product by adding final greetings in their own hand; certainly that was Paul's practice (Gal. 6:11; 2 Thes. 3:17). The inference is that he dictated all his letters, and perhaps other NT writers did the same.

The difficult question to sort out is how much freedom such amanuenses enjoyed. The evidence is unclear, and therefore much disputed. That some freedom was possible is hinted at even by the fact that Tertius identifies himself. Even so, there is no reason to think that amanuenses regularly enjoyed independent freedom. The degree of freedom probably depended on the relationship between the amanuensis and the one doing the dictation, the relative skill of the two persons, the nature of the correspondence, and so forth—much as the degree of independence given to a secretary today turns on similar variables. However, once the author had read the finished product and signed it, the document was 'owned' by the author, not simply by the amanuensis. Still, it may be that some differences in wording between, say, the Pastoral letters and the rest of the Pauline corpus turn on the probability that Luke was the amanuensis for the former (see 2 Tim. 4:11), which contain a substantial number of turns of phrase more typical of Luke's own writings.

Thirdly, it is often asserted that the writing of pseudonymous letters (*i.e.* letters purporting to be written

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by some well known author, but in fact written by someone else) was a common practice in the first two centuries of this era, that NT writers would have seen nothing wrong with it, and that literary evidence demands the conclusion that some NT letters are pseudonymous. (The list differs from scholar to scholar, but the Pastorals and 2 Peter are most commonly thought to be pseudonymous, followed by Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians, and less frequently several others.) But although pseudonymity was not uncommon in the ancient world, especially in apocalyptic books, it was rare, and perhaps quite non-existent, in the domain of letters. There is no certain example of a pseudonymous letter that has come down to us from the first two centuries. The examples that are cited are not very impressive. On the Jewish side, *The Epistle of Jeremiah* is a homily rather than a letter, and *The Letter of Aristeas* is an apologetic narrative (both of these examples are also a trifle earlier). Similar problems attend the later Christian examples (*e.g.* letters of Christ and Abgarus, a letter of Lentulus, some alleged correspondence between Paul and Seneca). There is not one convincing example from the Graeco-Roman pagan world. Certainly as soon as the church started to evaluate such matters, any suspicion that a document was pseudonymous meant that it could not be recognized as having canonical authority. And in any case many scholars have become convinced that the traditional reasons for labelling certain NT letters pseudonymous are not very compelling. These matters are briefly treated in the introductions to the relevant books.

Finally, for the sake of completeness, the means of transporting these letters should be mentioned. Although the imperial government had its own postal system, it could not be used by the general public. Letters were therefore carried by friends, acquaintances, slaves, employees, soldiers, business people, passing travellers—whoever was willing and was heading in the right direction.

The letters of Paul

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If we assume that the thirteen canonical letters that bear his name are Paul's work, we must nevertheless ask how they came together, and on what principles they found their way into the NT as we know it.

The collection of Paul's letters

Paul's letters were written over a period of about fifteen years (after he had himself been a Christian for about fifteen years), and sent to churches and individuals far removed from one another. How, then, did these thirteen come together? The short answer is that we do not know; the evidence is too slight to be certain. In some cases Paul himself ordered limited circulation (Col. 4:16). Good arguments have been advanced in support of the view that Ephesians was first written as a general circular letter for believers in Ephesus and in neighbouring towns and cities, a general letter covering more specific ones such as Colossians and Philemon (and perhaps Philippians).

The first concrete list that has come down to us is the list of ten Pauline letters (excluding the Pastorals) compiled by Marcion (the leader of an unorthodox Christian movement about 140). Some scholars argue that this was the first time any such list was put together. But this is highly unlikely. Only a tiny fraction of written material from late antiquity has come down to us, and Marcion's list is valuable primarily as evidence that larger, more orthodox lists were probably already circulating. It was the practice of such pseudo-Christian leaders to adapt Christian literature to their own needs. Marcion excluded all of the OT and most of the New; even of the gospels he preserved only a mutilated edition of Luke.

Others have argued that Paul's letters were first brought together shortly after AD 90, fifty years before Marcion. Some devoted follower of Paul, spurred on by the publication of Acts (shortly before 90, on this view), pulled

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the extant Pauline letters together. But it is far more likely that Acts was published much earlier, about 64, and difficult to see why the collection of at least some of Paul's writings would have had to wait for that event anyway. There is strong evidence that several of Paul's letters are cited in the early apostolic fathers (especially Clement of Rome; c. 96). More importantly, 2 Pet. 3:16 refers to the way Paul writes 'in all his letters', an expression which, though it does not necessarily embrace precisely the thirteen canonical letters that have come down to us, certainly presupposes that there is common knowledge of a circulating body of Pauline correspondence. Although the weight of contemporary scholarship favours a late date for 2 Peter, substantial reasons can be adduced for a publication date as early as 64 or 65.

Though it cannot be proved, another theory is perhaps more plausible than its principal competitors. Small groups of Paul's letters circulated regionally even during Paul's lifetime, partially owing to his own requirements in this regard (Col. 4:16). Then, after his martyrdom (c. 65), one or more of his closest co-workers (Timothy?) undertook to preserve as much of his master's circulating correspondence as possible. None of this can be proved beyond doubt. Nevertheless, some such theory seems best able to fit the facts that have come down to us.

The order of the letters

The organization of the Pauline corpus in our New Testaments demands some explanation. The sequence follows neither chronology (publication date? time of writing?) nor themes. It is based on two simple principles: letters to churches (Romans to 2 Thessalonians) are grouped before letters to individuals (1 Timothy to Philemon), and in each group longer letters are placed before shorter letters. The one exception is Ephesians, which on these principles should be placed before

c. circa, about (with dates)



Galatians. At a guess, those who ordered Paul's letters in this way had a copy of Ephesians written in a slightly tighter hand, and therefore mistakenly thought it was shorter than Galatians but longer than Philippians.

Paul's letters are often classified, in more topical fashion, into four groups. The first, comprising Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians, are sometimes described as the great evangelical letters. The first three were written during Paul's third missionary journey. Though many assign Galatians to the same period, a fairly convincing case can be made for the view that it was the first of Paul's extant letters to be written. In content, Romans and Galatians are fairly close, though Galatians was clearly written to warn the churches of Galatia against those who were elevating Judaism within the (Gentile) Christian community, while Romans does not appear to have so specific a purpose.

The second group is often called the captivity or prison letters since in each of them Paul refers to himself as a prisoner. These are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Perhaps all four were written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome, though many scholars have argued that Philippians and perhaps others of these four were sent from Ephesus or Caesarea.

The third group embraces 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Many argue that of Paul's extant letters these two were the first he wrote. Even if Paul wrote Galatians earlier, these two, written from Corinth during his second missionary journey, establish a pastoral sensitivity and a 'last days' perspective that resurface in many of his other letters. Although Paul commonly associates one or more of his colleagues with him in the opening lines of his letters, these two are explicitly tied to Paul, Silas and Timothy, and then rather unusually, are written almost entirely in the first person *plural*.

The fourth group, the Pastoral letters, comprises 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. These are the Pauline letters that are

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most frequently regarded as pseudonymous. If we do attribute them to Paul, however, we must conclude that Paul was released from his Roman imprisonment, for in 1 Timothy and Titus Paul is no longer in chains. By 2 Timothy, however, Paul is again a prisoner, and this time he quite clearly does not expect to survive. Although the linguistic and thematic peculiarities of this group have sometimes been exaggerated, they are substantial, and probably arise from a mixture of factors. These letters are to individuals, late in the apostle's life, dealing in part with the principles of Christian leadership, and possibly dictated to a trusted colleague (Luke?) serving as an amanuensis with relatively greater freedom than usual.

The non-Pauline letters

These are highly diverse in authorship and character. The letter to the Hebrews is formally anonymous, and there is no consensus as to its author. Two letters announce themselves as having been written by Peter, and one each by James and Jude (whom many take to be half-brothers of our Lord). The remaining three are formally anonymous, though two of them announce themselves as the work of 'the elder'. There is good reason for thinking that the author of all three is the apostle John. Two of these seven letters are amongst the shortest in the NT (2 and 3 John); one is amongst the longest (Hebrews).

Hebrews and 1 John are alike in one interesting respect. Both begin without a salutation of any sort (unlike the rest of the NT letters). This has prompted some scholars to suggest that these writings are not letters at all, but brochures or small books, homilies or essays. But Hebrews, at least, concludes like a letter, and both contain enough personal remarks, not to mention references to specific details in the experience of the readers, that one must conclude their respective authors had specific readers in mind (*e.g.* Heb. 5:12; 6:10; 10:32; 1 Jn. 2:19). Still, the wealth of phrases used normally in speech in Hebrews

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suggests that the letter began as a series of homilies that were reduced to this form. It is possible that 1 John served as a general pastoral letter circulated amongst a number of churches, with some churches also receiving their own specific and briefer missives (2 and 3 John?).

Several of these letters have features calling for extended comment, even though they can only be noticed here. Jude and 2 Peter share some relationship of literary dependence (as do, say, Mark and Matthew). It is possible that the letter of James was the first book of the NT to be written. John's second letter is unique in its address: it is directed to 'the chosen lady and her children', most probably a sister church and her members (though the reasons why John chose these words are far from agreed). John's third letter is remarkable for its frank reflection of 'power politics' within the primitive church, somewhat reminiscent of 2 Cor. 10–13.

Interpreting the letters

The general interpretative principles briefly summarized earlier (see 'How to interpret the Bible' in the article Approaching the Bible) must of course be borne in mind, but in addition there are a few guidelines that are particularly valuable when reading the letters.

1. Because most of the letters maintain some degree of a linear flow of thought, we must do our best to trace that flow. At the same time, allowance must be made for several important variations.

First, sometimes a writer is responding to the agendas of those to whom he is writing. This is particularly true in 1 Corinthians. Although chs. 1–4 address the problem of factionalism in the church in Corinth, the remaining chapters find Paul treating, item by item, matters raised by oral reports that had reached him (chs. 5–6), and then items raised in a letter from the Corinthians (ch. 7 onwards).

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Secondly, the movement of thought is anything but straightforward in several letters. James is notoriously hard to outline, 1 John even more so. Some have argued that in the latter case there is a 'rondo style', with several basic points being treated again and again. If so, it is not a matter of mere repetition: each cycle introduces new material and insight. In any case the development of the argument is not linear (as it is, relatively speaking, in much of Romans or 2 Corinthians); nor is it piecemeal, as in some lists of proverbs. The flow of thought has to be teased out, but it often circles back on itself and looks at ground already covered, but from a slightly different perspective.

2. The earliest of the letters were the first canonical documents to be produced after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; the latest of them were amongst the last canonical documents to be written. But although they cover a period roughly contemporaneous with the writing of the gospels, the gospels, unlike the letters, set out to present Jesus in the days of his flesh. However much we can reasonably know from the gospels about the state of the church when they were written, what we glean is never more than inference. By contrast, the letters offer us relatively direct insight into the nature of the early church.

Thus the letters provide us with the doctrinal, ethical and spiritual culmination (this side of the second coming) of the salvation-historical movement of the Bible. That the picture is rich and multi-faceted must not be denied. That we do not have all the pictures of the puzzle is certain. But these are the pieces that draw together many of the themes of Scripture and set out the ways in which apparently divergent strands are drawn together in God's revelation, in these last days, in his Son. It is difficult to imagine how impoverished we would be if the NT did not include, say, Hebrews, with its comprehensive vision of the way the levitical system and its related covenant pointed forward to the sacrifice and priest who would deal effectively with sin once and for all; Ephesians, with its breathtaking vision of the sweep of God's plan in drawing lost Jews and lost

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Gentiles together into one new humanity, the church; 1 John, with its stirring insistence that real Christianity can take comfort and assurance from doctrinal fidelity, moral obedience, and genuine love; Colossians, with its pointed warnings, peculiarly relevant in our pluralistic age, that Jesus Christ is not one deity among many, but the exclusive, redeeming, self-disclosure of God, the One in whom all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col. 2:9). Similarly distinctive claims could be made for every letter in the NT canon.

3. In substantial measure, the letters are bridge documents. The OT Scriptures were written by Jews, very largely in the context of the covenant Yahweh made with his people. True, these books reflect something of the ancient Near Eastern context in which the Israelites lived. We are familiar, for example, with something like Jewish Wisdom Literature in the literature of Egypt, something akin to the structure of the covenant in the treaties of the ancient Hittites and other peoples, and the use of circumcision in other tribal groupings (though with quite different symbolism than amongst Abraham and his sons). But the NT letters self-consciously spring from this Jewish heritage and, in many cases, address fledgling churches in the Graeco-Roman world. The change was not incidental; it reflected the transformation of the people of God from a tribal grouping to an international community of the redeemed. As the NT writers faced this extraordinary transition, as they began to work out this globalizing vision to which the Spirit of God pressed them, they not only had to sort out the relationship Christians have to the law of Moses, but the challenge of keeping Jewish and Gentile Christians together. There were new social and political implications of a covenantal community that was not a nation but an international fellowship.

Even at the literary level this 'bridge' value of the letters takes on large importance. On the one hand, it is possible to examine the letters of Paul and note his largely Jewish handling of Scripture and his profound acquaintance with

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Jewish methods of interpretation. At the same time, Paul had enjoyed not only the advantages of excellent education at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem but also sufficient exposure to Greek thought that he could cite minor Greek poets and make use of rhetorical and literary devices that spring from the Graeco-Roman world. Sensitivity to this dual heritage will enrich our exegesis. At the same time, it calls forth wonder before the providential wisdom of the God who so carefully prepared the way for this supreme act of self-revelation.

4. Because the letters reflect not only concrete historical circumstances but also culminating biblical theology, there are two additional tools that are very helpful to pastors and laypersons (in addition to commentaries). Good Bible dictionaries provide a wealth of material on cities, movements, technical expressions, relevant archaeological evidence and some critical matters. When reading 1 Corinthians, it is helpful to know something about Corinth; when reading the last of the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 3:14–22), it is extremely helpful to learn something about Laodicea. At the same time, good theological dictionaries can summarize a great deal of biblical and post-biblical Christian discussion in a few paragraphs or pages, setting discussions within broader frameworks that might easily be missed by those who are seriously studying the text of Scripture for the first time.

5. Because all of the NT letters were in some measure prompted by specific occasions, it is helpful to reconstruct the occasion. Sometimes this exercise is vital; sometimes it is dangerous; always it is a bit tricky.

Reconstructing the occasion that calls forth a letter from the evidence of the letter itself is a little like trying to reconstruct a telephone conversation from the evidence of what is said at only one end. Sometimes the task is very easy; sometimes it is exceedingly difficult. At the risk of pushing the analogy too far, it is easy to reconstruct a telephone conversation where the end to which you are

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listening constantly repeats what the other is saying; it is a trifle more difficult, but not challenging, where only one inference is possible; it is more difficult, but not impossible, where several inferences are possible but where the trends in the conversation tend to eliminate some of them; and it is impossible to get beyond probabilities or even sheer speculation where there are many possible inferences that can be drawn, and few certain ones. Even there, however, what can actually be heard at one end may be exceedingly valuable in its own right.

This effort of reconstructing the occasion that calls forth a particular letter is sometimes called 'mirror-reading'. For example, from the very surface of the text of Hebrews one observes that the author is deeply concerned that the readers persevere in the faith, regardless of difficulty. But are the readers Jewish Christians who want to return to detailed observance of the Jewish law? Are they Gentile proselytes to Judaism, and thence to Christianity, who want to return to more overt connections with practising Judaism? Have they or the author been heavily influenced by the writings of Philo of Alexandria, whose work at a merely formal level frequently parallels Hebrews rather closely? Certainly one can mention scholars who support each of these views, and many more.

At one level, such questions do not matter very much. Regardless of the decisions a modern interpreter reaches, virtually all will agree that the text of Hebrews urges professing Christians to persevere. Nevertheless, the questions are not merely academic. The nature of the readers' temptation and the manner in which they are drawn to persevere are tied to their concrete circumstances. That one can find scholars who disagree with this position or that is no reason not to think through such matters for oneself; scholarship is not above partisanship, nor is it free from bias and cant. Arguments must be weighed by every thoughtful reader. What is clear, however, is that what we make of the occasion that calls Hebrews forth will affect not only our understanding of the call to persevere, but it will

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also affect our understanding of the way this letter should be applied to believers today. Telling, appropriate and effective application turns in the first instance on establishing reasonable links between our circumstances and the circumstances first addressed.

Despite arguments to the contrary, the main lines of the occasion that called forth Hebrews are much more straightforward than the situation behind Colossians. Precisely what the 'Colossian heresy' was has never won widespread agreement. The answer, in any case, is the exclusive supremacy of Christ, the only one in whom the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col. 2:9), the only one who is the image of the invisible God, the only one through whose blood, shed on the cross, God has made peace (Col. 1:15, 20). These great truths are firm regardless of the nature of the Colossian heresy. Doubtless it would be a little clearer exactly why Paul argues as he does if we knew more certainly just what he was confronting, but the main lines of the thought of the letter are clear in any case.

The principal point to observe is that the nature of the letters requires that the interpreter make the effort to understand the historical circumstances surrounding the writing of each document. What is not permissible is to make one particular interpretation utterly dependent on a reconstruction that is itself the result of a merely possible set of inferences.

6. The occasional nature of letters in some ways makes the interpreter's task difficult. The themes that Paul, say, is likely to stress are determined in part by the situations he confronts. In that sense his themes may not be fair representations of his theology as he might preach it in the marketplace, or as he might articulate it in a book for his fellow apostles. This does not mean his letters are contrary to his theology; it means, rather, that with the possible exception of Romans, Paul nowhere sets out to give an overview of the theological structures of thought he has adopted as a Christian apostle.

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This means that much that is written about the 'centre' of Pauline theology does not adequately take into account the nature of his writings as they have come down to us. One cannot reasonably determine the relative importance of the cross and the Spirit in Paul's thought by simply counting up the number of occurrences of each word. There may have been important pastoral reasons why he said more about one than the other, even though the other was more controlling in his thought. Moreover, one needs to examine all the places where, say, 'cross', 'crucified', 'death' and 'blood' occur, to see what function such references have in Paul's thought.

Even the notion of the 'centre' of Paul's thought may be misleading. It demands of him an ordering of his theology, with successive hierarchies of importance, that he might well have found strangely abstract, even repulsive. 'Centre' is not in any case a clear term; it needs to be defined more clearly. What can be argued is that justification is the 'centre' of Paul's thought in the sense that it marks the turning point in a person's relation to God and is, therefore, the fundamental concept on which all other saving blessings depend. But one could define 'centre' in a slightly different way and insist that the cross, Christology, or the glory of God, or half a dozen other things are central for Paul.

7. But if the occasional nature of the NT letters causes difficulties of interpretation, at another level the Christian's task is much easier than would otherwise be the case. If the writers of the letters had chosen instead to write theological tomes, doubtless Christian intellectuals would be very gratified. The letters as we have them, however, not only stimulate thought and increase understanding, but bear on all of life. The letters deal with ethical questions, pastoral attitudes, the deep wellsprings of human emotions, conscience, will, morality, truth. We find tender thanksgiving in Philippians, deep and loving yearning in 1 Thessalonians, blistering indignation mingled with pained love in Galatians, passionate pleading in Hebrews, and so forth.

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This, surely, is as it should be. For the Bible, not least the letters, was given not merely to inform the mind, but to transform the life. These letters constitute a graciously given divine means to mediate the presence of God to men and women who would otherwise be lost and abandoned. Thus the interpretative challenge must never be a merely intellectual one. It must be a part of our calling as Christians, as justified sinners, as disciples who confess Jesus as Lord.

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Further reading

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