

THE LETTERS

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-one of the twenty-seven New Testament books are epistles. In the Old Testament we have a few letters, such as that which Jeremiah sent to the people in exile (Chapter 29). But these Old Testament letters are incorporated into larger works. The New Testament epistles are letters that stand by themselves.

The letters can be separated into groups in several ways. The letters to Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Third John are personal letters from the writers to various individuals. These letters are more intimate and specific than the epistles that are addressed to congregations. Probably all the New Testament letters were dictated to scribes. They may have been reread and corrected before the final drafts were finally written on papyrus. Then they were placed in the hands of a messenger to carry to the recipients. The Roman postal service did not carry personal letters.

Another way to group the letters is by writer. Thirteen are under Paul's name, although the actual authorship of some of them is questioned by some scholars. Hebrew is anonymous, one is by James, two by Peter, three by John, and one by Jude. Sometimes the letters by Paul are called *Pauline*, in contrast to the others that are called the *General Epistles*.

THE DATING OF THE LETTERS

All the letters were written from about A.D. 50 to 100. Opinions may vary, but generally the order of writing is Galatians, First and Second Thessalonians, First Corinthians, Philippians, Second Corinthians, and Romans, all in the decade from about 50 to 60. Then follow

Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, First Timothy, Titus, Second Timothy, James, First Peter (the date of Second Peter is unknown), and possibly Hebrews, all before A.D. 70. Jude may have been written about A.D. 80, and John's three letters date in the last decade of the first century.

The letters are particularly valuable because they are the oldest Christian writings we have. Paul's earliest letters predate the earliest Gospel (Mark) by at least a few years. Also, Paul wrote other letters (see 1 Corinthians 5:9 and Colossians 4:16); but those that survived were particularly treasured, copied, and circulated by the early Christian communities. This whole process was a part of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, we believe.

THE FORM OF THE LETTERS

Archaeology has shown us that the New Testament letters follow the normal form of letters in the Hellenistic world of that time. Only the greetings and endings of the biblical letters show differences in form. The general pattern is (1) salutation; (2) identification of writer; (3) body of the letter, usually divided into theological statements followed by exhortations and practical advice; (4) closing remarks, prayers, requests, and benedictions.

THE CONTENT OF THE LETTERS

Naturally, with a large group of diverse letters we cannot expect uniformity of content. However, these letters do contain teaching about God and the Lord with instruction on the Christian life and conduct. They also respond to problems that the early church faced.

Some basic ideas expressed in the letters are these:

(1) The relationships between God, Christ, and persons and their salvation. The letters express the same ideas on these subjects as those we find in the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. God is the loving Father who sent his son into the world as the Christ that people might be saved. Christ—crucified, buried, risen, and ascended—is Lord. The world is corrupt and evil. We cannot save ourselves, but by faith in and obedience to Christ an individual can be saved. That person should then, as a part of the body of Christ (the church), live to the praise of God's glory.

(2) While Christ is both at the right hand of God and also inhabiting the church, he will return visibly and in glory at the end of the age. This is the Christian hope, to be with him in glory.

(3) The church is collectively the called-out people of God. Christ loves the church and is in the church through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. As individuals, Christians should live as slaves of Christ. They are redeemed by his blood and are examples of moral, upright persons in an immoral and unrighteous social situation.

(4) The affairs of congregations of Christians should be handled decently and in order with appropriate leaders who love and shepherd the flock of God. Their worship, too, should be done decently and in order. But the Holy Spirit's activity and power in the worship experience should not be hindered.

Christians today recognize in the letters the testimony and instruction of the Apostles. The letters are a basic guide of faith and practice.