

BGM BIBLE COLLEGE

New Testament Survey

Lecture 17 by

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The Epistles of the New Testament

Within the New Testament there are in all twenty-seven books, of which twenty-one are epistles, forming nearly thirty-five percent of the text. Out of these twenty-one epistles, **thirteen belong to the Apostle Paul**. Among the Jews, the writing of epistles for the purpose of teaching religion was not a common practice. Hence, the question arises: why then were these twenty-one epistles written?

The answer may be thus given: in the early days of Christianity, when the missionaries journeyed from one place to another, they possessed no other means of communication, and therefore the letter became the most reliable method. **Epistles** were written because they were a simple means of instruction. Moreover, **a letter** was also a medium of nearness; though the writer was absent in body, his writing gave the sense of his presence.

The Epistles of the New Testament and Their Greco-Roman Background

Although in ancient times the writing of letters was not frequent, yet it was not unknown (**cf. 2 Samuel 11:14-15; Ezra 4-5**). But in the Greco-Roman world, the letter became a regular and popular medium of communication. For this cause, scholars have studied the conventions of ancient letters, that they might better understand the epistles of the New Testament.

A typical Greco-Roman letter was composed of three parts: the address or salutation, the main body, and the conclusion. This simple pattern is seen in **Acts 23:25-30** and James 1:1. Yet two of the New Testament epistles (Hebrews and 1 John) do not follow even this form. Most of the epistles, however, lay great emphasis upon the opening section, such as those of the Apostle Paul, the two epistles of the Apostle Peter, and 2 John. This change was likely connected with the purpose of the letter itself.

Ancient letters often began with prayers for health and well-being; therefore, the New Testament epistles instead commence with thanksgiving and blessing.

The Distinction between New Testament Epistles and Ancient Letters

Though many similarities exist between the New Testament epistles and ancient letters, yet significant differences are also found. These arose chiefly from the Jewish background and the particular circumstances of the early Church. This distinction is most evident in the epistles of the Apostle Paul, for he was a creative and unique writer.

With regard to length, the epistles differ from the common letters of the time. In that age, letters were often lengthy, yet even the longer epistles of Paul are shorter in comparison.

Epistles or Letters?

The classification of ancient correspondence began with the well-known distinction made by Adolf Deissmann, who separated between “Epistles” and “Letters.” According to him, a “**LETTER**” is an informal and personal message, addressed to a particular individual in a given circumstance; whereas an “**EPISTLE**” is a formal and literary composition, written for a wider and more general audience.

He maintained that the Apostle Paul’s writings were in truth “Letters,” being personal and informal in nature. Yet a renowned scholar of the New Testament, D. A. Carson, hath rightly said that we ought not to draw too sharp a line between the two.

The Use of Amanuenses (Scribes)

Because literacy was rare in the ancient world, many letters were dictated to scribes, who then wrote them down. The New Testament itself gives witness to such a practice ([Romans 16:22](#)). It was a common custom that, when a scribe wrote the letter, the author would write the final greeting with his own hand ([2 Thessalonians 3:17](#); [Galatians 6:11](#)).

D. A. Carson remarked that though we cannot affirm this with absolute certainty, it is highly probable that most of the New Testament epistles, including those of the Apostle Paul, were written in this manner.

Among scholars there remained debate whether the scribe had liberty to employ his own words, or whether he was bound to the exact dictation of the author. The truth seemed to be that it depended upon the measure of trust which the writer placed in his scribe. Since the concluding salutation was in the author’s own hand, it is likely that the writer reviewed the entire letter, to ensure that it faithfully expressed his own thoughts and feelings.