

Paul and his Correspondence

Key Passages

I Corinthians 5:9

2 Corinthians 10:9-11

Romans 16:1-2, 22-23

Colossians 4:16

2 Peter 3:16

Paul's letters were reputed in Corinth to be weighty and powerful (2 Cor. 10:10). Later, in 2 Peter, while they are already regarded as scripture, they are reported as sometimes difficult to understand (3:16). That they were generally highly valued is evident from the significant place they occupy in the New Testament, given that they comprise almost half of its contents. They are still extremely important because they are the earliest written documents of the emergent Christian faith. Although Paul probably did not realise it when he wrote, his letters were to become his greatest gift to the Church in the centuries after his death.

We do not know who was responsible for their collection and eventual inclusion in the New Testament. We do not know how many letters Paul wrote altogether. A letter is mentioned in I Corinthians 5:9: 'I wrote to you in a letter...'. Thus I Corinthians seems in fact to be Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. Since Paul's letters are almost all forms of correspondence to particular churches concerning problems in those congregations, they must at first have been received and kept by the churches to which they had been sent. The exception is the letter to Philemon, which contains only 25 verses and was written to Philemon and the members of the church in his house about a runaway slave called Onesimus. The letters were eventually put together into a collection around the year 100 CE. One theory is that the person responsible for collecting them may have been the slave Onesimus, who possibly may have later become the bishop of Ephesus.

Paul does not seem to have developed letter-writing as a means of caring for his converts until the second part of his ministry, or if he did so earlier these documents have not survived. The letters we do have from him were probably all written between the years 48 and 60 CE. In the New Testament, and as noted in earlier module units, we have eight letters that are generally recognized as being from Paul: 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans. Ephesians and Colossians, although in many ways very similar to Paul's undisputed

letters, are most likely to have been written by a disciple of Paul, someone who was well acquainted with his life and thought. The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus belong to a later period in the life of the Early Church and demonstrate development some thirty years or more after Paul's death.

In the first century CE letter-writing flourished in the Hellenistic world. Paul's virtue is that he popularised this form so that it became the normal vehicle of communication within the church. Paul regarded his letters as an important part of his ministry, which was exercised through his own visits to the churches and visits by his colleagues and assistants. The letters were in a very real sense a substitute for Paul's own apostolic presence; he said in them the very same things that he would have said had he been present in person. So although they are very personal, his letters are more than this; they represent the views of someone who believe that he was commissioned by Christ for a very specific task as leader of a mission to the Gentiles. As such he used every means in his power to ensure the wellbeing and growth of his new Gentile communities of believers.

Paul's letters are neither casual nor informal communications. They are the carefully constructed creations of an educated man, having a recognizable format in keeping with the normal letter conventions of the Hellenistic world. They are basically vehicles for informing and encouraging his communities; above all, they are instruments of persuasion to maintain a proper lifestyle in accordance with the pattern exemplified in Paul's own life in imitation of the life of Christ himself.

The rhetoric of persuasion is apparent throughout the letters. Paul appeals, warns, shames, coaxes, and prays for his converts. His rhetorical skills are evident in 2 Corinthians 10-12, where he makes full use of irony in a comparison into which he is forcibly drawn by his opponents. Whilst acknowledging that he is behaving like a madman in boasting at all, he takes up their challenge and boasts of his sufferings rather than in his own eloquence and wisdom. Elsewhere he skilfully writes in the dialogue style of the diatribe using quotations and answers to communicate his opinions clearly (Rom. 2:1-3:8); he composes a hymn to love as the greatest spiritual gift (I Cor. 13); he cites early Christian traditions (Gal. 3:28); he makes use of biblical citations to substantiate his arguments (Rom. 9-11).

Paul's letters should not be viewed as theological essays containing general truths for universal application, irrespective of circumstance or place. There is evidence that letters were read in more than one church: in Colossians 4:16 we read, 'and when this

letter is read amongst you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and you likewise should read the epistle from Laodicea'. Paul's letters, however, were specifically targeted to address problems in a particular church at a specific time in its history; the statements they contain are specific to the churches addressed, and Paul's exhortations cannot be interpreted apart from their original context without the risk of considerable distortion. It was some years after Paul's death before his letters came to be regarded as scripture and, as such, suitable for general application to all churches everywhere.