

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life... (1 John 5:13)*

Letter writing is mostly a lost art. There was a time when letters were necessary for long-distance communication. But, with cheap and instant means of speaking to one another, most people under a certain age have written few letters, if they've written any at all. Instant communication has its benefits, of course – especially in troubling situations – but the number of letters arriving in the mail is only getting smaller.

Whether we not we still write or receive letters, letters themselves will always be a central part of Christian faith and life. Every Sunday, the second reading we hear is from an Epistle. The word 'epistle' is simply the Greek word for letter. After the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and the historical account of the early Church (Acts of the Apostles), the New Testament contains 22 letters, all written in the first century AD, almost 2,000 years ago. There's a lot we could say about these letters, but I wanted to highlight especially some of the reasons we still read and hear these ancient letters today, even if letter-writing itself has mostly fallen to the wayside. Why do we read letters during worship?

First, these give us a snapshot of the Church in the first century. In that sense, they are important for us not only to understand the history of the Church, but even more to see that the same problems (and joys!) experienced by people 2,000 years ago are what we still deal with – for better or worse – today.

Second, even though these letters were written so long ago, they contain timeless truths of faith and life. In fact, even if some of these letters were written to pastors or people who were in positions we were not in, they can still mean something for all Christians.

Third, hearing these letters gives us an intimate look at real people speaking and receiving. Far from being textbooks, instructional manuals, or theological treatises, these are personal writings which name names, places, and interesting details. Almost all of these letters have names attached to their writing – names of real people who had real problems and struggles. Yet, the same message of hope and warning, or rebuke and comfort that we speak today was spoken to them as well.

Finally, and most importantly, though these are the words of great apostles and leaders (Paul, Peter, James, John, etc.), they are even more *God's Word*. From the earliest time of the Church, Christians have recognized that these letters are *Scripture*. More than just a letter you might read and discard, and more than even a special letter you might keep in a folder or scrapbook, these letters were inspired by God to be read among Christians of all times and places. They were *breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness* (2 Timothy 3:16).

So, yes, we still read and hear ancient letters. Just because they're old, though, doesn't mean they're no longer relevant. Instead, may God keep us in the timeless truth of his Word, written down and spoken across space and time, a Word which endures forever!

-Pastor Squire

“God is speaking by His Spirit, speaking to our hearts again, in the ageless Word declaring His own message now as then. Through the rise and fall of nations one sure faith yet standing fast; God abides, His Word unchanging; God the first, and God the last.”

(“God Has Spoken by His Prophets,” *LSB* 583, v. 3)