

# EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Dr. Justin Terrell

justin@fbcdandridge.org

## The New Testament Epistles

### 1. Epistles

- a. **Definition:** The word “epistle” comes from the ancient Greek word “epistolé,” which refers to a letter sent to a person or group for the purpose of teaching or directing. Such letter writing was very common in the ancient world. Not only do we have a collection of inspired New Testament letters, but there are countless non-inspired letters written between leaders and churches, including many deemed to be false and misleading (pseudepigrapha). However, sending and receiving epistles didn’t stop at the end of the first century, but continued throughout church history. Many of the early church fathers communicated to churches through these formal letters (e.g., Ignatius, Irenaeus, Clement, etc.).
- b. **Genre:** It’s been noted that the literary genre of epistle is not found in the Old Testament. As Carson states, “The letter was not a typical method of religious instruction among Jews” (331). However, there are two main reasons that the apostles used letters to communicate God’s truth. First, since the Christian movement was growing geographically, there was a need to correspond from a distance. Second, the apostles wanted a form of communication that would establish “personal immediacy,” or a personal sense of conversation. Carson notes, “People in Paul’s day saw the letter as a means of establishing person presence from a distance, and this perfectly served the needs of the apostles in pastoring their distant flocks” (331).
- c. **Style:** Most of the New Testament epistles were written in a traditional Greek style, with a formal opening, body, and closing. This format was orderly and efficient.
  - **Opening:** Most epistles begin with a greeting or salutation, which identifies the author and recipients, offers a blessing to the readers, and words of thanksgiving.
    - **Ephesians 1:1-2** – “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
    - **Jude 1:1-2** – “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.”

- **Body:** The body of an epistle contains the content the writer wanted to communicate. In the New Testament, the body addresses theological concepts and corrections, instructions for life and ministry, practical questions from churches, words of encouragement and hope, warnings, and other concerns. Markle notes that the New Testament letters “often have a hortatory function where the author warns, rebukes, exhorts, charges, thanks, encourages, and reminds his readers. Such exhortations are always grounded in the reality of Jesus’s cross-work, providing the motivation and power to obey God’s Word.” We also find hymns and creeds, vice and virtue lists, and household codes.
    - **Romans 12:1** – *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*
  - **Closing:** Most of the letters conclude with final thoughts, words of encouragement, travel plans, and a benediction or blessing.
    - **1 Thessalonians 5:23-28** – *“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”*
- d. **Length:** In the New Testament, we find a range of length and content. The longest letter is Romans (7,111 words) and the shortest is 2 John (219 words). Since most of these letters would have been read aloud by churches during worship, the length corresponds to speeches or sermons.
- e. **Writers:** While the New Testament letters were ultimately authored by apostles under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, there is evidence that these authors used others to draft these documents. According to Carson, “The value of papyrus and the low level of literacy meant that many ancient letters were dictated to trained scribes” (Carson, 334). In other words, because writing materials were scarce and few were trained in formal penmanship, mistakes were very costly. Therefore, we see evidence in the New Testament that the apostles would use an “amanuenses” (secretary, scribe) to record what they wanted to communicate.
- **Example:** At the conclusion of Romans, it says, *“I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord”* (16:22), even though Romans 1:1 states, *“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle...”* Tertius was Paul’s scribe responsible for physically recording his message. However, other times Paul indicates that he was the one responsible for drafting the letter. In Galatians 6:11, he says, *“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”*

- f. **Authority:** Each of the New Testament letters are fully inspired and authoritative. However, while these letters were originally sent to specific churches and people, they are also known as “circular letters,” because they were written to be circulated to churches beyond their original destination. In other words, Paul may have written a letter to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians), but the letter would have been sent on to Pergamum, Thyatira, Colossae, Smyrna, etc. We see evidence of this in James, who wrote to the “*twelve tribes in the Dispersion*” (1:1), which were various churches scattered in foreign places. In addition to the churches in the first century, these inspired letters were also written to all churches throughout history, which is why they are in the Bible today. In essence, because these letters were inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are authoritative for all believers until Christ returns.
- g. **Interpretation:** While each of these letters were originally written in the first century to specific churches or people, one must take proper steps for understanding their message for today. Like most other biblical texts, understanding the context is critical for interpreting the passage. Therefore, one of the most important questions to ask is, “What were the issues or circumstances the writer was responding to in the first century?” In other words, what problems were being addressed through this letter. Sometimes the biblical writer will supply this information (e.g., In Galatians, Paul describes what the false teachers were saying about circumcision), but other times we use a method known as “mirror reading,” where the writer’s response helps us to discover the problem. Once we understand the problem, then we can apply to biblical solution to our modern context.
2. **New Testament Epistles:** There are twenty-one inspired epistles in the New Testament canon (35% of the New Testament text). These letters are categorized in two main divisions.
- a. **Pauline Epistles:** The apostle Paul is credited with writing thirteen New Testament letters (not including Hebrews, which some contend was authored by Paul).
- **Theological Epistles:** *Galatians, Romans, 1-2 Corinthians*. These letters are the longest and most theologically robust. They describe topics like Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Missiology, and practical ways for the church to live and function.
  - **Eschatological Epistles:** *1-2 Thessalonians*. These letters emphasize the second coming of Christ, and addresses confusion and false teaching concerning this doctrine. It’s been noted that Jesus’ return is mentioned in every chapter in 1 Thessalonians.
  - **Prison Epistles:** *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. These letters were written by Paul while he was locked up in a Roman prison. He claims in each letter to be “*in chains*.” He addresses various topics of theology and practical living.
  - **Pastoral Epistles:** *1-2 Timothy, Titus*. These three letters were written to pastors that Paul trained in ministry. Not only does he instruct them how to lead, but he teaches them how to

organize their churches, respond to false teachers, and ordain other church leaders, such as the qualifications for elders and deacons.

- b. **General Epistles:** These letters were written by at least four other apostles (five if Hebrews was written by someone other than Paul). Unlike Paul's letters, which were written to specific churches or people, these letters appear to be written to general audiences or multiple churches.
- **Petrine Epistles:** *1-2 Peter*. These letters were written by Peter the apostle, one of the original twelve disciples and most popular leader of the early church. He writes concerning how to live in holiness in a pagan world, how to honor governing authorities, how husbands and wives should relate to one another, and how pastors should shepherd their churches.
  - **Johannine Epistles:** *1, 2, 3 John*. These letters were written by John the apostle, one of the original twelve disciples. He writes mainly to give believers assurance of their salvation by listing notable signs and evidence of true faith in Christ.
  - **James:** Most believe James was the half-brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem Church. He wrote to persecuted believers who had been scattered throughout the region. James gives the church practical wisdom for godly living.
  - **Hebrews:** The author of Hebrews is anonymous. No one knows for sure who wrote this lengthy letter. However, it seems to be Jewish in origin and seeks to exalt Christ.
  - **Jude:** The author of Jude is thought to be the half-brother of Jesus. In this short letter, he addresses the danger of false teachers, protecting churches from satanic attacks.