

**CHAPTER 22**  
**LETTERS IN THE HELLENISTIC WORLD**

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In the Christian community, writings we regard as authoritative inspired Scripture are oftentimes letters grounded in circumstances impacting a particular Christian community of the first century Church. Of course, the difficulty is to apply the historical contexts of these letters to the 21<sup>st</sup> century's problems of the Church. Understanding this is very significant in providing interpretative historical value to Christians today. Let's take a look at letters in the Hellenistic World and their various functions.

"Mainly through the finds of archaeologists we possess a large number of letters from the ancient world... [they can range] from the most informal "to do" list to formal letter-treatises... The letters of the NT, themselves of various types, are obviously for the most part between these extremes."<sup>1</sup> This chapter references Adolf Deissmann who made a distinction between letters and epistles. Adolf described the former "as "non-literary," confidential and personal in nature. The latter he calls "an artistic literary form, a species of literature," designed for publicity."<sup>2</sup>

While Adolf categorized Paul's letters as strictly just that, Paul meant for his letters to the Church to be authoritative and read publicly in the Church. Hence, "I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them" (I Thess. 5:26). Therefore, "Paul's letters are both personal and public documents...Paul has created what amounts to a new type of letter. He has taken over and, at the same time, to a certain extent transformed the Hellenistic letter."<sup>3</sup>

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1Hagner, Donald A, The New Testament, Pg.410

2 Ibid., pg. 410-411

3 Ibid., pg. 411

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Paul uses the Hellenistic letter form: prescript, health wish, body and closing, but changes aspects of it to accommodate his purposes, “and which he uses consistently to articulate his Christian perspective.”<sup>4</sup> The significant difference between the Pauline letters and Hellenistic letter “...is that the last section of the body of a Pauline letter almost consistently is devoted to ethical exhortation.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, “Paul, in short, Christianizes the secular Hellenistic letter form.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Paul’s letters are lengthier than the average Hellenistic letter, except for Philemon. “...The length is the direct result of the character of the letters as public teaching documents...”<sup>7</sup> Besides Paul’s letters, there are other NT letters which have similarity to a Hellenistic letter but to a lesser extent.

The function of a letter in Hellenistic terms is not just communicating an idea to another, but the letter stands in place of the absent person. Therefore, we can see how Paul handled urgent matters impacting the church where his presence was needed. “...The letters, in short, represent apostolic *parousia* or “presence.””<sup>8</sup>

There is also the Greco-Roman Rhetoric which Paul shunned which relied on persuasive argument. Instead Paul preferred to rely on the Holy Spirit in his letters to the Church. According to his “detractors” “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” 2 Cor. 10:10. Paul would at times cite scriptures to prove his point as part of his rhetorical style. Moreover, “...Paul thus became the letter writer par excellence of earliest Christianity.”<sup>9</sup>

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4 *ibid.*, pg. 412

5 *ibid.*, pg. 412

6 *ibid.*, pg. 412

7 *ibid.*, pg. 412

8 *ibid.*, pg. 413

9 *ibid.*, pg. 415

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Bibliography

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