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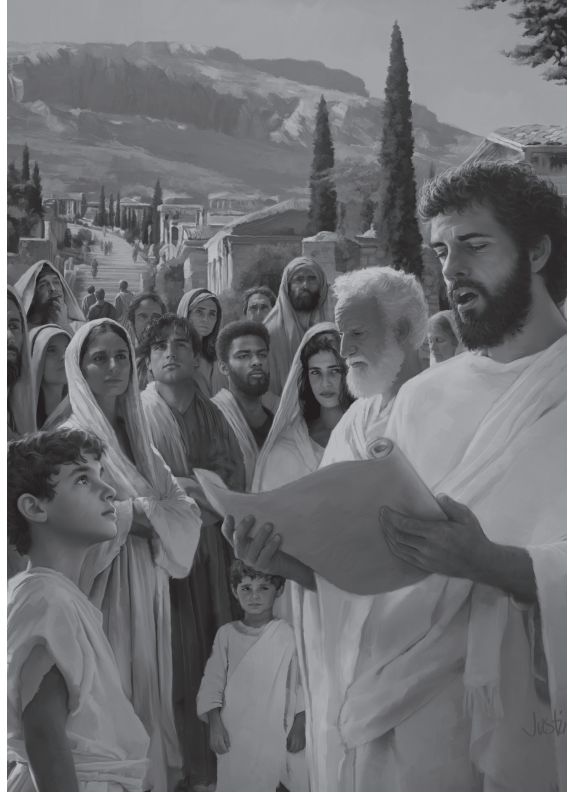
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The Essence of Christian Life and Witness



Writing letters is an age-old activity that has not become obsolete. We've merely changed the way that letters are written. Yes, social media superseded paper. However, in their essence, emails and other forms of electronic letters exert basically the same function: they connect people by exchanging information, feelings, and thoughts.

Why do people write letters? A possible answer is that they have something to say. So it was with the apostle Paul. Although he had so much to say, he did not always have the chance to be face-to-face with those whom he wanted to talk.

So, he wrote letters instead—such as to the Corinthians, which contain some of Scripture's most profound truths. Among them are: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (*1 Cor. 2:2, ESV*), and "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (*2 Cor. 8:9, ESV*). And what about the stunning hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13?

On the other hand, whoever reads Paul's letters to the Corinthians will inevitably get perplexed, not only because of some substantial problems within the church—such as sexual immorality—but also because of the nitpicking that results from cheap factionalism among the members. If you think your church has challenging issues, get ready to see the avalanche of quarrelings Paul had to deal with in Corinth. Perhaps your local church's problems are not as significant as you

imagine! Very likely, you will see that things in Corinth had been much worse.

As disturbing as the problems in Corinth had been, the letters to the Corinthians capture our attention, not because of the problems but because of the remarkable way Paul faces them. By exhorting the church members to evaluate themselves, their behavior, and the surrounding culture in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he exalts the message of the Cross. To use the words of Paul himself elsewhere, any standard lower than the gospel message is to be seen as “anathema” (*Gal. 1:8, 9, ASV*).

In Paul’s time, Corinth was famous for its wealth and strong commerce, all thanks to its port, architecture, shipbuilding, and ceramics. The city was an important financial center. Nevertheless, it was also known for its sexual immorality, religious cacophony, and shrines dedicated to various gods. Indeed, daily life in Corinth was marked by flagrant idolatry. This historical-cultural background helps us understand Paul’s main concerns regarding the Christians in that city and, consequently, his exhortations to them.

This quarter, we will survey Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. In these two remarkable New Testament books, the apostle presents the gospel message as the essence of Christian life and witness, the lens through which everything else is to be judged. No matter the challenges each of us individually or the church in general faces in our journey to heaven—the answer to the most puzzling issues in our work for Christ is the same as for the Corinthians: “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

Jesus is coming soon. This is a time for more unity in Christ, for an openness to the Holy Spirit as never before, for diligent use of the spiritual gifts, and for a more profound experience with our resurrected Lord. It is time for a genuine Christian ministry, engagement in stewardship and mission, spiritual warfare against false teachings, and growth in grace, love, and fellowship. This is a time to hold fast and be faithful to the message of the Cross, and Paul’s letters to the Corinthians teach us to do just that.

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