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The Letter to the Galatians—Fall 2013 Shared Ministry Study

## + An Introduction to Reading Someone Else's Mail

Most of the books of the New Testament (arguably 21 of the 27 books) are actually *letters*, written correspondence between the biblical authors and other people, usually either congregations or individual persons. That means if we are going to study any of these books, we had better get familiar with reading other people's mail. Of course, we believe that these books/letters (more technically, they are called *epistles*) are written also to us, the followers of Jesus in all times and places. But they are for us while we overhear them as conversations written to others first. So as we study Paul's letter to the Galatians, we will need to pay attention to things like Paul's situation, his original readers' situation, and what these ancient words mean to us who are reading over the Galatians' shoulders.

As a place to start, let's take a look at samples of letters from our own culture and time, and see what we might be able to gather simply from their style and form. This will help us understand how Galatians "works" as a letter.

Dear Smith, John. /5948134

Dr. Smith has transferred your care to our service and your medical record is kept in my office. It is very important for us and for you to continue your care.

Dear Valued Customer,

We appreciate your business! We are sure you are enjoying your purchase of...

Did you know that you can save up to 15% with your trade-in if you purchase a new car from...

Dear Mrs. Jamison,

We regret to inform you that you have not been selected for the position for which you applied. We will keep your resume on file. We appreciate your interest in our firm and wish you the best in your endeavors.

Regards,

Dear Grandma,

Thank you so much for the five-dollar bill for my birthday! I know just what I am going to spend it on. Thanks for coming to my party—it means so much that you came.  
Love,

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## How An Epistle Works

If you spend any time at all reading the New Testament epistles, something of a formula emerges. There is, in general, a basic outline to these letters, much as there is a basic structure for how we write letters today. (And similarly, you can tell something about the *kind* of letter you are reading by how a writer works within that basic structure—is it a friendly personal letter, a formal business letter, a computer-written form letter, etc.?) In the New Testament, the epistles of Paul generally have this format: **(1)** sender and receiver information (who is writing to whom), **(2)** greeting/salutation, **(3)** either a thanksgiving for or a blessing of readers, **(4)** main body (usually including Paul’s primary reason or reasons for writing), **(5)** final exhortations (the hand-on-the-door things to be said), **(6)** personal greetings to individuals and closing benediction.

Take a look at how some of these component parts show up in some of Paul’s other letters:

### (1) Sender and Receiver

#### Romans

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection of the dead from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,  
To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

#### 1 Corinthians

Paul, called to be an apostles of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,  
To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

#### Philippians

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,  
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

#### Galatians

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God’s family who are with me,  
To the churches of Galatia:

#### First Impressions

- What differences do you see in these opening sentences from some of Paul’s letters? How does Paul *identify* himself differently in each letter?
- Why do you think Paul might describe himself differently in each of these letters? What cues might we be able to pick up simply from how Paul introduces and identifies himself?
- If you had to guess now, what themes might you expect to hear more about from the letter to the Galatian Christians, from these verses?

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## (2) Greeting/Salutation

### Romans

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### 1 Corinthians

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Philippians

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Galatians

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

## (3) Thanksgiving for Readers

### Romans

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you....

### 1 Corinthians

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ....

### Philippians

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now...

### Galatians

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you...

- What stands out about Galatians at this point in the letter, compared to the other examples?
- Why might Paul generally want to start with giving thanks for his readers? Why not in this case?

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## The Real Gospel from A Reliable Source—Gal. 1:6-24

The way Paul skips over the pleasantries and leaps right into “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you...” would have gotten everybody’s attention when Galatians was first read publicly. Once he had their attention, he begins to get down to brass tacks.

### 1:6-10—All or Nothing

Something has clearly got Paul hot and bothered. He spends v. 6-10 making the case that there is only one true Gospel, and that if the Galatians are sliding into another belief, they have left the real Good News behind. In other words, the message of Jesus Christ, and of being justified by grace through faith in him apart from works of the law, is an all-or-nothing proposition. Either you get the Good News in all its powerful freedom and audacious grace, or you have watered it down into something else—but that something else *isn’t* the Good News anymore. And there is no such thing as Gospel Lite, or Gospel-with-a-little-bit-of-earn-God’s-love-by-rule-keeping. We are either made right with God as a gift of *grace*, or we have lost what the Good News is all about. Paul is setting down from the beginning that there is no middle ground.

- Paul says that there is only one authentic *gospel* of Christ. What does he mean?
- Is there only one way to put the one Gospel into words? How do we know what the Good News really is?
- How would you put the Gospel into a sentence or two? How can you have *that* ready to share with someone at a moment’s notice?

### 1:11-24—Not an Invention

Here’s the thing: the Gospel Paul announced, with no messing, diluting, or watering-down, sounds too good to be true. As theologian Robert Farrar Capon put it, writing about the Reformation’s rediscovery of the Gospel:

*“The word of the Gospel—after all those centuries of trying to lift yourself into heaven by worrying about the perfection of your bootstraps—suddenly turned out to be a flat announcement that the saved were home before they started...Grace has to be drunk straight: no water, no ice, and certainly no ginger ale; neither goodness, nor badness, not the flowers that bloom in the spring of super spirituality could be allowed to enter into the case.”*

So that begs the question, did Paul just make this message up? Is it wishful thinking? Is it just what he wants to be true about God? So Paul spends the rest of what we call Chapter 1 (v.11-24) attesting to his credentials as an apostle and telling the story of how Jesus himself got a hold of him to bring the Gospel to the Gentile (non-Jewish) world.

- What does Paul want us to take home from his telling of his life story and coming to faith in Christ?