

When was the last time you received a hand-written letter or card? In our impersonal age of text messages, mass emails, and electronic communication, it's become so convenient to communicate that someone taking the time to sit down, write out a personal note or card, put it in an envelope, and mail it to you feels significantly different. You can see their handwriting. The script is not generic Times New Roman font from a computer email or a text message. Every word has been thoughtfully penned, placed on the page, put into an envelope, and mailed to you.

In our basement, Melanie and I have a box of our hand-written letters that we wrote to each other when we were dating. Long distance phone calls were expensive. Cell phones were just coming in to common usage. And emails were just starting to become a method of communication. So to go to the mailbox and get a hand-written letter from the person who loved me filled my heart with joy.

Recently, I received a card from someone who wanted to share with me how I had been an encouragement in their life. They had taken the time to thoughtfully write about many different things that had encouraged them and strengthened their faith. It wasn't like a NT letter, one thing it did for me was give me a little window into how the early church would have received the letters from the apostles.

In the NT, we have 21 letters or epistles from Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude. In each of these letters, the writers are correcting false teaching, encouraging believers, writing for support for mission trips, and reminding others of the true faith. But if I were to sum up these letters, behind all of these things, the letters functioned to do two things:

Know Christ

John writes and tells these believers that his aim is that they would know Christ so that they would not sin. He doesn't want these Christians to continue faltering and struggling. He wants them to flourish and succeed. And the way of success is not by continuing in sin, but in knowing Christ. He is neither too lenient about sin, telling them that he writes so that they would not continue in sin; and he is not too severe, lest they be crushed and falter. Rather, he writes with the aim of the heart of Christ so that God's children would live and love and walk as his people.

In a matter of two verses, John summarizes so much of who Christ is and seeks to unpack it in the rest of his letter. He writes so that believers would know the righteous atoning advocate for them.

John writes about Christ in three ways. I want to pick up each one to see how knowing Christ helps us to live the Christian life.

First, he writes about “The Righteous One.” John has already used this word in 1:9 – if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In this sense, John is using the word “righteous” to refer to a moral quality. Sin stains or pollutes us. And the way for cleansing is by confessing our moral failure and receiving the cleansing from Christ. But what makes Christ able to cleanse us? The only way Christ could cleanse us is if he was righteous. He can declare our sins forgiven because he lived a perfect life without sin. He was without fault. He walked in complete dependence on the Spirit. He lived the righteous life, fulfilling God’s requirements.

If we are to walk in the light as he is the light, if we are to receive cleansing, it has to be from one who can cleanse us. A filthy rag doesn’t wipe away stains, it only spreads and smears it more. His moral purity is not contaminated by our filth; rather, his moral purity cleanses our moral filth. But how?

Second, John writes about how Christ is “The Propitiation for our Sins.” What does this mean? In some translations, the word used here is ‘he is the atoning sacrifice.’ And this picture takes us back to what the high priest would do when he entered in to the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. To come into the presence of God to plead for the people, the high priest would take a sacrifice for sin and sprinkle the blood on the top of the ark of the covenant between the two angelic warriors. He could then come before God with his prayers and the prayers for the people.

John says that our access to God comes through Jesus Christ, our sacrifice, who enables us to come into the presence of God like a high priest. We can come boldly with our requests because we can have confidence that our confessed sins allow us to come before God. God’s hatred toward sin is satisfied by the sacrifice that cleanses from sin. And the way that we can be righteous and live moral lives is not merely by trying harder, but by trusting. Christ’s moral purity is applied to all who confess their sins and trust that he cleanses them to change them. This change is made clear in vv. 3-6 – we don’t make it a habit of sinning, but we learn to kill sin in us by confessing it and believing that his moral purity is applied to us. But how is it applied to us?

The third thing John says is that Christ is our Advocate. This is how his moral purity is applied to us. Because he is pure and righteous, because he dies to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, he now has been raised and is ascended in heaven where he pleads our case to the Father. Jesus continues to pray with us and for us. John Calvin would say that ‘Christ’s intercession is the continual application of his death to our salvation’ (quoted in John Stott, *The Letters of John* TNTC, vol. 19, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 87). In other words, we have the perfect representative for us in heaven. He pleads and prays for us before the Father. He presents his righteous life and perfect sacrifice to appeal for us and for our cleansing and for our help. He continues to apply the gift of salvation to us by his work in heaven.

The way that we can live the Christian life is by believing God's love for us in Christ. The Father has provided for us his love in spite of our sin: Christ is our righteousness who by his atoning death is able to advocate for us to the Father. He cannot advocate for us if he had not died for our sins and he could not die for our sins unless he had been righteous. To know Christ more and more is to fight against sin because the penalty and power of sin have been broken by Christ, our Righteous Atoning Advocate.

Know Love

If there is a heartbeat behind the NT letters, it is the heartbeat of pastoral care. Because Christ had so loved his Church, the NT writers cared for the flock of God. Consider John's burden: I am writing to you dear or little children. John writes these letters out of a deep affection and love. These are not first theological letters nor are they just letters written generically. These are personal, pastoral, hand-written letters to people dearly loved by God and loved by the apostles.

So when these letters were written, the apostolic desire was singular – to display the love of Christ to the Church of Christ through written correspondence. John could feel their inadequacy, and so at the end of his second and third letters (2 Jn 12; 3 Jn 13) he would communicate that he had much he'd love to write but he'd rather see them face to face. The process of writing was time consuming, expensive, and required diligence and care. There was no eraser – you couldn't write your thoughts out and then go back and correct them. You gathered your thoughts beforehand. You organized them. And with the cost of writing a letter, you couldn't afford to just ramble. You had to be organized, prepared, and deliberate.

The letters of the NT then were very deliberately written. For Paul he often would begin with a doctrinal section and then flesh out the practical implications for Christian life, like he did in Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. In some instances, the letters were a written response back to issues that were going on that believers had asked Paul about (like 1 and 2 Corinthians). A few of the letters are personal correspondence that would have been read to the whole church (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon).

So when John writes "dear children," he's not writing something customary or formal. These are the words of the apostles. They are writing out of deep care. They are writing concerning the souls of the people they love. Their priority for these believers was that the gospel do its deep work in them.

What pastoral care meant was that the apostles would write to correct false ideas. In John's letter, he was writing out of a concern for those who were claiming to have had received some special anointing that made their faith greater than those who had not received this anointing.

The Story of Everything: Letters – 1 John 2

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It had created division in the church. It had caused some to act as though they could not sin any more. So John went back to the love that he had for these believers and the love that God had shown them in Christ at the cross to remind them that the new covenant promises mean that when you receive the Spirit, you receive what is adequate to walk in the light.

John saw that the integrity of the gospel message was at stake. He began his letters by reminding these dear children that he had seen, touched, heard and been with Christ himself. He was an eyewitness. And he himself had been the beloved disciple, the young man whom Jesus had dearly loved. All of the love that Christ had shown him through personal affection, John now displays to these Christians.

And this is what Christ's love does for us. John can write about loving God means obeying the commands. He can write about how loving God means loving your fellow believers. Why? Because John had been loved by Christ. Therefore he could say that we love him because he first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19).

Why does pastoral care matter? Because it displays the love of Christ. It helps people when they are struggling. It is rooted in gospel hope. It never gives up. It believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Why? Because love never ends (1 Cor. 13:8a).

So when you open up the NT letters, remember that these were first written as hand scribed letters. They were painstakingly thought about. Sent with great care. Penned with great affection and love.

When we know we are loved by God and feel that love from other believers, when we know Christ is our Righteous Atoning Advocate, we can fight sin, walk in the new life of Christ, and bring that joy to the world around us. These letters are our letters. These letters are for us. They are God's love letters to you and me.