

Paul the Leader Who Communicated (The Importance of Speaking and Writing in Leadership)

By J. Oswald Sanders

In any leadership position, the ability to communicate clearly and effectively, whether in correspondence or in other literary work, is a quality much to be desired. Where it is lacking, misunderstandings very quickly arise. Paul, as in so much else, was a master of the art. Whether his letters were written in the midst of a busy itinerant ministry or from the unwelcome solitude of his prison cell, he succeeded in injecting his personality very vividly into his writing.

It is our unstudied correspondence that we reveal our true selves, and in his letters the real Paul, peeps out on every page. We know more of the man from his letters than from any other historical source. They are models for any Christian leader, combining as they do clarity of thought and felicity of expression. They reveal keen spiritual insight coupled with sound commonsense and loving concern.

The rich profusion of thought and the excitement of the truth he wished to convey sometimes caused him to break his train of thought, or leave sentences unfinished. In the early days of the Church Irenaeus defended Paul, because he ‘frequently used a transposes order in his sentences, due to the rapidity of his discourses, and the impetus of the Spirit who is in him’.

Not all his letters were pleasant and easy to write. Indeed, in his second letter to the Corinthians, he referred to his previous letter which contained exhortation and rebuke in these words: “For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you” (2 Corinthians 2:4).

When he had a difficult letter to write, he was careful to **dip his pen in tears and not in acid.**

After he had written his strong letter to the erring Corinthians, his tender pastor’s heart caused him to wonder whether he had been too severe. He could not rest for anxiety lest they should misunderstand what he had written. “Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter”, he wrote afterwards, “I do not regret it. Though I did not regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us” (2 Corinthians 7:8, 9).

In writing a letter of this nature, Paul’s objective was not to win an argument, but resolve a spiritual problem, restore harmony and unity and produce a growing maturity.

From Paul we learn that, while it is important to couch our letters in clear speech so that the meaning is plain, it is even more important that they breathe a spirit of loving concern. Letters are an unsatisfactory medium of communication. They cannot smile, they have no eyes to express love when they are saying something difficult. We should therefore take extra care to see that they are warm in tone. When a much-blessed friend of the author wrote a letter that could cause hurt feelings, he made a practice of holding it over-night and reading it again in the morning, to make sure that its spirit was right.

Encouragement and inspiration abounded in Paul's correspondence. He always aimed at the spiritual enrichment of the recipients, but that did not mean that he refrained from faithful correction and rebuke where that was called for. "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" he asked the Galatian believers..."My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, How I wish I could be with you now and now change my tone, because I am perplexed about you" (Galatians 4:16, 19, 20).

Letters were an important part of Paul's follow-up program, and contributed greatly to the growth and development of the churches to which he wrote. George Whitefield, the silver-tongued evangelist, emulated Paul in this area. It was said that after preaching to large crowds, he would often sit up until 3 a.m. writing letters of instruction and encouragement to new converts.

No one would have been more surprised than Paul had anyone told him that his pastoral letters would become one of the most influential forces in the religious and intellectual history of the world. They were written as part of his ordinary day's work, and with 'no thought of fame or futurity'. While they were not formal treatises and at times lacked literary polish, their influence through the ages cannot be estimated.

Tolstoy adds another thought: "How strange and odd it would have seemed to the educated Romans of the middle of the first century that the letters addressed by a wandering Jew to his friend and pupils would have a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand times more readers and more circulation than all the poems, odes and elegies and elegant epistles of the authors of those days—and yet this is what has happened."