

# The Pastor's Quarry

First Baptist Church of Granite Falls, MN  
January, 2012

## How to Read a Hard Letter, Part 1

I've said before that when you have a disagreement with someone, you should think twice before writing him a letter:

The apostles wrote letters, but considered them inferior to meeting face to face (Rom 1:10; 1Th 3:10; 3Jo 13-14). It is difficult to convey tone in writing; misunderstandings are common and often devastating. It is also tempting to use incendiary rhetoric in writing, since you don't have to face the immediate consequences of hasty words, i.e. it is tempting to write things you wouldn't dare say in person. Meet face to face if you can, or second-best, pick up the telephone.<sup>1</sup>

I still believe this is good advice, especially to those who would pick up the pen simply to avoid the stress of meeting face-to-face. But does it mean that writing hard letters is *always* a bad idea? Certainly not!

If writing hard letters were foolish, then the apostle Paul must have been quite the fool! What was he thinking to write such hard letters as 1 Corinthians and Galatians? What was God thinking to put these letters in the Bible? But of course this is nonsense. Paul was not foolish at all to write these letters, and the Holy Spirit was certainly not foolish when he inspired them. If the Corinthians or the Galatians got angry when they read them it would have been their fault, not Paul's.

Yet nowadays people tend to pin the blame on the letter-writer when a hard letter angers somebody. Rather than expecting people to read hard letters with humility and a teachable spirit, the expectation is upon the letter-writer to avoid anything that might possibly offend the reader. If you dare to disagree with, challenge, rebuke, or even exhort somebody in a letter, then you are the villain if he gets upset. Why is this?

I think Proverbs 9:7 gives us the answer: "Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury" (ESV). Is it any wonder so many people scorn you for writing hard letters? We live in a world of scoffers! We are warned, "Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you" (Pro 9:8, ESV). No matter how carefully, gently, and delicately you write a hard letter, scoffers will hate you for it. But those who are wise will love you, humbly seeking instruction from even the most clumsy, harsh, and crude letter.

So what kind of person are you? Are you easily offended by hard letters, or are you easily instructed by them? When somebody disagrees with you, challenges you, rebukes you or exhorts you in a letter, do you get irritated? Or do you look for something to learn when you read a letter like that, even if it is written in the most nasty, foolish way? You can't control the way other people read your letters, but you can control how *you* read *theirs*. You can be wise as you read even the hardest letter.

Isn't that what you want others to do when they read your own letters? As you write letters to people, you hope they won't read things into your letter that you don't mean to say. You hope they won't jump to the wrong conclusions, assume the worst of your tone, or seize upon an offense while ignoring your main point. Well, that's exactly how you should read letters that other people write to you! "And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them" (Luk 6:31, ESV).

As important as it is to write letters well – especially hard letters – it is perhaps even more important to *read* letters well. And we in the church ought to be the best letter-readers of all, the most humble, gracious, loving letter-readers on earth. The Bible is full of wisdom about this, full of instruction to make us better letter-readers. This is what I want to explore further in next month's edition of *The Pastor's Quarry*.

## Mark Your Calendars

Apr. 15: Quarterly Meeting

Jun. 16: Picnic at Parsonage

Jul. 15: Quarterly Meeting

Jul. 22: Riverside Sunday

Aug. 18: Picnic at Parsonage

Oct. 21: Quarterly Meeting

## Memory Verses

Here are the verses we will recite from the ESV at the beginning of the Sunday School hour, one week after the date assigned:

Feb. 5:	Psa 91:4-6
Feb. 12:	Psa 91:7-10
Feb. 19:	Psa 91:11-13
Feb. 26:	Psa 91:14-16

## Quotes of the Month

*It is often good for us to have others know our faults and rebuke them, for it gives us greater humility. When a man humbles himself because of his faults, he easily placates those about him and readily appeases those who are angry with him.*

**Thomas À Kempis**

*The Imitation of Christ*

*To acknowledge the receipt of letters is always proper, to remove doubts of their miscarriage.*

**George Washington**

*Letter to his step-grandson, 28 Nov. 1796*

<sup>1</sup>"Dignified, Diligent, and Even Delightful Disagreement in the Church: Part 3," *The Pastor's Quarry* (Nov. 2010)

## "Father of Mercies, in Thy Word"

by Anne Steele (1716-1778)

Father of mercies, in thy word  
What endless glory shines!  
Forever be thy name adored,  
For those celestial lines.

Here may the wretched sons of want  
Exhaustless riches find;  
Riches above what earth can grant,  
And lasting as the mind.

Here the fair tree of knowledge grows,  
And yields a free repast;  
Sublimier sweets than nature knows,  
Invite the longing taste.

Here the Redeemer's welcome voice  
Spreads heavenly peace around,  
And life and everlasting joys  
Attend the blissful sound.

O may these heavenly pages be  
My ever dear delight;  
And still new beauties may I see,  
And still increasing light.

Divine Instructor, gracious Lord,  
Be thou forever near;  
Teach me to love thy sacred word,  
And view my Savior here.

### Published by:

Todd Mitchell  
1620 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Granite Falls, MN, 56241  
320-564-3748  
pastor@firstbaptistgranitefalls.org  
<http://www.firstbaptistgranitefalls.org>

## A Bit of History

In the centuries prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had one official Bible: the Latin Vulgate. It had been accepted as the one and only Bible for so long that most people (including priests and monks) did not even know that the Bible had originally been written in Hebrew and Greek. Thanks to the work of men like Martin Luther and William Tyndale, people learned the truth. Furthermore, these reformers taught people to look for the literal meaning of the text – a radically different way of reading the Bible in an age when interpreters allegorized the text.

With these changes came a new concern. If the text itself was so important, and the Hebrew and Greek text was the standard, then just what did the original Hebrew and Greek text say? All they had were copies of the original texts. In the case of the New Testament they compared the various fragments of copies they could find, ruling out the most obvious scribal errors to figure out what the original text must have been. But the Old Testament was different, for two reasons.

First, the copy of the Hebrew Old Testament available to them had been preserved with painstaking precision for over fifteen centuries, ever since the Masoretic scribes compiled it in A. D. 600-1000. The Masoretes invented a system that allowed them to check for errors as they made copy after copy, and Protestant scholars could accept it with a high degree of confidence. But a second feature of the Hebrew Old Testament did raise a question about its accuracy – the vowels of every single word.

The problem of Hebrew vowels sparked a storm of controversy, but to understand why, you need to know a little about Hebrew. Hebrew is not like Greek or English. English has five vowels – a, e, i, o, and u – that we use along with our 21 consonants to make words. Greek works the same way. But ancient Hebrew (and most modern Hebrew, too) doesn't have vowels at all. All it has is consonants! You don't have to know Hebrew to imagine what this is like – just imagine taking all the vowels out of an English word. For instance, "Granite Falls" would be written "Grnt Flls," and "Bible" would be written "Bbl." Of course, you can still read these words because you know them. You can easily supply the vowels yourself when you say "Grnt Flls" out loud as "Granite Falls," and "Bbl" as "Bible." That's how Hebrew-speaking people do it, too. They learn the words as they grow up, and they supply the missing vowels as they read the Hebrew words spelled only with consonants.

The problem is that some words have the same consonants! Take the English word "fall," for instance – if you have "fl," do you pronounce it "fall" or "fill" or "full?" The same thing happens with Hebrew. As John Owen pointed out, "The same letters have quite different significations, for example the same consonants SCHIN-LAMED-MEM-HE may be rendered as the name Solomon, or as the word 'perfect' or 'punishment' or 'garment.'"<sup>2</sup> If you fill in the wrong vowels, you'll get it wrong.

The Masoretes who compiled the Hebrew Old Testament tried to avoid this problem by adding special markings to each word called "vowel points." But what if they got some of them wrong? Since these vowel points weren't added until thousands of years after the first books of the Old Testament were written, can we really trust them? That was the big question that Protestant scholars had, and it was a huge question!

What follows is a story of fierce controversy among Protestants – and clever intrigue by the Roman Catholic church to shake their confidence in the Hebrew Old Testament. But that story will have to wait until next month's edition of *The Pastor's Quarry*.

<sup>2</sup> John Owen, *Biblical Theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 514.