

## WITH MY OWN HAND

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If ours is the Information Age, it must also be the era of impersonal information—at least less personal than things used to be. In a bygone day, folk had to be within earshot to talk to each other. Or, if separated by miles, they could put ink to paper and write a letter to be delivered at a future date. Today, we absorb digital images on screens ranging in size from the huge IMAX to the handheld iPhone. We read electronic text messages, receive electronic mail, make electronic updates to Facebook, where we keep up with the digitized personae of our friends (who, we assume, are still real people actually living somewhere). We can even bypass the need to grab a pencil to jot a reminder to ourselves, since we can simply type a memo with our thumbs into a smart phone, which will wirelessly sync with our online calendar. There is a lot of information flowing, but not so much handwritten.

This week I wrote a letter by hand. A keyboard could have made the process quicker (I can type roughly ninety words a minute). And a typed letter would have made it easier for me to save a copy (instead, I took a picture of the finished letter with an iPad, then e-mailed the digital image to myself, downloaded it as a .jpg file on my desktop computer, then uploaded it to my Dropbox account on the internet, where the digitized copy of my handwritten letter is now filed online in the electronic folder for this year's correspondence). Yes, it may be more trouble to do all that, but the recipient gets a letter with, perhaps, just a bit more warmth or personality than a laser printer affords.

Imagine receiving a handwritten letter from an apostle. "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (1 Cor. 16:21, ESV). Granted, Paul never saw a keyboard, but—if you could choose—had you rather have Paul's words on parchment in his own handwriting, or onscreen as a typed .pdf? When Paul says, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand" (Gal. 6:11), there is an added element of personal contact, care, attention, friendship, even a revealing of his own frailty causing him to form "large letters." We may or may not care to revive the lost art of the handwritten letter, but that is not the point (these brief paragraphs were, themselves, composed on a screen).

But our interactions with brothers and sisters in Christ should be characterized by genuine concern. If our greetings are based on formality more than friendship, improvement is in order. With the biggest of topics in Scripture, small talk does not become us. If our conversations with Christians never move from the superficial (e.g. "sure is hot outside") to the substantive (e.g. "you've been in my prayers this week"), then we ought to work on getting to know our spiritual family better. "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). The other side of that coin is that we have to be willing to be known, in order for others to look out for our interests. In point of fact, even a heartfelt e-mail or a text message (or phone call, card, etc.) may be just the thing to brighten a Christian's day, encourage a struggling soul, letting him know the church really is a family, made of members who know you well and truly care. After all, Paul, himself, was not above needing to hear expressions of love from the saints. "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you" (Col. 4:18).

