

## **Postal Service Controversy Focuses Attention on the Importance of Letters**

*The Wired Word* for the Week of August 30, 2020

### **In the News**

The performance of the United States Postal Service has been the center of debate on Capitol Hill, with some Republican lawmakers trying to portray the reports of delayed mail, dismantled sorting machines and removed mailboxes as "conspiracy theories." Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.) testified on Friday, August 21, that there have been "no delays" occurring throughout the USPS. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) responded by saying, "Unfortunately, this is part of the problem. Some Republicans would prefer to shut their eyes."

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, an appointee of President Trump, testified that there had been a "dip in the level of service." Prior to his June appointment, changes had occurred including the removal of mailboxes and sorting machines. Other mailboxes and machines were in the process of being removed, but DeJoy has suspended these actions until after November 3. Saying, "We all feel bad about what the dip in the level of service has been," he promised to "deploy processes and procedures that advance any election mail, in some cases ahead of first-class mail." He said that he would not restore the removed sorting machines, however, saying, "They're not needed."

DeJoy focused on "election mail" because the President had said that he wanted to block USPS funding to prevent mail-in voting. "They need that money in order to have the Post Office work so it can take all of these millions and millions of ballots," the President said on Fox Business Network. "Now, if we don't make a deal, that means they don't get the money. That means they can't have universal mail-in voting, they just can't have it."

All states allow for absentee voting, in which a registered voter requests a ballot, which is mailed to him or her, and is then returned. This is not the same as "mail-in voting," in which ballots are mailed to all names on the voter registration rolls. Many observers and (mainly Republican) politicians claim that mail-in voting greatly increases the likelihood of fraud and has resulted in chaotic elections when held. Election officials of both parties are actively encouraging citizens to vote by mail as a way of avoiding the spread of Covid-19.

Congress is involved because Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution says that the Congress shall have the power "to establish Post Offices and Post Roads." The House of Representatives passed the "Delivering for America Act" on Saturday, August 22, in an attempt to grant \$25 billion in funding for the USPS. As of the writing of this TWW lesson, the bill's future is uncertain in the Senate, and the White House has sent mixed signals about whether the President will sign it.

Financial problems for the USPS are nothing new. For years, revenue has been dropping as people have shifted their style of communication. With the advent of the internet, people began

to send texts or emails rather than written correspondence. Bill payment moved online for many Americans. And then the Great Recession cut the volume of first-class mail by 13 billion items over two years, a drop that has not been overcome in the years that followed. Still, the USPS is a beloved institution. A recent Pew Research Center survey showed that 91 percent of people have a favorable view of the post office -- the highest of any federal government agency.

The USPS is also burdened by \$160.9 billion in debt, brought on by Congress's 2006 Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA). This act ensured that the Postal Service's 630,000 workers would be offered prepaid health and retirement benefits, an obligation not typical for private companies or government agencies. The USPS missed its first payment on those expenses, worth \$5.5 billion, in 2011, and since then the debt has continued to pile up. "That prepayment responsibility that they've been unable to meet has exacerbated over the years," said Cary Brick, former chief of staff for Rep. John M. McHugh (R-N.Y.), a co-sponsor of the 2006 law. "It was bad, and it got more bad and it got worse. But now it's desperate."

Back in 2006, PAEA seemed like a responsible decision. First-class mail volume was healthy, and from 2004 through 2006 the agency made \$6 billion in profits. But first-class mail volume plummeted between 2010 and 2019, and the USPS ran up larger and larger operating deficits. Now the pandemic has caused a loss of revenue because of lower demand for highly profitable personal and marketing mail, which could lead to a loss of \$23 billion over the next 18 months. The USPS is now facing a double crisis: finding money to finance operations, and paying down a debt while running an ongoing deficit. Both challenges point to a need for a government bailout plus continued restructuring of the Postal Service.

In the face of these challenges, the Postmaster General has said that his "number one priority" is to ensure that election mail is received on time. Speaking to the Senate Homeland Security Committee on Friday, August 21, he said, "As we head into the election season, I want to assure this committee, and the American public, that the Postal Service is fully capable of delivering the nation's election mail securely and on time." He also expressed support for voting by mail (although it is unclear if he meant "absentee voting" or "mail-in voting"), telling senators, "I think the American public should be able to vote by mail, and the Postal Service will support it."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Dems Hit House Republican for Denying USPS Delays. \*Fox News\*](#)

[President Trump Says He Wants to Block Post Office Funding to Stop Mail Voting. \*Time\*](#)

[House Approves Additional \\$25 Billion for U.S. Postal Service. \*CBS News\*](#)

[The Postal Service Needs a Bailout. Congress Is Partly to Blame. \*The Washington Post\*](#)

[Why the Postal Service Matters. \*National Geographic\*](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

Use this recent Postal Service controversy as a starting place for your own reflection -- as a person, as a Christian, and as a citizen -- on the importance and power of letters.

## The Big Questions

1. Are you planning on voting by mail this November? Why or why not? What concerns do you have, if any?
2. What is your experience with the United States Postal Service? In what ways do you depend on it?
3. Where do you find particular significance in a letter, either in writing one or in receiving one? What letters have you saved, and why?
4. How have your methods of communication shifted since the advent of the internet? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these changes?
5. In your opinion, why were so many letters included in the New Testament? What power or significance do they have for you?

## Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **2 Samuel 11:14-15**

*In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die." (For context, read 11:1-15.)*

King David's problems began in the spring, the time each year when "kings" -- that is, serious kings -- "go out to battle" (v. 1). But instead of doing his job and leading his soldiers, David remained in the comfort and safety of Jerusalem, shirking his duties. After getting up from a nap, David saw a naked woman, liked what he saw and found out that she was Bathsheba, "the wife of Uriah the Hittite" (v. 3). Although Bathsheba was off limits to David as the wife of one of his unit commanders, he fetched her and went to bed with her.

When Bathsheba became pregnant, David said to his captain, Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite" (v. 6). David told Uriah to go to his house and sleep with his wife Bathsheba, so that Uriah would cover David's tracks and obscure the paternity of the child. But Uriah was determined to follow his conscience instead of the commands of the king, so he "slept at the entrance of the king's house" (v. 9), not wanting to disrespect his colleagues in the field by enjoying a night with his wife. Then David, with a heart as cold as ice, wrote a letter to Joab and forced honorable Uriah to carry it to the battlefield. "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting," David said, "and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die." Uriah carried his own death sentence to the battlefield.

**Questions:** When has a letter carried a significant message, good or bad, for you or for someone you love? What is the power of a message that is written down, in the author's own hand?

### **Acts 21:25**

*But as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. (For context, read 21:17-26.)*

The apostle Paul visited James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem and "related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry" (v. 19). But the followers of Jesus who had grown up as Jews were reluctant to let go of the laws of Moses and practices such as circumcision. So they asked Paul to join a group of men in a rite of purification, to prove to them that he still observed and guarded the law. Paul did this, and the Jewish church members sent a letter to the Gentiles with instructions about diet and sex.

**Questions:** When have you received instructions in a letter, and how did you respond? How did you assess the authority of the writer or writers? How, if at all, is a written word more persuasive than a spoken word?

### **2 Corinthians 10:11**

*Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present. (No context needed.)*

The apostle Paul's letters are the oldest Christian documents in the Bible, and all of them probably predate the Gospels. They are arranged from longest to shortest, Romans to Philemon, and are letters written to churches and individuals addressing a variety of theological and personal issues. His letters to the Corinthians are his most typical type of letter, written to address divisions in the church and to instruct people in what it means to follow Jesus. In the 10th chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his ministry against those who criticize his speech and his physical appearance, saying that there is integrity between what he writes and what he does.

**Questions:** When have you been misled by a letter? How do you assess a match between what someone writes and what they actually do? What standards do you have for judging whether a person is "walking the walk and talking the talk"?

### **Galatians 3:28**

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (For context, read 3:19-29.)*

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul was writing to churches in a region called Galatia, located in the central highlands of what is now Turkey. Having taken the gospel to them, he began his letter by saying that he was astonished that they were "turning to a different gospel" (1:6). The heart of the gospel Paul taught was that "a person is justified not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (2:16). For Greek-speaking Galatian followers of Christ who wondered if they needed to add Jewish religious practices to their new faith in Jesus, this was a transformative insight. After receiving Paul's letter, they realized that there was "no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male and female." Instead, all were "one in Christ Jesus."

Before Paul's letter to the Galatians, the religious laws of the Bible restrained and protected people, preventing them from hurting themselves and others. "The law was our disciplinarian," said Paul (v. 24), using a word that had a very specific meaning in the first-century Greco-Roman world, one that the Galatians would have known. The disciplinarian (Greek *paidagogos*) was a slave who supervised and guarded children, taking them to school and back while keeping them safe and overseeing their behavior.

The protective custody of the disciplinarian was important but temporary, since the slave's services would no longer be needed once the children grew up. Paul said that we were "guarded under the law until faith would be revealed" (v. 23) -- in particular, until the faith of *Jesus Christ* would be revealed. "Now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian" (v. 25), and all followers of Christ are "children of God" (v. 26).

**Questions:** What particular insight, if any, from the letters of the Bible has been transformative to you? What is meaningful to you about the voice of a particular letter writer, whether it be Paul, James, Peter, John or Jude?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. TWW team member David Hall offers an example of how the USPS has become sidelined by the internet. Consider the LL Bean catalog: "At one time you got a catalog in the mail (Post Office income); you filled out an order and mailed it back (PO income); they mailed your product to you (PO income). Three items of income now replaced by an online catalog order delivered by UPS or Fedex." How has your use of the USPS changed in recent decades? What are your feelings about this?
2. Can private, for-profit delivery companies step up and replace the USPS? One problem is that companies such as FedEx and UPS can already drop their packages off at a post office and pay the USPS to deliver them the "last mile." Private companies find that it's simply too expensive to include remote locations in their routes. One value of the USPS is that it offers delivery to any place in the country, for the cost of postage (which is well below market value and doesn't cover the costs of delivery). How is the church like the USPS, in that no one is "simply too expensive" to be reached? What are you willing to pay for such service? When have you gone the "last mile" to reach someone?
3. TWW team member Mary Sells writes, "I send cards to older relatives for birthdays, holidays and to just keep in touch because they do not email or text. The mail is our vital link to family connection." She also knows seniors who receive their medications by mail, or who do not trust going online to get their social security checks. How is the Postal Service a vital link for you, or for people you know?
4. In 2 Thessalonians 3:17 we read, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write." What is distinctive about the way you write? When you receive a handwritten letter from a friend or loved one, what is special about it?

5. "Cursive handwriting has a long, rich history in the U.S., from the copperplate lettering of the Declaration of Independence to the Spencerian script of the Coca-Cola logo," writes Nicholas Gilmore in an article, "[Mourning the Death of Cursive](#)." How is cursive writing connected to letter-writing, if at all, and what kind of communication will be lost when this style of writing is lost?

6. TWW team member John Coulson writes, "Like any other business, the Postal Service needs to adapt to the changing environment to meet their customers' needs. Change is never easy but is necessary for survival. In some ways, how the church delivers the Word has had to change to adapt to the changing environment. Our church is now posting a recorded version of our service, and the number of views we are seeing is vastly greater than our typical in-person attendance ever was." Has your church had to change how it delivers its message? If so, how?

7. TWW consultant James Gruetzner and his wife have found, in the running of their business, that the USPS is set up for individuals, UPS for large account shippers, and FedEx in between. Each has its target customer base, and each has those it serves less well. How is this like "one body" with "many members," as the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:12, or the diversity so praised nowadays? In the church, how does a diversity of gifts meet a diversity of needs?

### **Responding to the News**

Take the time to write a letter to someone you love, remembering that handwritten messages have always been very personal and powerful forms of communication.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, Lord, for the letters that have touched and transformed us over the years. Help us to continue to communicate with integrity and authenticity. In Jesus' name. Amen.