

Cultural Daily

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The Real Story Behind the Chain Letter

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The history of the chain letter is a curious one. The very first chain letter was supposedly authored by Jesus himself. After the crucifixion and subsequent ascension [a letter started doing the rounds](#), proposing a number of statements and supposedly containing instructions for future use on earth with its author now no longer able to instruct in person. The truly curious thing about the letter, however, was the stern warning that whoever copied the letter and passed it on would be blessed, and whoever did not would be cursed.

Be it that the authenticity of the letter had always been in doubt by all who looked upon it, it is said to have survived until the early 1700's. If that wasn't a pudding full of proof of the superstitious nature of man, then nothing is.

During the decades that followed, it was a story of more of the same. People seemed to have an innate need to appease the need for prosperity, charity or religious enlightenment by means of a superstitious practice, almost as if the practice itself was the key to unlocking all of the above.

Altruistic Beginnings

Another example of a chain letter is one written by a Methodist church's women's missionary convention. The group was in dire financial trouble, not having had enough to make basic ends meet. They prayed for deliverance from their less than fortunate situation, but at the same time, also realised that the time had come to show initiative and take matters into their own hands. And so it was decided that a letter asking for help would have to be drafted and sent forth to reach as many eyes as possible. In a way, the idea was similar to the concept of [dropping a message in a bottle in the ocean](#) and hoping someone would find it, but in this case, there were hundreds of bottles in a very small pond.

The instructions were simple; make three copies of the letter, to be sent to three friends who would hopefully follow suit. Each recipient was also instructed to donate a dime to the church. The letter did achieve a certain measure of success in that \$6,000 was raised in support of the church's cause, with many people having decided the cause to have been so worthy, that they had decided to donate larger sums than those requested.

There were also those who seemed to have cottoned on to the irritation factor of the common chain letter, advising the church that they had received more than one copy and that obviously, had reached their limits of being pestered by unwanted post.

Others yet, told it like it was, informing the church that considering the basic principles of a letter

of this nature, the church was surely already in possession of enough funds and that they would not be adding to the kitty.

Ultimately, the church's concept request was dubbed a "peripatetic contribution box", referring to a postal hat passing. It had started a revolution as the format of the letter was soon adapted by other organisations in order to serve their particular cause. By 1898, so many of these letters were passing through the US postal system that it had clogged up the arteries of the New York Post Office, prompting the powers that be to beseech its citizens to knock it off with all the letters already.

Taking Advance Of Weakness

The natures of letters were obviously altruistic at first and the aim to raise funds for charities and the like. However, as these things go, it did not take too much time for the entire idea to go seriously south, when people started to use the concept (in many case an adapted version of the original Methodist letter!) to scam others out of their hard-earned income.

The year was 1935 and times were trying indeed. The great depression had the United States in the grip of many a dark and dire financial situation. People needed hope. Hope that soon arrived in the way of a chain letter promising prosperity to all who obeyed its instructions involving the donation of money and a promise of riches for all those who were willing to pass it on. Many who were desperate for help fell for the hoax. This was a prime example of how to take advantage of the superstitious nature of people, which is essentially what chain letters aim to do.

Quick And Easy Mail Hail

Today, it's become a great deal easier to take advantage of the superstitious as all the hassle of having to buy ten thousand postage stamps has been eradicated by electronic mail. It's never been easier to hone in on the superstitious nature of the masses and make a quick buck in the process, and the humble chain letter is still around today, with many who simply insist on passing it on, just in case!

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