

The Pauline Letter Closings: Analysis and Hermeneutical Significance

JEFFREY A. D. WEIMA

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

The contention of this article is that the Pauline letter closings are carefully constructed units, shaped and adapted in such way that they relate directly to—sometimes, in fact, even summarize—the major concerns and themes taken up in the bodies of their respective letters. Consequently, the letter closings aid in important ways our understanding of Paul's purpose, arguments and exhortation. The article begins by evaluating the reasons why the Pauline letter closings have been ignored in the past and offers in response suggestive comments about their potential significance. This claimed significance of the Pauline letter closings is then established by examining one of the closing conventions (the peace benediction) as it occurs in two of Paul's letters (1 Thess 5:23-24; Gal 6:16).

Key Words: letter closing, hermeneutics, sanctification, parousia, 1 Thess 5:22-23; Gal 6:16

INTRODUCTION

The examination and interpretation of any Pauline letter must take as its starting-point an analysis of the letter's epistolary structure. As Robert Funk observes: "The first order of business [in the study of Paul's letters] is to learn to read the letter as a letter. This means above all to learn to read its structure."¹ Biblical scholars have been somewhat slow to recognize the importance of letter structure (epistolary analysis) for understanding Paul's writings. Of late, however, much work has been done in developing a clearer picture of the form of his correspondence. It is now widely acknowledged that the form of the Pauline letters consists of four major sections: (1) the Opening (sender,

[p.178]

recipient, salutation); (2) the Thanksgiving; (3) the Body (transitional formulae, autobiographical statements, concluding parenthesis, apostolic parousia); and (4) the Closing (peace benediction, hortatory section, greeting, autograph, grace benediction).²

¹ R. W. Funk, "The Form and Function of the Pauline Letter," *SBL Seminar Papers* (Missoula: Scholars, 1970) 8.

² Note, however, J. L. White's insistence that the thanksgiving section ought to be viewed as part of the opening section, so that Paul's letters consist of three major units rather than four: e.g., "Saint Paul and the Apostolic Letter Tradition," *CBQ* 45 (1983) 438-49; "Ancient Greek Letters," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament* (ed. D. E. Aune; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 96-99. White's assertion has merit in light of the similarity between the Pauline thanksgiving and a thanks-offering phrase to a deity often found in the opening of Hellenistic letters. Nevertheless, since the Pauline thanksgiving differs in significant ways, both formally and functionally, from its counterpart in Greco-Roman letters, most scholars view the thanksgiving as a major unit within Paul's letters, distinct from the opening, body, and closing sections.

A great deal of scholarly attention has been given to the first three epistolary sections and, in particular, to how formal variations within these sections aid our understanding of Paul's letters. By comparison, however, the fourth section has been all but completely ignored. The purpose of our study here, then, is to rectify this imbalance that exists in the epistolary analysis of Paul's letters and to highlight the hermeneutical significance of the Pauline letter closings. It is our contention that these epistolary closings are carefully constructed units, shaped and adapted in such a way that they relate directly to—sometimes, in fact, even summarize—the major concerns and themes taken up in the bodies of their respective letters. Consequently, the Pauline letter closings provide important interpretive clues for a proper understanding of their respective letters.

I. THE PAULINE LETTER CLOSINGS: A PROPOSAL

1. *Scholarly Neglect of the Pauline Letter Closings*

When one examines the increasing number of form-critical studies on Paul's letters, it quickly becomes evident that scholarly attention has been mostly directed to the thanksgiving and body sections of the letters, with somewhat less attention paid to the opening sections.³ By comparison, however, the closing sections of Paul's letters have been virtually ignored. Biblical commentaries generally treat the closing

[p.179]

material in a cursory manner, and are typically at a loss to explain how a particular closing relates to its respective letter as a whole. Although a few scattered articles on individual formulae or epistolary conventions found within letter closings have appeared,⁴ nothing thus far has been written about the potential significance of this final section for interpreting Paul's

³ On the Pauline thanksgivings, see especially P. Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939); P. T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (NovTSup 49; Leiden: Brill, 1977); J. Sanders, "The Transition from Opening Epistolary Thanksgiving to Body in the Letters of the Pauline Corpus," *JBL* 81 (1962) 348-62; L. A. Jervis, *The Purpose of Romans: A Comparative Letter Structure Investigation* (JSNTSup 55; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 86-109; P. Arzt, "The 'Epistolary Introductory Thanksgiving' in the Papyri and in Paul," *NovT* 36 (1994) 29-46. On the Pauline letter bodies as a whole as well as the various epistolary conventions found within this section, see, e.g., J. L. White, *The Body of the Greek Letter* (SBLDS 2; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1972) 67-164; *idem*, "Introductory Formulae in the Body of the Pauline Letter," *JBL* 90 (1971) 91-97; C. J. Bjerkelund, *Parakalö: Form, Funktion und Sinn der Parakalö-Sätze in den paulinischen Briefen* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1967); R. W. Funk, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (eds. W. R. Farmer *et al.*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 249-68; T. Y. Mullins, "Petition as a Literary Form," *NovT* 5 (1962) 46-54; *idem*, "Disclosure: A Literary Form in the New Testament," *NovT* 7 (1964) 44-50; *idem*, "Visit Talk in New Testament Letters," *CBQ* 35 (1973) 350-58; *idem*, "Topos as a New Testament Form," *JBL* 99 (1980) 541-47; S. N. Olson, "Epistolary Uses of Expressions of Self-Confidence," *JBL* 103 (1984) 585-97; *idem*, "Pauline Expressions of Confidence in His Addresses," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 282-95.

⁴ E.g., G. J. Bahr, "The Subscriptions in the Pauline Letters," *JBL* 87 (1968) 27-41; R. Jewett, "The Form and Function of the Homiletic Benediction," *ATR* 51 (1969) 13-34; T. Y. Mullins, "Benediction as a New Testament Form," *AUSS* 15 (1977) 59-64; *idem*, "Greeting as a New Testament Form," *JBL* 88 (1968) 418-26.

letters. Even the two more detailed studies of the Pauline letter closings by Harry Gamble⁵ and Franz Schnider and Werner Stenger⁶ fail to demonstrate how these final epistolary sections relate in any significant way to the major concerns previously dealt with in the bodies of their respective letters.

The scholarly neglect of the Pauline letter closings and the failure to recognize the hermeneutical significance of these final sections may be due to at least three factors. First, the lack of attention given to the closing sections may be partially explained by a natural tendency to focus on the perceived "weightier" sections of Paul's letters: the thanksgivings and the bodies. The closing (and opening) sections, however, are not without significance. For as Ann Jervis notes: "The opening and closing sections are where Paul (re)establishes his relationship with his readers and where the function of each of his letters is most evident."⁷ Thus, rather than being insignificant, the letter closings serve an important function in the overall argument of the

[p.180]

letter. For Paul skillfully uses these final sections to place himself and his readers in such a relationship to one another that his purposes in the letter are furthered.

Second, the widespread disinterest in the closing sections may also be attributable to a belief that the body of a letter contains the particular topic of concern whereas the closing (and opening) are primarily conventional in nature and serve only to establish or maintain contact. Illustrative of this assumption is the following statement of John White:

Whereas the body conveys the specific, situational occasion of the letter, the opening and closing tend to convey the ongoing and general, aspect of the correspondents' relationship. Whereas the opening and closing enhance the maintenance of contact, the "keeping-in-touch" function of the letter writing, the body expresses the specific reason(s) for writing.⁸

Although White is speaking here only of ancient Hellenistic letters,⁹ such thinking appears to control the way most scholars view the closings in Paul's letters as well. Yet as Paul Schubert insisted some time ago, the epistolary situation modifies *every* item in a letter.¹⁰ There is,

⁵ H. Gamble, Jr., *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 65-83. Gamble's primary concern is not with the letter closings themselves but with whether or not the final chapter of Romans fits the general pattern of Paul's other letter closings and so can be considered part of the original letter.

⁶ P. Schnider and W. Stenger, *Studien zum nentestamentlichen Briefformular* (NTTS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1987) 108-67. Most of their attention is focused on the closing greetings and the autograph sections. There is little or no discussion of the final grace benediction, peace benediction or other epistolary conventions found in Paul's letter closings.

⁷ Jervis, *Purpose of Romans*, 42. See also G. Lyons, who notes that in a speech or written discourse the opening and closing are where the speaker makes his purpose explicit (*Pauline Autobiography. Toward a New Understanding* [SBLDS 73; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985] 26-27).

⁸ J. L. White, "The Ancient Epistolography Group in Retrospect," *Semeia* 22 (1981) 7. See also White, *Body of the Greek Letter*, 63.

⁹ White, however, makes a similar statement about the openings and closings of Paul's letters in his "The Structural Analysis of Philemon: A Point of Departure in the Formal Analysis of the Pauline Letter," in *SBL Seminar Papers* (2 vols.; Missoula: Scholars, 1971) I, 27.

¹⁰ Schubert, "Form and Function of the Pauline Letter," 377.

therefore, good reason to believe that epistolary closings are to be seen as being intimately related to the concerns addressed in the bodies of their respective letters. Third, the Pauline letter closings may also have been ignored out of a belief that the diverse formulae found within these final sections have been largely borrowed from the liturgical practices of the early Christian church, and so any particular letter closing is assumed to be unrelated to the rest of the letter. An example of such a viewpoint can be seen in Leonard Champion's monograph on the benedictions and doxologies that occur primarily in the final section of Paul's letters:

This examination of the benedictions and doxologies in the epistles of Paul has shown quite clearly then that they are not essential to the thought of the epistles and that they can be separated quite easily from their context.¹¹

But even if there was a liturgical origin for many (or all) of Paul's benedictions and doxologies, this does not preclude the possibility

[p.181]

that these stereotyped formulae have been adapted by the apostle in such a way as to make them intimately connected to the concerns addressed in their respective letters.

2. *Hermeneutical Significance of the Pauline Letter closings*

The lack of attention given to the closings of Paul's letters is somewhat surprising, particularly since a number of scholars have pointed out—although just in passing—the potential value of these final sections for understanding the major issues addressed earlier in each letter. Almost a century ago Adolf Deissmann stated: "More attention ought to be paid to the concluding words of the letters generally; they are of the highest importance if we are ever to understand the Apostle."¹² More recently, Calvin Roetzel bemoans the fact that the Pauline letter closing has received scant attention, since there can be "discovered in it important clues to the viewpoint of the letter as a whole."¹³

Gordon Wiles, in his study of Paul's prayers, observes that the prayers for peace in 1 Thessalonians "reflect more immediately the exhortations and warnings which have preceded it in the epistle" so that such prayers can be said "to summarize and place the spotlight on the central message of the letter."¹⁴ Robert Jewett similarly comments that the closing peace benediction of I Thess 5:23-24 "serves, in fact, to summarize and climax the entire epistle."¹⁵ In regard to the closing of Paul's letter to the Galatians, Hans Dieter Betz states that 6:11-18 "becomes most important for the interpretation of Galatians. It contains the interpretive clues to the understanding of Paul's major concerns in the letter as a whole and should be employed

¹¹ L. Champion, *Benedictions and Doxologies in the Epistles of Paul* (Oxford: Kemp Hall, 1934) 34.

¹² A. Deissmann, *Bible Studies* (trans. A. Grieve; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901) 347.

¹³ C. J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 36. See also his observations in "1 Thess. 5:12-28: A Case Study," *SBL Seminar Papers* (ed. L. C. McGaughey; Missoula: Scholars, 1972) II, 367-83.

¹⁴ G. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 65-66.

¹⁵ R. Jewett, "The Form and Function of the Homiletic Benediction," *ATR* 51 (1969) 24.

as the hermeneutical key to the intentions of the Apostle."¹⁶ In the same vein, Richard Longenecker comments: "So 6:11-18 must be seen as something of a prism that reflects the major thrusts of what has been said earlier in the letter, or a paradigm set at the end of the letter that gives guidance in understanding what has been said before."¹⁷ A number of biblical scholars, therefore, have recognized the potential

[p.182]

hermeneutical significance of the Pauline letter closings, although it must be stressed that none developed this idea in any substantial way.

The hermeneutical significance of Paul's letter closings is also suggested by Greco-Roman rhetorical theory on how a speech ought to close. The ancient rhetoricians discussed the ending of a speech under the second of the five major parts of rhetoric arrangement.¹⁸ The different terms used to describe a closing section were, in Greek, *ἐπιλογος* or *ἀνακεφαλαίωσις*, and, in Latin, *conclusio* or *peroratio*. Aristotle claimed that the *ἐπιλογος* possessed four functions: "to dispose the hearer favourably towards oneself and unfavourably towards the adversary; to amplify and depreciate; to excite the emotions of the hearer; to recapitulate (ἀνάμνησις)."¹⁹ Cicero maintained that the *peroratio* consisted of three parts: the "summing-up" (*enumeratio*), the "exciting of indignation" against one's adversary (*indignatio*), and the "arousal of pity and sympathy" (*conquestio*).²⁰ Quintilian divided the *peroratio* into two types: one that involves a repetition and recapitulation of the facts (*enumeratio*); the other that makes an appeal to the emotions.²¹ In discussing the relative importance of these two types, Quintilian notes that the majority of Athenians and philosophers "have held that recapitulation is the sole form of peroration."²² The unknown author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium* identifies three parts of the *conclusio*: the summary (*enumeratio*) that "gathers together and recalls the points which have been made;" the amplification (*amplificatio*), and the appeal to pity (*commiseratio*).²³

¹⁶ H. D. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 313. Betz, however, makes this statement from the perspective of rhetorical criticism rather than epistolary analysis.

¹⁷ R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word, 1990) 288-89.

¹⁸ The five major parts of rhetoric as set out in the classical rhetorical handbooks are: (1) Invention (*εὑρησις*, *inventio*): the planning of a discourse and the arguments to be employed; (2) Arrangement (*τάξις* or *φράσις*, *dispositio*): the ordering of this material; (3) Style (*λέξις*, *elocutio*): the selection of words, figures of speech, metaphors to fit the desired style; (4) Memory (*μνήμη*, *memoria*): the process of memorizing the material; and (5) Delivery (*ὑπόκρισις*, *pronunciatio*): the choice of vocal variation and gestures.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *The 'Art' of Rhetoric* (trans. J. H. Freese; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926) 3.19.1.

²⁰ Cicero, *De Inventione, De Optima Genere Oratorum, and Topic* (trans. H. M. Hubbell; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949) 1.98-100, 107-9.

²¹ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (trans. H. E. Butler; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920-22) 6.1.1.

²² Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.1.7.

²³ *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (trans. H. Caplan; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954) 2.47.

The Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks exhibit some degree of variation regarding the content and purpose of the final part of a discourse. The one element common to all of them, however, is the function of recapitulating (ἀνάμνησις) or summarizing (*enumeratio*) the

[p.183]

main points previously raised in the oration. Ancient rhetoricians, therefore, expected good speakers to construct their closing comments in such a fashion that they echo the major concerns addressed earlier in the oration. Although we must be careful in drawing parallels between rules for speech and the practice of letter writing, the expectation that the final section of a speech recapitulates the major issues previously addressed is certainly suggestive for how we should look at the final section of Paul's letters, especially given the widely recognized fact that "the letter is a substitute for oral communication and could function in almost as many ways as speech."²⁴

The suggestive comments of a few modern scholars about the final section of Paul's letters as well as the expectations of the ancient rhetoricians about the proper means of closing a speech lead us to a new proposal concerning the hermeneutical significance of the Pauline letter closings. A Pauline letter closing is not an insignificant epistolary convention, simply designed to maintain contact with the addressees (although that goal is surely part of its intended purpose). Rather, it is a carefully constructed unit, shaped and adapted in such a way as to relate it directly to the major concerns of the letter as a whole, and so it provides important clues to understanding the key issues addressed in the body of the letter. Thus the Pauline letter closing functions much like the thanksgiving section, but in reverse. For as the thanksgiving foreshadows and points ahead to the major concerns to be addressed in the body of the letter,²⁵ so the closing serves to highlight and encapsulate the main points previously taken up in the body. And this recapitulating function of Paul's letter closings, in turn, provides interpretive clues for a richer understanding of their respective letters.

II. TEST CASE: THE PEACE BENEDICTION

It is impossible in this brief essay to look at all of Paul's letter closings so as to determine the validity of our proposal concerning the hermeneutical significance of these final sections. We will therefore

[184]

²⁴ D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 158. Written letters and oral discourse (conversations, speeches) were closely related in the ancient world (see Pseudo-Demetrius, *Epistolary Types* 223; Cicero, *To Friends* 2.4.1; Seneca, *Letter*, 75.1). In fact, the Greek word ἐπιστολή ("epistle") originally referred to an oral communication sent by messenger (Herodotus 4.10.1; Thucydides 7.11.1). See M. L. Stirewalt, Jr., "Greek Terms for Letter and Letter-Writing from Homer through the Second Century CE," in his *Studies in Ancient Epistolography* (SBLRBS 27; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) 67-87.

²⁵ See Schubert, *Pauline Thanksgivings* O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings*; Jervis, *Purpose of Romans*, 86-109.

limit our inquiry to the *first* of the epistolary conventions typically found in Paul's letter closings: the peace benediction²⁶ We begin with a formal analysis of the Pauline peace benedictions in order to establish the typical or standard form of this closing epistolary convention. Then we will examine two peace benedictions (1 Thess 5:23-4; Gal 6:16) that deviate in significant ways from this expected form, showing that such changes in form are not fortuitous but due to a deliberate attempt by Paul to adapt a closing convention in such a way that it echoes the major concerns or themes previously raised in the body of the letter. Such an examination will therefore also serve as a good illustration of how a Pauline letter closing can aid in important ways our understanding of Paul's central purposes in the writing of his letter as well as our understanding of his readers and their historical situation.

1. *Formal Analysis of the Peace Benediction*

As witnessed in the table below and explained in the subsequent discussion, Paul's closing peace benedictions consist of four elements: an introductory element, the divine source, the wish, and the recipient.

a. *The Introductory Element.* Peace benedictions are normally introduced by the particle $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ in the postpositive position. This particle sometimes has a connective force, and so could serve to link the peace benediction with the material that precedes it.²⁷ More commonly, however, $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ possesses an adversative sense (although more moderate than $\alpha\lambda\lambda\acute{\alpha}$), which

²⁶ The Pauline letter closings typically contain five epistolary conventions, usually given in the following order: (1) a "peace benediction" which expresses Paul's prayer that the peace of God will be with his readers; (2) a "hortatory section" which consists of some final commands or exhortations; (3) a "greeting section" which conveys closing greetings from Paul and/or others with him to the readers, including an occasional command that they greet each other with a "holy kiss"; (4) an "autograph formula" which indicates that Paul has taken over from his secretary and is now writing in his own hand; and (5) a "grace benediction" which expresses Paul's prayer that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ will be with his readers. In addition to Gamble, *Textual History*, 65-3 and Jervis, *Purpose of Romans*, 132-4, see the extended discussion in my recent monograph, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (JSNTSup 101; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 77-55.

²⁷ The connective force of $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ is stressed by Jewett ("Homiletic Benediction," 22-23), who argues that the peace benedictions of the Thessalonian letters are closely linked with their respective preceding homilies.

Jeffrey A.D. Weima, "The Pauline Letter Closings: Analysis and Hermeneutical Significance," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 177-198

would serve to set peace benedictions somewhat apart from what has just been written.²⁸ This latter sense is supported

²⁸ For the use of δέ in general, see J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934) 162-89; M. F. Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament* (Leiden Brill, 1962); *BDF*, Section 447. For the use of δέ in the Pauline peace benedictions, see J. E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T Clark, 1912) 210; Gamble, *Textual History*, 69.

[185]

Peace Benedictions

	Introductory Element	Divine Source		Wish	Recipient
Rom 15:33	ὁ δέ	θεὸς τῆς	εἰρήνης		μετὰ πάντων ὑμῶν
Rom 16:20a	ὁ δέ	θεὸς τῆς	εἰρήνης	συντρίψει τὸν Σατανᾶν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας ὑμῶν ἐν τάχει	
2 Cor 13:11	καὶ	ὁ θεὸς τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ	εἰρήνης	ἔσται	μεθ' ὑμῶν
Phil 4:9b	καὶ	ὁ θεὸς τῆς	εἰρήνης	ἔσται	μεθ' ὑμῶν
I Thess 5:23	αὐτὸς δ	ὁ θεὸς τῆς	εἰρήνης	ἀγιάσαι ὑμᾶς ὀλοτελεῖς καὶ ὀλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα ἀμέμπτως ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τηρηθεῖη	
2 Thess 3:16	αὐτὸς δ	ὁ κύριος τῆς	εἰρήνης	δώη τὴν εἰρήνην διὰ παντὸς ἐν παντὶ τρόπῳ	ὑμῖν
Gal 6:16	καὶ ὅσοι τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ στοιχήσουσιν εἰρήνη ἐπ' αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ				

[186]

by the fact that a peace benediction normally occupies the first position in a Pauline letter closing and so serves as a literary heading, marking the transition from the letter body to the letter closing.

The adversative sense of the particle δέ in peace benedictions explains why in 2 Cor 13:11b, Gal 6:16 and Phil 4:9b the wish for peace is introduced instead by the simple conjunction καί. For the peace wish in these three instances, rather than being set apart, is linked with the immediately preceding material.²⁹ Thus the shift from δέ to καί should be seen as a subtle, yet significant, clue signifying that the closing section of the letter begins not with the peace benediction but with the material preceding the wish.

b. *The Divine Source.* After the introductory element, the divine source of the wish in the Pauline peace benedictions is given in the nominative case.³⁰ Whereas the divine source of the *grace* benedictions is always identified as "(our) Lord Jesus (Christ)," in the *peace* benedictions it is typically "God" (ὁ θεός).³¹ This pattern of aligning a grace benediction with Christ and a peace benediction with God follows naturally from the opening salutation, where the same two wishes are linked in chiasmic fashion with the same two divine figures: "Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Added consistently to the identification of the divine source is the qualifying genitive phrase τῆς εἰρήνης ("of peace"). The fuller expression ὁ θεός τῆς εἰρήνης ("the God of peace"), rare in the literature of Paul's day,³² describes God as the source and giver of peace. Consequently, when this phrase is used with the verb εἰμί, whether stated or implied, it expresses the wish of the benediction. Paul's statement "May the God of peace be with you" is tantamount to saying "May

[187]

²⁹ The significance of the shift from δέ to καί in these three peace benedictions is recognized by R. Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (trans. R. A. Harrisville; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976, 1985 [Eng.]) 250; V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB 32A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984) 586; R. P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40; Waco: Word, 1986) 493, 500.

³⁰ In a couple of instances, the intensive pronoun αὐτός is added to the noun (1 Thess 5:23; 2 Thess 3:16). G. Harder (*Paulus und das Gebet* [Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1936] 26, n. 4) argues for a connection between the third-person address "God himself" with the second-person address "You God" or "You yourself" found in the Psalms (LXX) and the Talmud. M. Black (*An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1946] 70) proposes that the expression αὐτός δ ὁ is an Aramaism in which the intensive pronoun is used proleptically to emphasize the following noun. G. Wiles (*Paul's intercessory Prayers*, 30-31) claims that αὐτός "had an accepted liturgical significance, adding a note of majesty to the address." Although the origin of the intensive pronoun in the peace benediction remains a disputed point, the occasional addition of αὐτός to the divine source of the wish seems to have an emphasizing function.

³¹ The two exceptions are Gal 6:16, where the divine source is omitted, and 2 Thess 3:16, where the giver or source of the wish is ὁ κύριος ("the Lord").

³² The phrase "the God of peace" occurs only two times outside of Paul's closing peace benedictions (*T. Dan.* 5:2; Heb 13:20).

the God of peace give you peace."³³ In fact, the peace benediction of 2 Thess 3:16 states this wish explicitly: "May the Lord of peace himself give you peace."

c. *The Wish.* Identifying the content or wish of the peace benediction is complicated somewhat by the fact that some of these closing benedictions use the copula εἰμί (given or implied) while others have a transitive verb. The content of the wish is taken from the qualifying genitive phrase. The benediction "May the God of peace be with you," therefore, can be understood as meaning "May the God of peace give you peace" (Rom 15:33; 2 Cor 13:11b; Phil 4:9b; see Gal 6:16). But the same wish is found as well in one of the benedictions using a transitive verb: "May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways" (2 Thess 3:16). And in the two other benedictions, while still identifying the source of the wish as "the God of peace," the content of the wish is for something additional or other than peace (Rom 16:20a; 1 Thess 5:23).

d. *The Recipient.* The fourth element in a Pauline peace benediction is the recipient of the wish. The recipient is frequently introduced by the preposition μετά ("with") and followed by the second-person plural personal pronoun ὑμῶν ("you"). This form of identifying the recipient, identical to that used in the grace benediction, occurs in the peace benedictions of Rom 15:33, 2 Cor 13:11b, and Phil 4:9b. Although the remaining four wishes of Rom 16:20a, 1 Thess 5:23, 2 Thess 3:16 and Gal 6:16 exhibit some degree of diversity and expansion, the identity of the recipient is still indicated by the second-person plural personal pronoun.

Summary: Our formal analysis of the Pauline peace benedictions indicates that this epistolary convention typically possesses the following formula ὁ δ θεός τῆς εἰρήνης [ἔσται / εἶη] μεθ' ὑμῶν (see Rom 15:33; 2 Cor 13:11b; Phil 4:9b). Although not as tightly structured as its counterpart, the grace benediction, the peace benediction nevertheless exhibits a relatively consistent form made up of the four elements outlined above.

2. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

A comparison of the peace benediction at 1 Thess 5:23 with the peace benedictions found in Paul's other letter closings reveals that here

[188]

the form of this epistolary convention is strikingly unique. For instead of the simple and relatively fixed formula "May the God of peace be with you," 1 Thess 5:23 reads in greatly expanded fashion: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit, soul and body be kept whole and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." The distinctiveness of this wish is further heightened by the unusual addition of a word of

³³ Most commentators take the genitive phrase to denote not so much a characteristic of God as a gift that he gives to his people. For example, in his discussion of the peace benediction, Martin (*2 Corinthians*, 494) states that he "takes 'peace' and 'love' to be gifts of God, given by him to the Corinthians." Similarly, E. Best (*Second Corinthians* [Atlanta; John Knox, 1987] 136) comments on 2 Cor 13:11b: "He is the God of love and peace and in situations of conflict what is needed above all is the peace and love that he alone can give."

encouragement that concludes the benediction: "Faithful is the one who is calling you, and he will do it."³⁴

That this form of the peace benediction is not fortuitous but rather deliberate—and so hermeneutically significant—can be seen from a careful comparison of 1 Thess 5:23-24 with the rest of the letter. For the expanded peace benediction and its concluding word of encouragement echo three major themes of 1 Thessalonians: the call to sanctified living, the certainty of Christ's return, and the comfort for persecuted Christians.³⁵

a. *Call to Sanctified Living.* One important connection between the closing peace benediction of 1 Thessalonians and the rest of the letter exists in the theme of sanctification. The importance of living a life of holiness is expressed in the peace benediction by means of the two optative verbs: ἀγιάσαι ("may he sanctify") and ἀμέμπτως τηρηθῆναι ("may it [your spirit, soul and body] be kept blameless"). That sanctification involves a person's entire life is stressed by the two adjectives that form an alliteration, ὁλοτελεῖς ("wholly") and ὀλόκληρον ("complete") and perhaps also by the threefold reference to πνεῶμα, ψυχὴ and σῶμα.³⁶

Although the call to living a holy life comes distinctly to the fore in the second half of the letter (4:1-5:22), the same concern can also

[189]

be found in the first half (1:2-3:13). Paul opens 1 Thessalonians by commending the Thessalonians for their "work of faith and labor of love" (1:3), i.e., for the outward and visible signs of a sanctified life that testify to their salvation in Jesus Christ. In fact, their "faith in God," manifested in their holy lives, has served as a powerful example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7-9).

This opening note of thanksgiving leads into an extended discussion of Paul's ministry at Thessalonica. Paul defends his apostolic work among them by appealing to the "holy, righteous and blameless" (ἀμέμπτως) lives of both himself and his missionary companions (2:10). This holiness exhibited in the apostles' ministry becomes in turn the ground on which Paul challenges the Thessalonians "to lead a life worthy of God" (2:12). The concern for

³⁴ The only other place where Paul adds a word of encouragement to conclude a peace benediction is 2 Thess 3:16b.

³⁵ The recapitulating function of the peace benediction in I Thess 5:23-24 has been noted by at least four commentators, though they fail to develop the significance of this fact in any substantial way. In addition to the comments of Jewett and Wiles that have already been cited above (see pp. 181-82), note also P. E. Langevin ("L'intervention de Dieu, selon 1 Thes 5,23-24. Déjà le salut par grâce," *ScEs* 41 [1989] 90), who concludes: "Cette bénédiction fait écho à plusieurs thèmes ou préoccupations majeures de la lettre. Elle en fournit même une certaine synthèse" ("This benediction echoes several themes or major preoccupations of the letter. It even provides a certain synthesis of it" [trans. mine]). C. A. Wanamaker (*Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 207), following the lead of Jewett, notes that verse 23 "sums up the dominant theme of the whole letter, parenthesis for Christian living" (see also his comments on pp. 50, 205).

³⁶ The connection between the tripartite reference and the theme of sanctification is noted by a few commentators. For example, F. F. Bruce (*1 & 2 Thessalonians* [WBC 45; Waco: Word, 1982] 130) comments: "The three [spirit, soul, body] together give further emphasis to the completeness of sanctification for which the writers pray." For a different explanation which connects the tripartite reference to the theme of Christ's return, see below.

sanctified living also comes out in the prayer that climaxes the first half of the letter: "May the Lord ... establish your hearts unblamable in holiness (ἀμέμπτους ἐν ἀγιοσύνη) before God our Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (ἀγίων)" (3:13).

The second section of the letter, with its parenetic focus, highlights to an even greater degree the theme of sanctification. The Thessalonians are called on to conduct themselves in a manner pleasing to God (4:1). This manner of conduct is explicitly identified as "your sanctification (ὁ ἀγιασμός ὑμῶν)" (4:3). Believers must abstain from sexual immorality and know how to control their bodies "in holiness (ἐν ἀγιασμῷ) and honor" (4:4). The motivation for such ethical concerns is that "God has not called us to uncleanness but in holiness (ἐν ἀγιασμῷ)" (4:7), and so he "gives his Holy (ἅγιον) Spirit to us" (4:8). Sanctified lives are further characterized by brotherly love, peaceful living, and hard work—all of which win the respect of non-Christians (4:9-12).

The theme of sanctification even occurs in the midst of a lengthy discussion about the return of Christ (4:13-5:11). For Paul reminds his Thessalonian converts that, though the day of the Lord is a day of judgment that will come like a thief in the night, they need not fear that day nor be caught unprepared, since they are "children of light and children of the day" in contrast to those "of the night or of darkness" (5:5; also see 5:4, 7, 8). The metaphors of light and day versus darkness and night, common to the literature of the OT and Second Temple Judaism, are used here, as in Paul's other letters,³⁷ to refer to

[190]

holy living, to the righteous lives of the Thessalonians. Thus the return of Christ, which is also a key theme in the letter, is intimately connected with Paul's preoccupation throughout I Thessalonians with holy living.

Likewise, concern with sanctification is evident in the various exhortations of 5:12-22. For if the Thessalonians want to be "sanctified wholly" and "be kept completely blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," they need to ensure that they respect their leaders (vv. 12-13a), are at peace with each other (v. 13b), encourage the faint hearted (v. 14b), help the weak (v. 14c), express patience to all (v. 14d), pursue what is good (v. 15), and so on, to reiterate just a few of the listed activities that are characteristic of a holy life. Paul makes frequent use in these closing exhortations of the adjective πᾶς (vv. 14, 15 [2x], 16, 18, 21, 22), thereby stressing the comprehensive nature of a sanctified life—a point also emphasized, as noted above, in the peace benediction.³⁸

It is clear, therefore, that the emphasis on sanctification expressed in the peace benediction of 1 Thess 5:23-24 echoes, both in content and in direct verbal links, the statements and exhortations given throughout the rest of 1 Thessalonians. Paul, it appears, has

³⁷ See Rom 1:21; 2:19; 13:11-13; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 4:6; 6:14; Eph 4:18; 5:8-11; 6:12; Col 1:13. The connection between the metaphor of day/night and light/darkness with the concept of sanctification or holy living is especially clear in Rom 13:12-13: "The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy."

³⁸ This is evident in the use of ὁλοτελεῖς and ὁλόκληρον, and perhaps also in the threefold reference to πνεῦμα, ψυχὴ and σῶμα

carefully adapted and expanded a traditional closing epistolary convention so that it recapitulates a key theme of his letter and so serves to drive home to his readers one last time the importance of living a holy life. Thus the closing peace benediction of 1 Thessalonians functions as a hermeneutical spotlight, drawing our attention to what Paul considers to be one of the major themes of that letter.

b. *Certainty of Christ's Return.* A second important link between the closing peace benediction of 1 Thessalonians and the rest of the letter lies in the theme of Christ's return. Paul's closing prayer is that his readers will be kept completely blameless "at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This reference to Christ's parousia is all the more striking in light of the fact that it does not occur in any other Pauline peace benediction.

The readers have been well prepared throughout the body of 1 Thessalonians to read of Christ's return at its closing. Paul begins the first half of his letter by praising the Thessalonians, not only for their "work of faith and labor of love" (1:3a), but also for their "steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3b). In the context of the letter as a whole, this can only refer to their abiding confidence in Christ and his ultimate return.³⁹ In fact, others in Macedonia and

[191]

Achaia have heard how they have turned from idols to serve God and "to wait for his Son from heaven" (1:10). Paul therefore anticipates that the Thessalonian believers will be his "crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming" (2:19). To ensure that result, Paul closes the first section of his letter by praying that Christ will establish their hearts unblamable in holiness before God "at the coming of our Lord Jesus with his saints" (3:13).

The return of Christ is a theme that is developed even more explicitly in the second half of 1 Thessalonians. The Thessalonian believers were apparently concerned about the fate of their fellow Christians who had passed away before Christ's return: Would the deceased not participate in that great eschatological event, or be at some disadvantage to those believers who were still living? Paul responds to such concerns in 4:13-18 by assuring his readers that all believers—those who have passed away as well as those who remain alive—will participate equally in the glorious day of Christ's second coming.

That the subject of Christ's return constituted a major issue within the Thessalonian church can be seen in the fact that Paul proceeds in 5:1-11 to talk at some length about the "times and seasons" related to the day of the Lord. Because his readers are "sons of light and sons of the day," they await Christ's return not with unprepared fear and ignorance but with sober readiness and hope. Thus the long section of 4:13-5:11 is permeated with references, both explicit and implicit, to the topic of Christ's parousia.

Such preoccupation with Christ's return, which is a particularly evident theme in 4:13-5:11 but present in the rest of the letter as well, makes it difficult to believe that the unparalleled reference to "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" in the peace benediction of 1

³⁹ See Wiles (*Paul's Intercessory Prayers*, 179): "Clearly the hope referred to here [1:3] was the Thessalonians' fervid expectation of the parousia."

Thessalonians is fortuitous. Rather, it seems apparent that Paul has deliberately adapted and expanded his typical closing peace benediction so that it echoes a main theme of this particular letter. And this recapitulating function, in turn, aids our understanding of Paul's purpose in writing and the situation of his readers, thereby highlighting their struggles and Paul's responses vis-à-vis important questions concerning Christ's return.

c. *Comfort for Persecuted Christians.* A third important connection between the closing peace benediction and the rest of the letter can be found in the theme of comfort for persecuted Christians. It is clear already at the opening of the letter (1:6, "you received the word in much affliction") that the Thessalonians had experienced persecution from the moment of their conversion (see also 2 Cor 8:1-2). In this regard, Gentile Christians at Thessalonica were no different than their fellow Jewish Christians in Judea, "for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews" (2:14).

[192]

That this persecution posed a serious threat to the Thessalonian church is clear, not just from Paul's use of the adjective "much" (πολύς) to describe their persecution (1:6), but even more so from his sending of Timothy to ensure that "no one be moved by these afflictions" (3:3; see 3:1-5; 5:16-18; also 2 Thess 1:4-7; 2:15). Thus a major concern of Paul in 1 Thessalonians is to provide comfort and encouragement for believers in their struggle (note the summary statements of 4:18 and 5:11, "Comfort one another" [παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους]).

This note of comfort in the face of persecution is also found in the closing peace benediction of the letter. The intensive pronoun αὐτός, which adds emphasis both by its placement at the head of the sentence and by its grammatical function, stresses that it is God "himself" who will carry out the wish expressed in the prayer. The Thessalonians' ability to resist persecution and be kept completely blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ does not rest in their own talent or strength but in God's.⁴⁰

In the peace benediction Paul further comforts his afflicted readers by means of a concluding word of encouragement: "Faithful is the one who is calling you, and he will do it" (5:24). As with the intensive pronoun αὐτός in the previous verse, so also here the adjective πιστός stands in the first position for emphasis. "Faithful" is the God whom Paul calls on to keep the Thessalonians holy and blameless at the return of Christ. So despite their present persecution, believers at Thessalonica need not worry about the ultimate outcome, for this faithful God "will do it."⁴¹ Furthermore, they should remember that God also "is calling (καλέω) you." The present tense of the participle is significant. God has not called them once in the past and subsequently abandoned them to their own devices. Rather, as Paul puts it elsewhere, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

⁴⁰ Wiles (*Paul's Intercessory Prayers*, 66) comments: "In the words αὐτός δέ he [Paul] seems to point away from the weakness of the converts' own unaided efforts and to place them under the supreme power of God."

⁴¹ The verbal idea of God "doing" or fulfilling the wish of the peace benediction is emphasized in two ways: (1) the addition of *lad* suggests that God not only calls but "also" acts; and (2) the omission of any direct object in the phrase has the effect of highlighting the verb. See G. Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908) 79; L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 183.

The description of God in the peace benediction as one who "is calling you" recalls earlier statements about God's initiative in the conversion of the Thessalonians. In the thanksgiving section (1:2-10), which addresses the subject of how the Thessalonians have turned from idols to serve a living and true God despite persecution, Paul

[193]

states that the ultimate cause⁴² of their conversion rests in their being "called" (τὴν ἐκλογὴν ὑμῶν by God (1:4). This divine initiative is more clearly spelled out in 2:12, which identifies God as the one "who is calling you (τοῦ καλοῦντος)⁴³ into his own kingdom and glory." Similarly, Paul grounds his commands concerning sanctified living on the fact that "God has not called (ἐκάλεσεν) us to uncleanness, but in holiness" (4:7). And although the verb καλῶν is not used, God's involvement in the lives of the Thessalonians is clearly central to Paul's reminder to them that "God has not destined us for wrath but for the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9).

The addition of the pronoun αὐτός in verse 23 and the word of encouragement in verse 24, therefore, result in a peace benediction that echoes an important theme found in the rest of the letter, i.e., that salvation is the result of God's initiative and that this divine calling ensures the full completion of salvation at the day of Christ's return. This provides a powerful message of comfort to the Thessalonians who were facing strong opposition because of their faith. Once again, it can be seen how Paul has masterfully expanded the closing peace benediction of 1 Thessalonians so that this epistolary convention now recalls earlier statements of the letter and better addresses the specific concerns of his readers.

The above analysis of the peace benediction of 1 Thess 5:23-24 and its recapitulating function illustrates the hermeneutical significance that Paul's letter closings potentially offer. For the peace benediction of 1 Thessalonians serves as an interpretive spotlight, illuminating the three central concerns of Paul in this letter and highlighting the historical situation of his readers.

In addition to drawing our attention to the major themes of the letter, the closing peace benediction of 1 Thess 5:23-24 also aids our understanding of specific exegetical difficulties faced within that letter. For example, the recapitulating function of the peace benediction suggests a new solution to the vexing problem of the threefold reference to the "spirit, soul and body" in 5:23. This is the only passage in the NT that speaks of a tripartite makeup of human nature. A number of diverse explanations have been forwarded, none of which have proven convincing to the majority of exegetes.⁴⁴ But understanding

⁴² The two participles μνημονεύοντες (1:3) and εἰδότες (1:4) introduce clauses that give the grounds or reasons for Paul's thanksgiving. For a detailed discussion of the structure of thanksgiving sections, see Schubert, *Form and Function of Pauline Thanksgivings*, 10-39; O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings*, 6-15; Jervis, *Purpose of Romans*, 86-109.

⁴³ The present tense of the participle here is also significant.

⁴⁴ The various proposals may be briefly outlined as follows: (1) B. von Dobschütz (*Die Thessalonicherbriefe* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909]), believing that Paul is describing the nature of a Christian as distinct from humans in general, takes πνεῦμα to refer to the divine Spirit that enters into a believer alongside the human "soul" and "body"; (2) C. Masson ("Sur I Thessaloniens V, 23: Notes d'anthropologie paulinienne," *RTP* 33 [1945] 97-102) understands πνεῦμα to refer to the human being as a whole person (see Gal 6:18; Phil

[194]

the closing peace benediction as echoing the major concerns of 1 Thessalonians as a whole suggests that the tripartite reference also refers back to some key issue previously addressed in the letter. A strong candidate for this antecedent concern is the Thessalonians' fears about the fate of their fellow believers who have "fallen asleep" prior to Christ's return (4:13-18). By closing the letter with a prayer that God may keep their spirit, soul and body "whole" (ὅλοκληρον) at the second coming of Christ, Paul responds one last time to such fears by assuring his readers that a believer's *whole* person will be involved in the day of Christ's return. Thus those who die before the parousia of Christ will not miss that glorious eschatological event nor will they be *in any way* at a disadvantage.

3. Galatians 6:16

Another peace benediction that deviates rather significantly from the typical form of this epistolary convention is Gal 6:16⁴⁵ This peace benediction differs not only in the wish (note the addition of ἔλεος ["mercy"], which along with εἰρήνη is expressed by means of the nominative case rather than by a qualifying genitive phrase) and di-

[195]

vine source (which is omitted), but especially in the identification of the recipient. Instead of the expected μεθ' ὑμῶν the recipient is introduced by a relative clause (ὅσοι τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ στοιχήσουσιν ["all those who walk by this rule"]), followed by a double prepositional phrase (ἐπ' αὐτούς ... καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ ["on them ... and on the Israel of God"]).

Unlike the other Pauline peace benedictions, the wish in Gal 6:16 contains a conditional aspect: only those who follow the rule laid down by Paul will enjoy a blessing of peace and

4:23) and that "soul" and "body" then explicate this; (3) P. A. van Stempvoort ("Eine stilistische Lösung einer alten Schwierigkeit in I Thess. v. 23," *NTS* 7 [1960/61] 262-65) takes πνεῦμα as equivalent to a personal pronoun "you" and divides up the verse so that ὅλοκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα belongs to the first half of the sentence in parallel to ὑμᾶς ὀλοτελεῖς: 'May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly and your spirit completely May both soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus'; (4) R. Jewett (*Paul's Anthropological Terms* [Leiden: Brill, 1971] 175-83) proposes that Paul is here taking over the language of enthusiasts in Thessalonica who adopted a Gnostic type of understanding of man in which the divinely-given spirit was contrasted with the human body' and soul; (5) M. Dibelius (*An die Thessalonicher I, II; An die Philipper* [Tübingen, Mohr, 1937] 229) believes that Paul has taken over a traditional formula (*Epist. Apost.* 24) and so any distinctions in it would not necessarily be his own; (6) Marshall (*Thessalonians*, 163) proposes reading the text as referring to three aspects, but not three parts, of a person's being.

⁴⁵ This peace benediction has some affinity with the 19th Benediction of the *Shemoneh 'Esreh* (the Babylonian Talmud lists nineteen blessings while the Palestinian has eighteen): "Bring peace, goodness and blessing, grace and favour and mercy over us and over all Israel, thy people" (see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Christ*, ed. G. Vermes et al. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979] II, 458). A simpler parallel can be found in Ps 125:5 (LXX 124:5): "Peace be upon Israel." If Paul is borrowing here from one of these benedictions, this would explain why Gal 6:16 differs in form so greatly from the other peace benedictions. The differences between Gal 6:16 and the two parallels, however, should not be overlooked. At best, one can only speak of a possible dependence of Paul on one of these benedictions.

mercy.⁴⁶ This conditional formulation of the peace benediction reflects the strained relations between Paul and his readers that are so evident throughout the Galatian letter.

Another unique feature of this particular peace benediction is Paul's reference to the recipients of the wish as "the Israel of God." On the basis of Paul's use of "Israel" in other letters as well as other claimed parallels, several commentators conclude that the phrase "the Israel of God" refers to Jews, either a non-judaizing group of Jewish Christians in Galatia,⁴⁷ a believing Jewish remnant within the broader Christian church,⁴⁸ or an eschatological Israel that will be saved at Christ's return.⁴⁹ It is difficult to believe, however, that in a letter where Paul has been breaking down the distinctions that separate Jewish and Gentile Christians and stressing the equality of both groups, that he in the closing would give a peace benediction addressed to believing Jews as a separate group within the church. If one takes the context of the letter seriously, it seems much better to conclude that the phrase "the Israel of God" refers to those Gentile Christians in Galatia who walk according to Paul's rule.⁵⁰

[196]

What is most significant for our purposes, however, is that the designation "the Israel of God" echoes an important theme in the body of the letter, namely, the claim of Paul (apparently in reaction to the message of the Judaizers) that Gentile Christians are legitimate heirs of Abraham and thus share fully in the blessings of God's Covenant with Abraham and his descendents, the people of Israel. This issue of who rightfully are heirs of Abraham manifests itself at a number of points in the letter body: in 3:6-9, where Paul gives an exposition of Abraham's faith ("So you see it is those who have faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you [Abraham] shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith"); in 3:14, where the apostle explicitly states that the purpose of Christ's death on the cross was to allow Gentiles to share fully in the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant ("in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles"); in 3:15-18, where he articulates the true nature of the Abrahamic covenant (the promises of this covenant are not intended just for the ethnic offspring of Abraham—the Jews; rather the promises of this covenant are for

⁴⁶ The conditional character of the peace benediction probably accounts for the subjunctive form *στοιχήσωσιν* found in P⁴⁶, thereby making the clause agree with the classical construction of a conditional relative (although the particle *ὅν* also should be added). The conditional character of the benediction has been noted by a number of commentators; e.g., P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 76; Gamble, *Textual History*, 73; Betz, *Galatians*, 320-21; Schnider and Stenger, *Neutestamentlichen Briefformular*, 150.

⁴⁷ So, e.g., G. Schrenk, "Was bedeutet 'Israel Gottes'?" *Judaica* 5 (1949) 81-94; *idem*, "Der Segenwunsch nach der Kampfpistel," *Judaica* 6 (1950) 170-90; D. W. B. Robinson, "Distinction between Jewish and Gentile Believers in Galatians," *AusBR* 13 (1965) 29-44.

⁴⁸ See E. D. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921) 357-58; Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church*, 74-84; W. D. Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel," *NTS* 24 (1977) 4-39, esp. 9-11.

⁴⁹ So, e.g., F. Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief* (Friburg: Herder, 1977 [3rd ed]) 417; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 275.

⁵⁰ So, e.g., N. A. Dahl, "Dir Name Israel, I: Zur Auslegung von Gal. 6,16," *Judaica* 6 (1950) 161-70; Betz, *Galatians*, 322-23; C. B. Cousar, *Galatians* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 150; R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 297-99.

his offspring, Christ, and, as is made clear later in verse 29, also for those who are Christ's own, regardless of their ethnicity); in 3:26-29 where he applies this claim about the Abrahamic covenant to the Galatian situation ("For you all are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise"); and in 4:21-31, where he treats in an allegorical manner the two wives of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah, and his two sons (the Gentile Christians of Galatia are the true sons and daughters of Abraham since they are children of promise and children of the free woman; see esp. 4:31). It is clear, therefore, that one of Paul's central concerns in the body section of Galatians is to prove that the Gentile Christians are truly children of Abraham and share equally with the people of Israel the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.⁵¹

In this context, Paul's adaptation of the peace benediction in Gal 6:16 becomes highly significant and telling. For by closing the letter with a reference to his Gentile readers as "the Israel of God," Paul reasserts the claim articulated in the letter as a whole: the Gentile Christians in Galatia, by faith in Christ rather than by submitting to circumcision and observing other Jewish laws, have become the true

[197]

heirs of Abraham together with all Jews who believe, and so can legitimately be called "the Israel of God." As in 1 Thess 5:23-24, here too we see Paul adapting the form of the peace benediction such that this epistolary convention now recalls and reaffirms one of the key themes of the letter. That this echoing function of the peace benediction is not fortuitous but deliberate and thus hermeneutically significant is confirmed by the remaining closing conventions in Gal 6:11-18 which have likewise been expanded and adapted by Paul in such a way that they also recapitulate the key themes developed throughout the Galatian letter.⁵²

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay has been to correct the lack of attention given to the Pauline letter closings. Although these final sections are usually considered to be merely conventional in nature and thus unimportant, we have claimed that the Pauline letter closings are carefully constructed units, shaped and adapted in such a way that they relate directly to—sometimes, in fact, even summarize—the major concerns and themes previously addressed in the body sections of their respective letters. The peace benedictions of 1 Thessalonians and Galatians serve as a good paradigm of how a Pauline letter closing aids in important ways our understanding of Paul's central purposes in the writing of this letter as well as our understanding of his readers and their historical situation. The peace benedictions of I

⁵¹ Longenecker (*Galatians*, 218) states: "The question that comes directly to the fore in Paul's use of Abraham in 3:6-9, and that which underlies all of his argumentation thereafter ... is: Who are Abraham's true children and heirs?" See also his comments on pp. xcvi, 298.

⁵² See Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "Gal. 6:11-18: A Hermeneutical Key to the Galatian Letter," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993) 90-107. Here it is shown how Paul adapts and expands the typical form of his closing conventions in such a way that five sharp Contrasts (four explicit and one implicit) are set out between himself and his Galatian opponents. These contrasts involving the themes of persecution, boasting, circumcision, and the new creation—as well as the implicit theme of "the Israel of God"—echo the central issues and themes raised earlier in the Galatian letter.

Jeffrey A.D. Weima, "The Pauline Letter Closings: Analysis and Hermeneutical Significance," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 177-198

Thessalonians and Galatians also suggest that other Pauline closings can likewise function as a hermeneutical spotlight, drawing our attention to the central concerns of Paul in his letters and illuminating our understanding of these key themes and issues. For even though we have examined in this essay only one of Paul's closing conventions (the peace benediction) and how this epistolary formula functions in just two of the apostle's letters (1 Thessalonians and Galatians), our study elsewhere of the remaining epistolary conventions within Paul's letter closings reveals that they also typically possess a recapitulating function and so are hermeneutically significant.⁵³ The Pauline letter closings, therefore, can no longer be ignored. Instead, they must play an important role in the examination and interpretation of Paul's letters.

© *Institute for Biblical Research* 1995. Reproduced by permission.

Converted to PDF by Robert I Bradshaw, January 2004.

e-mail: rob@biblicalstudies.org.uk

Website: <http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁵³ See Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings*.