

Introduction:

The Letters of Paul as Rituals of Worship

We rightly consider Paul, a Jew from Tarsus who became the apostle to the Gentiles, as a great missionary, evangelist, teacher, preacher, and pastor.¹ We often neglect, however, to give him the full consideration he deserves as the preeminent and paradigmatic person of prayer and worship.² Our most direct access to Paul is through the letters attributed to him. Yet when we read and listen to these letters, we often overlook their original function as epistolary rituals of worship. They were originally performed publicly in a liturgical assembly. They framed the issues and problems that Paul addressed through them within a context of communal worship. They aimed to enable and facilitate the worship of the assembly, not only their liturgical worship in the particular gathering in which they listened to the letter, but the ethical or moral worship of their everyday lives outside of the liturgical assembly.

1. For a recent comprehensive and perceptive presentation of Paul the missionary, see Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*.

2. “Worship in the NT usually means expression of praise or thanksgiving. Sometimes it implies obeisance as an attitude for supplication. In any case, it is the appropriate human response to the magnificent glory of God” (Powell, “Worship, New Testament,” 1391). “Worship characteristically involves ritualized actions . . . expressions of praise and adoration and also appeals directed to a deity, the devotee(s) usually expressing subordination to and/or dependence on the intended recipient of worship while also affirming a positive relationship with the recipient” (Hurtado, “Worship, NT Christian,” 910–11).

Epistolary Rituals of Worship

What, more specifically, does it mean to recognize Paul's letters as "epistolary rituals of worship"?³ First, the original setting for the public performance of these letters was communal worship that was most likely connected to the celebration of the Eucharist.⁴ Their audiences listened to the theological concepts, particular problems, and pressing concerns Paul addressed to them, as they were gathered together, probably in house churches, for worship.⁵ Even the letters addressed to individual delegates of Paul—Titus and Timothy—were not purely personal letters but were also addressed to the worshipping community as a whole.

Secondly, ritualistic and liturgical language both frames and permeates the letters of Paul. Each of the thirteen letters of Paul begins and ends with the same ritualistic greeting that "grace be with you"—the divine grace that comes from God the Father and/or the Lord Jesus Christ. This initial greeting of "grace" sets a liturgical tone for the letter that follows, a tone that is often prolonged by Paul's pronouncements of thanksgiving and/or blessing that serve as an epistolary worship of God, along with assurances of his prayers for his audience. In other words, Paul worships within the letters themselves, thanking, praising, and praying to God for the benefit of those listening. In addition, Paul often refers to the liturgical worship of his audience, their singing of psalms, spiritual songs, hymns, etc., and requests that they reciprocate his prayers with prayers of their own for his benefit. Furthermore, Paul often employs the cultic language that describes the suitability of sacrificial victims, terms such as "holy, blameless, and without blemish," when he exhorts his audiences on how they are to extend their worship beyond their liturgical assembly and into their everyday lives, how their moral living is to be an act of worship.⁶

3. "Ritual" is used here in the sense of "the observance of set forms or rites, as in public worship," as listed in *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1229. See also DeMaris, *Ritual World*.

4. With regard to the letters of Paul, "the presence of liturgical formulas (greeting, prayers, blessings, fragments of hymns) are unmistakable signs that they were meant to be presented to communities at assemblies connected with the celebration of the Eucharist" (Farkasfalvy, "Eucharistic Provenance," 28).

5. Balch, "Rich Pompeiian Houses," 27–46; Harland, "House Church," 903.

6. On the use of cultic language in the letters of Paul, see Vahrenhorst, *Kultische Sprache*; Finlan, *Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*.

Thirdly, as substitutes for his personal presence, the letters of Paul make him present to his various audiences in and through his words of worship considered as ritual “speech acts,” that is, words that actually do what they say, words that communicate by not only informing but performing.⁷ For example, when his audiences hear Paul’s greeting of God’s grace, they begin to have a renewed awareness of that grace as an expression that epitomizes the freely given, gracious salvation God has accomplished for them in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. When his audiences hear Paul praying for them in his letters, his prayers have a performative effect within the rhetorical strategy, as they make him part of, indeed the epistolary presider of, their communal worship. His prayers, then, begin to take effect in the very hearing of them by his audiences. When his audiences hear Paul praising and glorifying God in his letters, they are drawn into his own worship, inspired to imitate him as the preeminent and paradigmatic person of prayer, as one who worships God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ not only in a liturgical assembly but in and through his everyday living.

Worship and the Letters of Paul

Some of the elements and dimensions of worship have been analyzed and studied in various letters of Paul.⁸ But I am not aware of any treatment focusing solely on these letters from the aspect of worship in a comprehensive way.⁹ Indeed, in my opinion, the aspect of worship has been largely neglected or undervalued in New Testament studies in general.¹⁰ Although there have been numerous investigations of the letters of Paul from the aspect of their historical context, theology, rhetoric, ethics, social and political context, etc., scholars rarely if ever devote

7. On “speech act” theory in general, see Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

8. See, for example, Schubert, *Pauline Thanksgiving*; Wiles, *Paul’s Intercessory Prayers*; O’Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings*; Fowl, *Hymnic Material*.

9. An overview of each of the letters of Paul, however, is included in a more general treatment of worship in the entire New Testament by Borchert, *Worship in the New Testament*.

10. For some exceptions to this neglect, see Peterson, *Engaging with God*; Hurtado, *Origins of Christian Worship*; idem, *Lord Jesus Christ*; idem, *How on Earth*; Neyrey, *Give God the Glory*; idem, “Lost in Translation,” 1–23; Borchert, *Worship in the New Testament*.

serious consideration to the aspect of communal worship that provides the context, framework, and much of the content of these letters. The worship aspect so central to these letters seems to have been largely taken for granted and/or ignored, and has thus more or less faded into a shadowy background.

This book aims to contribute toward the correction of this deficiency by focusing on the aspect of worship in the letters of Paul in an effort to shed some light upon this key feature and bring the various dimensions of its significance closer to the foreground of Pauline studies. It will treat each of the thirteen New Testament letters attributed to Paul solely and exclusively from the aspect of worship, understood in its most comprehensive sense from the biblical tradition that combines in a dynamic interrelationship both liturgical and ethical worship. The intended outcome is a fresh way of reading and listening to the letters of Paul for a deeper appreciation of their original purpose. The goal is not to replace or contradict previous studies of Paul's letters but to supplement and hopefully enrich them. I now invite you to join me in what I hope will prove to be a very enlightening and stimulating survey of the letters of Paul as epistolary rituals of worship.¹¹

11. The order to be followed for this survey of the letters of Paul will not be the canonical order that places Romans first and Philemon last. Rather, a chronological order that holds 1 Thessalonians to have been written first and 2 Timothy last will be followed. Although there is no consensus on the exact order in which the letters were written, there seems to be a more or less general agreement distinguishing those letters written early from those written later in the Pauline mission. All biblical translations in the following chapters are my own.