

Patrick Gray. *Opening Paul's Letters: A Reader's Guide to Genre and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. 192 pages. \$19.99.

With the proliferation of technology—texting, tweeting, Facebook, and the like, how do we interpret the ancient biblical letters in this post-modern age? Patrick Gray contends that Paul is best appreciated and understood when read against the conventions of culture, particularly epistolary genre. With an economy of words, he offers a fresh and insightful approach to reading the letters of Paul that is complex yet clear, focused yet balanced. Transparent, succinct, and accessible are words not usually associated with the letters of Paul, yet they accurately characterize Gray's scholarship.

This concise, well-ordered, and practical text reveals a pedagogical intent that makes it immensely appropriate for beginning students. In addition to positing an organizing principle for teaching, its appeal extends to homilists, religious educators, and to general readers who seek to more accurately interpret the letters of Paul.

Gray correlates an accurate analysis of Paul's letters with the framing of relevant interpretive questions, which he argues, emerge out of epistolary genre. This inherently interdisciplinary, multi-dialogical work draws from scholars and theorists from contemporary as well as ancient times. It addresses the multi-dimensional concerns of historical, cultural, philosophical, and literary analysis, toward an integrative intent, in order to render a richer, deeper, and more expansive perspective. The thesis evolves as an engaging narrative, moving the reader along through a sequence of discoveries. It astutely holds the attention of the reader by utilizing the tensions, ambiguities and controversies inherent in the epistles of Paul. Each chapter unfolds to reveal clues to "opening Paul's letters."

As Richard Osmer observed that "interpretation...always takes place from a particular perspective and location" (*Practical Theology*, 2008, 59), *chapter one* examines the cultural context in which Paul was immersed, the interpersonal medium, the pervasive influence of Greek culture throughout the Roman Empire, and the implications for early Christianity. In *chapter two*, drawing on ancient scholars, Gray extrapolates the types and norms of ancient letters as a standard for comparing, assessing, and classifying Paul's writing. Then, having informed and grounded the reader in the culture and epistolary genre, he begins a comparative analysis of the letters attributed to Paul in *chapter three*, paying close attention to the organizational components of the letter, as well as explicating the intended points and arguments.

Gray examines Paul's intended audiences through the interpretive lens of "eavesdropping" (95)—what Heinz Kohut describes as "vicarious introspection," the process by which the reader "gains access to the viewpoints of insiders" (*Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 7, 459-483). From the reading/listening audience of *chapter four*, the text turns to the writer/speaker in *chapter five*. It investigates Paul's reading of the Old Testament in order to determine its impact on his perspective and interpretation of the gospel. Furthermore, this chapter considers the implications of a wide range of biblical translations not only in antiquity but also in this present time and context—do multiple translations mitigate a shared idiom or a common familiarity with Scripture?

*Chapter six* carefully considers pseudonymity and how it informs the reading of ancient letters. It emphasizes the necessity of a close reading of the text in constructing a hypothesis regarding authorial intent. As well, it investigates the influence of cultural norms in establishing expectations that determine authenticity, legitimacy, and authority in authorship. The adept use

of examples from antiquity and present time is elucidating; it clarifies the theories and grounds them in context.

In the *epilogue*, the author evokes the salient themes of the remaining New Testament letters, providing a wider backdrop from which to read and understand epistolary genre. The *appendices* display a comparative table that dates the letters of Paul, in addition to including a supplemental resource pertaining to pseudonymity. Sidebars, along with ancient and contemporary stories and illustrations, support and illumine the thesis. An extensive bibliography contributes to further reading, and discussion questions concluding each chapter encourage reflection and dialogue among readers. This text is a veritable treasure trove, filled with practical, applicable resources.

This generative work makes an important and needed contribution to biblical studies because it not only asserts an exemplary pedagogical framework for teaching the letters of Paul, it implies a shift in how readers know what is to be known about Paul's letters. At the same time, it extends access to what is known to a broader readership. Indeed, this text achieves its stated purpose. It reorients the reader by providing an interpretive framework in which epistolary genre through cultural experience becomes the norm for interpreting the letters of Paul.

Veronica R. Goines, Pastor, St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Ph.D. student, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA