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FORMULAS IN NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES

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A recent article by John L. White dealt with six epistolographic forms, considering them as formulas which "may introduce the body of the Pauline letter."¹ Two of these forms have been analyzed before, but four of them are apparently suggested for the first time by White. There are three aspects of the article which I propose to consider. First, its description of the forms needs to be filled out. Second, its characterization of the forms as "introductory formulae" needs to be reviewed. And third, the value of restricting consideration of the forms to Paul's use of them needs to be questioned.

I. The Specific Forms

In considering the petition, White indicates only one type of the rich epistolographic form. As I have demonstrated,² the petition in early Greek epistolography exhibits four types, all of them represented in the NT.

The first of these is the routine petition using ἀξιοῦν. An example of this type is in P. Oxy. 486: . . . /ἀξιῶ/--/ἐὰν δόξη σοι / ἐπιτρέψαι μοι . . .³

The second is the formal petition which uses δεῖσθαι. An example of this type is in P. Oxy. 1470: . . . διὸ/δέομαι/τῆς σῆς κηδαιμονίας . . .⁴

The third is the familiar petition, using ἐρωτᾶν. An example of this type is in P. Oxy. 1466: . . . /ἐρωτῶ,/κύριε, /--/ δοῦναί μοι κύριον . . .⁵

The fourth is the personal petition, using παρακαλεῖν. An example of this type is in P. Oxy. 158: παρακαλῶ/τὴν ὑμετέραν λαμπρὰν γνησίαν ἀδελφότητα/κελεύσαι . . .⁶

The personal petition is the only type indicated by White, although he implies that other verbs of petition are used.

White says, "They contain, uniformly, two major elements, a background

¹ John L. White, "Introductory Formulae in the Body of the Pauline Letter," *JBL* 90 (1971) 91-97.

² Terence Y. Mullins, "Petition as a Literary Form," *NovT* 5 (1962) 46-54.

³ B. Grenfell and A. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1898-1948) 3, 181.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12, 205.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 224.

section and a request period."⁷ Actually, as my published analysis of the petition shows, there are three basic elements and at least two elaborating elements of the petition. The example I cited showing all five elements was from P. Oxy. 487:

background / *petition* / *address* / *courtesy phrase* / *desired action*
 vss. 4-12 . . . / *δέομε* / *κύριαι* / *ἐὰν σοῦ τῆ τύχη* *δώξῃ* / vss. 13-19.⁸

The major elements are the most important part of the petition as far as the petitioner is concerned; they contain the stuff of his argument. But the elaborating elements can be of much greater importance to the scholar studying the nuances of form. The development of these elaborating elements in the NT is especially revealing.

In the papyri the four different types of petition are consistently used in four different situations and the use of one type of petition rather than another tells much about the intent and attitude of the petitioner. Thus, Paul's use of a personal petition in 2 Cor 2:8 indicates that he is addressing his readers in warm, friendly terms, while his use of a formal petition in 2 Cor 5:20 indicates that he is using a less personal, more forensic form of address — and to interpret this passage as meaning that his sense of urgency is so great that "he cannot speak indifferently; he must beseech or beg . . ." ⁹ is to give this passage a different kind of intensity than the form indicates. On the other hand, the petition in Acts 29:22 is a routine petition and does not indicate intensity at all; it indicates minimal interest. Finally, the use of the familiar petition in Paul's letters (and in no other NT letters) is interesting and may relate to the multiple authorship of these letters (1-2 Thessalonians and Philippians); in official petitions among the papyri, the familiar petition is used by persons who were the social equals of the official who was petitioned.

In considering the thanksgiving, White referred briefly to Schubert's work on the form¹⁰ and proceeded to correct Sanders' analysis¹¹ along the same lines that I had earlier.¹²

A bit more should be said about the thanksgiving. As Schubert pointed out, it is not just Paul's parallel to the *προσκύνημα* formula of the papyri. It exists in the papyri. Moreover, its use in the papyri indicates that it is not to be excised from the "body" of the letter as White does. On the contrary, Schubert points

⁷ White, "Introductory Formulae," 93.

⁸ *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, 3, 183.

⁹ Floyd V. Filson, *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), 10, 343.

¹⁰ Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (BZNW 20; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939).

¹¹ J. T. Sanders, "The Transition from Opening Epistolary Thanksgiving to Body in the Letters of the Pauline Corpus," *JBL* 81 (1962) 348-62.

¹² Terence Y. Mullins, "Disclosure, a Literary Form in the New Testament," *NovT* 7 (1964) 44-50.

out that in a letter from Apion to his father (BGU, II, 423:2), after the Opening and the Wish there follows "in the form of a thanksgiving to the Lord Sarapis, the essential item of epistolary information. This thanksgiving focuses the epistolary situation and permits the writer to continue in simple epistolary phrases, to recite his experiences and make his requests. The thanksgiving is explicitly and exclusively addressed to Sarapis, the patron god of seafarers. This is however not an account of a formal act of thanksgiving made in a Sarapeum, but a definitely epistolary form of thanksgiving, as the use of the simple present tense (εὐχαριστῶ) indicates."¹³

The thanksgiving is a comparatively rare form in ancient Greek epistolary practice. Outside of the NT it has a simple structure. There are five elements: the verb of thanksgiving, a modifier, the object of thanksgiving, the person addressed, and the substance of the thanksgiving. Of these, the verb of thanksgiving and the substance are essential; the rest are optional and the entire form may be preceded by a transitional phrase which could be considered a sixth element, also optional. An example of a thanksgiving with all five elements is that cited by Schubert (BGU 816):

addressee / thanksgiving / modifier / object of thanksgiving / substance
 πάτερ, / εὐχαριστῶ / πολλὰ / Ἰσιδώρω τῷ ἐπιτρόπῳ, / ἐπεὶ συνέστοκέ . . .

The NT thanksgiving has this pattern in it but commonly expands it into an elaborate literary structure. As Schubert has shown, the Pauline thanksgivings were grammatically intricate. Schubert analyzed them in two types. The first "is characterized by one or two or three participle constructions immediately following and modifying the principal verb εὐχαριστῶ . . . followed by a final clause which is subordinate to them."¹⁴ The second "is structurally characterized, first, by a causal ὅτι-clause immediately following the subordinate to the principal εὐχαριστῶ-clause and, second, by a consecutive clause, following and subordinate to the ὅτι-clause, introduced by ὥστε."¹⁵

The disclosure is a minor form using θέλω and a noetic verb to indicate information which a writer desires to convey to the reader. White's analysis of the disclosure indicates only three elements, one of which he says is "often a two-membered unit."¹⁶ This is a needless confusion of the four elements which I have identified in the disclosure: θέλω, a noetic verb in the infinitive, the person addressed, and the information imparted. There may even be a fifth element, the vocative address, but it is optional.¹⁷ White says he has identified five alternate forms of this formula, but he gives examples of only one. If the other four are

¹³ Schubert, *Form and Function*, 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ White, "Introductory Formulae," 93.

¹⁷ Mullins, "Disclosure."

distinct types which appear in the papyri, they could be important for our understanding of this form because the NT use is often illuminated as much by the types of a form which are not used as by those which are.

The opening and closing formulas do not come within the range of White's article and he indicates that they have been thoroughly described before. He refers to Exler¹⁸ whose analysis of the forms in the early Greek letter is unexcelled, and to Wendland¹⁹ who early analyzed both the general use and the NT use; but there is no reference to the monumental work of Roller,²⁰ whose analysis of the Pauline opening ranks with Exler's of the papyri. Since this paper has a different thrust from White's, I feel we should look at some of the results of these three works.

Wendland identifies three elements in the opening: the name of the author in the nominative case; the name of the addressee in the dative case; and the verb *χαίρειν*. He says that these three parts may be varied in several ways; for example, either the writer or the addressee may be identified by a word or a phrase and the verb may be expanded or otherwise modified. Wendland points out that Paul used this sort of freedom to pour into this literary form a rich Christian content. He stresses the close connection of the opening and the closing formulas.

Exler accepts the same three elements for the opening as Wendland does, but he points out that they may be abbreviated as well as expanded. He too emphasizes the close relationship of the opening and closing formulas. Some of the relationships he specifies, "Familiar letters having the formula A— to B— *χαίρειν* are followed by the closing formula *ἔρωσο* or one of its modifications. Most official letters use the same final salutation. Business letters also use it, but less frequently; they are often without any special closing formula."²¹

Roller finds the same three elements in the Pauline Opening formula, calling them the superscription, the addressees, and the salutation. He also sees the nature of the closing formula as being influenced or determined by the character of the opening formula.

Like the Thanksgiving, the opening may be marked off fairly clearly. Its ending, too, can be determined by the appearance of another form. In the ordinary Greek letter the form which usually follows the opening, and marks the end of it, is the Wish. Exler says of the Wish, "the basic formulas are little more than the briefest expression of the general theme. The letter writer could vary, and did vary, the expression of this theme according to his fancy. Hence

¹⁸ F. X. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter: A Study in Greek Epistolography* (Washington: Catholic University, 1923).

¹⁹ Paul Wendland, *Die urchristlichen Literaturformen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1912).

²⁰ Otto Roller, *Das Formular der paulinischen Briefe* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933).

²¹ Exler, *The Form*, 134.

the great variety of detail."²² In this respect, and others, the wish and the greeting were alike.

White ignored the greeting except to refer to "closing greetings and benediction, and termination of the body."²³ In the ancient Greek letter, however, the greeting often followed the opening; at other times the order was opening, wish, and then greeting. Its presence in the cluster of forms at the beginning of the letter was common. This is one reason why Exler classified it as a type of wish. (It has, for example, better qualifications as an "introductory form" than the petition.) There is one letter, P. Oxy. 1679, where the writer put the greeting at the beginning, added three examples of the greeting in the middle of his letter, and then put the greeting at the end too.

The greeting has three types, according to the person of the verb used.²⁴ The type of greeting used can give insight into the relationship between the writer (and others on his side of the correspondence) and the persons addressed (and others on their side of the correspondence). The essential elements of the greeting are: the greeting verb, an indication of the person greeted, and an indication of the person who is doing the greeting. There is a fourth element, elaborating phrases, which is extremely valuable in showing the attitude of the writer. The elaborating phrases vary from the personal description phrases and identifying phrases, which characterize the receiver and the sender of the greeting respectively, to the modifiers and personalizing phrases, which are stereotypes intended to express greater warmth than the formula usually does.

White proposes four new forms which he calls joy expression, expression of astonishment, statement of compliance, and formulaic use of verb of hearing or learning.

For the joy expression he indicates five elements without saying which are essential and which are optional; he says they "may appear" in the form. Now, if a form is to be a form, there must be something about it which is basic. Presumably in the joy expression two elements are basic: first, "either the verb χαίρω ('I rejoice') in the aorist tense (cf. Phil 4:10 and P. Giss. 21 in type 3), or the noun χαρίς ('joy') in the accusative case as the object of the verb ἔχω (cf. Philemon 7 in type 3)"²⁵ and, second, "the object which was heard, introduced by ὅτι."²⁶ If these are the basic elements and if the adverb, the statement about something heard, and the vocative — his other three elements — are optional elements, then anything which says "I rejoice" and "because" has to be considered a form. That seems to be an inadequate set of conditions to determine a form. If "I rejoice that . . ." is a form, then "I sorrow that . . .," "I doubt that . . .,"

²² Ibid., 110.

²³ White, "Introductory Formulae," 97.

²⁴ See my article, "Greeting as a New Testament Form," *JBL* 87 (1968) 418-26.

²⁵ White, "Introductory Formulae," 95.

²⁶ Ibid., 96.

"I hope that . . .," and so on, would all be forms. It is possible that White's third element, "either a statement regarding the arrival of a letter or a statement concerning something which was heard," is a basic element and is considered to give the necessary formal structure to the joy expression. That would help. But such a statement could precipitate sorrow, doubt, hope, etc. as well as joy, so there is still nothing to set the joy expression apart as a form. There may be a form here, but at this point I do not see sufficient evidence for it. One of the references which White lists in a footnote (P. Lond. 42:7ff.) points up quite clearly the difficulty here. The sentence begins: *κομισαμένη τὴν παρὰ σοῦ ἐπιστολὴν παρ' Ὀρου, ἐν ἣι διεσάφεις εἶναι ἐν κατοχῇ ἐν τῷ Σαραπίειω τῷ ἐν Μέμφει, ἐπὶ μὲν τῷ ἐρῶσθα[ί] σε εὐθέως τοῖς θεοῖς εὐχαρίστον, ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ μὴ παραγίνεσθαί σε [π]ά[ντ]ων τῶν ἐκεῖ ἀπειλημμένων παραγεγο[νό]των ἀηδίζομαι. . . .* Thus, the contents of the letter are commented on by the person who received it and her response is a mixture of pleasure and displeasure; she is pleased that the writer is in good health, but displeased that he is not coming home soon. Now, these letters regularly contain wishes for health (see Exler's wish formulas) and assurances that the writer is in good health. Some of the latter attain a stereotyped form. It is possible that responses to such stereotypes would also be in stereotyped form. But no such form is in evidence in White's article. Reference to the contents of a letter and a response to it is not in itself an epistolary form. Some sort of repeated pattern must be exhibited.

For the expression of astonishment the case is, at first glance, even skimpier than for joy expression. There are only two elements: the verb *θαυμάζω* and "the object of astonishment." It might seem at that rate that any verb in the first person which is followed by *ὅτι* can be considered a form — in which case the term "form" would become meaningless. But there is more to the matter here than the two-element structure would suggest. Although White gives only one example from the papyri, and in footnotes only three more, he could have documented the phrase at greater length. Moreover, he has put his finger on the crucial aspect of the phrase when he mentions the "reproach for failure to write." That paragraph in White's article²⁷ points up the real nature of the phrase. The reproach aspect of the phrase has to be included in any attempt to identify it as a form. The whole point is that the writer is rebuking, even scolding, the addressee. And he is not using *θαυμάζω* in its common meaning; he is using it ironically, often sarcastically. He is not really astonished; he is irritated. This ironical use is an essential element in the form. If the verb is used in the normal sense, the form is not there. If the verb is used in an ironical sense to scold, then the form may be there. Thus, when a writer says, "I marvel that I have received no answer to my letters," he is not marvelling at all. In most cases he knows quite well what the score is. But he is rebuking his lazy correspondent. It should be noted that the irony does not always refer to a failure to write. That is a fre-

²⁷ Ibid.

quent theme, but anything which irritates the writer can occasion this form. Thus P. Oxy. 1233 may be paraphrased as "I marvel if my deputy discovers the landlord's boat in your possession, but . . .," and there follows such a detailed set of instructions about what should be done with the boat that we know the writer would have been astonished not to find it there. In P. Oxy. 113 there is a more petulant use of the phrase on a less important matter. Also P. Merton 80. Since there is no real astonishment in the phrase used this way and since irony and rebuke set the pervading tone, I suggest that if this is accepted as a form, it should be called ironic rebuke.

Both the statement of compliance and the formulaic use of a verb of hearing or learning lack the structural rigidity necessary for a form. Again White does not distinguish between essential and optional elements. Presumably, the basic structure of the compliance would be:

I ordered / that you . . . / and you have . . .

It is hard to see how this could be considered a stereotyped structure. Almost any contrast between intention and execution would produce a similar arrangement; for example:

I planned / that we . . . / but (*or* and) we have . . .
 You promised / that . . . / and (*or* but) . . .
 The weatherman predicted / that it would . . . / but it turned out . . .

Finally, the formulaic use of the verb of hearing or learning sounds like the mirror image of the joy expression. Assuming that the first element which White lists is optional and the rest basic, the structure would read:

I am sorry / to hear / that . . .

The one NT example that White gives, however, is Gal 1:13-14, and of it he says, "Gal 1:13f., unlike the usual form of the report formula, is neither stated in the first person nor is the report characterized by an expression of grief (*or* anxiety)."²⁸ So the only point of contact is the use of the verb ἀκούω and the statement of what was heard. That is really not enough.

II. *The Nature of the Formulas*

The characterization of these forms as "introductory formulae" is inaccurate. Most of them tend to appear near the opening formula or near the closing formula, but they may appear anywhere in the letter. Even when they appear at the beginning of a letter, they seldom introduce the body of the letter. We have examples of the following forms at different places in the letter.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

At the beginning of the letter:

Disclosure	P. Oxy. 1155, P. Oxy. 1481
Petition	P. Oxy. 292
Ironic Rebuke	P. Oxy. 1223, P. Oxy. 1348
Thanksgiving	P. Oxy 1299
Greeting	P. Oxy 531, P. Oxy. 1160, P. Oxy. 1679

In the middle of the letter:

Disclosure	P. Oxy 1670 (See also P. Oslo 151)
Petition	P. Oxy 1480 (See also P. Oxy 745)
Ironic Rebuke	P. Oxy 113, B.G.U. 1041
Thanksgiving	P. Oxy 1070
Greeting	P. Oxy 1765, P. Oxy 1070, P. Oxy 1679

At the end of the letter:

Petition	P. Oxy. 1666 (See also P. Oxy. 745)
Thanksgiving	P. Oxy. 1481, P. Giess. 21, P. Merton 81
Greeting	P. Oxy 1216, P. Oxy. 1679

There is one letter, P. Mich. 203, which has disclosures scattered all through it. Expressions of joy or references to compliance might occur anywhere in the letter.

Simply reading through a great many letters from the non-literary papyri suggests a general principle: *The use of one form tends to precipitate the use of others with it.* Thus, right in the middle of P. Oxy. 1070 there is a pause where the writer inserts a greeting; immediately, he adds a thanksgiving. But behind the general principle lies the nature of these forms as they are used in letters. They almost always punctuate a break in the writer's thought. The opening is a sort of warm-up for the main issue and provides a convenient clustering place for matters less important than the main issue (but not necessarily introductory to it). The closing constitutes the final communication and is a natural clustering place for matters of minor importance which the writer wants to add before breaking off. But in a letter of any considerable length there will be places where a writer will pause and break the flow of his thought for a moment. He may mark such pauses with epistolary forms whose relevance to the main subject matter will vary according to the way the writer thinks and expresses himself.

Structurally many of these forms are similar. Such elements as background, desired action, person addressed, sender, and elaborating phrases may be shared by different forms. To some they may be essential and to others optional, but their functional similarity is obvious. The elaborating or identifying phrases may even be identical in different forms.

Often, but not always, a given formula is a complete thought in itself and tends not to intrude into a section dealing with some other thought. This accounts for the clustering of forms together at a place where they do not interrupt other matters. But some forms — the petition and the disclosure are good examples — could well fit into the flow of a writer's main line of thought. And,

of course, in a short letter the form could constitute the whole reason for the letter. There are examples of this as far as the petition, the greeting, and the thanksgiving are concerned.

The way we characterize these forms is not a matter of mere pedantry nor of stylistic elegance. It affects the very substance of critical analysis of the material. A clear example of this appears in White's article. He begins with the assumption that he is dealing with "introductory formulae"²⁹ and when he finds one in the middle of Philippians, he concludes that "the presence of such a formula in Phil 4:10 supports Robert Funk's proposal that 'this may . . . be an independent letter, now truncated.'"³⁰ Only by keeping the nature of these forms firmly in mind can we avoid letting a small error generate a larger one. And one way to keep the nature of the forms in mind is to characterize them accurately. Except for the Pauline thanksgiving and perhaps the opening, it is not the nature of these forms to introduce, but to punctuate. (Jewett holds that Schubert established a strong case that in Paul's writing the thanksgiving serves to introduce the ideas with which the letter deals. Jewett recently used this analysis as showing that "the most powerful indications of unity [of Philippians] are found in the epistolary thanksgiving which, as Paul Schubert demonstrated, is a formal device to announce and introduce the topics of the letter."³¹) But even the thanksgiving cannot be said to introduce the body of the letter apart from Paul's use.

When dealing with epistolary forms, we must not lose sight of their epistolary nature. They were tools for communication between a writer and a specific reader or group of readers. They were not used by a writer as part of a purely literary project. They constitute a social gesture, not a thematic ploy. They show the writer's attitude toward the *audience* to which he is writing, not his attitude toward the *material* he is presenting. The use of epistolary forms, more than any other part of a letter, reflects the fact that it was a letter, not an essay or a theological tract, which was being written. The presence of one of these epistolary forms in an ancient Greek letter indicates a pause in a communication process, not a development in a literary process. It is easier for us to see this in the papyri than in the NT, but it holds for both. Wherever and whenever that pause comes, it signals that the writer's attention has shifted from conveying his personal ideas to the reader and that he is now dealing with more formal aspects of the relationship between himself (as writer) and his readers.

There are, of course, non-epistolary forms in the letters of the NT. Roetzel,

²⁹ He characterizes his paper as "an analysis of the formulae that introduce the body of the Pauline letter in relation to the common letter tradition" (p. 91) and concludes by stating that "the general purpose of the body of the letter is to impart information" and that "the function of the opening segment is to introduce the information" (p. 97).

³⁰ White, "Introductory Formulae," 95.

³¹ Robert Jewett, "The Epistolary Thanksgiving and the Integrity of Philippians," *NovT* 12 (1970) 53.

using Westermann's analysis of the judgment form,³² finds it used in Paul's letters.³³ I have recently analyzed three types of ascription in NT writings.³⁴ Both of these forms are based on OT models. Bradley finds Paul using the topos form.³⁵ In that case the form is based on Greek models of the Stoic or Cynic schools. Even in the case of these forms, the fact that they are used in a letter is important in analyzing their function.

III. *The Forms and Paul*

It is unfortunate that so much of biblical scholarship has restricted the study of epistolary forms — and other forms used in the epistles — with the limiting phrase "The Pauline Letter." Roller accepts such a boundary, but it is probably Schubert's example which has been most influential. Schubert, however, dealt with the thanksgiving, a form which does not appear in the NT except in Paul's letters. Sanders likewise was dealing with the thanksgiving and could properly restrict his title to "the Pauline corpus." But Roetzel need not have confined his study to Paul. Similar examples of the judgment form can be found in 1 Peter (4:4, introduction and offense; 4:5, punishment; 4:6-11, horatory conclusion); 2 Peter (2:1-3a, offense; 2:3b-6, punishment; 2:7-9, horatory conclusion); Jude (8-9, offense; 11-16, punishment; 17-23, horatory conclusion), and elsewhere. And Bradley need not have limited his study of the topos form to Paul, for the same sort of thing appears in James (2:1-7, on partiality; 2:14-26, on false faith; 4:1-10, on humility; 5:7-11, on patience); 1 Peter (2:11-4:6, on conduct in the world); and in 1 John (4:1-6, on false spirits). And White need not have restricted his study to Paul, for the petition occurs in other writers including 1 Peter (2:11 and 5:1) and Hebrews (13:19 and 13:22); the expression of astonishment, or ironic rebuke, may be present in an unusual construction in 1 John 3:13, depending on whether or not the verb has to be in the first person and whether or not the reproof has to be serious. His effort to establish the final two forms could well have used evidence from other NT letters. Expressions of joy occur in 2 John 4 and 3 John 3 in language which is even closer to White's example from P. Giss. 21:3-4 than the Pauline examples are; and 1 John 2:7; 3:11, and Jude 5 would have been very much to the point in discussing the formulaic use of the verb of hearing or learning.

Where we deal with forms common to ancient Greek epistolography which Paul used in the same way that other first-century letter writers used them (as is the case with the petition), we should simply speak of the form as it was used

³² Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967).

³³ Calvin Roetzel, "The Judgment Form in Paul's Letters," *JBL* 88 (1969) 305-12.

³⁴ "Ascription as a Literary Form," *NTS* (forthcoming).

³⁵ David G. Bradley, "The *Topos* as a Form in the Pauline Paraenesis," *JBL* 72 (1953) 238-46.

and not give the form a locus in the Pauline letter. When we deal with forms whose construction as used by Paul differs considerably from the general usage but is shared with one or more NT writers (as with the opening and closing), then the proper reference is to the use of the form in the NT so that we do not bias research by suggesting that Paul's use was original and the rest derivative. Only when the NT use is found in Paul alone (as with the thanksgiving), or where his use is significantly different from the use in the rest of the NT books, do we properly confine our research and our references to the Pauline letter.

As I see it, the way to go about analyzing the NT forms is first to establish the fact that certain forms which were in common use around the first century appear in the NT. Then you analyze points of agreement and disagreement between the common use and the NT use. Where the forms have a distinctive shape in the NT, you seek to determine how the distinctive shape came about. And finally you seek the interpretive significance of the form, following the common significance as far as possible, but taking into account the meaning of changes which produced a distinctive shape in NT use. To characterize a form as Pauline in the course of the first two steps is to subvert the objectivity of the analysis. One winds up determining the results of the last two steps not by data but by assumption. When one discusses the chronology of the NT books, one may assert the priority of Paul; but when one analyzes NT forms, one may not begin with such assertions.

Again, this is not mere nit-picking. It influences the substance of critical research. For example, some NT examples of the epistolary opening have a strong pastoral tone. This is particularly true of Paul's letters but it is not limited to them. 1 Peter, 2 John, Jude, and Rev 1:4-6 share the emphasis. This suggests that it is a style which developed within the early church. Considered in this way — as a style which developed within the apostolic church rather than as a style developed by one man — the form is freed from preconceptions of Paul's intent, his development of character and thought, or his theological bias. The form, *as a form*, is free to reflect social and cultural influences beyond one man's career. The content of the form is still representative of the writer, and when Paul uses a form, the content he puts into it will properly be interpreted by what we know of the man; but the structure of the form can show developments and influences of the environment within which the form was produced without continually relating the form to Paul. If we decide that a given form was shaped into its characteristic NT form largely by the influence of Paul, this will come as a conclusion, not as an axiom.