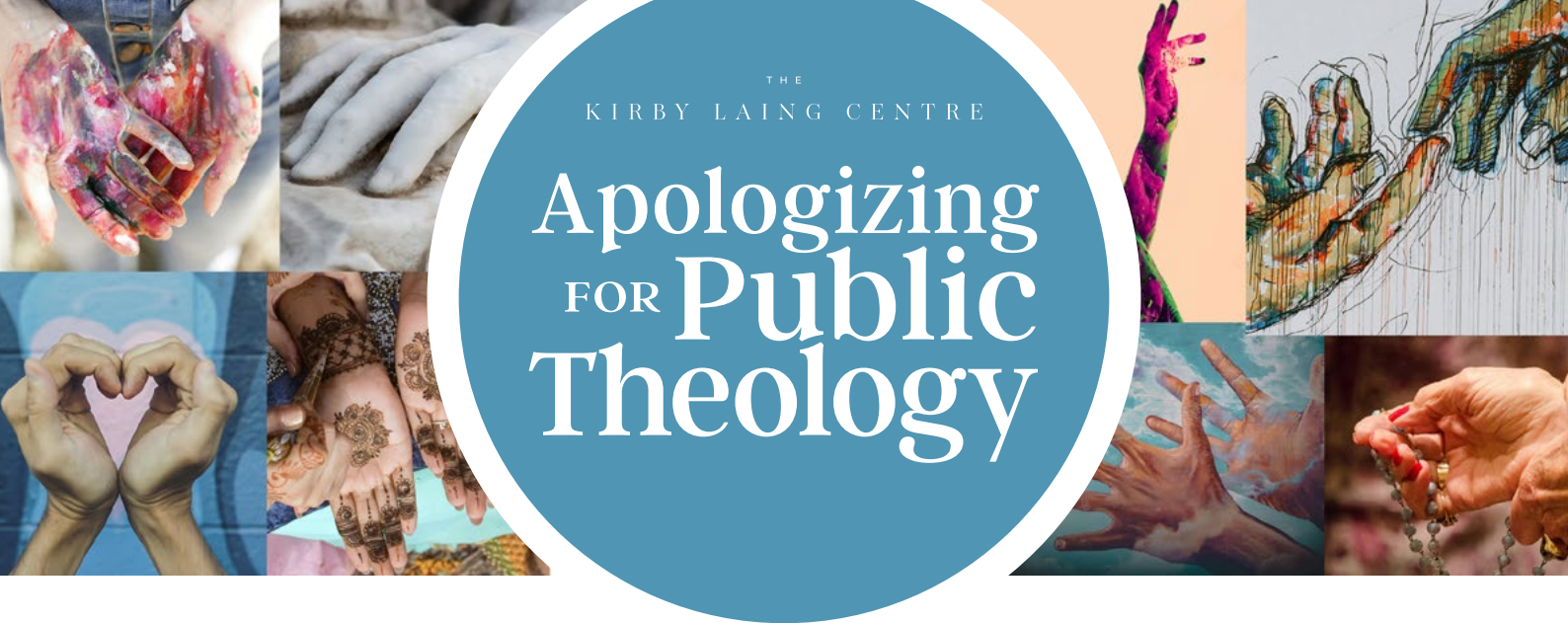




THE
KIRBY LAING CENTRE

Apologizing FOR Public Theology

PART 2 • CHAPTER 18

How Does the Pauline Literature Inform Public Theology?

J. DAVID STARK

For centuries, theologians have searched for and debated the most central, unifying concept for Paul's theology (e.g., justification, being in Jesus). But what distinguishes public theology from theology in general is its express orientation toward the public. From this orientation, when one seeks in Paul's letters for a central, unifying concept for his *public* theology, one finds—perhaps surprisingly—the structure of *welcome*.

Paul's Two Publics

Paul's letters have a two-fold relation to public theology. On the one hand, they are directed to particular audiences within the first-century Jesus movement (see Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–3; Rev 1:4–5, 10–11). On the other hand, the letters do not regard their addressees as isolated individuals or groups. Instead, they characteristically seek to form their addressees in relation to others. Those others may be within the same community, within other Jesus communities in other places, or even yet outside the Jesus movement. In this way, Paul's public theology has in view more than one public.¹

His letters have in view narrower “publics of address” (i.e., specific audiences or addressees) as well as broader publics with and for whom the letters express concern



Karl Emanuel Jansson, *Sakariston Ovi (Vestry Door)*, 1871.

¹ This duality of publics occurs elsewhere too. For instance, the United States Constitution requires the President annually to report to Congress on the “State of the Union” (art. II, §3). Since the advent of broadcast media, this report has typically taken the form of an address that is both about the broader union and, in part, to the broader public within that union.

(i.e., “publics of concern”). As the letters make their address, they create a particular relation between these two publics that may appropriately be called welcome.² So, if modern public theologians want their own public theology to be shaped by a fully orb ed understanding of Paul’s letters, these public theologians must also accept the challenge of expressing and fostering welcome.

Welcome as the Relation of Paul’s Publics

The relation of welcome arises vividly in the short letter to Philemon. This letter is formally sent by both Paul and Timothy to Philemon and several others, including “the assembly that meets at [Philemon’s] house” (1–2; translations mine throughout).

Most of the letter is dominated by Paul’s direct address to Philemon (2, 4–24).³ And Paul’s core admonition is for Philemon to welcome Onesimus, for whom Paul cares deeply (10, 12, 15–20).

² Beyond the examples discussed here, the letters often foster welcome in their greetings and in texts like 2 Cor 2:5–11; 5:11–21; 6:11–10:18; 13:9–12; Eph 4:1–3, 25–32; 6:11–12; Phil 1:12–18, 27–28; 2:2–1, 14–16; 3:17–21; 4:2–3; Col 1:21–23; 2:18–19; 3:11–17; 4:5–6, 10; 1 Thess 4:9–12; 5:12–15; 2 Thess 2:8–11; 3:6–15; 1 Tim 1:20; 3:2–7; 5:8–16; 6:1–2, 18–19; 2 Tim 1:15–18; 3:2–9; 4:9–11; Tit 1:7–9; 3:9–11. See also Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 88–92; Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

³ The first-person singular verbs and pronouns refer to Paul, as the second-person singular verbs and pronouns do to Philemon. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 313; Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 381–85, 394; Michael Wolter, “Der Brief an Philemon,” in *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, ÖTK 12 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1993), 254.

Spinello Aretino, *The Conversion of Saint Paul*.



Negretti and Zambra, *Paul Preaching at Athens*.

Only in the initial greeting and conclusion does the letter reference Timothy or the wider group of recipients (1–3, 22, 25). Yet this wider circle, along with Onesimus (10, 12–13, 15, 17–18) and a handful of other individuals (23–24), fills out the letter’s public of concern.

Perhaps it would hardly have been needed (18, 21), but by citing Timothy and other individuals close to Paul who are on his side of the admonition (1, 23–24), he broadens the public of concern. Involving the other addressees with whom Philemon has immediate relationships also increases the social stakes for him to welcome Onesimus as Paul asks.⁴ Thus, in Philemon, welcome is both the letter’s main topic and the orientation the letter seeks to create between its public of address (primarily Philemon and secondarily those with him) and its public of concern (primarily Onesimus and secondarily Paul and those with him).

Paul’s other letters address their own concerns and devote proportionately less space to the *topic* of welcome. Like the letter to Philemon, however, they consistently aim to create a *relation* of welcome between their publics of address and concern.

For instance, an orientation toward welcome becomes explicit in Paul’s admonition for the Roman Jesus community’s members to “welcome one another” (15:7a). In this way, each community member finds himself or herself addressed and oriented toward reciprocating concern with welcoming each other member.

⁴ See Lewis Brogdon, “Reimagining Koinonia: Confronting the Legacy and Logic of Racism by Reinterpreting Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” *ExAud* 31 (2015): 35–41.

But this welcome must be “just as the Messiah also welcomed you for God’s glory” (15:7b). And the divine welcome through Messiah Jesus not only embraces those already within the community but also extends to those who have yet to join.⁵ In the same way then, the community at Rome must both embrace each other and extend welcome toward whomever else may come.

Beyond those within the community or who might join them, Paul also creates a relation of welcome toward those who might refuse. The community does not sacrifice its identity or mission in an attempt to make accepting its welcome more palatable to those who wish to remain outside (cf. Rom 12:1–2). Nor does a Pauline kind of welcome permit the use of force to coerce those who wish to reject this welcome.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 8:5, Paul contemplates how “there are, indeed, those that are said to be gods – whether in heaven or on earth – just as there are many gods and many lords.” The claims of Israel’s God in his Messiah are not absolutely unique; Paul recognizes that many other similar claimants exist in his own highly pluralist context. “But for us,” Paul continues, “there is one God, the father ... and one Lord Messiah Jesus” (1 Cor 8:6).

The key phrase “but for us” demarcates a community boundary. Paul clearly rejects any other possible gods or lords.⁶ Yet he also creates an orientation of welcome to others who remain devoted to these powers. Such publics of concern are welcome to join the “us” for whom there is but one God and one Lord, and they are welcome to remain outside, continuing their devotion to those other powers.

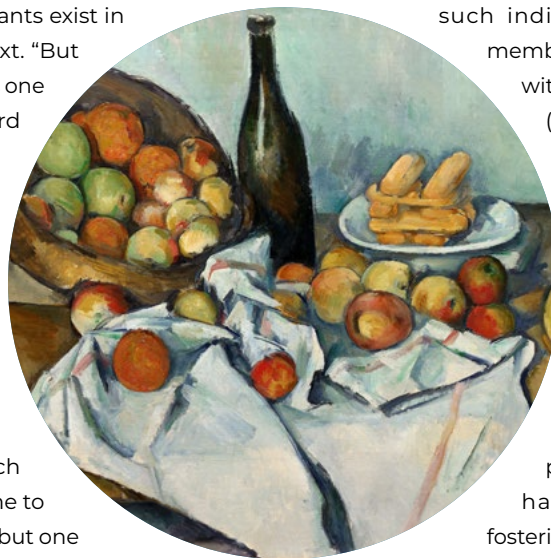
Each community member finds himself or herself addressed and oriented toward reciprocating concern with welcoming each other member.

This dual welcome hardly suggests Paul’s indifference toward such people, however (cf. 1 Cor 9:20–23). Instead, it expresses Paul’s dual respect – on the one hand, for the exclusivity of the proclamation that Jesus communities accept and, on the other hand, for a right to self-exclusion of publics of concern who decline the welcome offered to them to join these communities.

Of course, such respect also does not mean Paul’s orientation toward welcome always comes in language that is entirely calm and polite. Paul can be harsh when he finds the community’s orientation to welcome in jeopardy (e.g., Galatians; Phil 3:2–11).

In addition, even Paul’s approach to punitive measures helps create a relationship of welcome. To foster welcome toward those outside the community, Paul actively resists the idea that Jesus’ followers have a mandate to judge those who do not wish to join them (e.g., 1 Cor 5:9–10, 12). When Paul advocates punitive measures with respect to members of the community,

he fosters welcome in three ways. First, he credits such individuals’ self-descriptions as members of the community and deals with these individuals on this basis (e.g., 1 Cor 5:11). Second, while expressing his disagreement with such individuals’ behavior and resisting their efforts to exclude others, Paul affirms their capacity to engage in conduct that separates themselves from the community (e.g., Gal 2:11–21; 5:4, 12). And third, the punitive measures he advocates have the express purpose of fostering reconciliation (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1–5; 2 Cor 10:5–6; 13:9–10).



Pauline Welcome and Public Theology in the Twenty-first Century

What then, in sum, does Pauline welcome mean for the shape of modern public theology? First, public theologians may consider themselves to be one of the publics that Paul addresses. As such, public theologians find themselves confronted with the task of interpreting the letters in a way that welcomes broader publics of concern – even including these public theologians’ detractors.

5 See also Rom 5:10; 14:1, 3, 15; 15:7; John M. G. Barclay, “Faith and Self-Detachment from Cultural Norms: A Study in Romans 14–15,” *ZNW* 104.2 (2013): 194–200.

6 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, AB 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 342; see also Acts 17:18, 23; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols., CCS (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 2:157.

Second, when theologians themselves turn to address a given public, they bear responsibility for doing so in a way that encourages that public to extend welcome to broader publics of concern. Any definite welcome requires definite boundaries, and some publics of concern may prefer to stand outside those boundaries. But these facts neither threaten those boundaries (e.g., of Pauline orthodoxy) nor lessen public theologians' responsibility both to express and to encourage welcome. Instead, it is precisely the places of greatest differentiation that most require an extension of welcome.

By its very name, public theology declares its express concern with both the world at large and the word of God. Yet this expression becomes totally empty where the "world at large" is merely a cover for the "world as I would like it to be." It likewise becomes empty where concern with "the word of God" is a cover for "how I want to assert power to make others as I would like them to be."

Instead, for public theology's claim of concern to prove true, it must directly reckon with the world and the word

as they are.⁷ Public theology truly formed by Paul's letters can never afford to lose sight of how even the most final and severe divine judgment is not to be separated from still more profound and powerful divine welcome, both of which come through and find themselves united in the crucified Messiah (e.g., Rom 2:16; 5:6–11). Public theology must acknowledge that it has no insider status except by benefiting from this divine welcome. Even and especially in the face of difference, therefore, public theology in the Pauline tradition finds itself obligated to extend both this same kind of welcome and that with which it wants itself to be welcomed (cf. Matt 7:12; Rom 5:6–11; 14:3; 15:7; Gal 5:13–15).

J. David Stark is Professor of Biblical Studies and the Winnie and Cecil May Jr. Biblical Research Fellow at Faulkner University and a Senior Research Fellow at the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge. For more from David, see j davidstark.com.

⁷ On these dynamics, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, DBW(E) 6 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 134–45, 256–89.

Martinus Rørbye, *The Entrance to the Old Vicarage in Hellested*.

