

SOME SUGGESTED RESTRUCTURINGS FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTER OPENINGS AND CLOSINGS*

Dr. Barclay Newman is a UBS Translations Consultant based in Malaysia, and a member of the TEV Old Testament Committee.

It has long since been recognized that the Pauline correspondence, whether addressed to individuals or to churches, follows essentially the letter form used during the first century in the Roman world. In these letters the name of the writer was given first in the nominative case (for example, "Paul"), followed by the name of the recipient in the dative case (for example, "to Philemon"); and most translations have followed this form without much alteration. KJV, RSV, and many others, have simply "Paul"; while JB, NEB, and TEV have "From Paul". Die Gute Nachricht (GN) reads "Paul writes . . .".

Phillips and The Living Bible are, to some extent, exceptions; but one is hard put to find any logic or consistency in what they have done. Phillips places the sender's name at the conclusion of each letter ("Paul", "James", "Peter", "John", "Jude"), except in the case of 2 Peter! But he still retains the third person for the writer (Romans and 2 Corinthians: "This letter comes from Paul"; 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon: "Paul . . . to"; 1 and 2 Thessalonians: "To the church of the Thessalonians . . . from Paul"; "James . . . sends greetings to"; "Peter . . . sends this letter to"; "Simon Peter . . . sends this letter to"; 2 John: "This letter comes from the Elder to . . ."; 3 John: "The Elder sends this personal letter to . . ."; "Jude . . . to"), except in the case of Galatians ("I, Paul, . . . I and all the brothers with me send the churches in Galatia greeting") and 1 John ("We are writing to you . . ."). One can understand the shift to the first person in 1 John, since the author himself speaks in the first person plural; but why the shift in Galatians, and not in any other of the Pauline or non-Pauline letters? Moreover, to have the author's name at the end of each letter, except for 2 Peter, represents a literary judgment regarding the authorship of the letter, and so goes beyond the prerogative of the translator.

The Living Bible also retains the third person for the sender, and in all the New Testament letters except Romans, 2 Corinthians, and Ephesians (1 John is, of course, different), the letters begin like an office memo:

*"From: Sender
To: Recipient"*

Romans begins "Dear Friends in Rome: ¹This letter is from Paul"; 2 Corinthians, "Dear Friends,

This letter is from me, Paul, . . .";
and Ephesians, "Dear Christian Friends at Ephesus . . . This is Paul writing

* I wish to express appreciation to the persons present at the Pyramid, West Irian, Translator's Institute (March 1973), where the ideas for this article were developed.

to you . . .” But one is forced to ask why the translator changes the opening form in these three letters, when he is so consistent in retaining one form in the remaining New Testament letters. The letter closings of *The Living Bible* are also interesting. Each writer concludes “Sincerely,

Paul/James/John/Jude”

except for 1 and 2 Peter, which simply end with “Peter”. Again, as with the letter openings, so with the closings, there seems to be no logic for the stylistic changes.

But if the translator is aiming at naturalness in the receptor language, and intending for his readers to make essentially the same response as the original readers, then certain adjustments must be made in the opening formula of these letters. This is important since *the letter opening sets the tone of the entire letter*. In order to achieve naturalness for English readers, and to set the proper tone, at least the following alterations must be made:

(1) The addressee must be given first, in the equivalent of the second person.

(2) The name of the letter writer must be placed at the end of the letter. This may seem like a rather drastic shift, but the alteration is not so drastic when one recognizes that *the letter is a total discourse unit*, and that *meaning* (especially as conveyed in the emotive impact of the salutation) *has priority over form*.

As a matter of fact the presence of the sender’s name at the beginning of the letter not only sounds odd to the English reader, but it is entirely unnecessary. The letter will always have an identifying title (“Paul’s letter to . . .”), and when the letter is read orally the reader always identifies the passage for his hearers by title, chapter, and verse.

Paul’s letters have traditionally been divided on the basis of “personal” or “group” letters, and this is a valid classification, since “personal” letters are intended primarily for private reading, while “group” letters are designed for oral reading before a congregation. But Paul’s letters may be further classified on the basis of the tone of the letter opening formula, whether a spirit of warmth is intended or a polemical tone is to be set. All of Paul’s letters, with the exception of Galatians, would seem to require a feeling of warmth in the opening words.

Among the non-Pauline letters of the New Testament, only 1 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John have the full form of the ancient letter, with the opening salutation and the final greeting. 2 John and 3 John suit well the “personal” letter form, and also demand a warm salutation. First Peter is somewhat different because it is obviously a “group” letter intended for circulation among various churches. And although its tone is “formal” in some places, it does have the opening and closing formulas and should be treated as a letter. First John has no letter opening, and so poses no problem in this regard.

Second Peter and Jude do not have the letter closing, and the tone is that of an encyclical—formal, doctrinal, serious, and with the appeal to authority. James, also lacking the letter closing, should be treated in the same way as 2 Peter and Jude, though there is not the same type of appeal to authority. In these letters the sender is best placed at the beginning and in the third person, in order to achieve the proper authoritative tone.

In most of the restructuring given below the wording is essentially that of TEV. The alternative suggestion for the initial part of the letter substance of Romans follows Die Gute Nachricht. (No attempt is made here to deal with the problems of restructuring "grace and peace!")

Pauline Correspondence

I. Letters which require a warm greeting

A. PERSONAL

1 Timothy

Opening: Timothy, my true son in the faith:

May God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord give you grace and peace.

(Letter Substance)

Closing: Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will, sent to proclaim the promised life which we have in union with Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy

Opening: Timothy, my dear son:

May God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord give you grace, mercy, and peace.

(Letter Substance)

Closing: Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus by God's will, sent to proclaim the promised life which we have in union with Christ Jesus.

Titus

Opening: Titus, my dear son in the faith that we share:

May God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior give you grace and peace.

(Letter Substance)

Closing: Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Philemon (Here the mention that Paul is a prisoner is necessary for the argument.)

Opening: Philemon, our friend and fellow worker:

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

As a prisoner for the sake of Jesus Christ, I join with our brother Timothy in writing you, our sister Apphia, our fellow soldier Archippus, and the church that meets in your home.

(Letter Substance)

Closing:

Paul

B. GROUP

Romans

Opening: All of you in Rome whom God loves and has called to be his own people:

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

(Letter Substance) The Good News was promised long ago by God . . .

Closing: Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, and an apostle chosen and called by God to preach his Good News.

[If one feels that it is necessary to stress Paul's call from the outset, then the following arrangement may be used:

Opening: All of you in Rome whom God loves and has called to be his people:

 May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you peace.

 (Letter Substance): God has called me to preach the Good News that he has now made come true ²what he promised long ago through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.

Closing: Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, and an apostle chosen by God to preach his Good News.

1 Corinthians

Opening: God's church in Corinth, all who are called to be God's people, who belong to him in union with Christ Jesus, together with all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

 May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

 (Letter Substance)

Closing: (16:19-20; 22; 23-24; 21; 1:1) ¹⁹The churches in the province of Asia send you their greetings; Aquila and Priscilla and the church that meets in their house send warm Christian greetings.

²⁰All the brothers here send greetings.

 Greet one another with a brotherly kiss.

²²Whoever does not love the Lord—a curse on him!

Marana tha—Our Lord, come!

²³The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

²⁴My love be with you all in Christ Jesus.

²¹With my own hand I sign this letter—*Greetings from*

Paul, ^{1:1a}a servant of Jesus Christ, and an apostle chosen and called by God to preach his Good News.

2 Corinthians

Opening: God's church in Corinth, and all God's people in Greece:

 May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

 (Letter Substance)

Closing: Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ by God's will, and from our brother Timothy.

Ephesians

Opening: God's people in Ephesus, faithful believers in Christ Jesus:

 May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

 (Letter Substance)

Closing: Paul, who by God's will is an apostle of Christ Jesus.

Philippians

Opening: God's people in Philippi, believers in Christ Jesus, together with your church leaders and helpers:

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

(Letter Substance)

Closing: Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.

Colossians

Opening: God's people in Colossae, my faithful brothers in Christ.

May God our Father give you grace and peace.

(Letter Substance)

Closing: (4:18, 1:1) ¹⁸May God's grace be with you.

Do not forget my chains!

With my own hand I sign this letter: *Greetings from Paul*,
¹¹who by God's will is an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy.

1 Thessalonians

Opening: People of the church in Thessalonica, who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

May grace and peace be yours.

(Letter Substance)

Closing: Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

2 Thessalonians

Opening: People of the church in Thessalonica, who belong to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

May God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

(Letter Substance)

Closing: (3:17-18; 1:1) ¹⁷With my own hand I sign this letter: *Greetings from Paul*. This is the way I sign every letter; this is how I write.

¹⁸May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

^{1:1} Paul

Timothy

Titus

II. Letters which do not require a warm salutation.

Galatians (Here the mention of Paul's apostleship is important for the argument.)

Opening: I, Paul, whose call to be an apostle did not come from man or by any human means, but from Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from death, join with all the brothers here in sending greetings to the churches of Galatia:

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

(Letter Substance)

Closing:

Paul

