

The congregational address of Paul's letters is no mere formality. The address to the entire group goes well beyond the introductory greetings. One only has to think of the continual address, "Brothers": ten times in Romans, twenty in 1 Corinthians, three times in 2 Corinthians, eight times in Galatians, six times in Philippians, fourteen times in 1 Thessalonians, and seven times in 2 Thessalonians. Further, as is well known, references to persons in positions of authority are rare in Paul. Phoebe is mentioned once as a *διάκονος* in Romans 16:1; the *διάκονοι* are greeted in Philippians 1:1, and though Paul occasionally uses the term of himself or of his colleagues, outside the two references given above it is never used of a person holding a position within a congregation. The *ἐπίσκοποι* in Philippians are even more isolated. 'Elders' do not appear in the congregational letters at all. Not only so, but attempts to show that Paul is addressing particular leadership groups in his letters under the term "brothers" must be judged unpersuasive.¹ I can find no example within the Pauline corpus where Paul addresses any responsible group other than the congregation as a whole. Paul may occasionally make suggestions to "those of us who are mature" (Phil. 3:15) or to "those of you who are spiritual" (Gal. 6:1), but that is all. Notably, in the case of the Corinthian church, he firmly restrains those who think of themselves as "prophets, spiritual", and insists on the competence of the congregation as a whole to manage its own meetings (1 Cor. 14:26-38).² When Paul addressed the congregation of one of his churches, he addressed it as a responsible community.³

Did other ancient letter-writers write to groups? (a) the papyri.

We turn now to our second question. How common was it for ancient letter-writers to address letters to groups? As far as I have been able to tell, this apparently obvious question has simply never been asked in the context of Pauline scholarship. The answer, in brief, is: not common at all. An exhaustive survey would be an immense undertaking, but even a brief exploration will show how rare letters written to groups are. Not only so, but those which do exist lack the intensity of personal involvement with the group which (with the exception of Romans and Ephesians) so characterises the Pauline letters.

The first volume of the Loeb edition of select papyri contains 169 letters, only one of which has multiple addressees. This is no. 103, from one Petosouchos to two of his brothers and four of his friends, though the outer address is to his brother

1 See W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983), 75-77, and E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 1978, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 16-22. For a critique of Ellis' position see my *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment*, (Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck), 1995, 255-257.

2 For the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14 which lies behind this reading of the passage, see my *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 251-269.

3 On this point see particularly J. D. G. Dunn, "The Responsible Congregation (1 Co. 14:26-40)" in *Charisma und Agape (1 Ko. 10-14)*, ed. L. De Lorenzi (Rome, 1983), 201-236, now reprinted in *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 2, *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998), 260-290.

Peteharsemtheos only.⁴ Volume 2 contains 25 letters, of which two (nos. 417 and 418) are official letters directed to the inhabitants of Pathyris by Platon the epistrategos, and one (424) from Apollonius the ὑπηρέτης to the agoranomoi of Oxyrhynchus.⁵

I have drawn a third sample from the series *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*. Here, out of a total of fifty-five papyrus letters, I could find no examples of letters written to non-family groups.⁶

Among the 123 private letters, 3 are addressed to two people⁷, in each case close family members, one (P.Oxy 744) is addressed to three family members, and only one to a group. This is P.Oxy 1162, from the fourth century, where Leon the presbyter writes to the presbyters and deacons of a nearby church. It can hardly be insignificant that our sole example of communal address in a private letter is from a Christian context.

In brief, among the sample of more than 520 papyrus letters I have examined, I can find no close parallels to the communal address of the Pauline letters. Private letters were normally written to one, or at most two or three, named people. It is true that “family letters” regularly contain extensive greetings to multiple family members, similar to the greetings to fellow-Christians in the Pauline letters. But that is quite a different phenomenon to the Pauline communal address, reflecting a different social context. The only letters written addressed to groups are those few letters written by officials to bodies or communities with whom they have official dealings, or which fall under their jurisdiction. Even then, however, we see nothing of (a) the personal involvement in community life that so characterises Paul, and (b) the opportunity for, or likelihood of, rhetorical delivery. Letters to non-family groups are very rare among the papyri, and letters of the Pauline variety seem to be virtually unknown.

Finally, by chance I came across the letter of one Mnesiergos, writing in the 4th century B.C.E., who in the first line of a letter addressed to “Nausias or Thrasycles or his son”, sends greetings and wishes of good health “to those at home” (τοῖς οἴκου).⁸ This group address and greeting, which modern people take so much for granted, is extremely rare among the papyri.

4 A. S. Hunt & C. C. Edgar, eds., *Select Papyri*, vol. 1 (London, Heinemann, 1932). For this papyrus see also J. L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986), no. 55, 90-91.

5 A. S. Hunt & C. C. Edgar, eds., *Select Papyri*, vol. 2 (London, Heinemann, 1934).

6 The letters were gathered from vols. 1-9 of *New Documents Illustrating early Christianity* (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1981-2002); from vol. 1 documents nos. 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 26, 29, 83, 84 and 85. From vol. 2, documents nos. 3, 20, 21 and 103. From vol. 4, nos. 15, 17 and 18. From vol. 6 p. 58, p. 60, p. 100, p. 101, no. 21 p. 156 and no. 25 p. 169. From vol. 7 no. 2 (11 examples), no. 3 (5 examples), no. 4 and no. 6. From vol. 9 nos. 14, 20, 24 and 30.

7 P.Oxy 115, 116 and 533.

8 M. Trapp, ed., *Greek and Latin Letters: an Anthology with Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50-51. The text is from SIG³ III 1259; the letter, written on a sheet of lead, was found in Athens.