A FUNCTIONAL LETTER PERSPECTIVE: TOWARDS A GRAMMAR OF EPISTOLARY FORM

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1. Introduction

One of the major recurring debates in discussion of the letters of the New Testament, including especially the Pauline letters, is the relationship between Pauline epistolary form and other means of speaking of epistolary organization. As is widely known, and even discussed elsewhere in this volume, the discovery of the documentary letters of Egypt prompted a flurry of comparative research into the structure of New Testament letters, led at the outset by the significant studies of the German scholar Adolf Deissmann.1 The major terms of the debate tend to revolve around whether the New Testament letters and especially the letters of Paul follow the three-, four- or five-part structure. This work in many ways culminated with the work of John White, who investigated various dimensions of the letter form in significant detail.2 However, much of this formal epistolary research was thought to prove to be relatively static, as it failed to produce as many productive research results as initially indicated. This contributed to the development of a variety of other attempts to analyze epistolary form.3 The major efforts in this area have been performed by rhetorical analysts of various types. Rhetorical criticism ranges in form from the New Rhetoric that is related to types of literary criticism to the imposition

3 There have been a number of different interpretive frameworks that have been applied to the letter form, including Gricean pragmatics, speech-act theory, relevance theory, and various cognitively oriented models and approaches.
of various types of ancient rhetorical criticism. Despite the potential and realized productivity of the New Rhetoric, in New Testament studies the emphasis has been upon the use of ancient rhetoric to study the Pauline letters. In many ways, these efforts too seem to have run their productive course, so that much recent ancient rhetorical criticism of the New Testament has become stagnant and repetitious, and has failed to produce the interpretive results once promised.

In light of these developments, I believe that it is time to consider other means of thinking about and analyzing the Pauline letters. To be sure, there will continue to be numerous efforts made using the traditional methods, including those noted above. However, the lull in their creative activities prompts me to ask the question whether we have availed ourselves of all of the productive resources available, or whether we should consider utilizing or even developing new methods to study this ancient literary form, the letter.

In this paper, I risk an exploratory and experimental venture into developing and testing a new form of epistolary criticism, what I have labeled a Functional Sentence Perspective. Clearly derived from the Prague Linguistics Circle, this linguistic model begins by attempting to define a grammar of epistolary form, and then test its interpretive possibilities on selected examples. There is a long tradition, within biblical studies and linguistics, of deriving grammars of phenomena. This one pushes beyond the clause or sentence to attempt an extended functionalist explanation of the entire letter form.

2. The Functionalist Perspective

One of the noteworthy, yet now widely overlooked, accomplishments of the Prague Linguistics Circle was the Functional Sentence Perspective. The Functional Sentence Perspective, proposed by one of the

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6 In some forms, it has even distanced itself from the letter form altogether. See Ben Witherington, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 3, who argues that the letters of Paul are simply orations with epistolary openings and closings.