

Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity by Karl P. Donfried
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Karl Donfried is a contemporary Lutheran scholar, having received his training at Harvard Divinity School (M.Div.), Union Theological Seminary (S.T.M.), and the University of Heidelberg (Th.D.) under Günther Bornkamm in the field of New Testament studies. He is widely published in these circles, and the present volume is a collection of essays relating to the chronology of the apostle Paul, the specific background of the church at Thessalonica, and the characterization of Christianity in its earliest stages. The first two essays form the centerpiece of this collection: “Shifting Paradigms: Paul, Jesus, and Judaism” and “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence.” The first essay is intended to establish the author’s fundamental supposition that the early theology of the apostle Paul was directly influenced by contact with the Essene community (as represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls). The second essay presents information about the historical and cultic background of Thessalonica, and it makes the point that “a knowledge of the interrelated cultic and historical background of Thessalonica, particularly the strong Roman presence and domination at the time of Paul, is an indispensable first step in the interpretation of the Thessalonian correspondence.” (p. 48)

While the early German school established the principles of higher criticism and the historical-critical method in addressing the issue of the “historical Jesus,” Donfried follows a similar approach in addressing the issue of the “historical Paul.” Although many of the so-called “critical” principles that were developed can be helpful in applying an intelligent, research-oriented approach to the analysis of the Scriptures, they become destructive when they are applied with rationalistic or naturalistic presuppositions. When this happens the inspiration, inerrancy, reliability, and authority of the Scriptures are brought into question and the Bible is viewed as a purely human book. Under this assumption the interpreter expects to find errors and discrepancies, and he views the text as containing a mixture of truth and untruth.

It is clear from these essays that Donfried’s approach follows the path of his predecessors. For example, he questions the reliability of the historical chronology in the book of Acts when he comments that “Luke has a theological program that shapes his historical narrative, but within this narrative one often finds valuable and accurate pieces of specific information.” (p. xxxiii) He goes on to say that “the Acts account is a *relatively* accurate reflection of the early Paul known to Luke and modified for this theological intent.” (original italics, p. 71) His conclusion is that, “Acts can still be a valuable source of detailed and accurate information when separated from its programmatic framework.” (p. 72) Whether such a programmatic framework exists and how one separates this information from it is the key, and Donfried makes reference to the methodologies of literary, rhetorical, theological, and form-critical analysis as the basis for such delineation. Donfried also devotes an entire essay to challenging the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, even though the text itself lists Paul by name as the author in two places. Regarding the Pastoral Epistles, Donfried leaves room for the possibility of *fragments* of authentic Pauline writing when he states, “Although most scholars do not regard the Pastoral Epistles as Pauline, one does need to ask whether this is perhaps an authentic fragment.” (p. xxxvii) Most scholars *in Donfried’s circles* may believe this, but it is certainly not a universally held opinion.

Another characteristic of the German school is what is often called the “developmental hypothesis” which was originally intended as an application of the theory of evolution to literary and historical analysis. Donfried explores the evolution of Paul’s theology and alleges that “his theology developed over a far greater time span than the traditional chronologies allow. The moment has indeed arrived in Pauline studies to make a consistent distinction between the early Paul and the late Paul.” (p. 70) He goes on to say that “it has been precisely my rethinking of Pauline chronology which has been a major factor in my willingness to posit an early and a late Paul.” (p. 71) In the introduction Donfried had stated that, “A proposal of far reaching implications is that 1 Thessalonians is to be dated to the early 40s and that Acts 18 is a conflation of two visits to that city....This throws out the whole of Pauline chronology as this is usually understood, and also means that the order of Acts is distorted.” (p. xxvii)

Donfried bases his conclusion that 1 Thessalonians is Paul’s earliest epistle on 1) a rejection of the complete historicity of the Acts chronology, and 2) a linguistic analysis of Paul’s letters compared with the Qumran texts. He finds parallels between Pauline language and the Qumran writings, and he assumes that a similarity with the Essene texts implies that there had been direct contact between them. “As one enters into the world of the Dead Sea Scrolls, one is immediately impressed by a significant overlap between Pauline and Essene language.” (p. 5) After presenting several alleged parallels, Donfried concludes that “the close proximity of several themes in 1 Thessalonians to the thought world of the Community of the Renewed Covenant gives additional support for the early dating of 1 Thessalonians (c. 43 CE).” (p. 19) Based on this evidence Donfried accentuates the “Jewishness” of Paul and asks, “Did Paul give up his Judaism once he was called – please notice that I have avoided the verb ‘converted’” (p. 4). He states that “one should also use with exceptional caution the term ‘Christianity’ for the period of its earliest beginnings since one really ought to view the followers of Jesus during his lifetime as another school of Torah interpretation, one that was as thoroughly Jewish as Jesus himself.” (p. 6)

This collection of essays is not without positive features. For example, the detailed research on the culture and history of Thessalonica does make an important contribution as an interpretive aid. The conservative interpreter using the traditional grammatical-historical method might agree with Donfried on the importance of placing “the Thessalonian correspondence within the broader Greco-Roman culture of the city of Thessalonica, particularly its cultic background, and that such an analysis was essential for an informed interpretation of the letters.” (p. xvii) Donfried also devotes several pages to refuting the teachings of Jesus Seminar (e.g., pp.15-16).

While this book does not contain a helpful subject index, it does include an index of authors and of ancient texts. Its extensive bibliography and footnotes are dominated by works from the same general school of thought as that of the author. Apparently it is a compendium for use within a specific circle of scholarship. Essays and commentaries by noted evangelical scholars of a more conservative persuasion (e.g., Robert Thomas, Leon Morris, William Hendriksen, F. F. Bruce) are not cited or addressed. As a collection of essays, it does not flow – it is not a unified commentary either on 1 Thessalonians or on the chronology of Paul’s life. Therefore it is more suited for limited research on the fine points of a particular theological position.

Reviewed by Steve Lewis, *High Peaks Bible Fellowship*