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## Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity

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and well worth exploring. Because of the great diversity in classrooms and churches in Canada today, educators, scholars and other students of the Bible would certainly benefit from carefully considering this relevant treatise on methodology.

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### **Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity**

Karl Paul Donfried

Grand Rapids, Michigan:

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002

347 pages, \$29.39 Softcover

Karl Paul Donfried's *Paul, Thessalonica and Early Christianity* gathers together this scholar's work on the Thessalonian correspondence for the last twenty-eight years, a work which demonstrates a high level of precision scholarship on these texts. Within these numerous articles one finds examination of such varied topics as the literary and rhetorical character of the epistles, the religious and cultic infrastructure which the newly emerging Jesus Movement encountered in Greco-Roman Thessalonica, the nature of the Christian communities found there, studies of theological concepts vis-à-vis the Pauline writings, Paul's ties with Judaism and possible connections between the Thessalonian correspondence and Qumran.

In my opinion, Donfried's greatest strength lies in his textual analysis and facility with meaning nuances in the original languages. He takes great pains in dealing with religious concepts that emerge from these texts. Indeed, the tool of word studies undergirds his strongest arguments for the Qumran/1 Thessalonian connection he espouses. Overall Donfried comes across as a conservative scholar within a mainline tradition that accepts the tools of Biblical criticism. By way of example, in 1993, in a piece entitled "2 Thessalonians and the Church of Thessalonica" (Chapter 3 of the book) Donfried

accepts the non-Pauline authorship of the epistle, but unlike those scholars who posit a *sitz im leben* a generation later, he defines the second letter as a response to unresolved eschatological issues in 1 Thessalonians. In short, he views 2 Thessalonians as theologically Pauline and likely from the hand of Timothy.

I must admit that his more conservative approach leaves me troubled, not because it is “conservative” in terms of the church’s faith tradition but rather because it seems stuck in an almost exclusive focus on internal textual meanings. I am struck by the fact that we learn almost nothing about the political, social and economic realities of first century Roman Thessalonica. Instead he concentrates on the city’s pagan cults as if the Christian ecclesiae there faced their competition solely on abstracted religious conceptual grounds. For the most part, I found these “religious” values (whether Christian or pagan) as abstractions drifting in some ethereal realm apart from their historical incarnations of class, economic and power issues. Indeed, I see this ahistorical bifurcation within Donfried’s own theological *sitz*. In two of the book’s last chapters the author reflects on the concepts of justification and judgment in Paul, one in celebration of the Bultmannian scholar Günther Bornkamm’s seventieth birthday and the other twenty-five years later. As a Lutheran impassioned by the doctrine of radical grace and justification, I appreciate Donfried’s reflections on my denomination’s seminal understanding of the gospel. At the same time I am troubled by his continuation of the post-Enlightenment relegation of Christianity to an internal non-public sphere of existence known as “the church” which must, at all costs, avoid the political and economic. Of course, Donfried does not fall neatly into this rather simplistic paradigm. He is too sophisticated for that. However, it seems to me that he remains stuck in a textual room sterilized from the more mundane seepage of political, economic and social struggle. Sadly history does not transpire via such neat separations.

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