



# The Apostle Paul meets peer review

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It occurred to me recently that many readers, especially those who do not work in education, may not be familiar with a somewhat unique feature of academic culture known as “peer review.”

The basic idea is before an article is published in a “refereed” journal, the editors run it past two or three “experts” in the subject matter germane to the piece to see if they deem it “worthy.”

It’s designed to be a quality control measure, but in reality it seldom works that way. I’ve been submitting articles for decades, and my experience is the screening process is often deeply flawed and imperfect, fraught with subjectivity, personal bias, and professional elitism.

To illustrate what I mean, imagine how Scripture might have been different if the Apostle Paul’s writings in the New Testament had been subjected to peer review before being included in the Bible:

St. Paul

Ephesus, Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, Rome

Dear St. Paul,

Greetings. Thank you for submitting your letters to *The Bible*, the premiere journal for serious religious scholars. As is our policy, we sent your manuscript out for review to several leading Christian scholars. The editorial board has reviewed their recommendations, and we support their conclusion that your submission has potential and should be considered for publication – with some suggested revisions.

First, it was recommended by multiple reviewers you consider calling your letters “epistles.” Remember, you are writing primarily for the leading religious scholars of our day. “Letters” has a rather proletarian ring to it which tends to detract from the significance of the ideas you are attempting to convey.

It was also noted you have included very few citations throughout your narrative, and the references you do provide are often from the Torah, which in many instances are hundreds of years old. A lot has happened over the last few centuries, and several reviewers strongly recommend you add some contemporary sources. We concur with this suggestion as we think it would serve to strengthen your primary thesis considerably.

A couple of astute reviewers brought it to our attention that the length of your various letters varies considerably. Titus and 2 Thessalonians, for example, contain only three chapters each - and Philemon is only 335 words in the original Greek. Romans and 1 Corinthians, by contrast, each contain 16 chapters. This inconsistency is glaring and takes away from the story you seem to be telling. As such, we recommend you consider combining some of your shorter letters for the sake of uniformity.

One reviewer noted you tend to repeat yourself a lot. Specifically, “In Christ” appears over 160 times, “Grace and peace” is found at the beginning of all your letters, and “the Day of the Lord” shows up 16 times. Try to be a little more creative and perhaps consider only one, more universal admonition to follow the teachings of Jesus, instead of the multiple variations currently scattered throughout the document.

As far as content and the main message you are trying to convey is concerned, a couple of reviewers were put off by your constant insistence that everyone be allowed access to God’s grace, including the Gentiles. As you may be aware, this goes against Nero’s Anti-DEI directive. So please examine your submission carefully and remove any references to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Along those same lines, one reviewer noted the overall aura of ‘negativity’ that seems to permeate your approach to the task at hand. In fact, this appears to be a central theme in all your letters. Your constant reminders that people need to repent can come across as overemphasized and redundant. Perhaps you could tone it down a bit so sinners, in particular, will not feel targeted or judged by your prose.

Finally, the word count for all 13 letters currently stands at around 32,400, which is about 17,400 over the limit for what we typically accept for publication in our journal. So you’ll need to trim the combined letters down to around 15,000 words. We think this can be accomplished by paying careful attention to the above recommendations.

Again, we appreciate the time you took to submit your letters to The Bible. We feel your letters have potential and collectively make a valuable contribution to the canon. Therefore, we invite you to revise and re-submit taking the aforementioned recommendations into account. We will reconsider the status of your submission at that time.

Sincerely,

The Editors  
The Bible

My recommendation: Approach anything published in a “peer reviewed” journal with an appropriate level of skepticism and critical thinking. In many cases, you can find information that is just as valid and reliable in your local newspaper.



— Aaron W. Hughey is a university distinguished professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. The views expressed in his columns are entirely his own.

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