In *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community* Mark Strom presents a provocative and timely challenge to the interpretation of Pauline theology. Building on a number of significant studies over recent decades setting Paul amid the world of popular philosophy of his day, Strom’s particular contribution is an analysis of the way Paul develops an alternative philosophy of everyday life that shapes his sense of ministry and community.

‘Conversation’ is the predominant engagement motif in this book, further developing Strom’s 1995 doctoral thesis (*Conversing across the Ages: A Conversation around Some Intellectual and Social Paradigms of Graeco-Roman Antiquity, the Apostle Paul, and Modern Evangelicalism*). While the theoretical underpinning of *Reframing Paul* is clearly derived from the doctoral study, the material has been largely rewritten and reshaped. This notion of ‘conversation’—engagement with philosophical traditions and *topoi* which determine values and approach to life—is presented as a model for engagement with life issues and experience in contemporary contexts and a paradigm through which prevailing evangelical culture is critiqued.

To my mind, while I would have liked this ‘conversation’ model for analysing the ‘meeting of two worlds’ to have been articulated more directly, I believe it to be a valid and helpful one, at least as employed by Strom. It balances and challenges the predominantly theological reading of Paul, who should not be considered in splendid isolation from the cultural milieu of his day. Indeed, Paul needs to be better understood as critiquing and subverting the values and paradigms that formed popular approaches to everyday life in the Graeco-Roman world.

*Reframing Paul* is divided into five parts. Part 1 is a ‘snapshot’ overview of Greek/Hellenistic philosophy from Homer to Seneca via Plato and Aristotle. While recognising the difficulties of simplistic categories, Strom argues for life and belief as split between two realities: *primary reality* and *everyday reality*. Exploring the interplay between these two is at the heart of his analysis, and Strom provides a helpful and concise analysis of the philosophical ‘DNA’ of Graeco-Roman society. His treatment of ‘Rank, Status and Convention’ (chapter 5) is superb and a must read for anyone wanting to gain a better understanding of the ‘honour and shame’ dynamics in the world of the apostle Paul.

Part 2 considers ‘Paul on Jesus Christ’ and the way in which the ‘Story of Jesus Christ’ shapes the social, historical and personal ‘frames’ integral to Paul’s outlook. Reference to Stephen Fowl’s *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul* would have further enhanced Strom’s analysis at this point, but the main direction of his treatment must again be judged valid. In this section Strom touches on a few areas that are otherwise underplayed in his presentation, especially the ‘frame’ of Paul’s heritage within Judaism. He is aware of artificial distinctions between Hellenism and various forms of Jewish culture and recognises the complexity of the interplay between Paul’s
various cultural traditions. However, further consideration of Paul’s engagement with issues and values associated with his Jewish heritage (as highlighted, for example, in the research of Mark Nanos) would enhance the ‘conversational’ model Strom explores with reference to Paul. Again, such a criticism should not be overstated, and Strom does touch on the profound way Paul’s thought was influenced by his encounter with the Messiah (see especially pp 74–80). I am not sure, however, of the degree to which this element carries through to Strom’s analysis of Paul in other sections—it may be a bigger ‘frame’, shaping the categories of Paul’s thought more than he allows (a criticism also made of E A Judge).

Part 3 (drawn more closely from Strom’s doctoral thesis) examines the ‘Meeting of Two Worlds’ and considers (in turn) Paul and philosophy, theology, religion, and morality. Strom’s identification of relevant issues, each explored in socio-cultural context, is astute and draws discerningly on significant secondary studies. My one question at this point is over his narrowing of ‘renewal of the mind’ to intellectual dimensions and, more specifically, to Paul’s attitudes towards intellectualism and sophistry. These are certainly key aspects, but I would argue that Paul’s reference to ‘mind’ is broader and encompasses the whole being, including emotions, attitudes and will.

Strom keeps the argument moving, and the profound reshaping of Paul’s outlook comes more clearly into view in Part 4 as he explores ‘Frames for Grace and Conversation’. This is one of the most satisfying sections of the book and emphasises the strongly relational orientation of Paul’s theological endeavours—in marked contrast to the ‘serene independence that marked the Graeco-Roman ideals of the wise man’ (p 159). The profoundly personal experience of knowing Christ grounds Paul’s whole outlook: his self-understanding and the (literal and metaphorical) walk that came with commitment to discipleship and service. It is in this section that Strom underscores the social dimensions of strength in weakness, humiliation, and the paradoxical ‘freedom of slavery’. The paradigm of the Christ story is far from abstract or idealised, but it shaped the everyday realities encountered by Paul in his travels, ministry and counsel to the various Christian communities associated with Paul.

The argument at this point segues well to the heart of the matter for Strom. As he explores the interplay between ministry and community, the frames of grace and conversation come into their own. Recent work highlights the degree to which Paul entered the realm where philosophers failed: the creation of genuine community in which human relations are shaped by the values espoused in the professed world view (see especially Troels Engberg-Petersen, Paul and the Stoics, T & T Clark, 2000). Drawing extensively on Edwin Judge and Robert Banks (Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting, Eerdmans, 1980), Strom follows the view that *ekklēsia* refers essentially to ‘the actual gathering or group who gathered’ (pp 170,172). There are significant implications that follow this narrow definition, and this is seen in some of the conclusions that follow. The focus narrows to the ‘purpose and character of the gathering’ (p 174), which becomes central to considering ministry and community. However, expectations concerning the nature of community need to be considered against a broader canvas than the semantic range of *ekklēsia*. The vision of hospitality at the heart of church community (Romans 12:9–13) suggests something more dynamic and flexible than ministry essentially restricted to the realm of ‘gatherings’. I am sure Strom would affirm this, but I wonder whether he has made enough allowance for this in the critique of contemporary patterns of ministry that follows.
Strom rounds out this section with an impressionistic sketch of the ‘Rhythm of Conversation’ in Paul. Suggestively arguing that Paul was ‘more akin to a jazz musician improvising than to a lawyer or theologian assembling a tight argument’ (p 182), Strom identifies the interplay between innovation and conformity: Paul in creative conversation with various socio-cultural currents and traditions.

The final section of the book (Part 5 – ‘Now and Then: Reframing Grace-full Conversation’) adopts a markedly different and more passionate tone. Strom writes out of personal experience (see especially the remarkably honest account in the final chapter) and primarily to the evangelical community (especially North American and Sydney Anglican). The most trenchant criticism mounted by Strom is directed at the notion of ordination and the exercise of leadership in evangelical circles more generally. I must admit that I am largely in sympathy with many of Strom’s telling observations, especially in regard to evangelical culture that so strongly promotes the authority of the pulpit and thereby controls the ‘conversation’. However, I would also contend that we are moving into ‘throwing out the baby with the bath water’ territory here, and that pointing out abuses in the way ministry is undertaken doesn’t necessarily mean the whole pattern of ordered ministry is fundamentally flawed.

The foundation of Strom’s perspective is the contention (quoting Edwin Judge) that for Paul ‘[n]or surely is there any ideal or notion of leadership’ (p 178). My problem at this point is the lack of definition of what is considered ‘leadership’. It is undoubtedly true that the Pauline churches did not have leadership as we know it in contemporary reference. Yet cultural anthropologists would argue that some exercise of leadership is inevitable in community life. Strom notes that Paul ‘avoided the vocabulary of leadership’ (p 180), preferring to use metaphors of service and the like. The two needn’t be set against each other. A stronger case would be that Paul urged a different style of leadership in the context of interdependent and mutually subordinate community.

Granted this proviso, Strom’s critique of contemporary leadership modes is an important one. The priority given to pulpit ministry all too easily masks mechanisms of control and manipulation. Conversation becomes a monologue and authority is buttressed by the monopolisation of ministry by ‘professionals’. We might take issue with Strom’s line of reasoning here or there, and his use of sweeping categorical statements leaves him open to serious challenge at points, but these are uncomfortable questions we must face. We cannot return to the patterns or forms of the primitive church, but we can surely learn from Paul’s model of conversation. Strom is to be commended on a constructively provocative book that is certain to open up many a lively conversation.