

Pauline Theology: A Review Article

Allan R. Bevere*

James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. 808 pp., cloth, \$50.00.

Dunn's book is a detailed work on the theology of the great apostle and the culmination of forty years of study, lectures, and publications. In the Preface Dunn begins by mentioning his interest in Paul, even as a boy, and how that interest took on a more profound aspect. "In my student days the fascination deepened as I began to appreciate something of Paul the theologian. The combination of profound theological reflection and sensitive grappling with all too real human problems, of outspoken argument and pastoral insight, 'found me' at many points" (p. xv). Having been found by Paul, it could be said that this book focuses on what Dunn as "found out" concerning Paul's theology.

Given the nature of a full-scale work on Paul, Dunn had to make several difficult decisions on approach and method. First, was to use the book of Romans as a template for a more complete explanation of Paul's theology. The value in this is to use the major theological themes developed in Romans. The problem with this approach is that the other letters in the Pauline corpus are treated in a "more broken" (p. xvi) way, which is less agreeable. But Dunn sees the other possibility of analyzing each letter as problematic in its own right.

"A second important decision was to treat the subjects in sufficient detail for (Paul's) theological and (my) exegetical rationale to be clear" (p. xvi). Thus at certain places in the book, Dunn provides quotations of key scriptural texts, sometimes at great length (e.g. pages 138 and 302). Dunn is aware that the reader may not always have the texts of scripture at hand. Not only does this provide a convenience to the reader, it also assists in reinforcing certain key points by the writer.

A third critical decision was to decide on the degree of engagement with other scholars on the "substance and detail" (p. xvi) of Paul's theology. The massive volume of scholarly work available on Paul could easily turn an already large discussion into an endless one. Thus difficult choices had to be on what scholars to include in the discussion based on the themes being developed.

A final difficult decision was what to entitle the book. *The Theology of Paul* was not self-explanatory outside scholarly and ecclesiastical circles, and *The Theology of St. Paul*, according to Dunn, would not correctly characterize an apostle who used the term "saint" to refer to all believers. Thus Dunn settles for *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, since "apostle" is clearly one title Paul cherished (p. xvii).

In the Prologue Dunn wrestles with the complexity of whether or not a theology of Paul is possible, and if so, how one should be written. He asks and answers several key questions as he works toward a solution. *Why a theology of Paul?* The answer: "Paul is the first and greatest Christian theologian" (p. 2). *What is a theology of Paul?* It is a study wedded to "historical analysis and contextualization" that is neither necessary nor possible with many other early Christian writings (p. 11). It is theology that has everything to do with everyday living (p. 9). *Can a theology of Paul be written?* Yes, it can. In fact it is possible to write a theology of Paul in a way not possible with anyone else in the first century of Christianity (p. 13). *How do we write a theology of Paul?*

* Allan Bevere (Ph.D., Durham University) is Assistant Professor of Biblical Interpretation and Theology at ATS.

According to Dunn, not around a center of core principles reminiscent of much German scholarship in the twentieth century, which led to a theology too inflexible putting Paul into a static, unchanging world (pp. 19-20). Nor should a theology of Paul be written around the notion of his theological development, of which the problems have been clearly stated (p. 22). Dunn finally settles on Beker's model of coherence within contingency, whereas (quoting Beker), "the coherence of the gospel is constituted by the apocalyptic interpretation of the death and resurrection of Christ" (p. 23). One key assumption is that Paul's thought is essentially coherent unless incoherence is demonstrated. This is simply a matter of respect for Paul and his work. *How do we move toward a theology of Paul?* The answer here is two-fold: First, through dialogue. This is not simply theological dialogue, but the kind of dialogue where we learn to understand and appreciate others. We thus dialogue with Paul, not only in his theology, but also in his history, and in his person and on his own terms. Second, in using Romans as a template for the discussion, since it was written to articulate and "defend his own mature understanding of the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17) as he had thus far proclaimed it and as he hoped to commend it both in Jerusalem and beyond Rome in Spain" (p. 25).

Having put forth the task and its method, Dunn then moves into Paul's theology proper. The progression of the chapters reveals a traditional theological approach from God to sin, from Christ to salvation, from church to sanctification. Chapter two is focuses on the discussion of "God and Humankind," then it moves to chapter three, "Humankind Under Indictment." From there: chapter four, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ;" chapter five, "The Beginning of Salvation;" chapter six, "The Process of Salvation;" chapter seven, "The Church;" chapter eight, "How Should Believers Live?" and chapter nine, "Epilogue."

In chapter two Dunn focuses on Paul's doctrine of God and humanity. For Paul, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Israel (p. 43) is the foundation of theology. Paul was firm in his conviction that there is only one God, and that this God is the creator of the world and its judge. It is this understanding of God that is indispensable for his understanding of salvation; and it is this thoroughly Jewish view of God that creates the primary tension in Paul's theology as a Jew who believed in Jesus and called to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. Thus Paul's theology is not abstract reflection, but it is "sustained and informed by his own experience in conversion and mission and prayer" (p. 50).

Paul's understanding of humanity works within various aspects. Human beings are embodied, that is, they are social, having the desire and the ability to enter into relationship, which is indispensable to human existence. Human beings are merely human, weak and subject to "appetites and desires" (p. 78) that make them vulnerable. At the same time, as rational, they are "capable of soaring to the highest heights of reflective thought" (p. 78); and as emotional beings, able to experience the most profound feelings and motivations. And most significantly, human beings are "animated by the mystery of life as a gift" (p. 78).

In chapter three "Humankind Under Indictment," Dunn takes up the subject of Paul's understanding of Adam, sin and death, and the law. There is clearly a dark side to humanity, an indispensable dimension of sin. Here Dunn makes some helpful references to this dark side as depicted by such literature as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and Shakespeare's portrayal of tragic heroes (p. 81). Yet, Paul focuses on Adam to explain this dark side of humanity.

Human beings were created to be in relationship with God, which is the very essence of human life. But human beings believed a more fulfilling relationship with the

world was possible apart from relationship with God. In thus turning away from God and focusing solely on the creation, human beings attempt to become their own creators. "In consequence humankind has fallen when it thought to rise, has become foolish not wise, baser not superior. It has denied its likeness to God and preferred the likeness of beasts and things" (p. 101). Humanity thus stands under indictment.

Sin leads to death. The forces of evil are real and working in the world. These forces are not simply to be reduced to human will and selfishness. "There are also constraints and pressures operating within and upon human society which combine with human weakness to corrupt both individual and community" (p. 127). Sin is individual and social. "Humankind lives out its life in the service of sin, whose payoff is death" (p. 129).

For Paul, the law plays an important role in explicating sin bringing it to consciousness as transgression. It has the same, though less obvious task, with the Gentiles through conscience. Thus all humanity, Jew and Gentile, are guilty before God, having missed the mark of what God has intended for human beings.

While the law in some respect plays a role with Gentiles, it has a special relationship with Israel, "particularly to protect and discipline Israel in the period from Moses to Christ" (p. 160). Such a role for the law is only interim, eliminated with the coming of Jesus Christ.

Israel is unable to recognize the temporary role of the law, assuming that the law had given them a privileged relationship. Thus Israel is even more vulnerable to the indictment of Romans 1:18-3:20. The coming of Christ has ushered in an "eschatological shift," and Israel's insistence on the continued significance of the law means that "Israel is now 'behind the times'" (p. 160).

God gave the law to Israel first and foremost to provide direction for living and provide the terms by which Israel could maintain her covenant status with God. How this relates to the law's functioning to protect Israel, as well as Peter's criticism of Israel's inability to recognize the eschatological shift in Christ, are unclear.

One thing is clear: the power of sin uses the law to enslave human beings. Israel's own rejection of the temporary status of the law and using it to cling to its privileged status is an obvious example of how sin exploits the law to trap humanity in sin and death. Thus, the law given by God as an interim guide to expose sin and put forth the terms of the covenant, now becomes an ally of the very sin it was given to expose. Logically, therefore, the law as an ally of sin leads to death.

Chapter four, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ," is the beginning of the solution to the plight of the law, sin, and death. "Paul's gospel, the divine response to the divine indictment, was centered wholly on Jesus Christ" (p. 181). For Paul, divine response was made personal in his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, and it completely turned Paul around. Christ was the key for knowing God's purposes for humanity and he revolutionized Paul's values. Christ became Paul's "supreme passion" (p. 181).

Dunn argues that Paul was indeed familiar with Jesus' ministry prior to his crucifixion and was influenced in his letters by the Jesus tradition. Jesus' own Jewishness and his messiahship were important features of Paul's christology, and "God's actual presence" (p. 206) in Jesus is clearly expressed in Paul's later work.

Paul believed his own gospel was entirely in keeping with Jesus' own teaching. Thus Jesus' Jewishness was not to be rejected; indeed, Jesus had fulfilled the messianic hopes of his people. This was not to be forgotten. Simultaneously, this continuity

between Paul's gospel and Jesus' teaching meant that the good news was not only for Israel, but for all humanity.

"There can no doubt as to where the center of gravity of Paul's theology is to be found. It lies in the death and resurrection of Jesus" (p. 208). In explicating the meaning of Jesus' death, Paul uses a variety of metaphors. The most significant ones are representation, sacrifice, curse, redemption, reconciliation, and conquest of the powers (p. 231). Dunn makes clear his view that these aspects of Christ's work on the cross are indeed metaphors and what is significant about a metaphor is that it is "not the thing itself but a means of expressing its meaning. It would be unwise, then, to translate these metaphors into literal facts, as though, for example, Christ's death were literally a sacrifice provided by God (as priest?) in the cosmos, conceived as a temple" (p. 231).

While I am not inclined to accept Dunn's view that these aspects of the significance of Christ's sacrifice are to be understood as metaphorical alone (and I doubt Paul would accept it either), Dunn is surely correct to state that all of the different "metaphors" Paul presents reflect a richness to the importance of Christ's death, and we must not make one of these images normative over all the others.

Paul certainly presents Christ's sacrifice as God initiated. "The act of Jesus is the act of God" (p. 232). The variety of metaphors reveals the influence of the proclamation of the gospel. The atonement itself is very much related to the experience of atonement. Thus, for Paul there can be no alternative scheme of salvation. Soteriology is focused entirely on the cross and the resurrection. Christ's crucifixion is an effective remedy for the power of sin and death.

Along with the crucifixion, Paul understood the resurrection of Jesus as decisive. There is no real distinction to be made between Jesus' resurrection and exaltation. The risen Christ is the last Adam. He is God's co-regent, and co-lifegiver with the Holy Spirit. In his sonship he is the elder brother of a new family and also the Son of God in power. In all of this, Paul's monotheism remains intact. Jesus' Lordship is held within its bounds (p. 265).

Dunn argues that Paul does indeed have a concept of Christ's preexistence, but not in the traditional theological sense. Instead it is the preexistence of Wisdom now identified by and as Christ. Wisdom (and Spirit, as Dunn argues) was a basic way of speaking of God's interaction with his world and with his people. Paul's christology puts forth the tensions between Adam and Wisdom that led to subsequent theologizing over how Jesus could be understood both as divine and human.

There is no doubt that Christ's second coming was a definite aspect of Paul's theology, and he maintained that belief in his later letters. While it was an integral part of his theology, Dunn suggests that it was not part of "the center of gravity of his christology" (p. 314), and unlike the cross and resurrection, the parousia never attained confessional status. The different imagery Paul uses to refer to the second coming is not mutually consistent, and no attempt should be made to draw it together into a single portrayal (p. 315).

In chapter 5, "The Beginning of Salvation," Dunn discusses Paul's understanding of the nature of what it is that Christ has done in his cross and resurrection. Paul's metaphors for salvation draw on the customs of the time. Justification and the removal of a debt are legal metaphors. Redemption is a metaphor from the practice of slavery or captivity in war. There are also communal images such as citizenship. He also draws images from religion (set apart), and from everyday life (adoption). These different metaphors were attempts to express a reality that defied simple explanation. Again, Dunn

uses the language of metaphor because it is necessary to express such deeply moving experiences (pp. 332-333).

Dunn devotes a major section of this chapter to justification by faith, not because it is a major concept in Paul, but because of its significance in Protestant interpretation of Paul. As part of the school of the "new perspective on Paul," Dunn seeks to present an alternative to the typical Lutheran understanding of "works of the law" as a reference to good works, and the misunderstanding that the Judaism of the first century was a religion where one's salvation was earned.

Justification means, of course, acceptance by God, the God who justifies the ungodly. Christ's death is a representative death; that is, sinners who trust in Christ do not escape death, they share in Christ's death. Justification opens up unhindered access to God. It is "acceptance into a relationship with God characterized by the grace of Israel's covenant" (p. 388). Gentiles are granted a share in Israel's inheritance. Justification is above all liberation, which is clearly the major point Paul makes in Galatians. It is here that Dunn makes his case for the traditional rendering of *pistis Christou* as "faith in Christ," over against the alternative proposal "faith of Christ" (e.g. Richard Hays).

Less judicial in nature is Paul's view that salvation is participation in Christ. For Dunn, participation is the "more natural extension of Paul's christology" (p. 390). There is a mystical aspect to this participation, revealed to some extent in the phrase "in Christ," which occurs eighty-three times in the Pauline corpus, a motif neglected in modern scholarship, which Dunn finds surprising. The phrase and related phraseology highlights that what has happened in salvation depends upon Christ, it refers to the status of believers subjectively, and it is used to refer to Paul's own work and activity (p. 398). Dunn also discusses the "striking feature of Paul's theology" (p. 401)—the "with Christ motif" and its complementary formulations (e.g. into Christ, the body of Christ, through Christ, etc.). Dunn notes that Christ's work is not only for the individual, but that Paul's soteriology is corporate in nature. Participation in Christ does not remove the believer from the world; it provides the foundation for a daily life that is differently motivated (p. 411). The gift of the Holy Spirit demonstrates that the Paul's gospel has everything to do with everyday realities.

Baptism signifies those everyday realities. Baptism was socially significant in the earliest Christian community revealing that conversion was not "some private spiritual transaction" (p. 447). Those baptized were publicly renouncing their old ways and putting on a new way of life. Baptism is also clearly linked to the death of Christ. As important as baptism was to Paul, he did not believe it to be the be all and end all of salvation, as evidenced by his comments to the Corinthians not to esteem their baptisms too highly (p. 449). Finally, Dunn argues that, for Paul, baptism itself is not the replacement for circumcision; it is the gift of the Spirit that replaces circumcision, even though baptism "in effect formed as effective a group boundary as circumcision" (p. 455).

In chapter 6, "The Process of Salvation," Dunn discusses the eschatological tensions in Paul's theology and the tension of relating the gospel to unbelieving Israel (Romans 9-11). For Paul the gift of the Spirit is the starting point for the believer, thus there is no second step or phase where one receives the Spirit after conversion. Paul's understanding of spirituality and maturity are not to be connected to earthly wisdom, eloquent speech or the exercise of certain spiritual gifts; spiritual maturity is revealed, seen in those who live according to the Spirit they have been given (p. 495).

"The believer's whole life is lived in the overlap of the ages, within the eschatological tension between Adam and Christ, between death and life" (p. 495).

Christians live within this tension; they do not escape from it. In this very real sense, then, salvation is a process. Suffering is thus viewed as an integral part of this process. This process also provides the foundation for ethics. "In every moral decision there was a choice to be made, for the flesh or for the spirit" (p. 497). While apostasy is a real possibility for Paul, that does not diminish the assurance of adoption and the guarantee of the Spirit for believers.

In reference to Israel, Dunn states "Paul bares his soul as nowhere else" (p. 531). His understanding of the future of Israel was closely linked to his own calling as an apostle to the Gentiles. He hoped that his ministry to the Gentiles would lead to Israel's turning. This hope, according to Dunn, was unfulfilled, and while Paul has been often misinterpreted in reference to Israel and its place in the covenant, Dunn argues that Paul himself presents part of the problem. While Paul has been used throughout Christian history in a negative way in reference to Israel, Dunn thinks it is possible to use Paul, particularly "Paul the Israelite," as an authentic voice of Israel to build bridges between Christians and Jews (p. 532).

Dunn discusses Paul's theology of the church in chapter seven. The church is, at the same time, different things—the body of Christ, the church of God, a community without cult, and a charismatic community sharing the experience of the Spirit. Paul's ideal understanding of the church is lessened by "the social realities of community formation within hostile environments" (p. 598). The question in Dunn's mind is whether Paul's model of church as charismatic community expresses "the idealism and unreality" of the movement's enthusiasm of the first generation of Christians? Do the Pastoral epistles represent a corrective to this idealism with its institutionalization of authority and its "routinization of charisma." Dunn is not satisfied with the pitting of the ecclesiology of 1 Corinthians 12-14 against the ones put forth in the pastorals. Dunn mentions, in particular, the work of Hans Küng, who understands Paul's charismatic vision of the church as the fundamental framework for Pauline ecclesiology.

In this chapter, Dunn concludes with an extended discussion of the Lord's Supper. The significance of the Lord's Supper for Paul is beyond debate with its importance being maintained throughout the history of church tradition, particularly in Catholicism and orthodoxy. It is thus disappointing that any discussion of the practice is limited to one letter (1 Corinthians 10-11). This Dunn attributes to Paul's *ad hoc* theology by epistle. Moreover, the fact that Paul has to address the subject so little suggests that the Lord's Supper was so common and fundamental to the life of the early church, that abuses, such as what was taking place in Corinth, were rare (p. 600). For Paul, the Lord's Supper is spiritual food; it is the sharing in the one body. The Lord's Supper re(-)presents the death of Christ with the new covenant graciously given. In "linking the Lord's Supper with judgment as well as spiritual food, with Christ's coming again as well as his death, Paul underlines the extent to which celebration of the Lord's Supper does indeed "proclaim" the whole gospel and provide instruction as well as sustenance during the long slog from the already to the not yet" (p. 623).

Chapter eight, "How Should Believers Live," takes up the subject of Paul's ethics. He begins with questioning (and rightly so) the traditional distinction made between indicative and imperative. "In fact, however, the 'theology followed by application' dichotomy is misleading. Paul never spoke other than as a pastor. His theology was a living theology, a practical theology through and through. The application is inherent in the exposition itself" (p. 626). This does not mean a complete rejection of the indicative and the imperative. It is true that for Paul that the indicative of what Christ has done is the basis for the imperative of what believers must do (p. 630). The

underlying principles of Paul's ethic strike a balance between "internal motivation and external norm" (p. 668). The external norms include such things as traditional wisdom, vices and virtues, notions of right and wrong accepted by people of good will, perspectives on community interdependence and the good ordering of society. It is Christ's love and self-giving that add a distinctive Christian perspective to these norms integrated to a thoroughly Jewish background of Paul's moral discussion.

The internal motivation is a combination of inner trust that depends upon the compulsion of the Spirit. It is also a renewed mind, the mind of Christ, always seeking to know the will of God. For Paul "*both* the outward norm *and* the inward motivation were essential for ethical living" (p. 669).

In the final section of chapter eight, "Ethics in Practice," Dunn looks at how Paul puts these inward motivations and outward norms into practice by analyzing specific moral issues. He begins by affirming that Paul's moral context as a social context. His ethics cannot only be dealt with as personal ethics. He then analyzes Paul's discussion on a variety of matters—living in a hostile world (Romans 12:9-13:14), living with fundamental disagreements (Romans 14:1-15:6), sexual conduct (1 Corinthians 5-6), marriage and divorce (1 Corinthians 7), slavery (1 Corinthians 7:20-23), and social relations (1 Corinthians 8-10).

On all moral matters, the eschatological tension is clearly evident and forming, and Paul shows great sensitivity in steering a difficult course in living in the already and not yet. "If in the end of the day the lasting impression is not just the principles which Paul enunciated for determining Christian conduct but the care with which he sought to live them out and the complications entailed, that is probably as Paul himself would have wished it" (p. 712).

The Epilogue of chapter nine is a postlegomena to Paul's theology. Dunn begins this last chapter where he started the book: reminding the reader that to write a theology of Paul, one must dialogue with Paul, theologically, historically, socially, and personally. The foundation of Paul's theology was stable. Paul did not think of Christianity as a new and different religion. The Jewishness of his theology is seen in the pillars of his faith, God, Israel, Torah, and Scripture. Paul's theology remains Jewish, even though, after his conversion, the fulcrum point of his theology was Christ, "the point on which a whole larger mass swings round into a new plane or direction" (pp. 722-723). For Paul, this made sense and could be no other way. "For Paul, God was now to be known definitively by reference to Christ" (p. 723). Christianity is Christ; he is the lens through which all reality comes into focus. Cross and resurrection are central to this reality.

Dunn ends the Epilogue by reminding us that people cannot be isolated by their thinking alone. Paul's enduring example to us is not only as a theologian, but also as a teacher and pastor and as a Christian. Indeed, his theology can only be properly understood when Paul is viewed as a whole person. "Paul theologized by writing letters. This means that his theology was always wrapped around with the greetings, thanksgivings, and prayers of letter openings, with the travel arrangements, personal explanations, and farewells of letter closings. Or, should we say, his theologizing always began and ended with the practicalities and little things of human relationships. Paul's theology, however, complex and high-flown, was never of the ivory-tower kind. It was first and last an attempt to make sense of the gospel as the key to everyday life and to make possible a daily living which was Christian through and through" (pp. 736-737).

Dunn's book will be an indispensable resource on the theology of Paul for years to come. It is a thorough discussion with detailed analysis written by someone with

an unparalleled command of the subject and resources. Particularly helpful are the brief bibliographies given at the beginning of each section, in addition to the general bibliography at the beginning of the book. One could take issue with some of the scholars he chooses to exclude from the discussion, but what would be the significance of such a criticism? With a written text of 736 pages and attention to many and diverse sources, such critique would be quite petty. One could also criticize his use of Romans as a template, but again, why bother? Dunn has made a good case for his methodology, while recognizing it has limitations, as is the case with all methodologies. No doubt there are points where others will take issue with him on matters of Paul's theology, and rightly so, but that just means that the great discussion on the greatest Christian theologian of the first century, and every subsequent century, will continue.

Thanks be to God!