

James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), hardback, 808 pages.

In this massive tome, Dunn has given the reader a mixture of fine and welcome analysis on many points of Pauline theology while at the same time casting doubt upon some basic fundamentals of the Christian faith. This eclectic work is useful for anyone who would be interested in discovering the issues involved in understanding Paul's writings. However, one must be cautious in accepting Dunn's interpretive conclusions.

The good features of Dunn's work include first and foremost his viewing of Paul from within the framework of his Jewishness. To be sure, he overdoes it as will be shown below. Nonetheless, it is a welcome corrective to many theologies of Paul which overemphasize his Gentile mission to the point of distraction from his Jewish roots.

Other good features would include (1) his fair and clear presentation of Paul's descriptive terms for the functions and substance of the individual's material and immaterial parts, terms such as *sarx*, *soma*, *nous*, *kardia*, *psyche*, and *pneuma*, (2) his seeming acceptance of a literal resurrection of Christ as taught by Paul, (3) the insightful presentation of the multi-faceted metaphors of salvation used by Paul, and (4) the clear presentation of a Baptist view of water baptism as to its mode, manner, and meaning.

All of these positive traits are somewhat negated by several faults with Dunn's approach to Pauline theology. First, he unfortunately follows most scholarship with his rejection of the Pastoral Epistles as written by Paul. This cuts him off from Paul's thinking on a number of scores such as practical church function, ethical obligations in the family, further second coming issues, and the nature of Scripture itself as *God-breathed*, a term coined by Paul (2 Tim. 3:16).

Second, Dunn's method leaves much to be desired with his emphasis on "intertextual echoes." By this he means determining the assumptions that are in the Pauline text which lie behind his overt teaching. The problems with this are the inevitability of exegeting what Paul did not write and/or making the "hints" of Scripture into the main points. In either case, this creates problems for a genuine biblical theology which should theoretically make the text itself supreme, not alleged features "behind" the text.

Third, Dunn falls into the common trap of overusing in his theology the phrase "eschatological now." New Testament scholarship presently is enamored with the present age as the *eschaton* and uses the term *eschatological* rather freely to depict any terms of change brought about by God (such as present conversion of sinners). This use of the term betrays an interpretive scheme which may or may not be substantiated by various texts and perhaps leads the reader to a conclusion based upon an extra-biblical theology.

Fourth, Dunn downplays or rejects the deity of Christ in Paul's thought. It seems that Dunn struggles with his own belief about the deity of Christ and the related doctrine of the Trinity. He would have been helped on that issue by including the Pastorals within the Pauline corpus (e.g., Titus 2:13 where Jesus is clearly God). Also, he does not do justice to the Trinitarian formulas in Paul (2 Cor. 13:14, I Cor. 12:4-6, etc.) or to clear passages affirming his deity (his discussion of Phil. 2:5ff is rather anemic). He seems to think that the focal point in Paul on this issue is Rom. 9:5 where the punctuation of the Greek text is an issue (see p. 255-56). By doing so, he marginalizes the whole discussion.

Fifth, Dunn overly relies on the work of E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977). Sanders' thesis, for which he coined the term "covenantal nomism," was that we have misread Paul's attack on Judaizers in Galatians and have forced the sixteenth-century Reformation debate concerning justification by faith into the Romans 4 passage (especially verses 4 and 5). While there are some good elements in Sanders presentation which will not be discussed here, the overall thrust for the present discussion is that he believed that the Judaism of Paul's day accepted a form of justification by faith as taught in Romans 4:4-5. Furthermore, Paul, in this view, was not reacting to any works-righteousness that was present in Judaism. Judaism simply could not be characterized in this way. While the focus on elements of continuity between Paul and his Jewish heritage is good, it does not stand alone as will be seen below. The result, which Dunn follows closely, is that the forensic nature of the doctrine of justification by faith alone has been substantially lost. Note Dunn's comment on this issue:

In affirming justification by faith, Paul set it against justification . . . "from works of the law." The traditional understanding of the phrase within Protestant theology is that it denoted good works done as an attempt to gain or achieve righteousness. The interpretation is wholly understandable, particularly in light of Rom. 4:4-5, where the "works" in view . . . seem to be explained as "working for reward" and set in antithesis to "not working but [simply] believing." . . .

The problem with the traditional view, however, emerges from "the new perspective." For as we have seen, the suggestion that Judaism typically taught that righteousness had to be *achieved* by law-keeping is a fairly fundamental misperception of "covenantal nomism." And our investigation of Paul's perspective on his own pre-Christian attitudes and practice has only strengthened the view that Paul the Pharisee enjoyed a sense of participating in Israel's covenant righteousness as attested and maintained (not earned) by his devoutness and faithfulness. Presumably the resolution to the debate between the old perspective and the new lies in clarification of the distinction between *achieving* righteousness and *maintaining* righteousness (p. 354).

Dunn's comments miss the point. The Reformers would say that any attempt to maintain righteousness after salvation is a repeat of the Galatian mistake whether the Judaizers were Jews outside or inside the Church. Again, there is trouble harmonizing Dunn's statement with Rom. 11:6 but little trouble harmonizing his statement in principle with Roman Catholic views of justification. He argues that to justify means to make righteous as well as declare righteous, but his emphasis appears to be on the latter.

One can be a little suspicious of Dunn's motivation on this score. Note his rather strongly worded hostility to the traditional doctrine of justification:

But behind the Catholic-Protestant debate, and obscured by it, was the more fundamental issue of Christianity's relation to Judaism, in particular the relation of Paul's gospel and theology to his ancestral religion. Two factors made it impossible for that situation to persist. One was Vatican II, and in effect the removal of most of the old Catholic-Protestant agenda as no longer at issue. The other was the Holocaust and its continuing reverberations in Christian theology. If post-Vatican II theology could no longer simply restate the old debate between Protestant and Catholic in the traditional terms, post-Holocaust theology could not longer stomach the denigration of historic Judaism which had been the dark-side-of-the-moon corollary to the Christian doctrine of justification (p. 354).

In short, it seems that Dunn blames the traditional Protestant understanding of justification by faith alone as hindering Jewish-Christian ecumenical dialogue.

One mistake that Dunn makes, following Sanders, is to rely on Rabbinic Judaism and the Apocrypha more heavily than on the Gospels to determine elements of first-century Judaism. The Gospels portray a mixed Judaism with several strands. The debate over supernaturalism between the Sadducees and the Pharisees is one example. It also appears that in the matter of salvation and acceptance before God that some Jews thought that they were accepted simply on the basis of their ethnic background (and presumed life within the covenant community). For example, John the Baptist scolded some of the Pharisees and Sadducees when they came to be baptized: “And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Mt. 3:9).

Yet other Jews seemed to be relying upon self-righteousness or self-achievement. Recall Jesus’ parable in Luke 18:9-14 where he compares the prayers of a self-righteous Pharisee and a humble tax-collector. The first prayed a braggadocious prayer while the tax-collector admitted sin and asked for propitiation (a concept we will deal with below). Notice that Luke introduces this story with the words, “And He [Jesus] told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” Consequently, it is wrong to assume that there was within Judaism no strand of salvation by works or self-effort that Paul could be reacting to in his theological arguing of Romans or his pastoral concern of Galatians. Thus, the “new perspective,” while correctly emphasizing some continuity between Paul and Judaism, has been taken to the extreme and, in so doing, has incorrectly downplayed the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone as taught in the Reformers.

Another issue that must be understood and which is a corollary of the “new perspective” (at least as it is explained in Dunn) is the current downplaying of the doctrine of propitiation. If the forensic nature of justification is doubted or downplayed, there must be repetition of the same movement with respect to the issue of propitiation. Propitiation is defined in the Reformation tradition as the satisfaction of divine wrath upon sin. As such it constitutes a punishment, i.e., it is a legal concept just like justification. If justification is rejected for being too legal, then propitiation as a description of the atonement would naturally be rejected as well. This is precisely what we find in Dunn’s discussion of Romans 3:25:

Should we translate “expiation” or “propitiation”? The problem with the latter is that it invariably evokes the idea of appeasing God, whereas in Rom. 3.25 Paul explicitly states that it is God himself who provided the *hilasterion*. More to the point, Hebrew usage contrasts markedly with common Greek usage on this precise point. Characteristically in Greek usage the human being is the active subject and God is the object: the human action propitiates God. But in Hebrew usage God is never the object of the key verb (*kipper*). Properly speaking, in the Israelite cult, God is never “propitiated” or “appeased.” The objective of the atoning act is rather the removal of *sin* – that is, either by purifying the person or object, or by wiping out the sin. Atonement is characteristically made “for” a person or “for sin.” And it can be said that it is God himself who expiates the sin (or for the sin). Of course, the atoning act thus removes the sin which provoked God’s wrath, but it does so by acting on the sin rather than on God. The imagery is more of the removal of a corrosive stain or the neutralization of a life-threatening virus than of anger appeased by punishment (p. 214).

Dunn’s position is consistent with standard English usage. One **expiates** a thing (impersonal) such as sin. One **propitiates** a person. Of course, the determination is made by the best translation of the underlying family of words in Greek and Hebrew. The mistake which Dunn makes here is to set up an “either/or” proposition. The interpretation of the passage in his view must be expiation *or* propitiation.

However, a “both/and” which he opts for in so many other places could be used here. Could not the sin that is removed in the passage be so removed by a propitiuous act? The real rub for those like Dunn is a perception of God which keeps him [Dunn] from allowing God’s anger to be at the center of the Atonement.

The actual evidence from the word studies can be found in the tremendous work by Leon Morris entitled *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (1956). Chapter four studies the words and concepts in the Old Testament. Chapter five studies them in the New Testament. Morris’ correct conclusion is quite different than Dunn’s. Instead, the idea of the penal satisfaction against individual sin (which idea includes the satisfaction of the wrath of God or individual retribution) is well established. The overwhelming focus of God as angry against sin and one who will stand as judge supports the legal side of the terminology.

In the end, the debate may be about the ecumenical movement as Dunn’s earlier comments show. Dunn apparently is reading back into first century literature (Paul’s writings) his modern ecumenical desire for there to be no foundational differences between Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism. If this thesis is correct, then Dunn’s work offers even less for those who are not willing to surrender doctrine and truth for the sake of a false religious reconciliation.

Review by Mike Stallard