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3-2015

## Book Review: The Church According to Paul

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### Recommended Citation

Kimble, Jeremy M., "Book Review: The Church According to Paul" (2015). *Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications*. 289.

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*The Church according to Paul: Recovering the Community Conformed to Christ.* By James W. Thompson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014, xiii + 289 pp., \$26.99 paper.

We live in an era where, seemingly, the church is increasingly losing its voice in the public square, even amidst a flurry of activity wherein churches seek to recreate themselves and to remain culturally relevant. As a result, churches operate as political action committees, corporations, and theater-like establishments, or they shift doctrinal stances to blend in more readily with modern culture. James Thompson, in his book *The Church according to Paul*, is concerned that such activity is derailing the community of faith from its primary mandate, namely, the transformation of churches into the image of Christ (p. 247). Thompson's purpose in writing is "to offer the theological foundation for the rediscovery of the church by examining Pauline ecclesiology within the larger framework of the apostle's theology" (p. 20). He maintains that such a study of Paul's ecclesiology offers needed insights for the church in a post-Christian world.

Thompson is professor of NT and Onstead Chair for Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University. This book builds on the insights of two previous works entitled *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) and *Moral Formation according to Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). With his focus squarely on the notion of moral formation as the key enterprise of the church, Thompson takes up this work because he believes "Paul's voice is largely missing in recent attempts to redefine the church" (p. ix). As such, the Pauline corpus takes center stage as Thompson seeks to delineate a robust ecclesiology strictly in line with the apostle's teachings.

Thompson begins his work by dealing with Paul's earliest correspondence to the Thessalonians. Here, Thompson avers, Paul seeks to shape the identity of his readers by showing their link to Israel, and he also uses familial language to indicate the nature of relationships in the church. Chapter 2 is a key contribution, as the author demonstrates the linkage between Paul's Christology and his ecclesiology. Union with Christ serves as a ruling paradigm in Paul's writings, and Thompson shows that the believer's unity with Christ is the basis for the unity of believers with one another. From this identity in Christ, certain "manifestations" or practices elucidate the realities of what the gospel accomplishes in forming the church. Therefore in chapter 3, Thompson discusses the practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In chapter 4, Thompson makes plain his corporate emphasis in conceiving of spiritual formation as primarily a community project. Looking back at its entrance into salvation and looking forward to its ultimate destination, the church is to be countercultural in the sense of continual transformation into the likeness of Christ, using a variety of spiritual disciplines. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the "communal dimension" of Paul's doctrine of justification and the mission of the church, respectively. Thompson then delves into the idea of the church as both universal and local in chapter 7, acknowledging the importance of local churches while also urging stronger cooperation between churches to highlight their universal identity.

These sections demonstrate the emphasis Thompson places on the corporate aspect of the church.

The final two chapters focus on the legacy of Paul in his “disputed letters” and his understanding of church leadership. In the first of these chapters he labors to show the continuity and discontinuity between the earlier and later letters. Here he deals especially with Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles. In the final chapter Thompson affirms a dialectical relationship between members and their leaders, recognizing the mutual exhortation that must take place between church members while also acknowledging the intentional selfless leadership of particular qualified individuals.

Thompson’s work offers an exegetically rigorous account of Paul’s ecclesiology. His chapter on leadership at the end of the book is worthwhile in reminding the reader of the proper role of leaders and church members alike in terms of authority and accountability. Readers may at times become frustrated by the lack of attention given to other segments of Scripture that may offer crucial supplementary content (e.g. the OT background of Passover to the Lord’s Supper could certainly receive a great deal more attention), but Thompson’s focus on Paul also serves as a great strength, since the details outlined from Paul’s writings exceed what is typically found in studies on ecclesiology. The approach taken by Thompson does not just note particular proof-texts regarding the church from various places in the NT but rather delves into the contextual realities of Paul’s epistles and thinks through how Paul’s theology affects his ecclesiology. Churches that are much more focused on pragmatic issues without giving proper attention to the ontological and theological realities that undergird ecclesiology will be helped in this regard.

Another helpful feature of this work is the way in which the author links ecclesiology tightly with Christology. Thompson helpfully argues that the body of Christ is an extension of being “in Christ,” and in this way he roots the people of God as a people through their union with Christ. Certainly a work such as Constantine Campbell’s *Paul and Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) has taken up this theme in various places. However, Thompson is to be commended for demonstrating that union with Christ is not meant merely about a personal relationship with God; it also entails the way in which God constitutes a people for his own possession.

This strength, however, gives rise to one of questionable features of the work as a whole, namely, the overemphasis on the corporate nature of ecclesiology and soteriology. This is most evident in his sections on spiritual formation (chap. 4) and justification (chap. 5). In terms of spiritual formation, Thompson states, “Paul envisions the transformation of the whole community as it progresses from the beginning to the end of its narrative. . . . He does not envision a church that facilitates the maturation of the individual, but envisions a community that grows into the image of Christ” (p. 125). While often the emphasis in spiritual formation has been overly individualistic, does this approach not tip the scales in the other direction a bit too emphatically? One does not give an account to God as a church, but as an individual (2 Cor 5:10), and therefore more of a balance is necessary here.

Similarly, Thompson goes too far in a corporate direction when discussing justification, and this is due to his affirmation of the New Perspective on Paul, which Thompson essentially assumes for his chapter on justification. Thompson works exegetically to make his points, but leaves a number of questions. For example, in claiming that Paul never describes the righteousness of God as the answer to the individual's guilty conscience (p. 129), does Thompson really do exegetical justice to the plight described in Romans 1–3 or the realities of 2 Cor 5:17–21? Is the new covenant only about “the remission of the whole nation's sins” and not the sins of individuals (p. 130)? Much ink has been spilt about this debate, but this viewpoint seems to be missing some key distinctions made in Scripture about righteousness and individual salvation. At the very least, more warrant is needed in this chapter to substantiate Thompson's claims.

This overemphasis does, in some ways, detract from the overarching theological realities portrayed in this work, but regardless Thompson has given his reader much to consider concerning ecclesiology in the Pauline corpus. It is a fitting sequel to his previous two books, with its focus on sanctification and on Paul's writings. In that way it is a unique contribution to the study of ecclesiology, and those looking for a book with this focus will be helped by many of the details given. For a broader perspective on ecclesiology, one could look also to *Sojourners and Strangers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) by Gregg Allison or *The Community of Jesus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013) by Kendall Easley and Christopher Morgan, which contains a helpful chapter on Pauline ecclesiology. Thompson has done a remarkable job in reminding us of our need for a robust ecclesiology. The ideal scenario would be that this work drives the reader back to the biblical text, as opposed to changing cultural trends, in seeking to formulate a steady God-glorifying theology of the church.

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*Paul's Financial Policy: A Socio-Theological Approach.* By David E. Briones. Library of NT Studies 494. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013, xiii + 258 pp., \$112.00.

In *Paul's Financial Policy*, David E. Briones, Dean of Students and professor of NT at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, FL, offers an explanation for Paul's seeming inconsistency with regard to financial support from the Philippians and the Corinthians. Along the way, he shows why the highly influential patronage model, as it is applied to Paul's letters, is inappropriate. He offers a three-dimensional theological-relational matrix that sees God as the source of gift, Paul as the broker of *charis*, and his congregations as mutually obligated partners based on the way they live in accord with the gospel. This theologically and exegetically informed work provides an intriguing answer to the question concerning Paul's financial policy and offers a plausible resolution to the issue of his seeming inconsistency.

Chapter 1 introduces the study, one in which Briones sets out to show why the widely held patron-client model is often misunderstood within mainstream