

A Review of *Pauline Dogmatics*, by Douglas Campbell, Eerdmans, 2020.

“Theology is the linguistic outworking in truth of our developing love affair with the God revealed in Jesus.”¹

When this book arrived, it needed two people to carry it, as it is only slightly smaller than my car,² and when I finished it, I was certainly expecting to be presented with a t-shirt proclaiming, “Pauline Dogmatics – Finisher 2020”. Alas, this never happened.

First, I should say that I find it hard to even wrap my head around the idea of how someone could write this book. As the name suggests, it is essentially Campbell’s take on “theology according to Paul”, which, as you can imagine, covers a huge range of topics. I take my hat off to him because, to be able to have such a strong grasp on such a broad range of things and to be so familiar with Paul is simply incredible.

Second, I should say that I loved the book and I think that, if you have a big enough house to store a copy, you should read it! It is absolutely fantastic. Campbell has made me rethink things that I did not know were even up for rethinking. His insight is only matched by the amply evident pastoral care that is at the core of everything that he says. That said, given the huge scope of the book, it would be worrying if I agreed with everything, but we can come onto that.

For me, the core of this thesis is Campbell’s challenge to *foundationalism*, by which (I think) he means theology built on anything other than the revelation of God through Jesus. This theme runs through the book and is reviewed in every chapter and topic. The fundamental premise is that by starting with another foundation than Jesus, we end up building in dangerous way. If we read Paul’s letters, “in terms of a fundamentally legalistic and retributive God, and in terms of a punitive atonement and contractual salvific terms,” then we end up with “a deep misreading of Paul’s gospel...and the destructive ramifications of false accounts of the gospel are far-reaching.”³ Campbell’s contrasting of this with an understanding that, “the revealed truth about the nature of God in Jesus is a gift from God to us, and this particular gift is one over which we have absolutely no jurisdiction,”⁴ is highly significant and applied throughout his book to various subjects to challenge assumptions. He unveils the subsequent dangerous dogmatics that many have embraced, and helps us to see, and undo, much misunderstanding in much of Western interpretation of Paul.

I absolutely *love* Campbell’s detailed description of the churches that Paul planted, with an emphasis on the poor and the vulnerable. His knowledge of the history of the day and the culture enable him to unpack the implications of so many of the subtle comments in Paul’s letters that I had just never seen before. I found myself captivated and excited by the picture he paints of these radical, culture-defying communities, even with their conflicts and issues, and longing to see more churches that look like that today.

Campbell’s chapters based on Philippians 2, which describe the four ways that we know the love of Christ are amazing and thought-provoking, particularly his chapter on “Love as Giving”, which is largely about the idea of “grace”. He notes at the start that, “I get the sense that [for many of my students] grace is an ethereal gas that floats down from God affecting various people (or not) as they breathe it in (or don’t).”⁵ He goes on to explore, in great detail, the patterns of the day whereby the wealthy patrons doled out gifts to those in need and how Paul takes this subverts it and transforms it, and defines grace in those terms, showing us that grace is most definitely a concrete and powerful thing and to the readers at the time there was nothing ethereal about the idea. Honestly, it blew my mind.

As I have said to pretty much everyone I know, you should read this book, *but* I do have some questions and disagreements with him over some things. In the glare of the headlights of such a towering intellect, I feel like a scared rabbit, but I still think it is worth pointing out. To sum up my issues, I would nervously suggest that

¹ *Pauline Dogmatics*, 314.

² This is sarcasm, for those of you not familiar with British humour.

³ *Pauline Dogmatics*, 741-2.

⁴ *Ibid*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid*, 272.

Campbell's passionate desire to remain Pauline in his work has led him to miss the bigger picture on some things. In a few areas, I found that his arguments were entirely consistent within Pauline literature, but I could not always see how they stood up to the gospel accounts. Also, in some areas, he finished with unanswered questions that I would argue could, perhaps, be addressed from within the gospel accounts.

I firmly believe or at least hope, in the idea of universal restoration, because, it is my understanding that eventually *"every knee... should bend, and every tongue gladly confess that Jesus the Anointed is Lord"*⁶ and that *"In the Anointed, all will be given life."*⁷ Campbell, in his chapter on "The Triumph of Love," makes a convincing argument for annihilationism, based on the premise that, "It is extremely difficult to make sense of a future scenario within which some are resurrected bodily, only to be judged unworthy and sentenced to death and possibly also hell."⁸ His argument appears to be that God would not raise people only to judge them, he would leave them dead. The problem for me here is that he seems to assume that judgement can only mean a permanent punishment, and does not give any time to the idea that the punishment or chastisement could be a temporary thing or a cleansing process.⁹ Having made the case for this, he then goes on to say that he believes that God will redeem all, contradicting what he has said in the first half. I was left somewhat frustrated as it seemed to me that, the two things need not contradict at all, and found this chapter sadly unconvincing. It is not that I disagree with him, but it is that, in limiting himself to only Pauline arguments, which say virtually nothing on judgement, he is not able to construct an argument by which many will be swayed (in my humble opinion).

The chapter on Judaism is powerful and has certainly made me rethink my views, but, ultimately, as with the above, I am left with questions and I was not totally convinced. His arguments sounded as though Christianity is almost a different denomination to Judaism. He was adamant that it is not the evolution of it or in any way *superior* to it, but when I look at John 20 and Jesus breathing the Spirit into his disciples (an act that Crispin Fletcher-Louis points out is a re-enactment of the creation account where God breathes his Spirit into Adam) and I cannot help concluding having the Holy Spirit within us is a better state of being than not. Also, what do we do with all the "you have heard it said, but I say..." sayings in the beatitudes? I am not convinced that the ultimate goal of Judaism was not *always* to have the Spirit of God in us, and thus, non-messianic Judaism is missing something fundamental that it is meant to have.

Bottom line, this is one of the best books I have ever read, and I will refer to it for many years. Yes, I have some issues with it (ironically mainly with the topics with which I agree), but these are not deal-breakers for me. In fact, most of these have made me want to ask more questions and engage in more conversation. Ultimately, I love that a Western Pauline Scholar is challenging us to remember that, "the centre of all truth is a crucified Jew who was resurrected on the third day and all God-talk, and really everything else besides, has to be measured against it, which is really to say, brought into subjection to it,"¹⁰ and that if we read Paul through that lens, we open ourselves up to an exciting and revolutionary experience.

⁶ Philippians 2:10-11, *The New Testament*, David Bentley Hart.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:22, *ibid.*

⁸ *Dogmatics*, 420,

⁹ Hart argues that, according to Philo and Josephus, the idea of an *aeon* as in *aeonios*, which is often translated as "eternal" and interpreted as everlasting, was understood by Jewish scholars at the time as being for "a limited period of time, usually a single lifetime, but perhaps as much as three generations." *The New Testament*, Hart, 539. Paul was a Jewish scholar, so would surely have known this.

¹⁰ *Dogmatics*, 36.