

REVIEW:
PERSPECTIVES OLD AND NEW ON PAUL:
THE 'LUTHERAN' PAUL AND HIS CRITICS

by Stephen Westerholm (Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, 2004) lge. pbk., xix & 448 pp.
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Another contribution to Pauline studies from the
associate professor of biblical studies at

McMaster University is to be welcomed. In this case it is the revision and expansion of his *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*, published in 1988. It has all the hallmarks of Westerholm's work: wide-reading, clarity, humour and informed orthodoxy. It deserves a wide readership.

As the quotation marks around 'Lutheran' in the book's title suggest, Westerholm is not arguing that Paul was a Lutheran but he does make the case for the essential correctness of Luther's reading of Paul. At the same time he recognises the importance of a good understanding of Judaism in the first century.

In the first part (pages 3-97) Westerholm offers four portraits of Christian leaders who held an essentially Lutheran understanding of Paul – Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Wesley. While each is only about 20 pages, they sufficiently illustrate that people of different temperament and in different situations concurred in the

meaning of justification in Paul. Westerholm closes with a review of Paul's teaching, and lays down 7 helpful points in his summary of it.

After this fitting introduction, we have a lengthy second part of about 160 pages in which the views of 26 twentieth century scholars are surveyed, grouped according to basic emphasis. This does not critique their views but seeks to encapsulate them in a succinct and fair manner. In beginning with William Wrede's Paul, issued in 1908, Westerholm provides an important reminder that views of Paul's theology in which justification by faith is a secondary issue are not new. According to Wrede, Paul believed that Christ has accomplished redemption from hostile powers effective for all and appropriated by faith. Justification by faith was a side issue, an effective polemic against those who insisted Gentiles should adopt Jewish ritual practices and/or observe the commandments in order to salvation, but not the heart of his teaching.

Westerholm steadily progresses through Schweitzer, Montefiore, Schoeps, Sanders, Kümmel, Stendahl, Bultmann, Wilkens, Drane, Hübner, Räisänen, Wright, Dunn and Donaldson until he comes to the 'Lutheran' responses of Cranfield, Shreiner and Das, Thielman and Seifrid. He closes looking at Laato's consideration of Paul's anthropology, Thurén and Aletti's emphasis on rhetoric, Martyns' study of Paul's apocalyptic world view and Jürgen Becker's understanding of Paul's theology of the cross. These scholars find coherence of thought in a 'Lutheran' reading of Paul taken along with the other aspects they have studied. A selection of quotable quotes from the anti- 'Lutheran' perspectives concludes the part.

The survey provided of a century of scholarship is of value for its own sake. Readers of this review may be particularly interested in Westerholm's summary of N.T.Wright, since he is the most conservative of writers on the new

perspective, and the one most likely to impact Reformed circles. In fact, four pages are sufficient to summarise Wright's position in which justification is regarded as God's vindication of his people at the end of history, anticipated in the present, and determined not on the basis of 'works of the law,' considered as boundary markers, such as circumcision, Sabbath and the food laws, but on faith in the gospel. Paul was not opposing the notion of earning one's salvation by good deeds, but a nationalism that insisted on the observance by Gentiles of the boundary markers that set apart Jews from Gentiles. Justification is about identifying who belongs to God's people not about declaring a person righteous. Thus N.T.Wright.

The third part (pages 261-445) is of great importance for here Westerholm deals with the key issues. He first takes up the *dikaio* word group (righteous, righteousness, justify, justification etc.) and distinguishes an ordinary

meaning in which, in contrast with sin, righteousness is what one ought to do: the one who does righteousness is righteous, and the justified are those declared to be innocent of wrongdoing. It is not the hearers of the law but the doers of the law who are justified in God's sight (Rom 2:13). 'Paul insists that the good spelled out in the law is the responsibility of Jews and non-Jews alike, and that all will be judged by whether or not they have done this good.' (p. 273)

But there is also an extraordinary usage for the acquittal of those heretofore sinful, by which sinners are made righteous through the obedience of Christ (Rom 5:19). Westerholm puts it well (p.275): 'No one has better grasped the absurdity of "receiving righteousness" than N.T.Wright: "Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom" (Founder, 98). But the absurdity of it all in no way alters the fact that Paul speaks of "receiving the abundant

overflow of grace and of the gift of righteousness” (Rom 5:17); and both 1 Cor 1:30 and Phil 3:9 speak explicitly of a righteousness “from God.” Further, God’s righteousness is referred to in a manner which shows God maintains the moral order at the same time as he declares sinners righteous (Rom 3:25-26).

When writers on the new perspective claim that righteousness refers to membership of the covenant community they fly in the face of the evidence. Ordinary righteousness is what sinners as sinners lack and need, whether Jew or Gentile. Extraordinary righteousness granted to sinners is what Jew and Gentile lack and need, whether or not they have an outward covenant relationship with God. God’s righteousness could refer to God’s faithfulness to his promises, but in fact righteousness itself does not mean covenant faithfulness. Indeed, Paul never explicitly links righteousness and covenant, but does stress that God’s righteousness reverses human

unrighteousness so that all who have faith a 'righteous.' For Paul, though not for Judaism, all men were fundamentally lost in sin and became members of God's covenant by the extraordinary act of grace which declared them righteous.

Westerholm then takes up the definition of law. He shows that while Paul sometimes uses the term *nomos* to refer to part or all of the Old Testament scriptures, his more common use is to refer to the body of law given to Israel by the hand of Moses at Mt Sinai. The broad and narrow uses need to be clearly distinguished. 'The law that can be kept, done, fulfilled or transgressed is clearly "the legal parts" of the Pentateuch. The law given 430 years after the Abrahamic promise (Gal 3:17,19) was not the Pentateuch as a whole but the Sinaitic legislation...' (p.299) As far as Paul is concerned the essence of law in this sense is that it requires works, and justification by faith is the antithesis of this.

If justification by faith was simply a useful polemic against those Jews whose nationalism made them insist that Gentiles observe certain Jewish boundary markers, then it is not something Jews need, or, if they do, it arises from their racism. But Paul insists all people – Jews, whether or not racists, and Gentiles – are under sin and all need to be declared righteous through faith. Nor is it legalistic works done out of self-righteousness that Paul rejects as the path to righteousness but all works.

Westerholm turns briefly to the definition of grace (pages 341-351). While it is indeed wrong to view Judaism as typically preoccupied with gaining enough merit to pass the Divine scrutiny in the judgement, rabbinic Judaism is not unequivocal in its rejection of merit and works. Judaism did not see grace and works as opposed to each other as Paul did. Judaism thought of God's choice of Israel as according to grace, but that grace had a reason in, for instance, the merit of the patriarchs or Israel's

willingness to submit to the law before God would grant it to them. Judaism was really very much in a Pelagian mould, and thus in some way thought one could contribute to salvation, whereas Paul's understanding of grace excludes any and all of our works absolutely.

A survey of justification by faith in Paul's thought (pages 352-407) and a discussion of the law summarised in nine theses (408-439) complete this stimulating volume. The new perspective's presentation tends to say the difference between Jews and Christian was not on grace but only on who was the Messiah. But Paul does not say that Gentiles should become like Jews (except for Jewish boundary markers) to enjoy God's blessings. Rather, he insists that Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners and need to follow stop pursuing righteousness by law but receive righteousness through faith in Jesus.

The volume is quite demanding but repays careful study. It is probably the best introduction

to the issue for theological students currently available. Some issues remain, for further discussion, including how one may best state the nature of the Mosaic covenant, the proper interpretation of Romans 7, and aspects of imputation. The effect of Westerholm's study is to give a substantial rebuttal of the distinguishing marks of the new perspective, of which only the general lines have been indicated in this review, and so set us to the heart of the Gospel of Christ.