



Gorman, Michael J.

Reading Paul

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

There aren't enough positive adjectives in the English language to describe how I feel about this small volume. What Michael Gorman has given us is an extremely enjoyable introduction to the apostle Paul and his worldview. I say worldview as opposed to theology because Paul's theology is only one of many things touched on in this volume. Gorman runs the gambit of Pauline studies in examining Paul's gospel, christology, theology, ecclesiology, missiology, and a whole host of other -ologies. This book needs to be in the hands of every student taking an introductory class on Paul! Professors, I'm talking to you — if you don't adopt this as your textbook then God help you!

Gorman begins this book with a revolutionary concept that runs contrary to the standard historical-critical approach to Paul and his epistles. He says: "*I think we can, and must, read Paul as our contemporary, and as Scripture.*" (2) He doesn't discount the importance of understanding Paul according to his cultural context nor is he asserting that Paul wasn't writing to specific audiences at specific times for specific purposes — on the contrary, he wants us to realize that: "*[y]es, Paul has been and can be misused, but Paul has been and can be trusted—trusted to speak for God and to light a fire of understanding and devotion among those who read his letters.*" (7)

In his chapter on "Grace and Apostleship" Gorman documents Paul's zeal which was expressed in his violence against the early church. He notes that "*Israel had a history of holy heroes whose zeal for God motivated their taking violent action against Israel's enemies and even against Israel itself.*" (13) He then speculates that perhaps Paul had as a role-model of sorts Phineas (Num. 25) and draws attention to Psalm 106:30-31 which says that Phineas' violent act was reckoned to him as righteousness.

But Gorman says that while "*it is more difficult to see him as a critic of the empire or peacemaker . . . the turn to nonviolence is at the very heart of Paul's conversion, and his gospel.*" (17) He also notes Paul's inclusiveness saying: "*[a]nother essential consequence of Paul's conversion was his inclusion of Gentiles in the 'beloved*

community' (19) but is quick to qualify this inclusion as not "*lacking teeth or limits. His gospel does not say, 'All are welcome just as they are,' but rather, 'All are welcome just as they are to be apprehended by, and fully converted to, Jesus Christ the Lord.'*" (19)

The following chapter "To Spread the Gospel" notes that Paul was not a "*lone-ranger missionary*" and mentions the fact that "*[h]e had traveling companions, emissaries, secretaries, co-authors for his letters, fellow political troublemakers (who then sometimes became fellow prisoners!), and other colleagues, including a husband-wife team...*" (23)

Gorman also offers concise summaries of all of Paul's epistles, addressing them in canonical order while making note of the fact that Paul follows a standard letter writing format consisting of a salutation, thanksgiving, body, closing exhortation, greeting/benediction (28-29).

In "The Power of God for Salvation" Gorman says that Paul's gospel was political but qualifies the idea by saying that:

This doesn't mean that Paul's gospel was political *rather than* religious; it is just that the two were inseparable. Words like justice (or righteousness), salvation, savior, peace, church (or assembly), gospel, and, of course, Christ (Messiah) were—and are—both political *and* religious because they had to do with how people relate to both God and others in the real world. Paul's gospel, therefore, is *theopolitical*. (44)

Fifteen miniature creedal/confessional statements are then examined briefly (47-54) but what precedes this examination is a statement that "*[t]he gospel Paul preached, then, is good news—good news from God, about his Son, and for us.*" (p. 45) Gorman concludes the chapter saying: "*Paul's gospel is a story of salvation for the human race in continuity with Israel's Scriptures and in contrast to Rome.*" (54)

Gorman follows up with a very brief chapter entitled "The Fullness of Time" in which he notes Paul's apocalyptic vision saying that:

"Paul saw this apocalyptic event occurring in two parts—commonly referred to as the first and second comings of Christ—with an intervening era in which the two ages overlap (1 Cor 10:11) and during which period the present age is already beginning to pass away (1 Cor 7:31; cf. Rom 13:11-12)." (59-60)

Gorman then coins a phrase to explain what it means to live during this overlap of ages — "bifocal existence" which means that "*those in Christ look both back to the past events of incarnation, cross, and resurrection, on the one hand, and ahead to the future events of return, resurrection, and renewal, on the other.*" (62)

In "The Gospel of God" Gorman quite rightly notes the proto-Trinitarianism of Paul (following Fee) saying:

Later Christian thinkers would develop a complex theology of this interrelationship in the doctrine of the Trinity, the basic notion being the existence of one God in three “persons.” It is often argued that to attribute anything resembling a Trinitarian conception of God to Paul is to read him anachronistically, projecting later theology onto the New Testament documents. This argument is perhaps understandable for a variety of reasons, but it is seriously misguided. To be sure, Paul does not use the philosophical and theological language of the later church fathers who developed the doctrine of the Trinity for their times. However, had the later church not articulated the doctrine of the Trinity, it would have failed to grapple fully and satisfactorily with the witness of Paul. (72)

Gorman quips in “Even Death on a Cross” that “[w]henever we read any of these interpretations of Christ’s death on the cross, we must keep in mind that the cross was not a template for pretty jewelry in the Roman world.” (79) What follows is a very thoughtful discussion on the cross and God where Gorman notes that “for Paul the unseen—or, better, the unveiled—actor in Christ’s death on the cross is God...” (80). He goes on to discuss the cross and Christ making much of the Carmen Christi (Phil. 2:5-11) noting a

...common pattern in Paul’s letters that indicates the essence of self-emptying, ‘kenotic,’ or ‘cruciform’ (cross-shaped) love: although [x] not [y] but [z], meaning *although* [x] one possesses a certain status, one *does not*[y] exploit it for selfish gain *but* [z] acts for the good of others. (84)

The chapter is closed out by noting some of the benefits of Christ’s death on the cross in Paul’s thinking. Briefly summarized these benefits include:

- justification
- reconciliation
- redemption
- forgiveness of sins
- deliverance from oppressive cosmic powers
- deliverance from the coming wrath of God
- empowerment to fulfill the covenant’s obligations (88)

What follows is a chapter on resurrection which focuses not only on Christ’s resurrection and what that meant for Paul, but also on our sharing in his resurrection. Gorman notes that for the pre-conversion Paul his main reasons for persecuting the church were “(1) *its preaching a crucified, and thereby cursed, Messiah and (2) its embrace of Gentiles in a way that polluted Israel.*” (93) But an encounter with the resurrected Lord changed this attitude forever. Gorman says:

Paul knew that Jesus had been crucified by the Romans. When Jesus appeared to him, Paul learned that Jesus was obviously no longer dead.

Since Jesus was no longer dead, then he had been raised from the dead, and since only God can raise the dead, as every Pharisee knew, Jesus must have been raised from the dead *by God*. That is why Paul almost always says, not “he rose,” but “God raised him” or “he was raised.” (93)

Gorman tells us that the bodily resurrection is a “*fundamental and non-negotiable building block of [Paul's] ethic . . . It is because the body was created by God, has been ‘purchased’ by God in the act of redemption (Christ’s cross), and will one day be resurrected by God that Paul can pronounce every bodily deed as a matter of grave spiritual significance (1 Cor 6:12-20).*” (106-07)

Gorman’s chapter on justification is worth the price of the book alone! He begins this chapter by criticizing ‘cheap justification’ quoting in part Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his comments on ‘cheap grace.’ Gorman tells us that “[c]heap justification is justification without transformation, without conversion, without justice. Once again, someone needs to speak, not merely of grace, but of costly grace; not merely of justification, but of costly justification by faith. That someone is Paul.” (112)

Gorman is quite right to note that:

Paul’s understanding of justification as reconciliation means that a narrow, “judicial” (sometimes called “juridical” or “forensic”) view of justification as a divine declaration and legal fiction is simply inadequate, for in Scripture what God declares, God effects—in this case restoration through forgiveness. Equally inadequate is the similar view of justification in accounting terms (see Rom 4:1-12 and the language of righteousness being “reckoned” or “credited”) . . . Judicial views wrongly privilege one aspect of justification, or one metaphor for it (the legal), while ignoring others, including the extended description that Paul himself provides in Rom 5:1-11. Justification as reconciliation means that justification is about a two-way relationship, and when the Bible speaks about the relationship between God and people, it does so in the two idioms of covenant and life... (118-119)

In “Called to be Saints” Gorman presents a picture of the body that is decidedly ‘cruciform’ (to borrow his buzz word). The church is a community or an assembly that “*meets to worship God. In that context it both hears from God, through prophecy and teaching, and speaks to God in praise, prayer, and hymn-singing . . . [We] encourage and admonish one another . . . [seeking] to discern God’s will [and] display the mind of Christ . . . [Our] coming together is an expression of [our] mutual indwelling with Christ and the Spirit.*” (137)

In discussing how believers are to be conformed to the image of the Son, faith, hope, and love play a central role. Gorman rightly notes that both faith and love are verbs, i.e., actions rather than mere trust or emotion. He describes hope as the future tense of faith

which admittedly is a definition I have never heard, but an interesting one nonetheless. Of hope he says:

But this hope that Paul has is not merely a wish or a dream. It is confidence grounded in the character and promise of God—God’s faithfulness and integrity. It is a conviction grounded in the reality of what God has done in the past and will therefore do in the future. (160)

This sounds remarkably similar to a definition I gave of faith some months back on my other blog.

“The Glory about to be Revealed” is admittedly my least favorite chapter in the book. In this chapter Gorman discusses Paul’s eschatology and he begins by launching into a polemic (I use the term loosely) against the doctrine of the rapture. The oft-repeated claim is made that the doctrine originated with J. N. Darby which has been disproved many times over although in Gorman’s defense he does offer an alternative in saying that if it wasn’t created by Darby it was “*at least first widely disseminated*” (170) by him.

I didn’t find his arguments against the doctrine to really be anything more than mere assertions which simply reflect a different reading of Paul than dispensational futurists have. I was also unpersuaded by his interpretation of what Paul meant by his statement that all Israel would be saved. Gorman said:

In my judgment, however, the argument of Romans 9-11 as a whole, where Paul discusses this at length, suggests that all Jews will be saved by virtue of God’s promise and their acknowledgment of Jesus as Messiah and Lord at his *parousia*, thus finally accepting him as the fulfillment of that divine promise. (173)

I think it much easier to simply read Paul as employing a common use of hyperbole. When Jewish writers speak of God multiplying Abraham’s descendants as the ‘*stars of the heaven*’ and as the ‘*sand which is upon the seashore*’ (Gen. 22:17) or when they speak of ‘*all the earth*’ seeking Solomon’s wisdom (1Ki. 10:24) we don’t take these things literally. I see no reason to do so with Paul either concerning ‘*all Israel*’ being saved.

In the end I’m comfortable with a disagreement on Paul’s eschatology because I see it as the least important aspect of all of Paul’s thought. This chapter while disappointing to me personally doesn’t take away from the overall allure of the book.

The final chapter summarizes everything that came before it answering the question, “Why Paul?” He ends the book on a positive note with a word about joy. He says:

And, yes, Paul regularly suffered for participating in God’s mission and Christ’s cross. But in spite of this all-consuming passion and its

consequences—or perhaps because of it—Paul was someone whose participation in God’s new creation was an experience of joy now (Gal 5:22; Philippians), and he was someone whose anticipation of future indescribable joy and glory kept him going (Rom 5:2; 1 Cor 2:9). (188)

All in all this is an excellent book. It will certainly wet the appetite of anyone who wants to dig deeper into the world that is Paul’s. This book is designed for study and reflection offering 2-4 questions for reflection at the end of each chapter. It is this feature that in my opinion makes this the perfect introductory text book for any class on the apostle Paul.

After reading this work students will be eager to jump into something much *bigger* (but not necessarily more *substantial*) such as James D.G. Dunn’s *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* or Gordon D. Fee’s *Pauline Christology*. But if nothing else, Gorman has succeeded in taking us through a journey of Paul’s thought and helping us to see the grand narrative that exists throughout all of scripture. I highly recommend this book to one and all.