

BOOK REVIEW

Westerholm, Stephen, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). viii + 104 pp. Pbk. \$15.00 USD.

Stephen Westerholm is well suited to offer this short book on the continuing biblical and theological debates surrounding the topic of justification. Having written numerous works on Paul over the last three decades, Westerholm has been at the forefront of these conversations his entire career.

In this study, Westerholm does not seek to do a second edition of his larger monograph from 2004 (*Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The 'Lutheran' Paul and his Critics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004]). Instead, this book gives a summary of the major authors involved in the discussion concerning the doctrine of justification in Paul. Westerholm does not attempt to explore every Pauline image for salvation. Instead he focuses on justification by faith. Also of benefit is the fact that the book does not give a long history of biblical interpretation or denominational distinctives. Alternatively, there are clearly defined terms and upfront summative conclusions. Westerholm does not try to modernize Paul, but gives primary focus to the biblical texts regarding Paul's interaction with the Mosaic economy, issues of salvation, covenant membership and the response of participants in the covenant.

Before looking at the chapters, I would like to point out some of the difficulties in trying to categorize this book. While its size and non-pedantic tone make it approachable, there are many indicators that it is written for those who have some awareness of the contemporary debates. There is an underlying polemical agenda against some of the bigger proponents of what has become the New Perspective on Paul. However, there is no introduction to these primary figures or their significance. Also, the footnotes refer to substantial issues and topics with little or no further comment. Neither of these points reduces the value of the book or weakens its argument, but readers should know that they

are not getting a dispassionate introduction. As the title suggests, it is a continuing project of 'Rethinking a Pauline Theme'. Even in his prefatory remarks, Westerholm states that he is summarizing his larger works, especially *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*. While familiarity with Westerholm's previous publications is unnecessary, it is important for readers to realize they are working with a summary and thus they should not expect mountains of footnotes to support every detail.

This new book has six main sections, each interacting with and responding to a single author's proposal. In order, the authors discussed are Krister Stendahl, E.P. Sanders, Heikki Räisänen, N.T. Wright, James Dunn and Douglas Campbell. Of course, Westerholm does not try to offer a complete summary of their works or an exhaustive refutation of their positions. Instead, he highlights what he finds to be critical weaknesses in their theological schemas. This structure is easy to follow and helps draw attention to the crux of the debates.

(1) Paul and Luther. Westerholm begins with the now-famous article by Stendahl that highlights the inherent problems of attempting to modernize Paul. One of Stendahl's main contentions is that the introspective consciousness of an early Renaissance monk has inappropriately controlled the paradigm for understanding Paul. While this is a significant issue, Westerholm disagrees with the conclusion of Stendahl. Westerholm finds that Luther was largely correct, in that Paul was preaching to answer the human question 'How do sinners find a gracious God?' (p. 22).

To substantiate the appropriateness of such an interpretation, Westerholm lays out a biblical, theological framework used throughout the rest of the book. Briefly working through key points in Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans, Westerholm agrees with Stendahl that Paul was not going around merely offering peace of mind to those burdened with introspection. But contrary to Stendahl, he maintains that Paul does deal extensively with the issue of salvation from a coming judgment, even if Paul had first to teach that judgment was coming. Westerholm concludes that Paul was proclaiming a message dealing with finding a gracious God, and this conclusion is defended throughout the book.

(2) Redefining Second Temple Judaism. Having established that the message of justification is one way of speaking of salvation, the book turns to Sanders and his analysis of Second Temple Judaism. Westerholm applauds Sanders for causing a paradigm shift of 'Copernican

proportions' (p. 24) that has served to correct views of Judaism as purely legalistic and based on works righteousness. But Westerholm disagrees with Sanders concerning the degree that Paul was required to stay within a Jewish paradigm. In fact, Sanders does not seem to allow for Paul to argue for any new theological points or developments.

There are two key issues about which Westerholm disagrees with Sanders. First, Paul displays a more robust view of indwelling sin than Sanders's Judaism, or anything else found in early Jewish writings for that matter. Secondly, as a consequence of Paul's belief in an inherited sin nature, his articulation of salvation 'necessarily excludes any part to be played by God-pleasing "works" since human beings are incapable of doing them' (p. 32). So while Westerholm is thankful for Sanders's efforts, he finds that Paul is not confined to the Jewish framework, and therefore works are not the condition for staying in the Christian covenant community.

(3) Contradictions and Tensions. The interaction with Heikki Räisänen logically follows from the conclusion of the previous section. Räisänen's agenda was to demonstrate that scholarship must be content with the logical contradictions and tensions in Pauline thought. Westerholm focuses upon Räisänen's thesis that despite Paul's theology, he allowed for people untransformed (p. 35) by the gospel to be capable of doing some good. While Westerholm agrees with Räisänen that non-Christians can do a type of good, he still contends that Paul's view of human nature is more pessimistic than Räisänen accounts for.

In this chapter, Westerholm does the most abstract theological work, though still working from a biblical-theological perspective. He finds Räisänen has not fully recognized that while Adam became a sinner on account of his actual sins, all others become sinners 'through Adam's representative act of sinning' according to Rom. 5.19 (p. 37). However, this inherited sin nature does not leave humans completely like beasts; there are, citing Calvin, 'some remaining traces of the image of God' (p. 46). This glimmer of the *imago dei* is how Westerholm accounts for Paul's views; thus there is no contradiction as Räisänen thinks, merely a tension.

While Westerholm responds to Räisänen well, this section feels a bit weaker than the others. In such a short work, it is imperative to be succinct and direct, which Westerholm does well through the majority of the book. In this section, however, it would have been helpful to use systematic categories and terminology to address the issue more point-

edly. There are signs of a struggle to define issues in the absence of technical language and categories, though in the end, Westerholm does get his point across.

(4) *Wright is Wrong*. Given the sheer volume of Wright's work, it is no surprise that Westerholm devotes the longest section to summarizing and responding to his positions. While many might believe Wright to be a biblical studies scholar, his works have consistently attempted to present an overarching theme of a covenantal framework originating with Abraham and climactically accomplished in Christ. Westerholm commends such an effort where 'every text finds a place in Wright's grand vision: a tour de force' (p. 59). He even compares his erudite thinking to the intellectual creativity of Albert Schweitzer.

Westerholm's appreciation of Wright should caution those who would be too quick to dismiss him when they disagree with his conclusions. And though Westerholm finds that Wright sometimes uses proof texts with a lack of sensitivity to their original context, his works can still be appreciated. In short, Westerholm believes Wright deserves a reading, and the 'result will be a reinvigorated reading of the apostle' (p. 59).

Despite these positive remarks, the critique is direct and pointed. Westerholm finds there is no hope of coming to an agreement on the issues of justification since the very definitions Wright creates are irreconcilable with the rest of scholarship. Westerholm concludes that Wright's endeavor has begun from the wrong questions and therefore ended with faulty results. Concerning the central debate, justification/righteousness 'does not mean, and by its very nature cannot mean, membership in a covenant' ... 'the word "justify" cannot mean what Wright wants it to mean' (pp. 63, 68.) Given that this is Wright's central argument, it is hard to imagine Westerholm being able to disagree more forcefully.

(5) *Works of the Law*. A surprisingly shorter section is devoted to James Dunn. In fact, the argumentative presentation leaves one with the impression of being a bit dismissive of such a prominent scholar. Focus is given to Dunn's understanding of the phrase 'works of the law' as found in Galatians 2. While the position is not entirely unique to Dunn, Westerholm summarizes him as contending that Paul is referring to covenantal boundary markers in Galatians 2 and not matters of salvation and justification. Though readers more familiar with the issues will feel more should be said, this is all that is logically

needed in the book, since Westerholm has already laid out what his response will be. With no further exploration concerning the distinction between situational context and linguistic co-text, Westerholm contends that Galatians 2 is dealing with righteousness and not table fellowship (p. 78). Therefore, the all-important phrase, ‘works of the law’, is, in Westerholm’s view, ‘closer (though not identical) to Luther’s “good works” than to Dunn’s “boundary markers”’ (p. 77).

(6) Justification Theory. In the final section, Westerholm acknowledges the impossibility of summarizing Campbell’s complex 1200-page work that attempts to dismantle all notions of legal justification theories. Instead, Westerholm focuses upon what he has already demonstrated, namely, Paul does have a high view of the justice of God, which is not abolished on account of God’s benevolence. Westerholm compares Campbell’s presuppositions with those of the infamous Marcion. He even finds that Campbell, despite his massive work, has not adequately accounted for Irenaeus’s polemic against Marcionite thought in *Haer.* 3.25.3. In the end, no matter the argument of Campbell, Westerholm stands by his defense that Paul did envisage a day of judgment requiring sinners to be legally justified.

The book concludes by acknowledging that modern scholarship has correctly drawn attention to a number of biblical details concerning justification that had often been underappreciated. However, in this small book Westerholm finds that the current challenges to a traditional Lutheran understanding of justification can be readily answered. Despite challenges, Westerholm still concludes, ‘the doctrine of justification means that God declares sinners righteous, apart from righteous deeds, when they believe in Jesus Christ’ (p. 99).

This book will benefit a broad range of readers. For those who side with Westerholm or with one of his opponents, the book will help to focus and hone descriptions of Pauline thought. Furthermore, those looking for an entrance into the debates will benefit from having the more significant contributors highlighted with the crux of their arguments pointed out. For all readers, the careful and fair presentation of a seasoned scholar will be appreciated.

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