

# *One New Book for the Preacher*

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Jouette M. Bassler, *Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2007. 139 pages.

For twenty years I have been watching lectors struggle to make enough sense of St. Paul's epistles to try to read the lesson for the day with some degree of confidence. Given the choice between unpronounceable Old Testament names or tackling one of Paul's infamous eighteen line run-on sentences, most of them would gladly choose Jehoshaphat. For my own part, while I am rather fond of Paul's writings in my private devotions, I find the epistles challenging to preach on. Most Sundays it feels as if Paul is in the middle of an important argument, but it's challenging to remember what he said last week or anticipate what is coming next. So how far back and how far forward does the preacher need to go to make sense of it all? Moreover, since we are only hearing his side of the story, I sometimes find myself trying to do my best Paul Harvey impersonation by telling "the rest of the story" of what might have been happening in Corinth or Galatia at the time, knowing full well that reconstructing the arguments from the other side is always a bit of a house of cards.

That can all feel daunting, and so I find that as a preacher I mostly avoid Paul because I am hesitant about wading into the mess of it all. Like my lectors, I, too, would rather tackle Old Testament narratives or the parables of Jesus than the Epistle to Romans. The only exceptions have been on those occasions when the shorter epistles come up in the lectionary for four or five weeks in a row and I am in the mood for a preaching series. This fall, toward the end of the long season after Pentecost, provides just such an opportunity with both Philippians and I Thessalonians. In the meantime, for the truly fearless preacher, there are sixteen straight weeks of Romans beginning right after Trinity Sunday!

If one were to choose that path, or even just to preach from Romans a few times over the summer months, there is a greater challenge than dealing with Paul in periscope-sized chunks. Paul's friends and foes (especially those of us influenced by the Protestant Reformation) both tend to assume that we already know what Paul has to say, because we have read Luther and Barth and they have already told us what Romans says! The challenge for preachers and congregations alike is to meet Paul again for the first time. Jouette Bassler's new book, *Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Comments* offers a way to do just that. The opening words of the preface encourage the preacher to tackle Paul not as a systematic theologian, but a pastor who practices theology in the context of ministry. Bassler writes:

This is not a book on Paul's theology. I am not at all certain that he had "a theology," that is, a reasonably well ordered and integrated set of beliefs. Even if he did, I am not convinced that it would have remained constant over the course of his tumultuous life or that we could hope to recover it from the few and focused letters that remain of his correspondence. Clearly, though,

Paul did *practice* theology. That is, he thought about the problems afflicting his churches in light of the gospel; and in so doing he referred frequently to concepts of obvious theological importance: grace, faith, righteousness, and the like. (p.ix)

The metaphor of *navigating* Paul is an apt one, and Bassler provides something like a map and a compass that help in that exploration, rather than to try to fit Paul into systematic theological categories. She does a superb job of orienting pastors and informed laypersons to the concepts and contours of the current debates in Pauline scholarship. The first chapter, previously published in *Interpretation* in 2003, is entitled "Grace: Probing Its Limits." It is worth attending to with some care because it sets the tone for the rest of the book. Building especially on the contributions of Krister Stendahl (*Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 1976) and E.P. Sanders (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, 1977), Bassler leads us through the questions raised by a better understanding of the richness of first-century Judaism. Even though both of these books were published more than thirty years ago, I suspect that most congregations (and too many preachers) continue to read Paul and preach Paul in ways that view grace and law antithetically. But Bassler reminds her readers that the old certitudes about grace have been shaken and replaced by "the chaos of vigorous debate" (p.1).

While grace is clearly central to Paul's thought, she reminds us that grace was central to almost all forms of first-century Judaism. What then does Paul mean when he contrasts grace and law, as he does in Galatians 5:4, for example? Bultmann suggested that the basic human perversion is self-reliance, and the law inevitably evokes the sinful response of "self-powered striving." We mistakenly believe that we can save ourselves, yet we find ourselves caught in a web of self-righteousness. There is no response but that of self-surrender to God's mercy and grace. I suspect that many good sermons on Paul have preached something very close to this Bultmannian interpretation of Paul. Bassler comments, however, that "Bultmann's interpretation is a magisterial theological achievement of stunning scope and compelling power. It is also, however, almost certainly wrong (p. 6).

She reminds us that this juxtaposition of law and grace is limited to Romans and Galatians, where the central theological questions are about full inclusion of the Gentiles within the community of faith and the polarizing issue of whether or not circumcision should be required of Gentile converts. She then raises the question of whether the real issue here might be about the breadth of God's grace, "a grace that negates any restriction of salvation to those under the law" (p. 8).

True to her words in the preface, Bassler resists one-dimensional conclusions. Instead, she maps the way, raises the questions, reminds us where scholarship has taken us over the past thirty or forty years, and then invites her readers to continue their exploration. She encourages us to follow Paul's lead by "probing the limits of grace" (p. 9) in order to reflect theologically on the challenges of ministry in our own time and place rather than to take Paul's insights (or our *reading of Paul*) as normative. Obviously, this context in which we find ourselves includes how we understand the relationship between Christians and Jews.

Chapter six, "The Future of 'Israel' – Who is Israel?" opens with these words:

The future of Israel was an issue close to Paul's heart, and he could be passionate in discussing it. It is also an issue about which contemporary interpreters of Paul have strong passions. Add to that the fact that Paul, in his passion, did not write about the topic with utmost clarity, and we have the foundation for the current state of affairs: radically disparate assessments of the issue that are passionately defended by scholars appealing to the same set of texts but interpreting them in very different ways. There is no prospect of a consensus view. All that can be done is to survey the evidence and discuss the options. (p. 71)

Bassler proceeds to do just that, charting a course that helps us to navigate texts written to the first-century congregations in Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi, Galatia and Rome. She concludes that the allusiveness of Paul's language allows for (and even requires) that the pieces will be put together differently by different interpreters, but that at the very least, we can become clearer about our own presuppositions. Yet she is clearly sympathetic to Lloyd Gaston's observation that the context of the second half of the twentieth century is such that Christians cannot do theology without coming to terms with what unfolded in the first half of the twentieth century: "Very central [after Auschwitz] is the recognition that Judaism is a living reality and that the covenant between God and Israel continues" (p. 84). This conviction, Gaston says (and I think Bassler agrees) doesn't inspire us to revisionism of ancient texts, but it does "open exegetical eyes and make it possible to see texts in a new way and perhaps understand them better" (p. 84). The unresolvable ambiguities of Paul can become "a mirror for us to see and examine not Paul's views on the future of Israel but our own convictions about that future" (p. 85).

So here, as well, *Navigating Paul* is an invitation to preachers and their congregations not to use Paul dogmatically, but to follow his lead by practicing theology in our own contexts. For many of us these issues of inclusion and what it means to be in relationship with Jewish congregations are part of where we live and move and have our being. *Navigating Paul* doesn't offer any easy prescriptive answers for us, but it points us in the right direction and maps out the territory ahead in ways that are accessible and faithful (and, I think, a helpful corrective to overly dogmatic interpretations of Paul). This book won't make it easier on lectors who draw the short straw of having to read the epistle in worship, but it will make it easier for preachers to navigate these texts and to invite the congregations they serve along for the journey.