

Campbell, Douglas A. 2020.

*Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of
God's Love*

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[Stay with this review as its author is adamant this is a book for
missional practitioners—Ed.]

AT ALMOST EIGHT HUNDRED pages this volume is in the best sense of the word a *magnum opus* and can't be praised highly enough. It is an excellent read. However, I have my problems in classifying it with regard to the theological disciplines. Is it exegetical or systematic or even practical? Was Karl Barth's commentary on Romans an exegetical one? The answer to the last question may direct our attempt to classify Campbell's *Pauline Dogmatics* and may lead to the conclusion, that it is more with Barth than in line with James D. G. Dunn's *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* from 1998. This said I would define it as a systematic theology of Paul based

on exegetical insights with an emphasis on modern Christian life. Thus, the truly interdisciplinary volume can be placed on the edge of biblical, systematic and pastoral theology.

This is how the author himself sees his book: “I tend to lean primarily on my favorite theologian in this area for guidance, Karl Barth. . . . It needs to be appreciated immediately that Barth is a useful guide to Paul partly because he was such a faithful Paulinist” (2). Being himself a renowned NT scholar teaching at Duke University he brings together insights from Biblical scholars and different Barthian thinkers like Hauerwas and the Torrances as well as historians, sociologists. This makes very much sense, when Campbell himself makes clear the purpose of writing this book: “It has been written for Christian leaders who live in the twenty-first century. So to be useful to them it needs to articulate where we also need to go beyond Paul” (7).

By the end of the book Campbell defines the purpose of the work even more precisely as “a practical manual instructing leaders how to plant and to nurture communities of Jesus followers, and to do so navigating the challenges of any context, including the especially astringent challenges offered by modernity” (741). Although I question the term “manual” here, because it is not at all about “How to do in ten steps,” and would have preferred “handbook” instead. This book is without doubt a deeply missional book bringing together Pauline church planting with today’s missional dynamics!

The book divides into twenty-nine chapters in four parts: resurrection, formation, mission, navigation. Every chapter concludes with a set of theses, key scriptural references, suggestions for key and further reading and a bibliography. Thus, reading this didactically structured book is a great benefit, but using it as a study tool in missional teams would bring even more benefit reflecting practice and leading to practice. One finds here a twenty-nine-session course bringing together missional leaders, students, interested church members. It is full of theology without using incomprehensible academic language.

Campbell starts with a profound grounding in God respectively in Christ himself. Here he deals with God's purpose for life, with the problem of sin and death, with resurrection and election to give some examples. Like a good house builder Campbell begins with solid groundwork. "If we don't *know* God, we will probably not be able to talk *about* God with any accuracy, and so we will end up, as Barth puts it wryly, talking about ourselves in a loud voice, which is unlikely to be much help to anyone" (13). From the very beginning it pops up in every chapter, which is so important for the whole book, that God's purpose for life is fellowship with him lived in relational communities. I only wondered, why the cross of Christ became a sub issue of resurrection contrary to Paul who says, "but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23).

Following the basic insight of God's intention to create fellowship with him and others Campbell continues with the formation of a learning community. Reminding the reader of a "personal God," who "desires to commune with us as persons" Campbell focuses on the church: "the church is *all about its relationships*" (194-95). The *leitmotif* here is love in its various settings. Taking up the terms of Robert Putnam church consists of bonding and bridging communities being best in networking in- and outwards. These communities are not bounded, but centered around Christ, and therefore able to change, when situations, contexts, when people change. And "they should then spread out, opening into these relationships that are less or non-Christian in mission" (375). Although Campbell never refers to Paul Hiebert's "bounded and centered sets" I was very much reminded of this fundamental distinction for understanding missional churches.

Part 3 "Mission" starts with the basic insight, that mission is communal: "A Pauline community reaches out to those who lie outside of it as God does, because loving involves reaching out and journeying, and especially to those who are different from it and indifferent to it" (381). In mission church crosses boundaries and "produces" diversity, which is crucial for the understanding of a

missional church. Defining the others and friendship comes into focus.

With the last part titled “Navigation” Campbell focuses on today’s issues and feels more clear the need of going beyond Paul. Once in a while I wondered why the author considers himself to be better grounded in Paul’s Trinitarian and Christocentric understanding than Paul himself. Could it be that in “those realities—places . . . where Paul must reinterpret Paul” (7) it is actually Campbell himself and his (post)modern view pressing against Paul, e.g., in the field of ethics and very strongly with regard to sex and gender issues? Campbell’s seemingly mandatory “Sachkritik” (material criticism) does find its followers, but raises hermeneutical questions as well. Here and there I felt the need to start a discussion using Pauline positions and disputing with Campbell.

This said, Campbell remains very much inspiring—and should be praised that he does so—taking up very important issues and questions in (post-)modern society that every missional community needs to deal with. In my agreeing and disagreeing this part is and remains thought provoking.

Writing a list of must reads for a missional church or fresh expression this book should definitely be one among the top ten. One can read it alone as a page turner, but better results will appear while using it as a study tool discussing it with others. The latter would definitely be more in line with the author’s purpose of writing the book.

