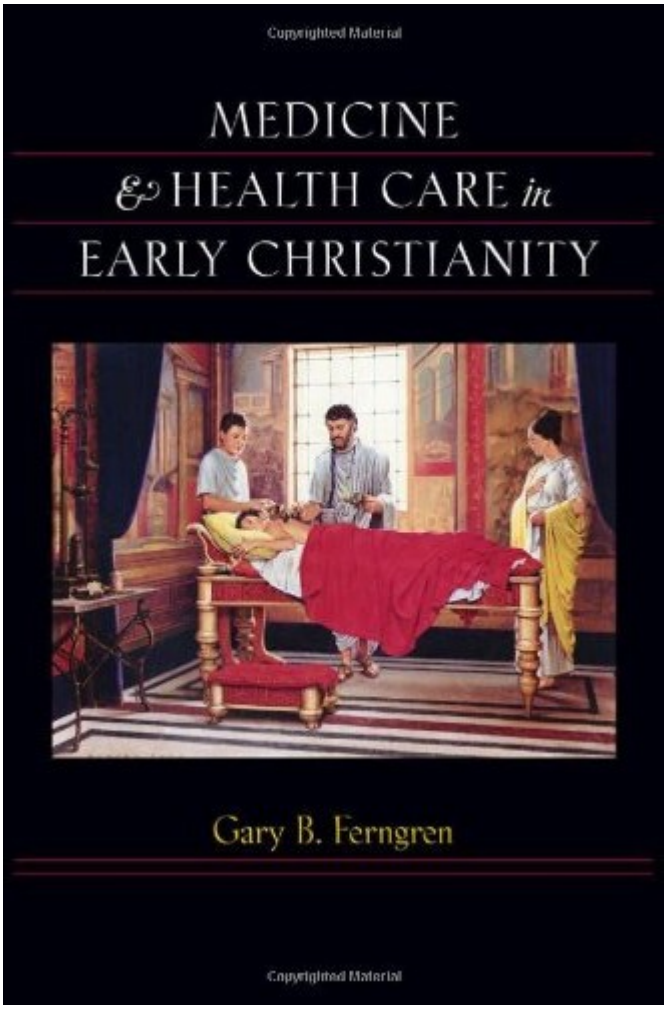
Rescue mission

By Beverly R. Gaventa in the May 18, 2010 issue

In Review



The Deliverance of God

Douglas A. Campbell
Eerdmans

At the heart of this complex and learned book is a single question: Did the apostle Paul regard the gospel as an offer or as a powerful redemptive gift?

Douglas Campbell, in this massive study of justification in the letters of Paul, contends that most readings of Paul view the gospel as an offer, in which sinful human beings are rescued from God's just retribution by their belief in Christ's atoning death. The resultant understanding of salvation, which Campbell refers to as "Justi fication theory," is individualistic, conditional and contractual. In Campbell's view, the gospel is not an offer to be accepted or rejected, but a gift. It breaks into human history (hence the term *apocalyptic*), revealing humanity's corporate captivity to the power of sin and calling faith into being.

I am entirely in sympathy with Campbell's answer to this central question, but perhaps because I am so thoroughly sympathetic, I am also disappointed with the way Campbell makes the case.

What Campbell unfortunately identifies as the "citadel" of Justification theory is based on Romans, especially the courtroom language of chapters 1–4, and that is the focus of his book (although he also treats most of Romans 9–11, relevant portions of Galatians and Philippians, and a few texts scattered elsewhere). Campbell draws a tight connection from Romans to Galatians, contending that Paul feared that the Jewish-Christian missionaries who had proved so destructive in the Galatian congregations (Campbell uses J. Louis Martyn's term, the "Teachers") would turn up in Rome ahead of him, where they would again insist that gentile Christians must observe Jewish law and in essence become proselytes to Judaism. So Romans becomes what the military would call a preemptive reactionary strike. (This military image fits Camp bell's style of presentation all too well.) Campbell argues that Paul makes this strike not by calling the Teachers out by name, but by crafting the letter as an ongoing dialogue with them. This allows Campbell to attribute to the Teachers rather than to Paul himself much of Romans 1:18–3:20, precisely that part of the letter that seems most congenial to Justification theory.

This is an ingenious solution to the problem, and many readers of Romans may welcome it, since most of us find at least some part of Paul's argument in 1:18–3:20 either uncomfortable or downright offensive. (If you think otherwise, perhaps you should note the inclusion of gossip and boastfulness in the dirty laundry list of 1:29–31.) But Campbell's proposal, however intensely and extensively argued, makes some historical leaps that many readers will find unjustified. After all, Galatians makes specific reference to the Teachers, but Romans does not (16:17–20 is too little and late to count as evidence).

Even if we grant Campbell his scenario, how were the Romans, to most of whom Paul was unknown, to identify which lines were the Teachers' and which were Paul's? Of course, there are brief passages in which Paul anticipates an objection (as in 6:1 and 6:15), and it is surely correct that the congregations gathered to hear Phoebe read the letter would have been adept at decoding verbal signals and conventional rhetorical gestures. Yet the confidence with which Campbell divides the Teachers' lines from those of Paul can strain even the most sympathetic reader.

Fortunately, Campbell's historical argument is not necessary for an apocalyptic reading of Romans, even of Romans 1–4 (as is clear in the work of Martinus De Boer, about whom Camp bell is oddly silent). Indeed, Paul needs the relentless argument of 1:18–3:20 in order to show the depth of human oppression by suprahuman powers. Since humanity is incapable of repenting or changing its mind or reforming its behavior (we are "weak" enemies of God, as he puts it in 5:8–10), humanity must be rescued, and with us the whole of creation, from those forces that intend to separate God from God's creation. By virtue of his focus on explicit references to justification and his lack of attention to chapters 5–8, Campbell's version of Paul's apocalyptic theology becomes just a little tepid. He insists on God's unilateral rescue of humanity, but from what? Where is the cosmic horizon of Romans? And where is the hideous power of sin and death? By obsessing over the bathwater, Campbell has forgotten the baby.

In the current academic and ecclesial culture, disagreement too often means dismissal. That emphatically is not my intent in this review. There is a great deal here that fascinates and instructs. Building on his own earlier studies, Campbell argues for a christological interpretation of 3:21–26, and his treatment of Romans 4 is perhaps the most illuminating section of the book, with its patient argument that Abraham's trust in God provides an analogy for participatory trust in Christ. I also learned a good deal from his discussion of 9:30–10:13. Campbell argues that this passage does not say anything about Israel's behavior prior to the coming of Christ, so it is not a critique of Israel's pursuit of the law prior to the time of the gospel. Instead, Paul wanted to show what has happened now that God "has come all the way to Israel" in Jesus Christ. I suspect that I shall return to Campbell's volume again and again in my own work on Romans.

This is a book that deserves to be read, but virtually every conversation I have heard about the volume has touched on its formidable length (some of which is in small print). Campbell insists that his project requires such length if he is to bring down

the citadel of Justification theory. I fear that the length is self-defeating, as it means that only the most determined specialist will work through to the end, and Campbell will have lost the readers he most wants to persuade.

A certain irony is at work here. In order to destroy the Justification citadel, with its emphasis on humanity's rational faculties, Campbell employs a highly rationalistic argument to bring readers to his side. Along the way he repeatedly employs militaristic imagery to describe his undertaking, finally identifying his book as an "important moment" in the "triumph" of the apocalyptic understanding of Paul. There is a good deal of combat imagery in Romans (much of which is obscured in English translation), but the combat is God's battle with sin and death on behalf of humankind, not a battle to be waged or decided by the likes of us.

Already there is talk about a shorter, more reader-friendly volume, and I hope it will come quickly. I also hope that it will focus on a positive statement of God's deliverance. If the citadel has fallen, what does the peace look like?