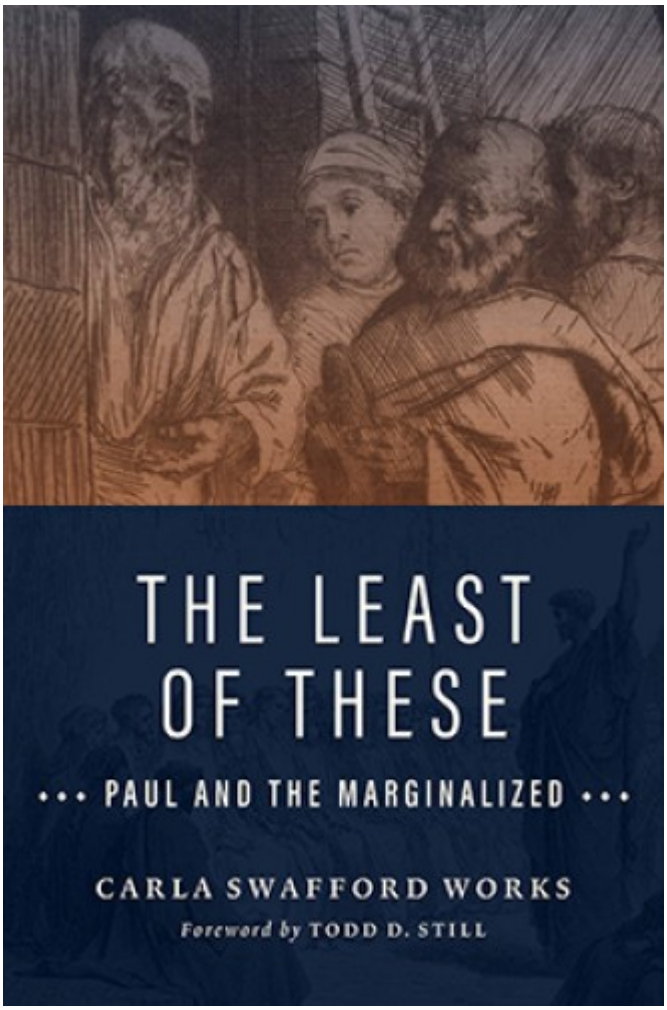
Take & Read: New Testament

Has Paul been unfairly judged?

by Joshua Jipp in the October 21, 2020 issue

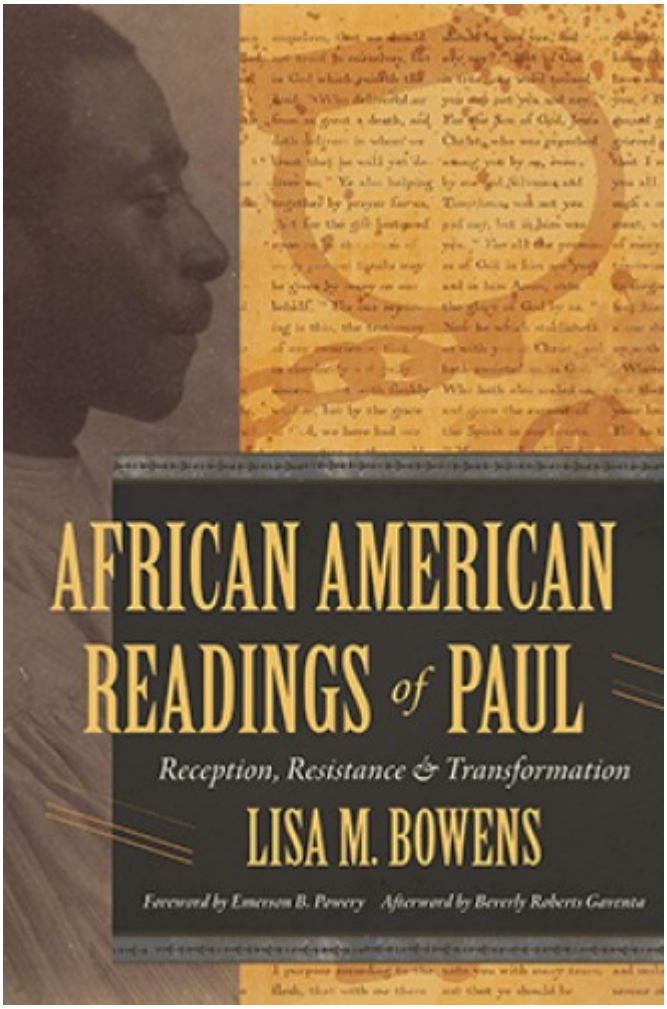
In Review



The Least of These

Paul and the Marginalized

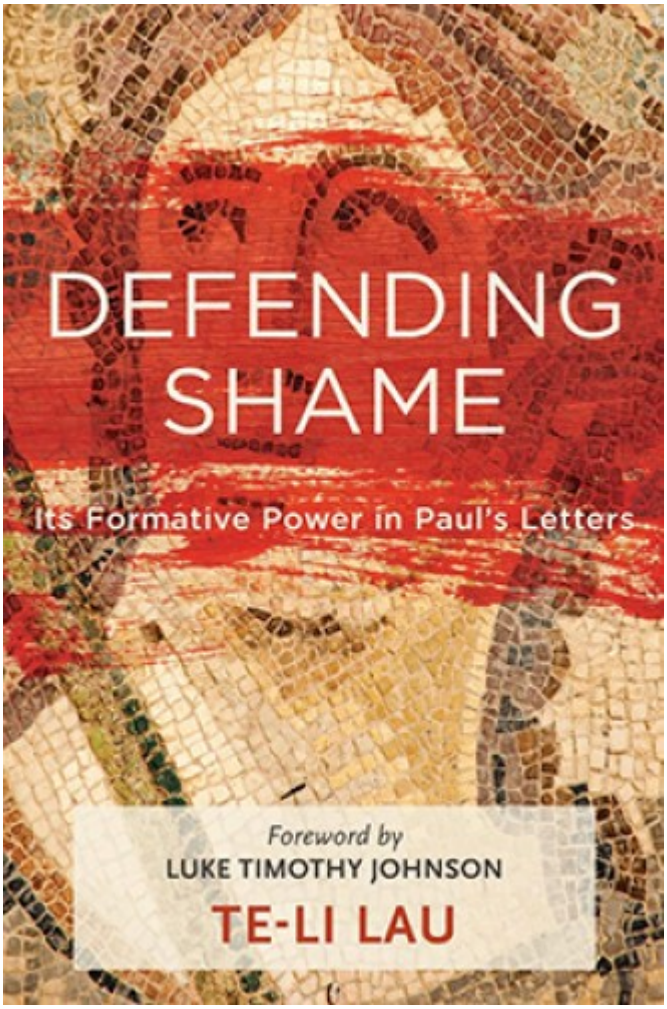
by Carla Swafford Works
Eerdmans



African American Readings of Paul

Reception, Resistance, and Transformation

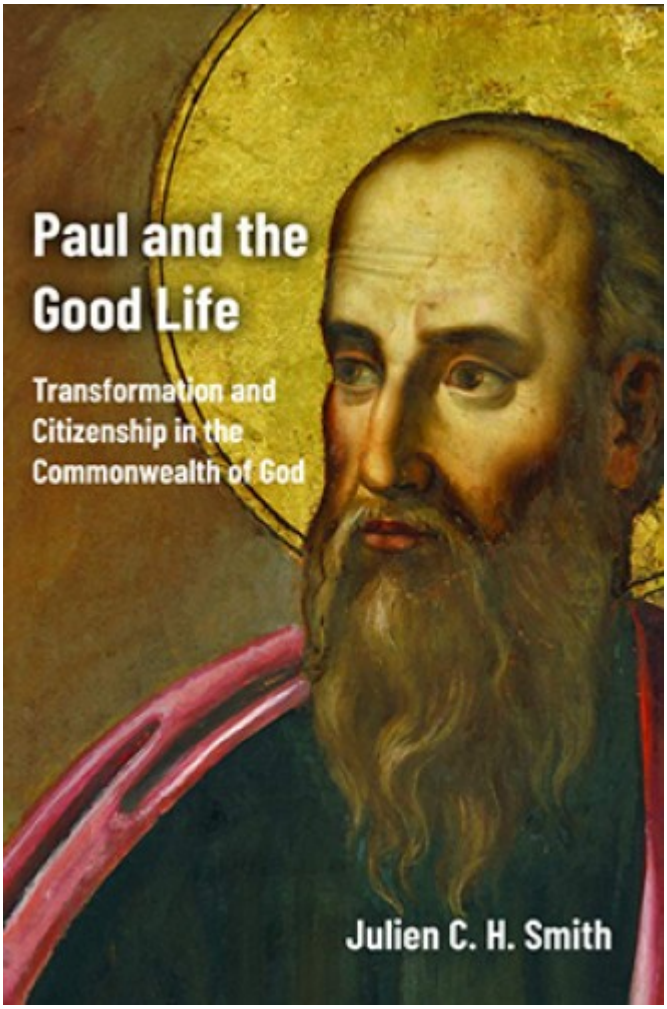
by Lisa M. Bowens
Eerdmans



Defending Shame

Its Formative Power in Paul’s Letters

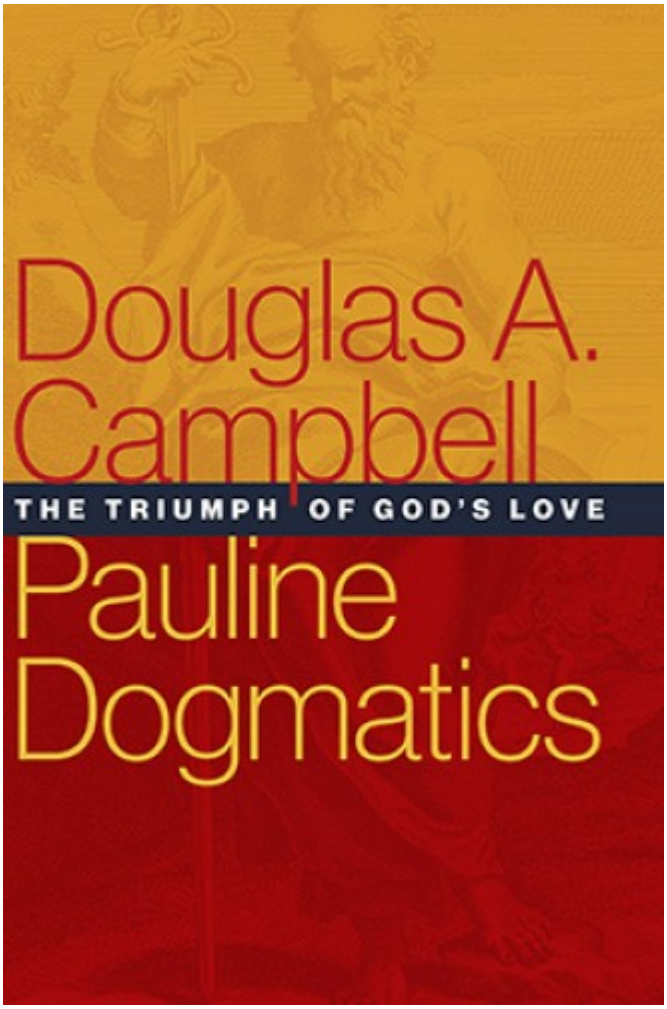
by Te-Li Lau
Baker Academic



Paul and the Good Life

Transformation and Citizenship in the Commonwealth of God

by Julien C. H. Smith
Baylor University Press



Pauline Dogmatics

The Triumph of God’s Love

by Douglas A. Campbell
Eerdmans

The Pauline letters have been mined for use by a variety of movements—some liberating and revolutionary, others oppressive and conventional. Paul’s writings have been employed strategically for insidious ends: to advance Christian supersessionist claims with respect to Judaism, to prevent women from preaching and leading in churches, to justify the sins of white slaveholders. Many interpreters now regard Paul’s theology as too otherworldly, detached from concern about poverty, justice, and human flourishing.

But others suggest that Paul has been unfairly judged by 21st-century expectations and through highly selective readings of his letters. Carla Swafford Works, for example, in ***The Least of These: Paul and the Marginalized*** (Eerdmans) shows that Paul's teachings mirror Jesus' concern for people who are poor, marginalized, and weak.

Paul's gospel is cosmic in scope, encompassing the whole world and seeing God at work in all people. His letters, Works argues, are written to interpret what God is doing with real people who have real problems. Paul's churches and his missionary team were, in fact, filled with women, slaves, and poor people.

While Paul was no abolitionist or modern-day egalitarian, his letters provide testimony that his gospel disrupted the social order by contesting the power of the most powerful and calling forth a display of ecclesial mutuality between slaveholders and slaves, men and women, and those from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Works finds in Paul's gospel an embodied theology that works through concrete actions, such as the provision of material relief for the poor, the sacrificial love of husbands for wives, and the treatment of slaves as fellow siblings in Christ.

One of the nastiest uses of the epistles is the employment of the household codes—particularly statements such as "Slaves, obey your masters" (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22)—to sanction both the existence of slavery and slaveholders' cruel and violent behaviors against enslaved people. As a result, some Black people have understandably rejected Paul and the oppressive legacy attached to him.

But most African American Christians did not simply reject the apostle. Rather, as Lisa M. Bowens shows in ***African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation*** (Eerdmans), "many blacks utilized Paul in their own work, repossessing and appropriating him as a voice for liberation and freedom." Bowens engages in a remarkable analysis of Black Christian writings, from slave petitions to abolish slavery (1774) to Martin Luther King Jr.'s essay "Paul's Letter to American Christians" (1968). She shows how these interpreters used Paul to resist White supremacy and fight against oppressive interpretations of the epistles.

Jarena Lee, for example, drew upon Paul's apostolic calling and experience of the Spirit to give voice to her own life as a Spirit-filled woman called to proclaim the gospel. David Walker passionately pursued the abolition of slavery, using Pauline

language to describe the evil of slaveholders who had been blinded by “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4), handed over to an evil and reprobate heart and mind (Rom. 1:28), and subjected to future divine judgment and wrath unless they repent (1 Thess. 5:2). Julia Foote, ordained in the AME Zion Church, drew upon 1 Corinthians 1:18–27 and Galatians 3:28 to disrupt social distinctions that silenced women and people of lower classes in churches. In story after story, Bowens shows Black people exerting moral agency as they draw upon Paul to pursue healing, life, justice, and freedom.

We can all agree, it might be supposed, that our society’s general rejection of shame is a good thing. Shame is so often deeply toxic and used for destructive and pernicious ends. We are rightly suspicious of any employment of shame, not least when we see its presence in scripture. But in ***Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul’s Letters*** (Baker Academic), Te-Li Lau tackles Paul’s shaming rhetoric head on—and argues that a proper sense of shame is a necessary component for human flourishing.

In some instances, Paul vehemently rejects shame. For example, he is clearly upset with the wealthier Corinthians who use the Lord’s Supper as a vehicle to shame the have-nots (1 Cor. 11:17–34). Yet he also shames the Galatians for foolishly listening to those proclaiming a false gospel (Gal. 3:1–5), encourages believers to extend hospitality to their enemies so as to heap “burning coals” upon their heads (Rom. 12:20), and exhorts the church in Thessalonica to disassociate from members who fail to follow his moral instructions (2 Thess. 3:14–15). For Paul, shame is necessary for the Christian life and provides a window into our moral character and beliefs.

What should we make of Paul’s shaming rhetoric? Lau argues that Paul intentionally uses shame as a pedagogical tool to cultivate the mind of Christ among his readers. Despite shame’s potential use for toxic ends, Lau suggests, Christians should not try to extirpate it from our moral lives. The loss of shame would “cripple our humanity as moral people.”

A spate of recent literature, TED talks, and professional conferences reveals fresh urgency around quests for purpose, practical strategies for living well, and questions surrounding morality. In ***Paul and the Good Life: Transformation and Citizenship in the Commonwealth of God*** (Baylor University Press), Julien C. H. Smith finds in Paul’s writings powerful resources for our most important questions about the meaning of life.

Smith argues that Paul's gospel, particularly as it centers upon Christ's kingship, is deeply connected to this-worldly human flourishing. Christians, who belong to the heavenly commonwealth and are heirs to its promises of salvation from sin, are daily transformed in particular embodied ways. "Jesus both rescues us *from* the tyrannical power of sin and by his reign over us restores us *to* a life of flourishing," writes Smith. Focusing on a number of the Pauline letters, he shows how Paul articulates a theology of the good life that centers on four components: citizenship, character, community, and creation. He sketches out the implications of Paul's vision of the good life for contemporary concerns such as political participation, the cultivation of virtue, economics, and care for the earth.

Douglas A. Campbell's ***Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love*** (Eerdmans) begins with a foundational claim: Paul's gospel centers upon the revelation of a loving triune God who through the person of Jesus draws humanity into divine fellowship and communion. Interpreters who base their readings on any other foundation—questions about the truth of his claims, for instance, or atonement theories that presume a "legalistic and retributive God"—skew Paul's gospel. They miss "this hidden, dynamic, determinative reality that is the divine Jesus" and fail to be "alert to the resurrecting power of Jesus working away within history."

Campbell argues passionately that beginning with the revelation of Jesus' lordship as an expression of divine love can provide clarity to the apostle's theology. His reading of Paul is compelling. It emphasizes resurrection as God's benevolent response to the fundamental problems of human existence: sin, death, and evil. But this resurrection, which we share by virtue of our participation in Christ, is also a reality now. The transformation of our minds leads us to live peacefully with God and one another. Our resurrection in Christ through our baptism transforms our moral agency.

As Campbell traces the practical implications of his reading of Paul, it becomes clear that the apostle's Christocentric and trinitarian gospel is both orthodox and innovative. There are few topics Campbell does not tackle. He discusses leadership, sexuality and gender, marriage, friendship, church planting, racial and ethnic diversity, the relationship between the church and Judaism, restorative justice for criminal offenders, and environmental concerns. For Campbell, nothing is more important than whether the church will be able to articulate and live out Paul's gospel.