

Luke Timothy Johnson wants us to read Paul in all his complexity

“What advantage do we gain by possessing a Pauline theology that lies outside and above his writings?”

[Nijay K. Gupta](#) interviews [Luke Timothy Johnson](#)

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(Courtesy of Emory University / Candler School of Theology)

Luke Timothy Johnson is professor emeritus of New Testament and Christian origins at Emory University. He recently published Interpreting Paul, the second volume in

his set The Canonical Paul. His memoir, The Mind in Another Place: My Life as a Scholar, is forthcoming from Eerdmans.

Every few years, a scholar publishes some form of a Pauline theology. In your two-volume set you resist this endeavor. Why do you think it is problematic to try to map out a theology of Paul?

The ambition to construct a theology of Paul is inherently misguided—and therefore fatally flawed—for three basic reasons.

First, it assumes that Paul is a theologian whose letters represent expressions of his theology as an individual and distinctive set of ideas. And since the expression of these ideas is dispersed through widely disparate letters, never appearing except partially and in passing, it is thought necessary to erect a systematic framework that can be seen as governing such diverse expressions.

But Paul is not a theologian. He is an apostle, a proclaimer of Jesus as Lord, a founder and pastor of communities. Responding in letters to the needs of such communities, he certainly shows himself to be a religious thinker, but there is no reason to suppose that Paul had a theology in the sense that we use the term. Paul worked out arguments in response to concrete circumstances. He certainly had deep convictions upon which he called as he thought through the implications of a commitment to a crucified and raised Messiah, but these convictions did not constitute an individual, distinctive, personal theology that was Paul's alone.

Second, because Paul's letters are so diverse, all such efforts reduce the complexity and irreducible diversity of the compositions. This is done through reducing the number of letters considered to be by Paul or through establishing a set of concepts that is taken as a conceptual center that gives coherence to the letters' contingent expressions: the faithfulness of God, authentic life before God, reconciliation between Jew and Gentile. Such selectivity invariably misrepresents the diverse character of the canonical letters and, at the very best, provides a sketch of a handful of letters (usually Romans, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Corinthians). Such devices distort the character of the chosen letters and marginalize the witness of the letters not chosen.

Third, to the degree that a theology of Paul is conceptually elaborate and impressive, it distracts readers from the demanding and rewarding work of engaging with Paul's letters themselves. It does so by directing readers to what is important in

the letters—namely, what conforms to the intellectual grid that has been constructed—to the neglect of other dimensions. And it can seduce readers into thinking that they now understand Paul, and therefore do not bother to read the letters at all.

In *Interpreting Paul*, you talk about the problem of flattening ancient thinkers into concepts like Platonism. What is an example of a thin construct of Paulinism, and what are readers missing when they engage in such reductionism?

Each of the letters ascribed to Paul in the canon is both distinctive and challenging. Each arises out of a pastoral need in Paul's churches or a circumstance in his own mission. Each displays language that is strange to us and logic that defies easy decipherment. Each offers readers insight into specific dimensions of the experiences and convictions of first-generation believers. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, each leads readers to probe their own experiences of God and convictions concerning God's world.

Why would we want to suppress any of these complex and rich resources for thought and practice in our own life of faith? What advantage do we gain by having in our possession—and I choose the term carefully—a constructed Paul or theology that lies outside and above these writings? Do we not find ourselves like those who have seized on one of the historical Jesuses offered by scholars—invariably a static and artificial construct—in preference to the astounding and life-giving portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels? Just as the great reformers of the church, from Francis of Assisi to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were stimulated and guided not by a scholarly historical Jesus but by the call issued by Jesus in the Gospels, so the great and generative moments of reform in the church, from Luther to Barth, were sparked not by a scholarly theology of Paul but by the specific inflammatory language of Galatians and Romans.

Any adjectival Paul is a diminished Paul. A Paul who is read in terms of justification by faith is no more and no less a diminishment than a Paul who is read in terms of Jew-Gentile reconciliation. An apocalyptic Paul applies to only a tiny portion of his letters; so does a Hellenistic Paul. A postcolonial Paul can be found only with great difficulty and a constant adjustment of the lens.

Many of the essays in *Interpreting Paul* engage with social, existential, emotional, and experiential elements of early Christianity. Why is this so interesting to you? What is at risk when students of Paul neglect this “real life” of early Christian community and experience?

An existential approach to Paul's letters follows from the decision to engage each of the canonical letters ascribed to him in its individuality. The mystery is not why I focus on religious experience and social issues in his letters but why other scholars might not.

When one reads the letters in their rhetorical specificity, one cannot help but be aware of how much the letters' rhetoric is shaped by the circumstances of the readers, as apprehended by Paul. Close reading of each letter makes clear that Paul's third pastoral tool—he preferred personal visits and the sending of delegates—was always deployed as a means of addressing real human situations. Even the centerpiece of virtually every theology of Paul, the letter to the Romans, is composed in the first place as a fundraising letter—although Paul's efforts at persuasion grow to something considerably greater than the flyers we get in the mail. Reading with an eye to the initial readers' circumstances also makes us aware of how much Paul is concerned with communal and individual practice—not ideas but actions.

In all of Paul's letters, furthermore, the role of human experience is constantly pivotal. In the first instance, the experience of the resurrection, which for Paul is at the heart of the Good News from and about God, is an experience that he and his readers can recognize and reflect on as determinative for their life together, an experience made real through the power of the Holy Spirit among believers. Paul also appeals to and applies the implications of myriad other experiences among his readers.

I should add that it is this existential aspect of Paul's letters—his constant thinking out of and into real-life experience—that makes them so pertinent and so powerful to present-day readers, if they can be liberated from the prison of abstract theory.

Your very first article on Paul was published in 1971. How have you come to see and interpret Paul differently a half century later?

I was extraordinarily blessed to have begun my serious study of scripture when I was still a monk and was exposed to the richness of the emergent Catholic scholarship

preceding Vatican II, from which I learned the practice of disciplined exegesis (through the recent legitimization of the historical method) together with a reverence toward the text (through immersion in patristic writers). In some ways, I continue to read Paul in the same manner as I learned.

In terms of specific insights, 50 years ought to have added something! My doctoral studies involved intense work in the Pauline letters, which soon led me to change my view concerning Pauline authorship and later pushed me to find a better model for speaking of authorship than the one usually used. I can point as well to the importance of my personal discovery of the “faith of Jesus Christ” in Romans. Other and lesser aperçus have occurred. But I regard the changes in my perception of Paul’s letters in terms of not seismic shifts but an ever-deepening appreciation.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The untamed Paul.”