

BOOK REVIEW

Westfall, Cynthia Long, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). xx + 348 pp. Pbk. \$32.99.

Amidst a growing flurry of writings on the subject, Cynthia Long Westfall's *Paul and Gender* aims to establish a coherent, contextually-sensitive theology of gender from the life, thought and writings of the Apostle Paul. This involves not only an exegetical revisiting of the standard 'difficult' texts, but also an exposition and reconstruction of the less commonly-discussed topics regarding gender, such as athleticism, the body, domestic metaphors, conceptions (and stereotypes) of power, calling and eschatology. The result is a refreshingly balanced and erudite study that transports readers from the contemporary scene into the world of the New Testament, and back again.

Paul and Gender can be located as a biblical studies monograph that seems largely aimed at clearing away (often unnecessary) fog caused by theological disputes and faulty methodology. 'Mining the biblical text to create systematic theology', she writes, 'has distorted our understanding of the text' (p. 233). For Paul and gender, this ultimately means that 'The traditional readings of the Pauline passages on gender fail to adequately interact with the sociohistorical, literary, and situational contexts. Such readings do not adequately account for the interpretive problems in the text, and they actually create dissonance and incoherence both within the discourses and in Pauline theology' (p. 313). Naturally, then, the first chapters of the book unfold the various dimensions of first-century life, while later chapters flesh out the biblical text.

Easier said than done. Paul and his writings exhibit a complex amalgam of intentions and influences. The Jewish and Greco-Roman culture in which he wrote and communicated is even more diverse. In this venture, Westfall is keen to realize that one cannot simply ask what

Paul means, but also must ask what Paul *does* through what he writes. Hence, ‘In order for his message to be communicated meaningfully, [Paul] deliberately employed commonly understood metaphors, conventions, and cultural institutions to transform the churches into a movement that was spiritually and ethically countercultural. To achieve this, Paul utilized common figures of speech, but did so in a manner so that such expressions frequently diverged from their normal meaning’ (p. 12). Properly identifying and interpreting these metaphors, deciphering what Paul is doing by implementing them and discerning between the accommodations and the transformations is a dizzying maze for sure.

But Westfall manages to navigate these turbulent waters with both skillful analysis and lucid prose. Primary sources comprise her chief tool in laying out the landscape for the first-century context, and readers are never lost in trying to discern her main contributions, contentions and reflections.

Readers familiar with the topic will also find a level-headed methodology that gives priority to thorough, sound exegesis—not being plagued by the apologetic overtones so common in other works. The exegetical analysis is also (generally) not a creative regurgitation or restatement of popular positions, having instead much material that will strike readers as new or interesting.

Her discussion on Ephesians 5 reveals that Paul is applying feminine domestic duties to the husband via metaphor:

Women’s work and responsibilities in the domestic sphere had a lower value and status in Greco-Roman culture: making clothing (spinning and weaving), laundering (washing and ironing), bathing children and men, providing and serving food, and last but not least, bearing and nurturing children ... The nature of Christ’s action toward the church and the husband’s actions toward the wife in Ephesians 5:25-33 would have been understood as ‘women’s work’ ... Paul is subverting male privilege in the home and church. He promotes a model of servanthood and low status (p. 23).

This observation is striking because it is often typical to unwittingly read (for example) the terms ‘spotless’ bride (Eph. 5.27) in a sort of atonement-theological context (i.e. ‘spotless lamb’, white robes of righteousness, etc.) or a similar theological category, when, in fact, it originates in women’s domestic life. The paired term ‘without wrinkle’

in 5.27 should make this obvious, but exegetes have often missed what Paul is doing.

Westfall's discussion on veiling in 1 Corinthians 11 argues that, because head-covering was an act of devotion and respect (not a sign of subordination), women insisted on keeping their heads covered, but it was men/husbands that challenged this practice. 'If women were resisting taking off their head coverings', she concludes, 'Paul was supporting them, their judgment, and their honor within the house church and within the community, possibly even against the church leadership' (p. 43). Publicly-visible, flowing hair was likely a common sign of sexual availability (i.e. prostitution) in Corinth. And because female slaves, prostitutes and freedwomen were prohibited from veiling, 'The practice of all women wearing the veil equalized social relationships in the Christian community' (see pp. 25, 43).

Regarding 1 Timothy 2, there is no reason to believe the context was 'public worship', given that there really was not such a thing in home-based churches of the first century. The idea that being the 'head' of woman in 1 Cor. 11.3 and Eph. 5.23-30 constituted general male authority also was not possible, as 'Male slaves never had any legal authority over their "wives" and children; they were not even legally married' (p. 175). In this effortless fashion, Westfall displaces some of the most commonly held beliefs about Paul and gender on the basis of contextual considerations alone. In addition to this, clear continuity between Jesus' attitude about power, privilege and gender and Paul's own thought is established; Paul continued and more fully carried out the social vision inaugurated by the risen Lord.

Other insights that might strike readers as new or interesting include Westfall's comparison of patriarchal 'gender roles' today and the authority of Jesus and Paul: 'Neither Jesus Christ nor Paul aspired to exercise the kind of dominion that is claimed by those who currently support men's priority and authority with Paul's teaching' (p. 174; cf. p. 89). Along a similar line of thought, she says, 'Christianity undercut essential patriarchal rights by requiring men to be faithful in the same way that the culture had required women to be faithful' (p. 203).

Westfall does not shy away in her conclusions about rank prejudice in the church. In pointing to the centrality of the Christian's call to ministry, she observes that 'In practice, a man's experience and emotions are treated as normative in his call to ministry, but a woman's emotions and experience are treated as suspect and can be invalidated,

if they lead her to a place that is outside of wherever the male authorities draw the line, delimiting the appropriate sphere of ministry for women' (p. 215). On a similar question of pastoral relevance, she pulls back the curtain from the 'gender role' rhetoric: "role distinctions" are a euphemism for role restrictions of the disadvantaged party; in the traditional paradigm, men have no "role distinctions" because they can theoretically fill any service slot in the church, even kitchen duty and nursery if they are willing to do it. Pragmatically, only women have assigned and specific "role distinctions" in the church' (pp. 171-72). These kinds of convicting observations demonstrate that *Paul and Gender* is anything but an abstract exercise in cloistered academic research.

Ignoring other commendable features, one must consider potential concerns in the work. As far as major flaws go, I see none and consider Westfall's thesis firmly established: Paul has practically been read upside down for most of church history. However, a few small complaints merit brief mention for the sake of review.

The book loses momentum towards the end of ch. 7 ('Calling') where 1 Cor. 14.34-35 takes focus. Little is added beyond what (for example) Craig Keener concluded in 1992 in *Paul, Women, and Wives*. Despite saying that 'Philip Payne has convincingly argued that 1 Cor. 14.34-35 is an interpolation' (p. 228), Westfall goes on to exposit the text as if this were not the case. Her reasoning is that 'the text may be analyzed as a discourse, based on the extant manuscripts that we possess, with the caveat that this passage has evidence of significant interpretive text-critical issues in those manuscripts' (p. 228). I find this methodologically unsatisfying, and (more importantly) detrimental to the persuasiveness of the argument—despite a confident declaration to the contrary ('therefore, I have drawn a convincing picture' [p. 240]). Of course, following through with Payne's thesis would also prove unpersuasive for all the reasons it regularly has over the years. What is more problematic is that the growing consensus about 1 Cor. 14.33-38 being a 'rhetorical refutation device' (a quotation Paul was critiquing) is absent from the discussion (for a list of scholars who adhere to this view, see Kirk MacGregor's '1 Corinthians 14:33-38 as a Pauline Quotation-Refutation Device', forthcoming in *Priscilla Papers*). This is unfortunate given that this view probably has—*definitely* has, in my estimation—more merit than the text-critical perspective.

The claim that Paul ‘avoids describing leadership as anything other than slavery or in similar terms that represented leadership in all forms as low-status menial labor’ (p. 257) is an overstatement. In 1 Tim. 3.1 and 5 we read that ‘whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task’, must manage the household well (‘for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church’) and, in v. 8, ‘deacons likewise must be serious [σεμνός]’. Combined with similar attitudes (e.g. Romans 16; Phil. 4.2; cf. Heb. 13.17), it is a considerable stretch to relegate this entire leadership and/or pastoral enterprise to the realm of ‘low-status menial labor’. Christian leadership in Paul (and other New Testament authors) was multi-faceted and thus had different faces and descriptions.

The statement ‘the notion that women are created to be subordinate fails to recognize that women’s eschatological future must be consistent with their purpose at creation’ (p. 173) is not really true. The theological movement in redemptive-history has both continuity and discontinuity. There is genuine *movement* and *change*, not simply pure restoration. The same tree of life is found in the New Jerusalem that was in Eden; yes, but notice that the dwelling place of God’s people is now a city, not a garden. More vividly, there will no longer be marriage in the end (Lk. 20.35; Mt. 22.30; Mk 12.25) as there originally was in the beginning. Other examples could be given. The lack of this progressive, redemptive-historical dimension in Westfall’s chapter on eschatology poses at least a potential weakness to her argument.

After delivering a decisive critique against sexist/patriarchal sexuality (where woman is viewed as the passive penetrated, and man the active penetrating one) and of various gender stereotypes as a whole, I found it somewhat odd to read how ‘Paul was effective in planting churches in virgin territory ... ’ (p. 253). A full critique of gender stereotypes and the enslaving devices of androcentrism—including the ones addressed in the book—will inevitably involve a change in the Christian’s own day-to-day language. Posing Paul as the colonizer, churches as the planted and territory as ‘virgin’ may encourage precisely the kind of mindset and ideology that Westfall seeks to undermine.

Interaction with secondary literature is sometimes lacking. I was surprised to find Rosner and Ciampa’s PNTC on 1 Corinthians entirely absent, and Fee’s NICNT commentary only very rarely used. Both are

some of the finest work on 1 Corinthians and could have lent considerable support to Westfall's thesis at several junctures.

As I said, these are but quibbles. In the larger picture of New Testament scholarship, Westfall's *Paul and Gender* is a hurricane of fresh air blowing away the chaff of rare and unlikely interpretations, unbridled theological agendas and half-hearted treatments of Pauline theology. The quality of the book and scholarship is solid, resulting in what will probably become the standard work on the subject for decades to come.

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