

THE THEOLOGY OF PAUL THE APOSTLE by James D. G. Dunn T & T Clark . Edinburgh, 1998, 768 pp., £29.95.

Will we ever understand St. Paul? Even when Paul was writing to churches which may have consisted of only a few hundred people, there were disputes about what he meant. Paul himself is aware of the ambiguities of his words. He frequently offers possible misunderstandings of his teaching. There is the question of consistency. Is Paul simply erratic? Happily contradicting himself as suits? Then there is the problem of his development as a theologian. How can we be sure of Paul's thought when it is continually developing in the course of his life.

James G. D. Dunn in his book *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* has tried to take hold of Paul's theology on a scale which has been not been attempted for generations. He insists from the outset that in the swirling possibilities of Pauline theology there is a basic consistency, a 'coherence within contingency', using J. Beker's phrase. Central to any study of Paul must be Romans as the one letter which Paul was able to write while free from the pressure of circumstances. As for the ambiguities of Paul, he is able to make use of this by engaging in a dialogue with Paul from various stances while aware that Paul himself is engaging in a varieties of dialogues with different groups. The illusion of the impersonal commentator on any bible text is long since passed and Dunn makes no attempt to hide his own personality and concerns in this dialogue with Paul. The sense that he, in reading Paul at any one point, is making a choice about how to read Paul pervades the book and this is not the least of its strengths

Where Dunn is at his most traditional is in his section headings. This is an advantage for those who would use the book as a textbook. The standard themes of Pauline theology are tackled in this book in detail but with great verve. The individual sections are grouped into chapter headings which themselves help to locate Paul's theology in the context of general theology. For example, Chapter 7 on the Church contains sections on the Body of Christ, Ministry and Authority and the Lord's supper. The sections too are subdivided. The whole book is enclosed by two chapters which are Prologue and Epilogue to the whole work. This helps to overcome the temptation to read the individual chapters without reference to the whole project of engaging in this dialogue with Paul. The sections will undoubtedly figure on the reading lists of undergraduates for many years to come.

Despite its usefulness as a textbook, a great deal of the value of the book is in the way that Dunn manages to revive these basic Pauline concepts which have been so much discussed to so little purpose over the years. In Chapter 14, the debate over justification by faith is given a new spin by being seen in terms of a relationship to God. God here means both the God of the Old Testament, or better, the God of the Covenant and the God of Jesus Christ. This God in the

context of Paul's concerns can also be seen as God the Father. The two sections after the section on justification by faith are on participation in Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. These three notions which are clearly linked by a logical development are also shown to be based on a fundamentally Trinitarian theology, although Dunn does lay great emphasis on the fundamental monotheism of Paul. This Trinitarian theology only appears with the fundamental transition which Paul believes Christ has made. So the old hackneyed concept of justification by faith is now seen in quite a new light. It is now the pivotal concept which both looks back to the central problem of the Old Testament which is how the Jews could relate to their God and looks forward to the new way of relation through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit.

This concern is related to Paul's life. For Dunn, Paul is a convert not from Judaism but from a specific form of Judaism which sees the law as separating the Jew from the Gentile. This is Dunn's explanation of why Christ brings the Law to an end (Romans 10:4). The law is no longer a means of separation as the Pharisees had regarded it. The works of the law were works which maintained this separation but now there is no separation in Christ. So the law, seen in this narrow sense, is now supplanted. Dunn is thereby able to explain why Paul can attack works of the Law while praising good works. An immediate implication of this view is that Paul's theology of Israel is seen as absolutely central to his thought. The mystery of Israel is bound up with Paul's eschatology. There is a tension here, an eschatological tension, as Section 7 of Chapter 18 is called. Invoking the concept of tension in biblical exegesis is very dangerous. Too often it is used to cover up what is simply inconsistency in the interpretation. Yet it is difficult to avoid seeing Paul's way of thought as having its own inbuilt tension. This tension revolves around the way in which redemption has been accomplished and yet still needs to be worked out. Israel acts as the great sign of this need to wait for the fullness of redemption. Until Israel is brought into the fold and its historic mission accomplished, then redemption has not happened. Yet it is not necessary to participate in the life of Israel to be saved.

The final section of the book deals with ethics, seen as the nature of daily Christian life lived out against this eschatological tension. The church consists of tiny communities struggling to survive yet is the heir to the kingdom. Paul's teaching is always bound up with the particularities of the Church's life. Dunn sees rather more sensitivity in Paul's approach than many others have. It is in his ethical teaching that we find Paul's personality coming to the fore — a personality which arouses us to this day. It is this personality which has produced this excellent book.

EUAN MARLEY OP