

Power in Weakness: Paul's Transformed Vision for Ministry, Timothy G. Gombis, Eerdmans, 2021 (ISBN 978-0-8028-7125-1), xvi + 168 pp., pb \$25

Power in Weakness, authored by Timothy Gombis, professor of New Testament at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary and author of several other texts, including *The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), offers a 'pastoral reflection on the New Testament portrayal of Paul as pastor with the aim of developing wisdom for contemporary church leaders' (p. 5). Gombis explains in the introduction that he is writing a text specifically for contemporary pastors. Because 'this is a book for pastors', Gombis provides 'few footnotes' and does 'not engage with the views of other scholars' (p. 5). Additionally, Gombis decides 'to read all of Paul's letters as informing his pastoral approach [so] that we actually see Paul doing the work of pastoral ministry' (p. 10).

After this introduction, Gombis divides *Power in Weakness* into eight chapters. In the first chapter ('Paul's Unconverted Ministry', pp. 13–33), Gombis describes Paul's pre-Christian pursuit of resurrection as a Pharisee (pp. 15–7). Gombis warns that pastors can fall into the same coercive traps that Paul had used before his conversion, making use of 'verbal violence' and 'breathing out threats' (p. 20). Like Paul, who says about his former past that he was zealous ' "for the traditions of [his] ancestors" (Gal. 1:14)' (p. 25), Gombis warns contemporary pastors about the 'tribalization' of evangelicalism (p. 26). He also cautions that the 'celebrity pastor' is one sign of this 'destructive tribalism' (p. 27). In Chapter 2, the 'Conversion of Paul's Resurrection Imagination' (pp. 34–49), Gombis focuses on the transformation of Paul's understanding of resurrection, primarily examining the words about the death and resurrection of Jesus in Phil. 2:6–11. Contemporary 'communities that want to experience resurrection power must be cruciform' (p. 49). In Chapter 3 ('Conversion of Paul's Ministry Imagination', pp. 50–65), Gombis considers the relevance for current pastors of Paul continuing to call himself a sinner in Rom. 5 (p. 53) and of Paul's cultivation of 'a personal presence of weakness' (p. 58).

Gombis develops this notion in Chapter 4 ('Pastoral Ministry in Cosmic Perspective', pp. 66–86) by stating that for 'Paul, the world was held in the enslaving grip of evil cosmic powers' who maintained an 'oppressive rule over creation' (p. 66). The rulers of this age consist of 'Satan, God's main cosmic enemy' (p. 69), 'the powers and authorities' who 'in some mysterious way [are] allied with Satan' and who 'took on bodies and had sexual relations with women' (p. 70), as well as 'several other cosmic invaders that have hijacked God's good world – Sin, Death, and Flesh' (p. 71). 'Discerning pastors', writes Gombis, should therefore 'constantly

resist ministry modes that draw upon and embody the logic of this world' (p. 81).

Following this, Gombis considers the contemporary relevance of Paul's rebuke of believers in Galatia who fell prey to image and discusses Paul's decision to 'boast in his weakness' in 2 Cor. 10–13 (Chapter 5, 'Cruciform Ministry and Image Maintenance', pp. 87–102). In the next chapter ('Cruciformity and Credential Accumulation', pp. 103–18), after considering Paul's impressive list of his credentials as a Jew in Phil. 3:4–6, Gombis addresses contemporary temptations for pastors to construct their social identity, such as the size of their churches (p. 106), their academic degrees (pp. 106–7), or pastoral introductions at ministry conferences (p. 107). In Chapter 7 ('Cruciformity, Passivity, and Taking the Initiative', pp. 119–31), Gombis suggests that since the 'entire New Testament speaks' about cruciformity 'from beginning to end,' 'pastors can preach about this reality from Matthew to Revelation' (p. 120).

Gombis next addresses 'Cruciform Ministry Postures' in Chapter 8 (pp. 132–47). Here, Gombis focuses on the Christian use of the word 'impact' (p. 132): 'The term *impact* has to do with forcefully coming into contact with something, which is a pretty violent understanding of how pastors relate to their churches' (pp. 132–3, emphasis in original). A footnote would have been helpful to support this definition. Because Gombis does not provide one, the reader must trust Gombis's definition. Gombis continues, 'Paul does not seek to impact his churches, nor even to influence them' (p. 133). According to Gombis, 'Paul is not forceful with his churches and does not portray pastoral ministry as something forceful – certainly not a set of tasks that have "impact" ' (p. 137, emphasis added). By arguing that 'impact' and 'influence' are violent, destructive terms, Gombis seems to contradict his own argument. For example, he says on pp. 123–4, 'Calls to repent may become more urgent and pastors must have the courage to warn sinning members that the church must be defined by its cruciform identity'. Similarly, Gombis observes that '[i]n the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul confronts the church' (p. 140). How do calls to repentance and confrontation differ from impact? After an epilogue (pp. 148–55) and a bibliographic essay (pp. 157–60), the text concludes with a subject index and Scripture index (pp. 161–8).

Gombis's *Power in Weakness* could have been improved in several ways. Most prominently was his avoidance of footnotes. Although I was disappointed not to see a single reference to any literature on 'weakness' in Pauline literature, I begrudgingly accepted Gombis's stated purpose and note the following about his use of footnotes: Over the course of the 162 pages, Gombis provides a total of 20 footnotes – 1 footnote every 8.1 pages. Moreover, Gombis does not provide any footnotes to support some of the controversial positions he takes on issues related to 'weakness' in Paul, such as his decision to examine the thirteen epistles written in Paul's name and Acts (p. 5), or his claim that Paul considers

Satan, Sin, Death, and Flesh – which are always capitalized in this book (cf. p. 7 n. 1) – as ‘cosmic actors’ constituting ‘the apocalyptic power alliance’ that fight against humanity (p. 7). Gombis states on p. 59 that God saves Jewish people as Jews. If I am not mistaken, even in a book written for pastors, each of these statements necessitates a footnote. Footnotes would have added credibility to such debated positions supported by Gombis.

The lack of footnotes was especially notable in Gombis’s discussion of Paul’s understanding of resurrection as a Pharisee (pp. 15–7). According to Gombis, the Pharisees understood resurrection as ‘God pouring out his life-giving presence upon the land and the holistic renewal of Israel’s national life – the restoration of flourishing at every level of society’ (p. 16; see also p. 6). Gombis thus provides one of many possible definitions of resurrection and offers a seemingly radical definition of it. That Gamble does not provide a single footnote to support this definition of resurrection is surprising and disappointing.

In Chapters 3, 6, and 7, Gombis does not provide a single footnote. In light of Gombis’s sporadic use of footnotes, perhaps he should have avoided footnotes altogether, or at the end of the respective chapter offered additional literature for further reading. Another – and in my opinion better – option would have been for Gamble to offer regular footnotes, citing recent authors who support his conclusion, mentioning differing interpretations of the respective issues, and citing New Testament verses that supported his position. This would have informed pastors of alternate positions that can be taken and would have given Gamble’s own viewpoints more credibility. In the text’s current form, one must continually assume that Gamble is aware of alternate positions and trust what he is saying.

An additional concern is Gombis’s various assumptions about pastoral ministry. Gombis presupposes that the Pauline epistles support the idea that some people are set apart for full-time pastoral ministry, and others are not. Although the letters that bear Paul’s name have much to say about pastoral ministry (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28–30; Eph. 4:11; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Tim. 3:1–7), Gombis never considers these verses. Near the end of his text, Gombis recognizes that the two-fold categorization of professional pastors and ‘ordinary people in the church’ is a problem (p. 139). I fear that Gombis has fallen into the very trap he identifies in his text. Furthermore, and the more dangerous assumption, Gombis believes that Paul was a ‘pastor of his churches’ (p. 5), rather than a church planter. To make such a statement, Gombis must first demonstrate that Paul was indeed a ‘pastor of his churches’. This, unfortunately, was never done in *Power in Weakness*.

Power in Weakness thus offers contemporary pastors a concise analysis of one author’s understanding of ‘weakness’ in the thirteen New Testament epistles bearing Paul’s name and in the Book of Acts. For a

more thorough introduction to the Pauline concept of weakness with relevant footnotes, readers might also consider reading, among others, David Alan Black's *Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Astheneia and its Cognates in the Pauline Literature*, 2nd ed (Pickwick, 2012).

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The Oxford Handbook of Dante, Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, Francesca Southerden (eds), Oxford University Press, 2021 (ISBN 978-0-19-882074-1), xxxv + 741 pp., hb £125

Dante often expresses wonder in his writings, yet in few passages does he express amazement as intense as he does at the beginning of *Paradiso* 19. Here, the poet says that what he has to portray has never been spoken, written, or imagined. What so amazes Dante is the fact that the Eagle of Justice he encounters in the Heaven of Jupiter – composed of a multitude of blessed human beings – should speak in the singular given that its meaning is in the plural. On the cover of the *Oxford Handbook of Dante* is an image of the Eagle that so amazes Dante. This is fitting. Through the editorial vision that has shaped it – which as the editors explain in their Introduction was consciously shaped by their desire to bring together as wide a variety of scholarly voices as possible – the *Handbook* generates an amazement similar to that expressed by Dante. Indeed, Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden have offered us a volume that stands out in a special way amidst the many other excellent publications produced in 2021 in commemoration of the 700th anniversary of Dante's death.

It is fitting in the present context to start from Dante's Eagle of Justice also because it is through its representation in the *Commedia* that Dante raises some of the most compelling theological questions that animate his work and that reach well beyond it. The most pressing of these are about divine justice itself. Is it equally and fairly distributed to everyone? If one has been excluded through no fault of one's own from direct contact with Christian teaching, how can it be just that one is thereby excluded from salvation? The response Dante receives to these questions from the Eagle is disarming. The Eagle tells Dante that there is no salvation if not through faith in Christ *and* that he is mistaken in thinking some human beings are simply excluded from salvation. The *Commedia* does not offer a definitive theological solution to the paradoxical tensions generated