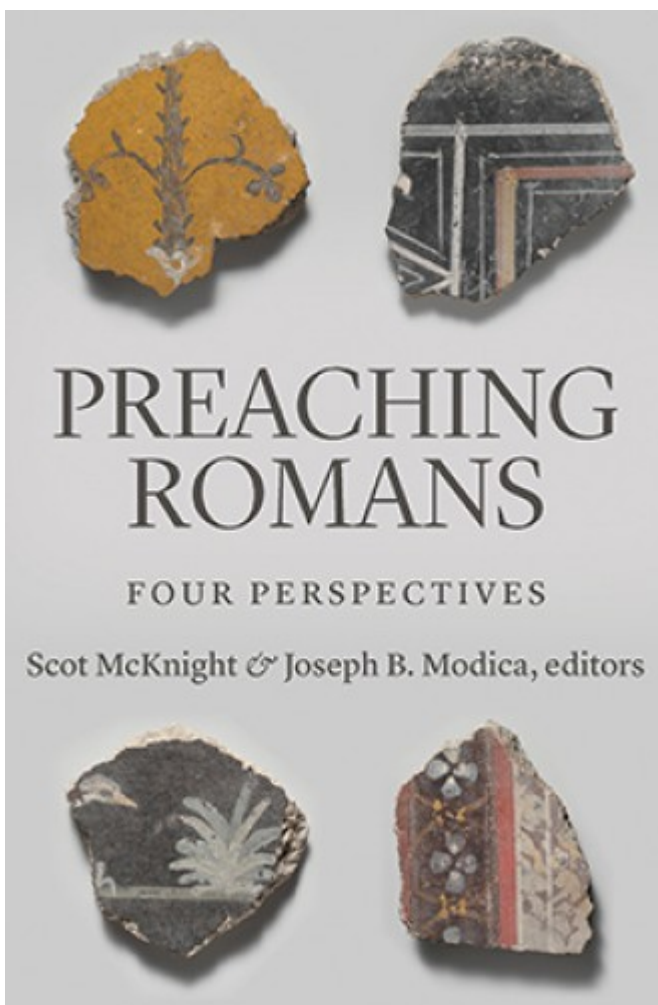


Four views of Paul's letter to the Romans

In *Preaching Romans*, a range of scholars present their perspectives in complementary ways.

by [Jessica Young](#) in the [December 18, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Preaching Romans

Four Perspectives

Edited by Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica
Eerdmans

Every week—in addition to counseling sessions, hospital visits, staff meetings, and budget reviews—pastors are expected to design a sermon that engages scripture with theology for a congregation with a vast array of experiences, interests, and educational backgrounds. In this work, *Preaching Romans* is invaluable for both preachers and their congregations.

Edited by Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, the book is structured around four streams of Pauline interpretation: the Reformational perspective, the new perspective, the apocalyptic perspective, and the participationist perspective. With essays by biblical scholars and sermons by prominent clergy, the book puts each of the four perspectives into conversation with Paul's letter to the Romans.

The *Reformational perspective* (which is also known as the traditional or Lutheran perspective) focuses on four theological features of Paul's letters: the sinfulness of every human, the inadequacy of good works to bring about righteousness, atonement for sin through Jesus' death and resurrection, and righteousness by the grace of God through faith in Jesus. Interpreters using this approach tend to see in Romans the juxtaposition of human sinfulness, magnified by the law, with the saving grace of God through Jesus.

The *new perspective* is shaped by scholars responding to what they perceive as the supersessionist tendencies of the traditional reading, which arise from a misunderstanding of Paul's delineation of law and grace. In this line of thought, people like E. P. Sanders and James Dunn seek to recover Paul's own Judaism and restore a more historically accurate interpretation of Jewish law in order to combat the false dichotomy between Judaism's "legalism" and Christianity's grace. According to this line of thought, Paul isn't critiquing the law. He's critiquing those who insist that Gentiles must follow the law and, in essence, become Jews, in order to be grafted into the covenant.

The *apocalyptic perspective* focuses on the revelation of God through Jesus, a theological insistence that's particularly significant for interpreters influenced by Karl Barth. Barth was reacting, in part, to theological foundationalism with its claims of self-established truth criteria, the dangers of which he saw in the German church's cooperation with National Socialism in the 1930s. Those who read Romans

from within this perspective concentrate on the promise of God's future victory as revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The *participationist perspective* focuses on Paul's use of the phrase "in Christ" and seeks to understand what it means to participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Interpretations of Romans in this tradition tend to emphasize transformation over belief or credal affirmation.

One strength of this book is that its contributors deliberately and respectfully acknowledge multiple points of view. For example, Stephen Westerholm, a staunch proponent of the Reformational perspective, maintains his position while also attending to the concerns of the new perspective. He acknowledges the progress new perspective scholars have made in addressing the supersessionist tendencies that pervade traditional Christian scholarship. Westerholm attempts to reclaim the traditional Lutheran perspective from its supersessionist misinterpreters by insisting that Paul does not attack Jewish law. Rather, Paul argues that no one is righteous by the law's standards, and therefore all are in need of the grace and forgiveness that come through Jesus.

In McKnight's chapter and accompanying sermon, both of which represent the new perspective, he puts Romans in historical context before applying Paul's message to the American Christian church with its proclivities toward defining insiders and outsiders. McKnight shows why the new perspective is relevant not only as a scholarly venture but also for a reorientation of the church's understanding of Paul. As he writes, "reconciliation needs to begin in the church, and preaching Romans is the place to start."

Preaching Romans takes a productive step in the direction of such reconciliation by creating a space for range of scholars to present their perspectives as complementary rather than oppositional. The book offers a method for listening to and learning.

If churches can become sanctuaries for this kind of honest, introspective conversation, they will be model communities that exemplify how to love one another as we seek the truth. As McKnight puts it, Paul's vision encourages us to "mix everyone together, let each person be who she or he is, let each group throb with its natural diversity, but let's all sit at the table and indwell the unity we have in Christ."