Some good press for Paul

Biblical scholar Susan Grove Eastman brings the apostle into conversation with today’s world.

by Anthony B. Robinson in the March 2025 issue
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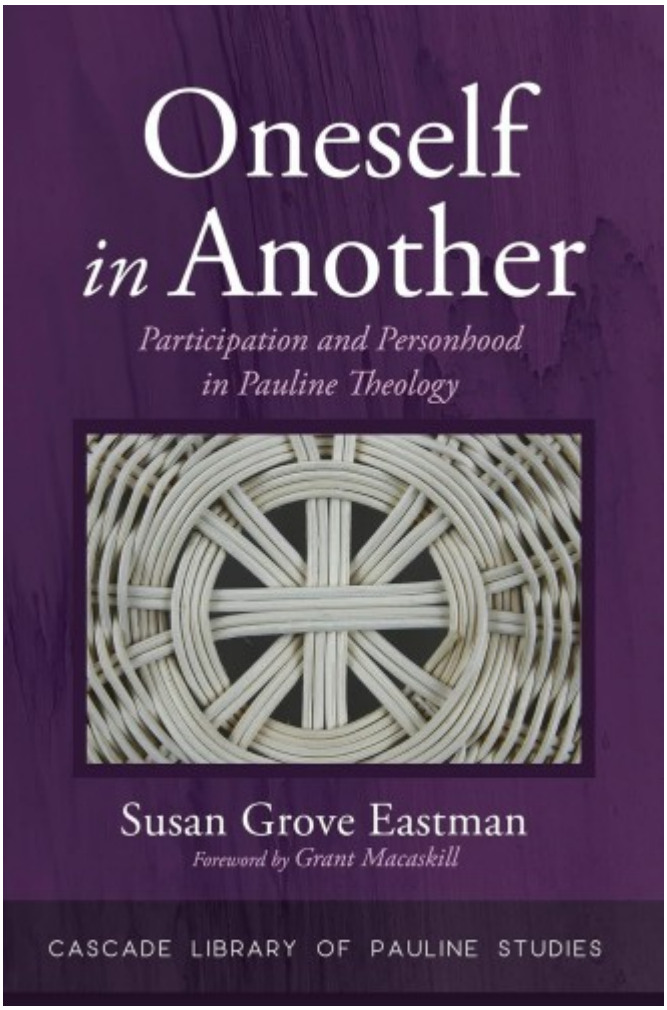
In Review



Oneself in Another

Participation and Personhood in Pauline Theology

By Susan Grove Eastman
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When Susan Grove Eastman told a fellow conference attendee that she was working on a book on Paul's letters, the response was perhaps unsurprising: "All I know about Paul is his bad press."

Indeed, in recent years Paul has gotten a great deal of bad press, particularly as mainline churches and clergy have highlighted Jesus as a teacher and moral example at the expense of Christ as Lord. It seems almost a badge of honor among recent seminary graduates to diss Paul. I suspect a lot of this resistance comes from people who have never really read Paul or studied the work of his more sympathetic interpreters.

Eastman is not just a sympathetic interpreter of Paul; she is a person whose life has been changed by a deep reading of Paul's letters. "They have," she writes, "taken me captive, captured my attention, enthralled me, engrossed me, and laid claim to me, with an urgency that exceeds mere 'academic' curiosity." As one who, like Eastman, has experienced the power of Paul's words—words that captivate me, quicken my pulse, and take my breath away—I am grateful for her resistance to contemporary and conventional wisdom's dismissals of the apostle.

Oneself in Another is a collection of essays Eastman wrote between 2008 and 2022, now published in one volume as part of the Cascade Library of Pauline Studies. These essays arise out of the school of apocalyptic interpretation of the New Testament, which can be traced to Ernst Kasemann and J. Louis Martyn. Eastman studied with the latter at Union Theological Seminary. Besides Eastman, other inheritors and interpreters of this perspective include such influential scholars and preachers as Fleming Rutledge, Douglas Harink, Beverly Gaventa, Paul Zahl, and Philip Ziegler.

Perhaps even more important than her defiance of Paul's bad press is Eastman's resistance to attempts to confine Paul to the first-century context. Eastman seeks to gain "a fresh hearing" for Paul's thought by putting him in conversation with "new interlocutors beyond the guild of New Testament scholarship." This results in fascinating essays which bring Paul into conversation with the horror of Rwandan

genocide, the contemporary use of psychiatric medication, and how we understand people on the autism spectrum.

The collection of essays is divided into two parts: “Exegetical and Theological Investigations” and “Pauline Theology in Theory and Practice.” What holds them together is Eastman’s core argument that Paul’s theological anthropology is altogether different from the individualistic interpretations of his work that have characterized modern preaching, whether of the mainline or evangelical tribes.

Conventional use of Paul has accepted modern understanding of the individual as autonomous and isolated. Accordingly, interpreters understand experiences like repentance, justification, and salvation in terms of an individual’s interior private life, saying little about the social and relational dimensions of life in Christ. Eastman argues persuasively that this construal of Paul tells us a lot more about us and our modern individualism than it does about Paul and his theology.

For example, she writes that modern interpreters describe the experience of the Holy Spirit in such a way that it “would appear to be something individual, private, inside one’s own subjective sense of oneself.” However, “interpersonal experience is part and parcel of Paul’s participatory anthropology, which renders boundaries between the self and others permeable without being fully dissolved.”

All of this has obvious implications for the church, which too often loses itself in a wholly individualized version of Christianity. This is even more true now, as many churches wrestle with the aftermath of the COVID adaptation to online worship. The gathering of the body of Christ has become virtual along with being optional. While Eastman does not comment on this particular development, she writes that “to be ‘in Christ’ is to be in relationship with people in the midst of whom Christ dwells through his Spirit, and thereby to share experiences not only with Christ but also with one another.”

When Eastman turns explicitly to more contemporary challenges, such as the use of psychiatric medication or our understanding of autism, she continues to carry forward a Pauline anthropology, which insists that the self never exists on its own. For Eastman, the goal of psychiatric treatment ought not to be producing self-determining “free-standing, self-sustaining individuals who can live ‘on their own,’” but rather relational connection and interdependence.

This framework also has implications for how we understand aging, which is a topic Eastman might usefully engage in future work. How often do we hear aging people say that their goal is to “be independent” and to avoid “being dependent on anyone,” especially their own children? Paul, mediated through Eastman, might ask, “Who taught you to think this way?”

While Eastman writes with an ear and heart open to contemporary society, this book’s audience will likely be New Testament scholars and scholarly preachers. One wishes that she might reach a wider and more popular audience—and possibly the kind of person who says, “All I know about Paul is his bad press.”