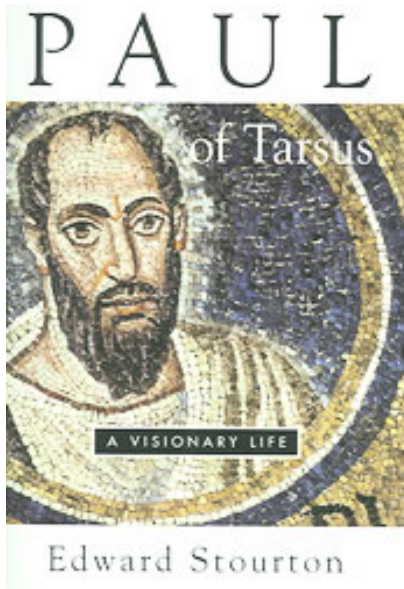


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**Stourton, Edward**

*Paul of Tarsus: A Visionary Life*

Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 2005. Pp. vii + 215. Hardcover.  
\$24.00. ISBN 1587680327.

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In his book on Paul, Edward Stourton takes his readers on a journey in Paul's footsteps. He offers a deliberately nonscholarly approach to Paul and presents his readers with a journalistic account of the life of the famous missionary. The book is lively and complete as well as written in a very agreeable style.

Without ever entering into detailed and complicated scholarly explanations, Stourton manages to touch upon all the major questions of Pauline scholarship and upon all the problems related to Paul's theology and legacy (see below for the table of contents). He discusses Acts as a source for our knowledge of Paul and gives clear preference to the authentic letters, without discarding Acts for information about Paul's life, if carefully examined. On questions hotly debated, such as Paul's position on homosexuality or on the role of women in church and at home, Stourton exposes Paul's faults and the faults of his interpreters (both on the Catholic and on the Protestant side) while at the same time presenting Paul's context and explaining the origins of his positions. He condemns the apostle for his harsh judgments but insists that, at heart, Paul was a compassionate person who was opposed to church regulations and laws. He also takes up the question of Paul's relationship to Peter and Jesus and remarks that, if Peter has to be credited with direct relationship to Jesus, creative and theological genius were definitely on Paul's side: it

“does not make Paul the founder of Christianity, but it does make him the creative force who defined its essence as we understand it today” (185).

Stourton does not shy away from delicate questions such as the relationship of Paul’s writings and their interpretations to Judaism and Islam. He gives a fair hearing to all sides involved, questioning experts in Judaism and Islam as well as in Christianity, all in an effort to understand the role Paul has played in the relations between these three major religions. Finally, he also tries to assess current Catholicism’s ties to the apostle. All of the discussions are lead with rigor and clear-headedness and lead to careful and oftentimes spirited statements.

In addition to the place given to debates around Paul, the life of the apostle is also described. In this case, Acts is often taken as a source of information, but always *cum grano salis*. Stourton describes the places that Paul visited and gives a good account of his missionary travels and of the way Paul worked and lived. When trying to reconstruct that aspect of Paul, Stourton oftentimes questions persons living in the places where Paul originally dwelled. These interviews are taken seriously, but, at the same time, Stourton does not lack critical insight, engaging in interaction with past and current scholarship on Paul. The result is a very lively picture of Paul emphasizing the relevance of the apostle for today.

Stourton’s book is remarkably enjoyable to read. It is well-written, oftentimes funny, and full of interesting anecdotes. One feels the penmanship of the journalist behind it. It is not a scholarly work (nor does it want to be!), but it is an excellent and well-informed introduction to Paul suited for church and nonchurch people alike.

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