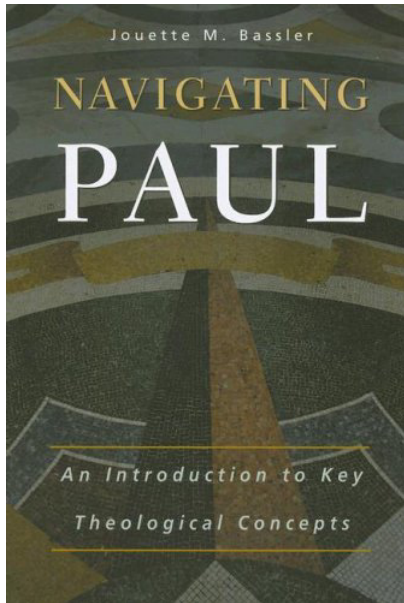


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**Bassler, Jouette M.**

***Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts***

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007. Pp. x + 127.  
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From the pen of one of the preeminent interpreters of the apostle Paul comes this accessible introduction to several key theological concepts found in Paul's letters. Standing somewhere between a glossary of Paul's theological vocabulary and an outright introduction to selected aspects of the apostle's thought, Jouette M. Bassler's *Navigating Paul* provides readers with seven short chapters on the following topics: "Grace: Probing Its Limits" (1–9); "Paul and the Jewish Law" (11–21); "Faith" (23–33); "In Christ: Mystical Reality or Mere Metaphor?" (35–47); "The Righteousness of God" (49–69); "The Future of 'Israel': Who Is Israel?" (71–85); and "Then Comes the End...': The Parousia and the Resurrection of the Dead" (87–96).

Readers familiar with Bassler's earlier work on Pauline theology, particularly her noteworthy methodological contribution to the Pauline Theology Group of the Society of Biblical Literature ("Paul's Theology: Whence and Whither?" in *1 and 2 Corinthians* [vol. 2 of *Pauline Theology*; ed. David M. Hay; SBLSymS 22; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1993], 3–17), will know that Bassler has long contended that attention to Paul's activity of "theologizing" in diverse, contingent circumstances should take precedence over the attempt to identify a core set of doctrines at the center of the apostle's thought. Thus, *Navigating Paul* is not an introduction to Paul's theology as such.

Indeed, Bassler, Professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, remarks in the preface:

I am not at all certain that [Paul] had “a theology,” that is, a reasonably well ordered and integrated set of beliefs. Even if he did, I am not convinced that it would have remained constant over the course of his tumultuous life or that we could hope to recover it from the few and focused letters that remain of his correspondence. Clearly, though, Paul did *practice* theology. That is, he thought through the problems afflicting his churches in light of the gospel; and in doing so he referred frequently to concepts of obvious theological importance: grace, faith, righteousness, and the like. (ix)

This book offers essays on seven of those theological concepts that Bassler deems most important for understanding Paul’s complex thought.

Chapter 1, an earlier version of which was published in the journal *Interpretation* 57.1 (2003): 24–32, explores Paul’s concept of grace. Drawing on E. P. Sanders’s seminal discussion of covenantal nomism in first-century Judaism, Bassler opens by locating Paul’s understanding of grace in its Jewish context. (This section might have been strengthened had it referenced James Harrison’s important study *Paul’s Language of Grace in Its Graeco-Roman Context* [WUNT 2/172; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003], which may not have been available at the time Bassler’s article was first written.) She argues that, while many of Paul’s statements about God’s grace fit well within the context of first-century Judaism, Paul did develop the concept in distinct, Christ-centered ways. In particular, “Paul had a more pessimistic view of human nature than most of his Jewish contemporaries, evoking a more powerful image of divine grace” (3). The chapter concludes with sections on Paul’s view of the grace of human suffering and the relationship between grace and law, a topic picked up in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 ably covers the thorny topic of Paul’s statements about the Jewish law. Bassler concentrates her discussion on Paul’s view of circumcision, on his use of the term “works of the law,” and on the differences in the nature and function of the law as it is characterized in both Galatians and Romans. Bassler’s balanced treatment in this chapter is both appreciative and critical of the so-called “new perspective” on Paul. In general, Bassler is concerned not to allow “extratextual concerns about consistency, about preserving the truth of Christianity as the interpreter conceives it, [and] about anti-Semitic (or more correctly, anti-Jewish) consequences” to drive one’s exegesis of Paul’s rhetoric vis-à-vis the law.

Chapter 3 surveys Paul's concept of faith. Following a brief discussion of the semantic range of the *pist-* word group, Bassler addresses the Pauline distinction between faith and law (or more properly, "works of the law") and provides a thorough analysis of the *pistis Christou* debate that is sympathetic to the subjective reading. The chapter concludes with some thoughtful reflections on the theological significance of the view that humans are justified by Christ's faith. Reading *pistis Christou* as a subjective genitive, Bassler contends, has several implications: (1) it makes Jesus' humanity—in particular his obedience to and trust in God—"soteriologically significant"; (2) it shows that the narrative of Jesus' faithfulness in life and death is important to Paul, thus reconciling an apparent tension between the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles; and (3) it demonstrates that the so-called "juridical" and "participatory" models of salvation in Paul's letters are, in fact, complementary. One would be hard-pressed to find a more readable treatment of the *pistis Christou* debate for beginning students than the one proffered this chapter.

Chapter 4 presents a fine discussion of Paul's "in Christ" language. After setting the stage with reference to the works of Schweitzer, Deissmann, Käsemann, and Sanders, Bassler summarizes the Pauline phrases that intimate participation in Christ, focusing on the phrases "Christ in you/me," "in Christ," "baptized into Christ/Christ's death," and "crucified with Christ." In showing how important union with Christ is for Paul's thought, Bassler suggests that Paul was a kind of mystic, although not one whose mysticism compelled him to withdraw from the reality of this world. Indeed, this chapter frequently highlights the ethical implications that union with Christ held for members of the Pauline churches.

Chapter 5 concentrates on Paul's concept of the righteousness of God. The chapter opens with a background discussion of key texts in the Psalms and the Qumran literature in which that terminology is found. The bulk of the chapter then evaluates the meaning of the phrase "the righteousness of God" in Romans, with brief exegetical sections on 1:16–3:20, 3:21–4:25, and 10:1–4. Bassler summarizes Paul's understanding of *dikaïosynē theou* as follows:

Paul is convinced that God's righteousness is revealed in God's constancy, consistency, dependability, trustworthiness, and faithfulness. Sometimes he emphasizes God's consistent righteous justice; sometimes he emphasizes God's trustworthiness in fulfilling the promises to Abraham; and sometimes he emphasizes God's faithfulness to Israel. Paul's argument is inexorably moving toward the conclusion that God's righteousness is now active in Christ to include Gentiles in salvation, but along the way it "means" a number of things. (65)

The chapter is punctuated with an excursus on justification—a move that reveals that Bassler is not convinced that justification lies at the center of Paul’s own theology.

Chapter 6 considers the future of Israel in Paul’s thought. Bassler begins with a summary discussion of several texts that do not, in her view, shed much light on Paul’s true view of Israel: 1 Thess 2:14–16; Phil 3:2–3; 1 Cor 10; 2 Cor 3; and Gal 4:21–31; 6:16. Romans 9–11 is the place to which one must turn for Paul’s fullest and clearest discussion of Israel, although these chapters, too, are filled with ambiguity. After summarizing the major interpretative options, Bassler concludes, “Paul’s view of the future of Israel all comes down to this passage in Romans that resolutely resists a definitive interpretation.... The vague allusiveness of Paul’s language allows—indeed, almost requires—the presuppositions of the reader to take charge of the interpretation” (84).

Chapter 7 ends the volume with a synopsis of Paul’s view of the parousia and the resurrection of the dead. After a brief discussion of views of the afterlife in several Hellenistic Jewish writings, Bassler provides sections on Paul’s view of Christ’s return in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, on his concept of the soul in 2 Cor 4:16–5:10, on his desire “to depart and be with Christ” in Phil 1:21–24, and on the relationship between the cosmos and the parousia in Rom 8:18–25.

This book is characterized by both careful exegesis of the relevant texts and a very clear and balanced presentation of the general consensus of Pauline scholarship on those issues it addresses. There is, therefore, very little with which to quibble in this excellent introduction. One might, however, raise a few questions about what is *not* included in this slim volume. A book on Paul’s “key theological concepts” that provides only passing mention of Paul’s view of the Holy Spirit or Paul’s understanding of human and cosmic sin neglects some concepts of fundamental theological importance for Paul. One might also have wished for a full chapter on Paul’s concept of the church, although Bassler does impart some perceptive comments on life in the “body of Christ” when she raises the question of what it would have meant for the female members of Paul’s congregations “to be told that their female bodies were members of the male Christ” (45).

Bassler, of course, recognizes the limited nature of her task in this present volume, and she does not aim for comprehensive coverage. This book is intended, instead, to offer beginning students “navigational guides to the more difficult currents of [Paul’s] thought” (x). Toward that end, Bassler serves as a most capable coxswain.