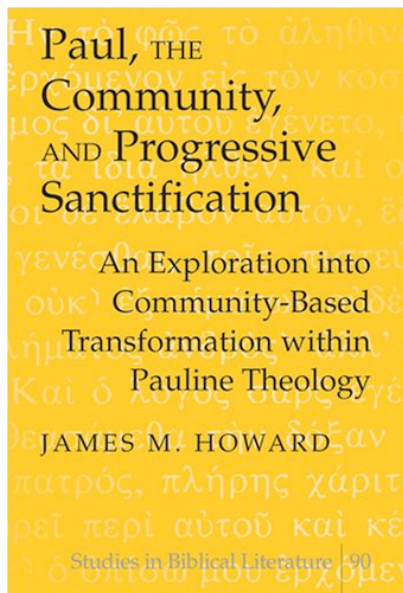


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Howard, James M.

Paul, the Community, and Progressive Sanctification: An Exploration into Community-Based Transformation within Pauline Theology

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This book is a reworking of Howard's dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary in 2004. Howard has rewritten this work to be understood by a more popular audience. He suggested that Paul believed that the community was an essential part of an individual's spiritual formation. At the end of this work he states:

At its core, this study asked the question, "Is it possible to grow to maturity in Christ without the believing community?" The answer, found in the preceding pages, is "no." In a very real way, believers need one another. No longer is it simply desirable to have mutually edifying relationships—it is essential. No longer is it optional to belong to a Christian community—it is essential. And finally, no longer is it a dream to have lasting and significant impact in the lives of others and the world—it is essential. This is the way God designed it and Paul envisioned it. (187)

Howard introduces this work by examining the current thought in Christianity that individuals are able to develop spiritually without a community. For Howard, this theory is both false and unscriptural. Many believers hold that the community is important but not necessary for a Christian's spiritual growth. The author, however, indicates that the biblical texts do not support this view.

Chapter 2 is a discussion of various approaches to progressive sanctification. Howard believes that spiritual maturity is a process and chooses the term “progressive sanctification” to capture the spiritual growth and development process. Howard suggests that sanctification/holiness is an ongoing process where the believer is transformed into the image of God/Jesus. For Howard, this process best describes the role of the community in forming the Christian. In this chapter Howard overviews and critiques the Wesleyan, Reformed, Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Keswick views of spiritual transformation. He finds that the Keswick view supports progressive sanctification more than the others. However, Howard does provide a balanced overview of these Christian church patterns of spiritual development. He next discusses individuals such as Larry Crabb, Stanley Grenz, and David Peterson and their concepts of progressive sanctification. Howard, however, points out that all of these individuals and theological concepts neglect the supreme value of the community in an individual’s transformation. At best, the community is viewed as a part of this process but not a driving force. While all acknowledge that the Holy Spirit matures the Christian, these views fail to mention that the Holy Spirit (which lives as community) uses community as a vehicle for this transformation.

In the next three chapters Howard weaves a theme through the Old and New Testaments of God’s plan for the individual’s spiritual transformation. Holiness is the call for the follower of God/Jesus who initiates this desire for humans to be like the divine creator of the universe. As God/Jesus initiates relationship and the path to sanctification, the community is drawn to the *imago Dei*. Howard next suggests that the community is to express solidarity/unity within the community as well as to those outside the covenant. This solidarity was expressed through the uniqueness of God/Jesus, the law/gospel, and the temple/incarnation.

Next the author discusses Paul’s focus on these three themes (solidarity/uniqueness, law, and temple) in the Pauline texts. For Paul, Jesus was the true Messiah who drew people to himself to prepare a unique people in a diverse world. The community was called to uphold this solidarity by resisting sin or disciplining those overcome by it. The law of Christ was a call to holiness, and the church was a temple of the indwelling spirit. Individuals were called to transform into God’s image through this relationship and encounter with Jesus.

Chapter 7 offers a final overview of Paul’s letters and his support of community. Galatians is a call to reflect the fruit of the Spirit and to express God’s love and holiness to the surrounding community. Outreach and sexual purity in a decaying culture are calls to progressive sanctification in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The Corinthian epistles suggest that unity and solidarity are a method for the church to challenge individuals who are putting the community at risk because of their selfishness and greed, to work within the

community group. Spiritual gifts are to be exercised to build up the church, not the individual. In Romans Paul promotes unity through love that is sincere and caring. With regard to the Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon), Howard suggests that the church's mission manifests the love and holiness of the community and God. In the Pastoral Epistles godly leaders are developed through their involvement in community.

Howard's conclusions are that solidarity was originally conceived of in Israel but is manifested through the nature and life of Jesus. Second, while the spiritual reality is found in Jesus and the community as uniquely Christian, the experience of this reality exists only in community. Finally, progressive sanctification and transformation happens within and through the community of faith.

This book is a valuable resource for clergy who need to address the value of community with themselves and their communities. While many members of faith communities believe that their spiritual growth is an individual relationship between them and their God, Howard believes that this promotes an incomplete transformation. Believers need to understand and embrace the value of community in their social and spiritual lives. However, the community is not just an important piece of progressive sanctification; it is a necessary component.