

Review

Transformation: The Heart of Paul's Gospel. By David A. deSilva. Snapshots, edited by Michael F. Bird, vol. 1. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014. x + 124 pp. Paper \$15.95. ISBN 9781577995852.

David deSilva's *Transformation* is a book written to address the common approaches taken to understand the significance of Paul's letters in regard to Christian living. deSilva notes that common statements given by Christian witnesses, such as, "If you were to die tonight, you would go to heaven," miss the overarching ethics mentioned by Paul in his letters (1). In its totality, statements like these fail to realize the awesome provision made by God in God's actions of "reconciling, restoring, and rescuing" humanity from the consequences of rebelling against God's rule (1). deSilva suggests, rather, that, "God offers you the means to become reconciled with him and to become a new person who will want and love and do what is pleasing to him because the spirit of his Son will live in you and change you" (2). In a society that often diminishes the meaning and significance of Christian identity, deSilva offers the goal of taking a different look at Paul's gospel, which magnifies Paul's emphasis on the "transformation of the individual, the community of faith, and the cosmos itself as God's goal for God's saving action" (5).

Chapter one is titled, "Foundations for a Broader Understanding of Paul's Gospel of Transformation." In this chapter, deSilva seeks to deconstruct the common usage of the words "justification" and "sanctification." He suggests that although these terms may serve as helpful categories, the common understanding of a "not guilty" verdict (justification) and holiness by way of sanctification may actually "constrain our understanding of Paul's writings rather than facilitate our encounter with Paul's own conceptualization of the gospel" (7). Salvation in Paul's view leans more to the physical action of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. This transformation results in a real, life-altering, shift in the way one relates to God and to one another. deSilva notes that Paul uses the language of transformation as his goal or overarching purpose for his converts in no fewer than four of his letters (12).

God establishes and marks the people of God to be changed and transformed to a new life, which in turn manifests itself through the people of God to the world. In this way, there is a distinct necessity for the people of God to actually be changed people. deSilva emphasizes this necessity by contrasting God's impartiality toward the Jews, God's chosen people. He then proposes the question, based on Romans 2, of why it would be any different for Christians (17). Notably, deSilva is denouncing a sort of "double standard" that rests on a mere belief verses the call to adhere to a real change in character. deSilva writes, "What the gospel cannot mean is this: When God comes to

judge the world, God will treat you as righteous when you are not; you're saved from being judged on that day no matter what you do, how you live, for whom you live; Jesus' righteousness is enough to get you off the hook with God; God expects nothing from you" (19). The right characterization of Christians, then, should be that of "faith putting itself to work through love" (29). deSilva's overarching point is made to suggest that the life humans have between conversion and eternity has eternal significance and consequence. He says, "What we do today, tomorrow, and the day after has everlasting significance" (38). The "good news" presented in Paul's writings affirm that through God's grace humans are brought into right relationship with God and God's righteous standards; thus, Christians are transformed into what God can "affirm and acquit all by God's initiative" (43).

Chapter 2 is entitled, "The Gospel Means the Transformation of the Individual: You Are Free to Become a New Person in Christ." This chapter is intended to assess, more closely, the ramification of being brought into "right alignment" to God. deSilva captures the meaning of grace, not in the fact that it is given freely or is unearned, but that God goes to such a degree of generosity toward his creation who is hostile and disobedient to God. God, through grace, offers the act of forgiveness, atonement, and reconciliation to capture the "fresh start" that characterized the good news of Paul's gospel. deSilva rightly captures the sense in which believers are in actuality being saved from who they once were. In this way, Christians are saved from themselves. He writes, "What people have been saved from, is what they formerly were They are saved to become something new, people with Spirit directed practices" (49). Salvation, then, is to be practiced in doing good to others. "Christ's purpose in giving himself for us was to make us a particular kind of people, a people like him, giving ourselves over to God to do the good works that God wishes to do in this world through us (51). Because of God's intended purposes in the world, God empowers believers to accomplish his tasks through the Holy Spirit, which "enables" believers' victory over sin. To walk in the Spirit, means to make "eternal investments" rather than temporal investments according to the rules of this world. deSilva notes, "Thinking that this life is all we have is in many ways the power source for our self-centered impulses and desires" (64). The final stages of transformation speaks to the eternal aspect of the transformed individual; physical death, in this manner, does not signify the end. Contrarily, the transformed individual will live eternally.

Chapter 3 is entitled, "The Gospel Means the Transformation of Community: You Are Free to Relate to One Another in New Ways." God, in God's transformation of God's people, has gathered all believers into the body or family of God. This is expressed in the term *ekklesia* (assembly). This identifier suggests the change in relationships of how believers relate to one another and with the world. deSilva offers, "The image of social group as a single body was intended to help people move beyond seeing one another as a threat to their own thriving and their own enjoyment of limited goods and to see one another as co-contributors to one another's thriving" (70). In this way, believers should

be dependent on one another for the ongoing process of transformation. The transformation of community placed a significant interest on “the other,” as opposed to oneself. Emphasis, here, is placed on the context of “group,” in which the community of Christ expresses the lordship of Christ through its interactions with one another and other congregations (91). Being a member of a community where the common goal of transformation takes priority ultimately helps members transform themselves and each other.

Chapter 4, “The Gospel Means the Transformation of the Cosmos: You Are Free from the World’s rules to Witness to God’s Rule,” seeks to express the meaning of the “good news” as it relates to the re-ordering of the cosmos. He notes “the sense in which Paul believed, the ‘ordering’ of this world, was still a vehicle for the right ordering of human society” (103). deSilva suggests that Paul was a “revolutionary” who looked forward to the overthrowing of the current world powers that existed within Paul’s day. Paul sought to encourage Christians that they could live as if the overthrowing had already taken place. In this manner, Christians were to “live in the midst of the powers of darkness as citizens who order their lives in line with the ‘Kingdom of the beloved Son’ that is built on the foundations of his teaching and example” (105). Paul, then, looks forward to the renewing of the entire cosmos which will be realized at the coming of Christ. Christians, now, are able to divest themselves fully in leading lives that are in line with the principle of God even amongst constant pressures to conform to the pattern of the world. The transformation of the cosmos is another expression of the good news, which ensures the correction of a world that has gone wrong.

In summation, the treatment given to the “good news” of Paul’s gospel is spot on. The tendency in Christianity has been to explain the gospel in ways that secure an eternal future without properly addressing the “good news” of transformation while living presently. David deSilva gives an excellent perspective on how God graciously extends the opportunity for transformation through the sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. One area of contention in this work would be that of deSilva’s treatment of the judgement of God, in which the eternal ramifications of a believer’s life seem to be held against the actions of the believer. Another route to this discussion would be in the realm of the fulfillment of purpose for the individual and for the community at large. However, this contention does not take away from the main thesis of this book, with its focus on the “transformation of the individual, the community of faith, and the cosmos” (5). This book would be particularly helpful for non-academicians who are looking for a different way to look at the “new self” by which Christians are encouraged to express in obedience to God and in the mind of Christ.

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