

David Wenham. *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. xvi + 452 pp.*

In *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*, Oxford scholar David Wenham has produced what is doubtless his most important contribution to contemporary scholarship to date. Wenham, previously the author of *The Parables of Jesus* and *The Rediscovery of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse*, tackles with considerable success the complex question of Paul's relationship to Jesus. While various collections of essays have recently appeared on the subject, Wenham's is the first substantial study on this topic since J. W. Fraser's *Jesus and Paul* in 1974. At the outset, Wenham quotes the comment by Wilson:

The only certainty is that there is, and can be, no certainty, and that this is as true of our understanding of Paul as it is of our understanding of Jesus. Neither Jesus nor Paul are stable entities and a definitive answer to the Jesus-Paul question, therefore, will always evade us.

Wenham himself does not share this pessimism. He promises to do justice to the complexity of the issue while remaining flexible on presuppositional matters and yet to arrive at a definitive answer to the question posed in the title of his work. Wenham's thesis is that Paul is much better described as "follower of Jesus" than as "founder of Christianity." At the heart of his book is the effort to locate in the Pauline texts evidence for the apostle's awareness of Jesus' life story and teaching. The author draws on recent advances made in the area of identifying allusions in Scripture and in distinguishing them from echoes and categorizes such links into "highly probable," "probable," and "plausible." Canvassing first Jesus, then Paul, Wenham compares their teachings on the kingdom of God, the person and cross of Jesus, the church, ethics, Christ's return, and Jesus' life and ministry. While the book's organization with its constant shifting back and forth between Jesus and Paul and back again makes considerable demands on the reader, I found Wenham's work fascinating, original, and thought-provoking. His judgments are generally balanced, his method sound, and his conclusions reasonable. If there are weaknesses in Wenham's approach, they do not primarily lie in matters of detail but in larger preliminary issues.

To begin with, Wenham appears to overstate his case when he goes as far as to say that it is Jesus who is Paul's "primary text" (p. 410). Despite the more or less subtle hints detected by him that may point to Paul's familiarity with Jesus' life or teaching — and certainty, despite Wenham's confidence, remains often elusive — Paul's primary text is clearly the OT, not sayings of Jesus, if for no other reason than that in the context of Paul's missionary proclamation, what needed to be shown was, not how well Paul knew Jesus traditions, but how Jesus could be the Messiah and the Son of God in terms of the Hebrew Scriptures. Under the Spirit's guidance, the apostle appears to have developed much of his own theology in conscious reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures, often in the context of challenges to his own ministry. This reflection may at times have been aided by Paul's awareness of Jesus' words or deeds, and for this Wenham has made the strongest case possible. It remains doubtful, however, whether reliance on Jesus traditions is as central and primary as Wenham asserts.

Arguably, a degree of subjectivism in one's judgment remains. Does, for example, 1 Thess 4:8 echo Luke 10:16 as Wenham maintains (p. 199)? Certainty seems elusive. To be sure, in the kind of cumulative argument the author seeks to build, every element merely contributes a small part to the overall case. But if the cumulative case rests on slightly exaggerated individual judgments, the cumulative argument, likewise, will tend to be overstated. While Wenham's work thus remains a helpful compendium of relevant texts, issues, and secondary literature, more modesty in his claims would have strengthened the value of his work. Paul, one feels, can do without the vindication

Wenham seeks to provide. To be a faithful follower of someone does not necessarily entail a lack of originality. Of course, Wenham does not deny the uniqueness of Paul's contribution altogether (see pp. 378–80 and 409); he does, however, clearly accentuate the continuity rather than the discontinuity between Paul and Jesus.

For example, one wonders whether there is really no difference for Paul between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith" as Wenham asserts. In a sense, this is true, but in another sense it is not, since Paul is exploring the implications of the new era of salvation history marked by the transition from the earthly Jesus to the risen and ascended Lord, resulting in significant further developments. While German scholarship in the wake of Bultmann may have unduly dichotomized the distinction to the extent of claiming that Paul was completely disinterested in the earthly Jesus — and Wenham legitimately takes exception to this — a leveling of this distinction likewise does not seem to fit the NT data. There are simply too many passages where Paul attempts his own Spirit-led reading of the Scriptures. Here Wenham focuses rather one-sidedly on places where Paul may draw on Jesus traditions (such as in 1 Corinthians 7 or 13) while failing to discuss the many instances where Paul arguably does not. The result is a picture that is largely true in what it affirms and doubtful in what it denies or at least neglects.

Some of the problems surfacing in the execution of Wenham's work appear to be rooted in the dichotomous way in which he frames his initial question: "Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?" It stands to reason that, depending on one's definition of these terms, neither category, taken by itself, does full justice to the relationship between Paul and Jesus. The designation "follower of Jesus," while containing elements of truth, conceals the significant advances made by the apostle in theological formulation and mission practice. The title "founder of Christianity," while also embodying a valid core, appears to overrate Paul's contribution to Christianity. Moreover, part of the answer to Wenham's question depends on one's definition of the term "Christianity." If by Christianity is meant a coherent system of theology that provides a framework for a religious commitment built around truths about the person and work of Jesus, Paul appears to have legitimate claims to be at least one of the major founder figures of Christianity. After all, he was an apostle, an important early Christian leader. One thinks of passages such as Eph 2:20 where it is said that the church was built on the apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the cornerstone.

The term "founder," too, is subject to definition and appears unfit to bear the weight laid on it by Wenham's question. In a sense, of course, it is Jesus, not Paul, who is the founder of Christianity; without Jesus, there would be no such movement. At the same time, however, it took someone like Paul to interpret and expound the significance of Jesus' person and work, aided by the Spirit, with reference to the church and the Christian mission (see here the concept of "mystery" in Paul's writings with regard to the apostle). Finally, what does Wenham mean by "follower"? Again, the term is patient of a variety of definitions. Thus answering Wenham's question is not unlike some of the tests to which we occasionally subject our students: it is a bit of both/and, all of the above but not quite, and a bit more. In the end, one is led to question the value of the practice of framing an ambiguous question and of artificially extracting an answer that will inevitably be inadequate because the question is ill-framed, the categories ill-defined or not defined at all, and the middle illegitimately excluded.

It should be acknowledged that Wenham seeks to defend Paul against charges of innovation that made Christianity into a different religion than the one envisioned by Jesus. In a scholarly environment where Scripture's coherence and the theological interconnections between the major proponents of early Christianity have been downplayed, the author helps to remove the wedge driven by some between Jesus and Paul. I doubt, however, whether he has entirely succeeded in doing so. First, as he himself acknowledges, it remains a possibility that Paul did not rely extensively on Jesus traditions while still having remained faithful to the thrust of Jesus' teachings. Likewise, for Wenham to show that Paul significantly drew on Jesus' teachings does not by itself exonerate Paul of

all charges of (legitimate or illegitimate) innovation; Paul could have done both. Once again, of course, the term "innovation" is subject to definition. If one takes the term to connote the development of a given concept to the point of contradiction of an earlier teaching, charging Paul with innovation entails jeopardizing the unity and integrity of Scripture. If one uses the expression in terms of one's further, even significant, development of an earlier teaching, charging Paul with innovation seems innocent enough. I am not sure whether or not Wenham has clearly distinguished between these two options in his book and whether or not Paul needs to be defended against the latter charge.

For these reasons I doubt whether Wenham's thesis will be adopted by a majority of scholars after careful examination. Wenham has not unearthed any major new evidence that would necessitate a radical reevaluation of the Jesus-Paul relationship. His findings can and should rather be incorporated as a helpful corrective into models that give greater emphasis to Paul's unique contribution to NT theology than Wenham does, models that leave greater room for areas of legitimate discontinuity between Paul and Jesus. Contrary to the author's fears, this need not result in the shipwreck of Christianity nor will it necessarily elevate Paul unduly over Jesus. If that were the case, Paul's Gentile mission likewise would have elevated Paul over Jesus who claimed to be sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. If the eleven would do "greater works" than Jesus, indeed "everyone who believes" (John 14:12), why not Paul? Wenham says we should read Paul "in the light of the Gospels." If by this is meant that Paul be remade in the image of the Jesus portrayed in the gospels, I say, let us let Paul be Paul.

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