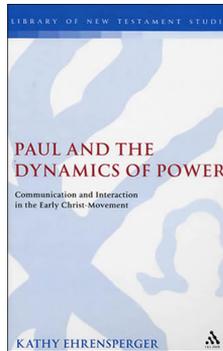


○ **REVIEW OF KATHY EHRENSPERGER, *PAUL AND THE DYNAMICS OF POWER: COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION IN THE EARLY CHRIST-MOVEMENT***

(LIBRARY OF NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES. LONDON: T&T CLARK, 2007)

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When the opportunity to review *Paul and the Dynamics of Power* was made available, I must confess that I felt a considerable amount of excitement at the prospect of interacting with a full-length work on such a timely subject. The critical study of the Apostle Paul is in a great deal of flux at the present time, and, as the author herself points out, there has also been a great deal of critical debate over the nature and proper use of power in social interactions. Furthermore, the book promised to be of more than critical interest, for the use and misuse of power are topics of significant importance for those who lead communities of faith. While the book does not provide the kind of indisputable, epoch-making evidence and conclusions for which one may hope, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power* does make a positive and provocative contribution to the conversation on Paul and his interactions with other believers.

In this relatively brief study, Ehrensperger paints a portrait of Paul's use of power that is surprising and refreshing in its subtlety and sophistication. She argues that the apostle and his circle of colleagues were not isolated from issues of power. Indeed, the apostles and other leaders of the early 'Christ-movement' were well aware of power and how it was used in their context of colonial domination. These leaders, however, did not simply adopt the methods and the motives of their Roman overlords. Instead, Paul and his circle of colleagues proposed an alternative scheme for the use of power – one that was more consistent with the conceptual world of Israel's Scriptures and more compatible with a religious movement that understood itself in light of the (wrongful) execution of its leader (Jesus). Paul did not do away with hierarchy, nor did he simply turn existing hierarchies upside down. Instead, Paul redefined how 'asymmetrical' relationships are to function and put temporal, functional, and other limits upon the hierarchies that necessarily existed in faith communities. Paul did not shy away from exerting his influence

over the ‘assemblies’ to which he wrote, but he generally preferred to ‘empower’ faith communities to live creatively in response to the call of God upon their lives and to facilitate a conversation that resulted in mutual (but not reciprocal) care and cooperation.

Ehrensperger begins her study (Chapter 1) by enumerating her own hermeneutical presuppositions and by laying out her plan for the book. Her presuppositions are unremarkable – with one important exception. Rather than reading Paul in light of Greco-Roman culture, Ehrensperger argues that he should be understood as ‘embedded’ first in Jewish culture, which she describes as being shaped in fundamental ways by the ancient Scriptures of Israel. Then, in the second chapter, Ehrensperger describes the current state of scholarship with respect to power. Much of the author’s approach has been shaped in dialogue with the work of Hannah Arendt, but her approach does not depend on any one theoretical perspective.

In the next three chapters, Ehrensperger deals with the related subjects of ‘grace’ and ‘apostleship’ in Paul. She describes Paul as a man who saw his role as ‘apostle’ as a gift from God that brought with it power and responsibility, but this gift was inextricably linked to Paul’s mission as an emissary of God’s grace (which should be understood in relational terms associated with ‘empowerment’). Thus, whatever power Paul had was merely a tool for accomplishing God’s work, and not a permanent reality. Then, in Chapters 6-9, Ehrensperger describes four ‘discourses’ in the Pauline letters (‘weakness,’ ‘education,’ ‘imitation,’ and ‘response-ability’) that are closely related to the exercise of power. In the final chapter, Ehrensperger draws together the various strands of her argument to present a coherent ‘reading’ of the apostle and his use of power. Her point is not to describe Paul as a perfect leader. Rather, Ehrensperger tries to show that, despite the fact that Paul lived in and was a product of a hierarchical, male dominated culture, he nevertheless attempted to use power in a way that was different from the dominant and dominating methods of the Roman Empire and in a way that was consistent with his own commitments and conceptual framework.

There is much to recommend *Paul and the Dynamics of Power*. Ehrensperger is able to explain the current discussion on power in such a way that religious practitioners, students, and junior scholars can understand it, and she is able to show how these discussions are relevant for her own investigation of Paul’s use of power. I find Ehrensperger’s arguments related to the discourses on ‘weakness,’ ‘education,’ and ‘imitation’ to be fairly convincing, and even when her arguments are not entirely persuasive, the author raises important issues that need to be addressed in greater detail. I find the contrast between the portrayal of perfect leaders in Roman literature and the portrayal of desperately flawed leaders in Jewish literature particularly stimulating.

There are also facets of the work that illicit concern. One wonders if the study is too brief to adequately address all the issues that are raised. Some of the most important presuppositions for the work are never critically examined. A related concern has to do with how the author defines certain key terms. For example, Ehrensperger uses adjectives like ‘dominating’ and ‘controlling’ to describe a specific type of power, but what exactly is meant by the use of these terms could be unclear to the non-specialist – especially given the fact that in certain contexts the regulation of behavior (i.e. ‘control’) is considered an essential part of ‘management’.

Other problems may also exist. Some will question whether the distinction drawn between Jewish and Greco-Roman culture is something of a false dichotomy, while others might question whether the description of the Pauline materials as ‘non-elite’ literature is entirely accurate. There seems to be a lack of evidence supporting some of the arguments related to grace and apostleship,

while other arguments seem to be strained – although it must be noted that Ehrensperger’s portrayal of the Pauline circle as a group committed to the work of the gospel, and not to the strengthening of its own identity, is quite helpful. Some will also question whether a Christological or soteriological understanding of grace would inevitably lead to a claim of absolute power on Paul’s part.

The discussion of what Ehrensperger calls ‘response-ability’ is particularly problematic. The author rightly asserts that the concept of obedience has been used in destructive ways throughout the history of the church, but this history of abuse does not justify a total rejection of the concept. It is true that to admit the possibility of relating to God through obedience opens the door to ‘power-over’ relationships with church leaders (since communication with God is often mediated through canon, the religious community, etc.), but Paul did not value personal liberty the way contemporary, Western people do, and there were plenty of social models from the Hebrew Scriptures that would have suggested to the apostle the necessity of obedience to God. Likewise, responding to God’s call and obedience are not mutually exclusive ideas, for God often demanded a very specific response when the call went out to God’s people (cf., e.g., Gen 12:1-3; 22:1-2, 9-12).

In the end, Ehrensperger’s study makes a strong case that Paul preferred to use power in what are perceived as positive ways in contemporary discourse. Important resonances can be found in this book with traditional Christian theology and with contemporary studies in transformational leadership, and these resonances render the book beneficial, even for those who do not share the author’s presuppositions. Unfortunately, however, the author does not convincingly demonstrate that the kinds of leadership strategies outlined in the book are always incompatible with static hierarchies and a command-obedience understanding of power. In the author’s defense, it must be remembered that Ehrensperger is proposing a ‘reading’ of Paul that is valuable for current discourse and not a perfectly objective rendering of history. Still, it is difficult to imagine that Paul would have ever repudiated the idea that God is to be obeyed, and one wonders if Paul and his colleagues would have had the same misgivings about coercive power that contemporary theorists have. Thus, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power* cannot be said to be the final word on the matter, but it is an interesting, informative, and provocative work that deserves the attention of critical scholars and religious practitioners alike.