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Review of Umbach's "In Christus getauft—von der Sünde befreit: Die Gemeinde als sündenfreier Raum bei Paulus"

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In Christus getauft—von der Sünde befreit: Die Gemeinde als sündenfreier Raum bei Paulus. By Helmut Umbach. FRLANT 181. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999. 344 pp. ISBN 3-525-53865-0. €72.00.

Most Protestant interpreters seem to assume (the struggle against) sin to be a normal element of Christian existence. The Spirit and the flesh strive against one another (Gal 5:17). The Lutheran-Reformed “*simul iustus et peccator*” theologizes that Christians remain sinners, while Catholic institutions testify to the same (for example, confession, penitence, absolution). Yet Paul speaks of “freedom from sin” (Rom 6:18, 22), deals rarely with Christian repentance and forgiveness for postbaptismal sins, and seems to anticipate blamelessness (not sins) in both himself and his converts. Believers are termed saints, not sinners, and Paul’s own conscience seems robust. Thus, against the majority of Pauline scholars, some have argued for Christian sinlessness (see Paul Wernle, *Der Christ und die Sünde bei Paulus*, 1897; and Hans Windisch, *Taufe und Sünde im ältesten Christentum*, 1908). Helmut Umbach continues this line of exegesis and seeks to bring some terminological precision to the debate in this slightly revised and updated version of a 1992 dissertation from the University of Göttingen under Hartmut Stegemann. In particular, Umbach seeks to prove that Paul never uses the term “sin (ἁμαρτία)” for Christian misdeeds; rather, he uses other terms for Christian wrong-doing (for example, “transgression” [παράπτωμα], Gal 6:1). Apart from a few traditional uses of “sin/s” (for example, 1 Cor 15:3), the term always refers in Paul to a personified power (“Sin” with a capital “S” in English). This exegetical finding leads to a theological conclusion. Through baptism into the body of Christ, believers are placed in a sin-free realm, once and for all put to death to the power of Sin, and no longer sinners. A “Christian sinner” would be an unbearable oxymoron for the apostle!

After a commendable introduction to the subject matter and review of others' positions, Umbach examines in the major section of this book, chap. 2, those Pauline texts from the undisputed letters that deal with sin or wrong conduct. In chap. 3 he looks at ecclesiological texts, that is, those dealing with being "in Christ" and a "new creation" (for example, 2 Cor 5:17–21; Rom 6:1–23), and in chap. 4 he treats Rom 7:1–8:39 under the heading of anthropology. The book closes with a summation of the results in twelve theses and a brief reflection on the ecumenical implications that form the backdrop of the study. A bibliography and author index round out the volume. A scripture index would be a welcome addition in such an exegetical work. It would reveal, for instance, the failure to note the use of the verb (ἁμαρτάνειν) in Rom 5:14; and one looks in vain for a treatment of Rom 14:23, which seems to say that Christian behavior, if not "of faith," can be "sin" (ἁμαρτία).

Umbach's study addresses an important issue in the wake of the "new perspective." The latter tends to downplay hamartiology in Paul, holding, for example, that Paul did not come to Christ out of a personal sinful plight and that Romans 7 is not about Paul's ongoing (personal) struggle with sin. Umbach's treatment is not generally supportive of this perspective. Nevertheless he, too, advances a less individualized understanding of sin. His work confirms that Paul's undisputed letters (generally) avoid using "sin" (ἁμαρτία) in reference to actual postconversion wrongdoing and employ it for a personalized power (Sin). It is also to Umbach's credit that his book stresses Paul's focus on the Spirit's power to produce a sin-free life. Paul found a path somewhere between triumphalism and being a "poor sinner." Rather than the image of conflict and struggle, it is the image of freedom from sin that dominates the letters. For this renewed call to the study of Pauline hamartiology and for outlining its important ecumenical implications one may be thankful.

To this reviewer's mind, however, the book's terminological thesis sometimes borders on hair-splitting, weakening its value, as when Umbach argues that the noun and verb (ἁμαρτήμα, ἁμαρτάνειν) in 1 Cor 6:18 refer to the immorality of 5:1 but are chosen explicitly in order to avoid using the noun "sin" (ἁμαρτία) for Christian behavior (pp. 133–35; see also 109 n. 145; 211). That one can commit the most socially objectionable forms of sexual evil and yet not be committing "sin" (ἁμαρτία) makes sense only within Umbach's prior theoretical framework. Similarly the attempt to paint a difference in kind between fleshly sin (Gal 5:16–21) and Christian "transgression" (παράπτωμα) (Gal 6:1) seems forced (pp. 102–5). Paul warns both: "God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" (Gal 6:7).

Although well structured and thorough, the argument is weakened on a number of additional points. Methodologically it relies too much on silence in drawing theological conclusions. Does Paul's omission of ἁμαρτία-terminology when speaking of Christian misdeeds mean that believers do not commit "sin/s"? Is the silence, perhaps, only a coincidence based upon the small literary sample of undisputed Paulines? Historically it leaves us with a very idiosyncratic Paul, whose understanding of sin does not appear to originate from his Jewish background, nor is it reflected in other NT writings. Paul stands opposed, for instance, to Matt 18:15 ("If another member of the church sins [ἁμαρτήσῃ] against you") and to the Christian prayer in Luke

11:4 ("forgive us our sins [ἁμαρτίας]"), not to mention the Pastorals (see 1 Tim 1:15; 5:20, 22; Titus 3:11; see also Eph 4:26). Paul's view of sin becomes a blip on the exegetical radar screen, coming from nowhere and being understood by no one. Lexically the argument seems to make "sin" (ἁμαρτία) a terminus technicus in Paul for personified Sin. Most are inclined to view more overlap with terms such as παράπτωμα, παράβασις, ἀδικία, κτλ. (so W. Michaelis, "παράπτωμα and ἁμαρτία are synonyms," in "πίπτω, κτλ.," TDNT 6.172). Exegetical quibbles may, of course, be expected. Umbach follows the truism that imperatives and exhortations do not always imply actual practice among the audience; yet it does seem likely that the Christians "thus sinning (ἁμαρτάνοντες) against the brethren" (1 Cor 8:12) are actually sinning by eating meat offered to idols, rather than simply contemplating doing the same. One might also wish for a more up-to-date use of Greek syntax. For instance, does the aorist tense form in 2 Cor 12:21 really imply a one-time act (p. 168)?

A satisfying treatment of "S/sin" in Paul, including the origin of his concepts and the ongoing relevance of sin in believers' lives, remains a desideratum. Students of Pauline hamartiology will find in this book a clear presentation of the problem with special attention to the theological implications of the answer. The solution offered, however, will not persuade many. The book fails to perceive in Paul the typically Jewish distinction between a singular act and a way of life. Those who "walk perfectly" and are "blameless" (for example, 1QS 9:8–9) nevertheless commit acts of sin (1QS 8:20–9:2). Umbach's study is an important reminder that for Paul Christians have been fundamentally set free from the dominion of Sin; this is the way of life upon which they have been set by grace. However, they can still commit sin/s.

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