



Paul: A Very Short Introduction

E.P. Sanders

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Missionary, theologian, and religious genius, Paul is one of the most powerful human personalities in the history of the Church. E.P. Sanders, an influential Pauline scholar, analyzes the fundamental beliefs and vigorous contradictions in Paul's thought, discovering a philosophy that is less of a monolithic system than the apostle's convictions would seem to suggest. This volume offers an incisive summation of Paul's career, as well as his role in the development of early Christianity. Both lucid and judicious, it is the most compelling short introduction to Paul now available.

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Paul: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Ahmad Sharabiani says

Paul: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #42), E.P. Sanders

Missionary, theologian, and religious genius, Paul is one of the most powerful human personalities in the history of the Church. E.P. Sanders, an influential Pauline scholar, analyzes the fundamental beliefs and vigorous contradictions in Paul's thought, discovering a philosophy that is less of a monolithic system than the apostle's convictions would seem to suggest. This volume offers an incisive summation of Paul's career, as well as his role in the development of early Christianity. Both lucid and judicious, it is the most compelling short introduction to Paul now available.

Ben De Bono says

As someone relatively new to (and very much interested in) the New Perspective on Paul, it was great to finally start to dig into E.P. Sanders' work.

I wasn't disappointed. Paul: A Very Short Introduction is deep, accessible and very challenging. One of the major arguments he makes throughout the book is that Paul was not a systematic theologian. He wasn't approaching theology from a philosophic and organized perspective where everything he said needed to line up perfectly. Rather, he was an ad hoc theologian, developing his theology in response to specific situations. His contributions to the New Testament were letters written in response to specific problems within his churches. Because of that, we shouldn't be surprised when what he says in one letter seems to contradict what he says in another.

It's a challenging idea, and one that many evangelicals are likely to reject off hand. While I do think Sanders takes it too far in places (some of his supposed contradictions seem to be resolvable without too much effort), I don't think we ought to reject the point entirely. Those of us who hold that the Bible is God's Word need to remember that it was written by humans within the context of human life. That it was also written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit does not give us an excuse to ignore the circumstances in which Paul wrote.

I also believe it's important to remember that Paul's purpose was not to construct a systematic theology. Modern Christianity has a very difficult time thinking outside the systematic box. Sanders would seem to suggest that until you do, you won't understand Paul. For as much as I believe systematic theology is helpful and has an important place, I'm inclined to agree with him.

For as important a point as Sanders is making, the book isn't without its problems. As I mentioned above, I do think Sanders carries his point too far in places. I also found the book open to criticism when looking at it in light of later developments in the New Perspective. For as much as Sanders works to put Paul in his Jewish context and rehabilitate how we view the Law, I don't think he goes far enough in his understanding of the covenant and the role of the covenant family in Pauline thought. Here, I find N.T. Wright's work to much better developed and argued. A proper understanding of the covenant in Pauline thought, such as what Wright proposes, not only fits better with seeing Paul in his Jewish context, it also goes a long way toward

resolving many of the "conflicts" Sanders sees in Paul's theology.

Overall, this is a great book and well worth reading. I'd definitely recommend Wright's work before this, but if, like me, you're trying to really dig into the New Perspective this is a must read.

Alexander Velasquez says

A Great Synopsis on St. Paul:

This book covers a lot of ground for understanding the Apostle Paul and the milieu that he wrote in. The first three chapters cover St. Paul's life and background, and then the rest of the book covers the fundamentals of Paul's theology.

However, this is not just a super basic book on Paul (as all VSI's go somewhat in-depth into the material). E.P. Sanders takes the liberty of employing Greek terminology at times to make his point clear, especially on the chapters covering what Paul meant by being Righteoused. Also, on his chapter on Behavior, Sanders also goes in-depth in the background of Paul's contemporary world in order to contrast the Jewish code of behavior from the Graeco-Roman one.

Many people knock the work because it can be controversial for what he interprets as ultimately Paul's word on things. But I don't think the book gets so complex and detailed enough to be that controversial. Maybe with a few points here and there but nothing over the top.

Overall, a great intro into St. Paul from an amazing scholar. 5/5 stars.

Nick says

While doing research for a paper on Romans 9-11 and sniffing around in the bibliography to *What Saint Paul Really Said*, which I read this past year for a Pauline literature class, I came across this slim little introduction. E.P. Sanders represents a milestone in the history of the interpretation of Paul, and I believe this book sums up nicely what he does in his larger, more magisterial works. N.T. Wright takes up much of Sanders' thinking for his own presentation. What's addressed here is the long history of interpreting St. Paul as railing against the Jews for their pursuit of "righteousness" through works--which is contrary to the gospel of righteousness through faith. Sanders makes it clear that this understanding, imposed on the letter first by Luther, fails to take into account Paul's historical situation and background and thereby puts words into his mouth. The issue of justification, Sanders contends, has nothing to do with the individual's status before God or his salvation, but simply refers to what identifies one as a member of the covenant people. This used to be obedience to the Torah; now, says Paul, it is faith in Christ, and nothing else. Through a lucid exposition of the translational issues, Jewish understanding of "justification," and a helpful articulation of Paul's own presuppositions, Sanders contends that Paul's arguments against "works righteousness" has nothing to do with what Reformation interpreters have taken it to mean.

If you get into tangles with non-Catholics over some of these questions, I would insist you read this short book.

Kelly Brill says

So grateful to the friend who loaned me this book! It is “a very short introduction”, but it is also a helpful and well-researched one. As the book admits, Paul is challenging and confounding. Some of his statements are contradictory. Sanders’ scholarship is thorough. He unpacks the main premises of Paul’s theology in a clear yet detailed manner.

Trevor says

I decided to read this book before reading Paul’s epistles, hoping the “introduction” would make Paul easier to read. In retrospect, having now read both this book and Paul’s letters shortly thereafter, I think this book might function better as an “epilogue” read *after* one is acquainted with Paul’s writings. Having read it without much familiarity with Paul’s thought and letters, I found E. P. Sander’s relatively dry discussions hard to follow at times.

However, as I review over my notes and highlights in writing this brief review, and having now read Paul’s letters, I now realize that Sanders actually does a pretty thorough job of covering the essence of Paul’s thought. And yet, at times his thoroughness borders on redundancy as particular Pauline topics are explicated numerous times in different places of the text (e.g., Paul’s understanding of “the law”; Paul’s understanding of how grace operates; etc.). Ironical for a book series that is built on the idea of being short and concise.

I would recommend this book as a supplementary aid to someone who is currently reading or, preferably, has read and is readily familiar with Paul’s writings. I fear it may be too technical for someone who has either not read Paul recently or much at all.

M. Ashraf says

It is a good overview one Saint Paul his life, preach and theology.

His distinction between the Jews and Gentiles was interesting.

I think it is a good VSI coming from knowing nothing about him to forming a broad idea.

Nigel Bamber says

I came to this book from a humanist and rationalist viewpoint, wanting to understand more about the development of early Christian church and how it went from being an obscure Jewish sect, to a global religious power. I understood that Paul was one of the key players in this process. With this in mind, I found the book disappointing. Apparently there was a heated debate in the years after Jesus’ death about whether Gentiles converting to Christianity had to become Jews too. There appear to me, to be fundamental incompatibilities between what God is supposed to have promised the tribes of Israel in the old testament, and the promises made to anyone following Jesus. Paul seems to have been heavily involved in trying to paper over these cracks in the church, using very inconsistent arguments. Even the author says “His conclusions were independent of the arguments that preceded them”.

For the greater part of the book, the author goes into, a series of impenetrable, convoluted and detailed

examinations of the text of Paul's alleged writings to try to justify Paul's precarious position, in another "papering over the cracks" exercise. Not a satisfying read for someone seeking logical philosophical arguments.

Ethan says

A short overview of Sanders' understanding of Paul and his theology.

The author does well at contextualizing Paul within first century Judaism, attempting to analyze his theology as an attempt to maintain things which he knows to be true regarding God and Israel while making sense of what has changed on account of Jesus. Primarily discussing only those works of Paul accepted by liberal scholarship he discusses Paul's life and developing theology especially through Romans and Galatians. He seeks to advance the argument that Paul was a theologian but not a systematic one and held dearly to mutually inconsistent ideas regarding Israel, the Law, election, and the new covenant.

The author's analysis of the language difficulties surrounding justification/to be justified, and the more appropriate "to be righteous," is quite useful.

It is hard to make a good judgment of the analysis since it is probably more fully presented in larger volumes. One would like to see some justification for many of the "throwaway" concepts left unsubstantiated in this book. The book also maintains speculation regarding Paul's expectation regarding Jesus' immanent return as well as a rather uncharitable view of Paul's ability to set forth the principles of Christianity in a clear, coherent way. Yes, it is true that the matter has been further muddled by the Reformation disputations, and there are matters regarding which we would like more clarity. But such does not mean that Paul's theology remains a complete mess.

Trey Kennedy says

A good introduction to Paul's epistles and writing style.

Monica Willyard says

This book discusses Paul, the apostle who wrote many books in the New Testament. The first part of the book covers who Paul was, who were his supporters and the detractors, and how he became involved with first the Jewish and then the Christian religious cultures.

The second part of the book discusses Paul's beliefs, the theology he taught in his writings, and some areas where some theologians find confusion in what he says. The author also covers the continual tensions between Paul, who mostly taught Gentiles, and the other apostles who spent much of their time teaching Jewish people in various communities. The author makes it clear that Paul had enemies in both the secular and Christian communities as well as the established Jewish community in Israel. Paul had to contend with people who were false teachers as well as genuine Christians who understood Christ's words differently in some ways. Meanwhile, the priests who served some of the Roman gods and goddesses as well as emperors in Rome became angry because the message Paul shared with people caused them to stop sacrificing to goddesses like Diana in Ephesus. The Jewish high priest in Israel wasn't happy with Paul either and

conspired to get him executed. Paul's life was not easy, and it was fraught with tension in many cases. He spent most of his final years in prison, and he was eventually executed for sharing his faith. During this final passage in his life, he was abandoned by many of his support workers either because they became ill, they died, they were working in other areas to spread the gospel, they had been brutally executed themselves, or sadly, a few turned away from the Lord.

Yet he writes confidently about having contentment in all things and daily experiencing the joy of the Lord in several places in his letters, especially in Philippians. He is an example of how our attitude and our choice to focus on what matters touches every aspect of our lives. If I am honest with myself, I think I would get depressed after being shipped wrecked and would probably complain about the food or rats in prison. I would like to think that eventually I would learn the lessons that Paul learned. I am going to spend a lot of time over the next couple of months reading his epistles to the churches because I have so much to learn from him. Ultimately, I hope that by feasting on God's word, I will be changed by that word and by God's leading in my life. I want to become more like Paul. I don't want it in the way that someone wants to be just like a rockstar. I want it because I know that his source is Jesus Christ, and that is what I want more of in my life.

I'm glad I read this book. I will have to admit that there were a few pages of theology that went over my head a bit. There were a few parts I didn't really understand. Maybe I'll understand it more after spending more time reading scripture, especially in Paul's letters.

Justin Evans says

I got far more from this than I was expecting, which is both good (inasmuch as I actually think I know something about Paul and interpretations of him) and bad (inasmuch as I wanted a quick weekend read and instead got a crash course in how-to-argue-with-ancient-Christians-who-say-all-Christians-must-be-circumsized). I knew just enough about Paul and the way people understand him to feel that I knew what was going on, but be warned, this is much more academic/rigorous than most VSIs. Sanders is engaged in argument with other people just as much as he's engaged in writing to naifs like you and me. The book is, though, very well written. I wish the Further Reading had gone a bit further. But if you want to know about Paul in a few hours, highly recommended.

Danny Daley says

Considering Sanders' pedigree, and incredible success with his more well known and longer writings, I found this book very frustrating. Rather than a true "introduction" to Paul, this book plays like an introduction to Sanders' specific, nuanced views, and because of the short length these views are not demonstrated clearly and very little is shown of how these views interact with far more dominant views on Paul over the past century or so. I know Sanders' views fairly well, and have read some of his other work, and I still found myself confused as to exactly what he was saying in regard to things like justification and atonement in Paul, and on a few occasions there was a lack of clarity as to how different Pauline ideas made sense in light of each other.

There were some very helpful things in this book to be sure. However, I recommend this book only to people looking for an introduction specifically to Sanders' nuanced views on Paul. As a true introduction, it ignores far too much.

Shelley Alongi says

An excellent overview of Paul and the main themes in his epistles. The book covers the law, the new relationship in Christ, miscellaneous topics and explains those such as the experience of the Gentiles with pornea in its particular cultural setting, and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in a theological and redemptive perspective. I would recommend this book as a good starting point for understanding Paul's theology. It might make reading his epistles easier. He poses questions about Paul's meanings in the texts and then endeavors nicely to answer them. The book has a nice list of source explanations and suggestions for further readings on Paul and his times. I'm pretty familiar with the Pauline epistles and I learned things from this book.

Joshua Booher says

This was an excellent read. This book is a synopsis of Sander's groundbreaking theology on Paul. I have already lined up two more books to read on Paul as a result of this text.

In addition, this is my second book in the Very Short Introduction series. I have been impressed by the quality of the materials. I look forward to other titles in this series.
