
Book Reviews

The Epistle to the Romans

The New International Commentary on the New Testament, by Douglas J. Moo, Eerdmans, 1996, 1012pp, £35 (hb ISBN 0-8028-2317-3)

What justification can there be for yet another commentary on Romans, and why replace the older volume by John Murray which is crammed full of distilled wisdom and succinctness of expression? I confess to having a soft spot for Murray because it was the first commentary on Romans that I owned. However, it was somewhat dated even when published and there is just room on my bookshelves for one more fat book on Paul's great letter. Is the £35 price tag money well spent?

Moo builds on the work he did in an earlier commentary on Chapters 1-8 to produce a massive and thorough treatment of the entire letter. The book's size means it will not lend itself to bedtime reading but its format is easy on the eye and Moo writes in a readable way. Each section of the letter is headed by excellent summaries of the flow of thought, which provide useful provisional roadmaps for the journey ahead. No stone is left unturned as Moo grapples with the complexity of Paul's argument. I was impressed by his ability to combine exegetical detail with clarity of expression and suggestive contemporary application.

Moo is clearly aware of all the cross-currents of Pauline studies and navigates them skillfully. There is a full and fair appraisal of the debate concerning the phrase "Works of the Law", both in the passage in Romans 3 and in an excursus, "*Works of the Law*" and *First-Century Judaism*. I was impressed by Moo's ability to explain complex issues whilst avoiding being lost in detail. Much of this detailed

work can be found in the extensive and very illuminating footnotes. The comprehensive bibliography is an indication of how fully he has engaged with a range of writers. It is particularly pleasing to see Dr Lloyd-Jones' work on Romans receiving such generous attention in a major commentary like this.

Moo is clear about the theme of Romans, "The gospel", explaining that we require a theme as broad as the gospel "to encompass the diverse topics in Romans."

The theological flavour is broadly Reformed, Moo is quite superb on Romans chapters 8-9. The one major area in which he departs from classic Reformed thought, at least of the Geneva brand, is one of the things which makes this commentary so distinctive. Moo's treatment of the believer's relationship to the Mosaic law is a bold attempt to explore and expound a full-orbed New Covenant theology that takes seriously the reign of grace in the life of the Christian. The 19th Century Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte had one acid test for a new commentary on Romans: if it didn't follow the classic Reformed line on Romans 7 the book went straight back to his booksellers. By that criterion Moo's weighty tome would need to be returned unread. That would, however, mean missing a host of good things, not least his bold and fresh approach to Romans 7. Moo argues that the right question to ask when approaching the chapter is not whether this is a believer or an unbeliever, but the question is how far the Mosaic Law can take a person spiritually. He concludes that the Law can neither save nor sanctify. Later in the commentary he works out the practical implications of this, for example on Romans 12:1-2 he writes, "We need 'law'; but it would be to betray Paul's call to us in these verses to substitute external

commands for the continuing work of mind-renewal that is at the heart of God's New Covenant work." It is difficult to suppress an Amen at this point!

Moo treats Romans as a whole book, and will not allow us to view chapters 1-8 as the main course and chapters 9-16 as the side-salad. They are not treated as an appendage to the main teaching but as "an important and integral part of the letter". Likewise chapters 12-16 are not a "last minute 'add-on' relatively unrelated to the real – theological – heart of the letter", instead it is the exposition of how the powerful gospel explained in the first eight chapters can change lives. If I had to have only one commentary on Romans I may well choose Moo, but be very tempted to sneak a look at someone's Bruce, Calvin, Cranfield, Dunn, Murray...

John Woods, Lancing

Some recent commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles

1 & 2 Timothy: Passing on the Truth, Michael Bentley, Evangelical Press, 1997, 316 pp., £8.95

Titus: Straightening out the Self-Centred Church, John Benton, Evangelical Press, 1997, 192 pp., £6.99

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Douglas Milne, Christian Focus Publications, 1996, 240 pp., £6.95

The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus: The Life of the Local Church, John RW Stott, IVP, 1996, 232 pp., £9.99

Timothy & Titus, Michael Griffiths, Crossway, 1996, 223 pp., £4.99

The seemingly exponential expansion of choice in the world of commentaries can leave the average pastor daunted. Even confining ourselves to evangelical works the choice is still broad. This review will examine five works

chosen only because they have been published recently and are evangelical in perspective.

Michael Bentley's book on 1 & 2 *Timothy: Passing On The Truth (Welwyn Commentary Series)*, is based around a series of sermons. It is written in a conversational style with many extremely pertinent and insightful personal applications. The book takes a generally conservative view on controversial issues such as the role of women with the arguments clearly and fairly set out. The end-notes are limited in their range and generally refer to older or more popular commentaries. In picking up a commentary of this sort I am mainly looking for a pastor's theological reflection with application and illustration which brings the bible alive for people living in our rapidly changing world. Unfortunately it is at these points that the book is relatively weak.

In the same series is John Benton's commentary on *Titus: Straightening Out The Self-centred Church*. He states in his preface that the commentary is the result of "trying to define and grasp more clearly... how the contemporary world around us affects, almost unconsciously the way we think" (p. 11). The book is rich in illustration and extremely contemporary in its grasp of the relevance of the message for today. There are times when one could have wanted more help, such as what exactly "the husband of one wife" does and does not mean, but no commentary can achieve everything.

John Stott, of course, is in a class of his own. His final contribution to *The Bible Speaks Today* series, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus: Life in the Local Church*, is eminently "Stottian". The work is impeccably organised and both comprehensive and succinct in its comments. As usual the commentary reflects a lifetime of pastoral experience

and theological and cultural reflection of the highest order. One may not always agree with him but one cannot fail to understand him and to warm to his impassioned plea for the church to be ruled by the scriptures. Those familiar with John Stott's other writings will find little which is surprising, though as usual in preparation for a recent sermon series I found myself starting here before branching out into less navigable waters.

Douglas Milne's commentary on all three Pastorals, in the *Focus on the Bible* series, is similarly well organised though perhaps a little more atomised in its approach to the books as a whole. Milne always has an eye for systematic theology, and for illuminating cross references, while perhaps being less sensitive to the particular cultural situation into which the epistles were written. There is no effort to interact with other positions or to provide any more than the briefest of pastoral reflection. It is more useful as an introduction than as a source for pastors.

Michael Griffiths has written the *Crossway Bible Guide* on the Pastorals. This is not a commentary but rather an aid to reflection. Griffiths is not always the most reliable of exegetes (for instance in his rather contentious statements about the greek word *authentain*) but he has an unerring eye for the key issues and questions in the minds of modern (especially young) readers which any sermon needs to address. For this alone it is worth a glance.

So what is the busy pastor of modest means to acquire? Those with a knowledge of Greek cannot afford to be without the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* on the Pastorals by George W Knight III. Its main strength is its insights into the original language. Nor should anyone ignore Gordon Fee's *New International Biblical Commentary* for his

spirited and largely persuasive attempt to sketch in a coherent picture of the churches to which the Pastorals were written. In today's world a pastor intending to preach through 1 Timothy cannot avoid doing some wider reading on the subject of the role of women. (See, for instance, Douglas Moo's brief but careful exegesis of 1 Tim. 2:11-15 in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by John Piper & Wayne Grudem.) For an eye for how a passage might become a sermon Stott and Benton are extremely helpful. The Pastorals are books in real need of being read and preached and lived out in the modern church. We are no longer short of evangelical contributions to that process.

Peter Comont, Oxford

Briefly Noted

One of the best loved leaders of evangelicalism in Britain in this century was the late Prof. **RA Finlayson** of the Free Church College in Edinburgh, where he taught systematic theology. He was also well-known as a preacher and lecturer, not least in many Christian Unions. Tom Maclean has gathered together a number of Finlayson's finest pieces in *Reformed Theological Writings* (Mentor/Christian Focus, 1996). Steeped in the rich heritage of Scottish Calvinism, this is clear-headed, warm-hearted, accessible, confessional and biblical theology at its best, the kind of theology that our churches desperately need today. After the biographical introduction, the book is divided in three sections – general theology, issues facing evangelicals and the Westminster Confession. The first and third sections stand the test of time and are a superb introduction to reformed theology. The second section is inevitably somewhat dated, but shows a godly mind at

work wrestling with the issues of his day and provides us with a model for our times. Finlayson was one of the architects of the post-war evangelical resurgence and his life and writings merit consideration as that legacy faces new challenges today.

A book in the same tradition as Finlayson is **Andrew TB McGowan's *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*** (Rutherford House/Paternoster, 1997). Boston is a fascinating figure in Scottish church history – a pastor-theologian who was both a popular doctrinal and devotional writer and a major contributor to the development of Scottish theology. McGowan clearly and succinctly surveys Boston's thought and brings out his theological genius. Although it began as a PhD thesis it is very readable and accessible to the non-specialist reader. As a pastor-theologian himself McGowan deals with issues that Boston dealt with in the early 18th century and which are of perennial concern to pastors.

John Piper is a pastor-theologian whose writings are always enriching, if sometimes controversial and provocative in the way he seeks answers to old questions. ***A Hunger for God*** (IVP, 1997) is a spiritual feast that should be required reading for every church-officer. The book is simply about, as its subtitle says, "desiring God through fasting and prayer". This is the only book I have ever read on fasting that has actually made me want to do it. Piper's great theme of enjoying God comes through on every page. The spiritual blessing of fasting is so wonderfully described that you want to start straight away. The book is deeply challenging. Take this as a sample: "The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world" (p. 14). The chapter on fasting for the poor and

oppressed is superb. It is a meditation on Isaiah 58 and if its message were taken seriously by churches the implications would be far-reaching. Here is applied theology that will set your soul on fire.

The writings of **Michael Horton** are increasingly appreciated by those who want to understand the underlying currents of what is happening in the church today. ***In the Face of God*** (Word, 1996) explores the issue of spiritual intimacy. Horton looks at what passes for spirituality in much of evangelicalism today. He shows how much of it closely resembles ancient gnosticism with its emphasis on direct knowledge of God. He then maps out an evangelical spirituality that is thoroughly biblical and owes much to the insights of the Reformers. If the book has a flaw it is that he so subsumes the work of the Spirit within the Word that I wonder if he has much room for any subjective experience in the Christian life. I would also challenge some of what he says about the sacraments. But overall the book is very good and a helpful guide in spiritually confusing times.

Even more robust and forthright is **Peter Jones' *Spirit Wars*** (WinePress, 1997). Jones, who teaches New Testament at Westminster Seminary in California, shows how paganism is being revived in America. The study of ancient Gnostic texts is something of a fad in biblical studies, but this is far from an arcane academic pursuit. There is a clear pagan agenda in what is happening. Jones does not see an organised conspiracy, but rather scholars reflecting the increasingly pagan culture around them. This is particularly evident in the way much feminist theology handles the Bible. The book is not well edited and I did not find it easy to read, but it deals with serious issues that we need to be aware of.

The Editor
