BOOKS

Two Views Of John

Christianity According to John, *by D. George Vanderlip (Westminster, 1975, 224 pp., $8.50), and* The Gospel of John, Volume I, *by James Montgomery Boice (Zondervan, 1975, 443 pp., $9.95), are reviewed by Donald A. Carson, dean, Northwest Baptist Theological Seminary, Vancouver, British Columbia.*

Both of these books are concerned with the Fourth Gospel, and each was written by an evangelical living in the Philadelphia area. There the similarities between them end.

Christianity According to John apparently arises out of Vanderlip's classroom experience. Its twelve chapters constitute a basic theology of the Gospel of John. The chapter headings cover many of John's most important themes: "Jesus as the Word," "The Children of God," "Believe," "Know," "Love," "Light and Darkness," "The Spirit of Truth," and so on. Vanderlip writes clearly and concisely and shows competence in the secondary literature (in fact, there are too many quotations).

For better or for worse, Vanderlip goes out of his way to show that John is "relevant." The first chapter, for instance, "John Speaks to Our World," begins with several pages devoted to discussing "life's true meaning," reality, genuineness, oppression. "John's understanding of love," we read, "involves creative human response to need." Several chapters conclude with a section seeking to develop the contemporary meaning of the exposition. I would be the last to eschew the relevance of the Scriptures, but I think Vanderlip's efforts to demonstrate this relevance are the weakest part of his book. At one point he even finds it necessary to apologize for the Evangelist's negative comments on "the Jews." We have, he says, no right to speak of the Jews, or of anyone else, as "children of the devil" (8:44) as John has done (though it should be observed that John ascribes the remark to Jesus). "We can understand it, but we must not perpetuate it." I would think that Jesus' remark, far from being racist, could be extended to all human beings everywhere apart from the grace of God.

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Vanderlip thinks the Gospel of John was written toward the end of the first century, with both Jewish and Gentile *believers* primarily in view. However, he later allows that the book's purpose includes both evangelism and instruction. The Apostle John probably stands behind it with his oral preaching and teaching; but one of his disciples prepared the first draft based on John's proclamation, and a subsequent editor or editors enlarged the draft by incorporating supplementary material—including that which makes up chapters 15-17, 21. It was published in Ephesus. The brevity of Vanderlip's book means that Vanderlip's reconstruction of the Fourth Gospel's early history is compressed into a few pages. It may be convincing to the beginning student or to the student who has already adopted some scheme such as those of R. E. Brown, B. Lindars, and R. Schnackenburg; I doubt if it will commend itself to those who see greater significance in the claims to eyewitness reporting, and who allow that only 21:24 f. was added by other writers.

Vanderlip focuses his attention on the Gospel itself, but in the case of two themes, knowledge and dualism, he includes a fair bit of background material. On the other hand, there are certain omissions. Many of Jesus' titles are discussed but not "Lamb of God." Much is made of John's emphasis on love, relatively little of his stress on wrath and judgment.

Vanderlip reserves the last chapter for a discussion of "History and Interpretation." It is in this area that I find myself in strongest disagreement with him. Twice he argues that John 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2 are references to excommunication from the synagogue by virtue of an alleged Jamnian decree (c. A.D. 85), even though he acknowledges that Leon Morris "prefers to interpret the excommunication as related to the time of Jesus." It is not only Morris: M. J. Lagrange, C. F. D. Moule, and even C. H. Dodd, among others, raise doubts as to whether this is an anachronism.

Not just an isolated incident is at stake. Everyone can agree that John gives his material his own impress, and that he uses his own vocabulary; and indeed the problem of the relation between history and interpretation is extremely difficult. But when entire chapters that the Evangelist ascribes to Jesus are now cast as later pious expansions of the significance of Jesus, then the problem becomes acute. Vanderlip is basically saying that the theology of the Fourth Gospel is true while its historical referents are doubtful. To justify this conclusion, he calls up two crucial arguments. First, he draws attention to Paul, who regularly gives his opinion on various matters: is John not entitled to the same recognition of inspiration that is confidently granted to Paul? But there is a qualitative difference: John ascribes his material to Jesus directly, in historical settings, sometimes even claiming eyewitness veracity. And both John and Paul are quite capable of distinguishing between statements from Jesus during his ministry, and post-resurrection insights (e.g., John 2:17, 22; I Cor. 7:10, 12). Second, Vanderlip makes repeated appeal to the Spirit (John 16:12-15), who will lead Christ's people into truth. He compares First Corinthians 7:40 ("And I think that I have the Spirit of God"), and writes: "If through the years Christians had not acknowledged the validity of this claim by Paul, the writings of Paul would not have been admitted into the New Testament canon. Extending the same principle to John, can we deny to the author of the Fourth Gospel the right to freedom of religious expression under the guidance of the Spirit (John 16:12-15)?"

Hence Vanderlip cites with approval the opinion of Sanders and Martin that "the material in the Fourth Gospel consisted originally of sermons, preached by a man who was a Christian prophet, whose own words were as truly 'words of the Lord' as those spoken by Jesus beside the sea of Galilee or in the Upper Room." But the Christian prophets were always

able to distinguish between what Jesus said during his ministry and what his Spirit appeared to be saying through them (see D. Hill, "On the Evidence for the Creative Role of Christian Prophets," *New Testament Studies 20* [1974], 262-74).

I am far from arguing that John is presenting verbatim reports of Christ's discourses; but I am persuaded that some model other than Vanderlip's better explains the evidence. John gives condensations, in his own idiom (independence of idiom is especially easy when the original material is in another language, in this case presumably Aramaic); but condensed reports can be accurate reports—both theologically and historically.

The book by Boice arose from the author's preaching ministry. This is the first volume of a projected series of five and covers 1:1–4:54. The fifty-six short chapters vary considerably in scope: they can cover just part of one verse (e.g., two sermons are given over to 1:14) or a more extended section (e.g. 2:1-11).

In both style and content the book is easy to read. Although written with the layman in mind, it contains insights that the Johannine specialist will appreciate. The work is marked by colorful examples and apposite quotations and illustrations. It is openly evangelistic.

Boice entertains no doubt about the truth of both theology and history in the Fourth Gospel, and occasionally ventures some explanatory remarks (see, for example, the part beginning on page 60).

The reader should be forewarned that the book is *not simply* an exposition of the first chapters of John—indeed, *not quite* an exposition. It is *not quite* an exposition in the sense that Boice selects certain teachings from many of his texts but does not attempt to expound the entire passage. The points he draws out of the text are usually valid; but not infrequently I was left with the impression that I was not being helped to understand *John* precisely as *John* wanted to be understood. Again, the book is *not simply* an exposition in the sense that Boice regularly draws in much material from elsewhere in the Scriptures. For example, in commenting on John 4:25 f., he manages to discuss the Matthean and Lukan genealogies. Three chapters are given over to a consideration of Christian baptism—mercifully, not in the categories of adult versus child baptism, or sprinkling versus immersion. In writing on John 1:4 Boice introduces us to Psalm 23. And, most noteworthy, in almost every chapter Boice ventures applications that, however valid, are not found in the text.

None of these features is blameworthy, if the book is accepted for what it is: a rewriting of sermons, preached in a textual/expository tradition. As such, the book is stimulating and helpful. I read it with pleasure. □