

*I, II, III John*. By Robert Kysar. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986, 336 pp., \$14.95 paper.

The Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament is "written for lay people, students, and pastors"—with the emphasis certainly on the first two. As successive volumes appear, the series is becoming well-known—a useful and engaging set of commentaries designed primarily for the more conservative wing of the liberal spectrum (if these labels are not too simplistic). Kysar needs no introduction to those who work in the field of Johannine studies. In addition to numerous essays and minor works, his major survey and assessment of these studies (*The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel*) has rightly earned him gratitude and respect.

On most issues Kysar adopts fairly common views. After briefly probing the relationship between the fourth gospel and the Johannine epistles, he concludes that "the epistles are products of and for a Christian church that shared a tradition embraced by the author of the Fourth Gospel." Similarly he thinks it impossible to show that 2 John and 3 John are from the same hand that wrote 1 John and that in any case it is more likely that they simply "shared with the Fourth Evangelist the same community." The time is toward the end of the first century, after John's gospel has circulated for some time and a group of separatists, committed to what is now called docetic Christology, has pulled out and left the original Church in some disarray. 1 John has been written to address their confusion. Kysar thinks it is made up of fragments of a number of messages patched together into written form and given something of the atmosphere of a letter by numerous "I write to you" formulas. This, he thinks, accounts for the fact that it does not share many formal characteristics with known letters of the ancient world. I am inclined to think it is better classified as a modified tractate letter and that its lack of the more obvious formal characteristics may be accounted for by the fact that it served as a circular that was introduced by cover letters such as 2 John and 3 John.

The exegesis, based on the *RSV*, is always clear and is usually restrained and sensible. What it lacks is bold theological exploration. For instance, the "faithful and just" phrasing of 1:9 cries out to be unpacked a little further. The use of *hilasmos* at 2:2 and 4:10, rendered "expiation" in the *RSV*, is discussed so briefly (about 15 lines) that although some of the issues are nicely set out, the cut and thrust of theological debate and its pastoral implications are inevitably lost, along with the full power of the term in its context. The devil seems to be depersonalized

on p. 80. At 3:9 Kysar appeals to John 1:12 for understanding “seed” as that which “God has implanted in Christians that . . . makes them his children.” I rather think he has entirely missed the point of the clause “sin is lawlessness” at 3:4. The same is true for the “sin unto death” passage (5:16-17).

All in all this is a useful commentary and, as with anything from Kysar’s pen, entirely lucid. Most readers who want a commentary on the Johannine epistles pitched at this level, however, would do better reading Stott (in his revised commentary for the Tyndale NT commentary series)—a work that, strangely, is not even mentioned by Kysar.

D. A. Carson  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL