

*The Pentecostal Commentary on 1 John, 2 John, 3 John.* By John Christopher Thomas. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004, vi + 283 pp., \$19.95 paper.

Thomas is both the editor of this new series and the author of this commentary within it. The purpose of the series, he writes, “is to provide reasonably priced commentaries written from a distinctively Pentecostal perspective primarily for pastors, lay persons, and Bible students.” Thomas tells us that the writers “have been encouraged to engage in prayer for this project, both as individuals and as members of a community of believers. Specifically, the guidance of the Holy Spirit has been sought in these times of prayer, for the leadership of the Spirit in interpretation is essential.” I recall the quiet comments of William Lane about his own practice in this regard when he was writing his Mark commentary.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating: so what is this commentary like? It is pitched about the level of TNTC or IVPNTC—though it is chattier than either, with occasional asides and application that sometimes remind the reader of “The Bible Speaks Today” series (though of course it is more exegetically detailed than the latter). Thomas holds that the author of these letters is probably the same author as the fourth evangelist, but not the apostle John; Thomas opts for John the Elder. This and other introductory issues are treated so briefly that there is little substantive interaction with other views. There is no attempt, here or in the commentary, to relate the Christological denials that John confronts with Gnostic or other movements of about the same period. The brief introduction ends with a short section on “The Holy Spirit in 1 John” but with no other theological survey (though there is a brief theological survey in the specific introduction to 1 John). The commentary itself works first through 3 John, then 2 John, and then 1 John (one recalls the commentary of I. Howard Marshall). There are a dozen brief sections headed “Reflection and Response.” The work includes no indexes. The “Select Bibliography” lists a dozen commentaries (one is surprised by what is omitted: e.g. Bultmann, Law, Stott, Klauck, Houlden, Dodd), plus two technical articles by Thomas. The actual interaction in the commentary includes a small selection of additional articles, but no further commentaries, as far as I can see, apart from the useful volume in the ACCS series. The commentary uses Greek sparingly (Greek font, no transliteration), occasionally with incorrect accents.

Thomas takes 3 John to be a genuine private letter. After outlining seven possible hypotheses to explain the relationship between John and Diotrephes, Thomas focuses on the attitude of the latter. The formal addressee of 2 John, viz. “the elect lady,” is a local congregation that is part of the larger Johannine community, and her “children” are her members.

Thomas does not think that 1 John is really a letter at all, but, following in the heritage of Raymond E. Brown, that 1 John is more or less a commentary on the Christological and other issues raised in the Fourth Gospel that have been misunderstood. The want of Ephesian markings may spring from the fact that the document was circulated in house churches where the Elder was well known, perhaps right in the Ephesus area.

Every commentator on these documents has to make a number of difficult decisions. It is impossible to record all of Thomas’s choices, but it may be worth drawing attention to a couple of them. The strong statement in 1 John 3:9 is hard to reconcile with what John writes in chapter 1. Thomas acknowledges the problem, leans toward the well-worn view that the present tense of the verb may point the way forward. He mentions the comments of John Wesley but refuses to follow him. On the other hand, several other possible explanations are not explored. Moreover, it must be said that Thomas’s occasional appeals to the significance of Greek tenses betray no knowledge of linguistic developments during the last decade and a half, especially in the domain of verbal aspect

theory. As for the meaning of ἰλασμός, Thomas judges “propitiation” or “propitiating sacrifice” to be unsatisfactory and opts for the view that the word conveys the notion that Jesus’ atoning death is the basis of cleansing and forgiveness, as well as the ground of Jesus’ intercession with God.

I disagree with some of these judgments, but I cheerfully acknowledge that they are within the orb of common contemporary Johannine scholarship. The crucial question to ask of a “Pentecostal Commentary” is what makes it that. Thomas detects “four dimensions of the Spirit’s role in 1 John,” all of them related in one fashion or another to knowledge or knowing. The “anointing” language is taken to refer to the work of the Spirit, and this “anointing” is opposed to the false teaching of the antichrists. Because they have the Spirit’s anointing, the believers are safeguarded and do not need teachers. What, then, of John’s role as teacher? Thomas says, first, that this is merely another of several tensions in 1 John; and, second (following Brown), that John and his community might have thought of John’s role as bearing testimony rather than as teaching. I disagree rather strongly with this line of interpretation, but in any case none of this is distinctively Pentecostal.

The second dimension is the Spirit’s role in assuring believers of their relationship to God (especially 3:24 and 4:13). Exactly what this role is, or how it works out, John does not make clear, but Thomas suggests that it “appears to include prophetic activity through human spokespersons.” Perhaps—but the text does not say so. Third, the Spirit is involved in helping believers distinguish between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception (4:1–6), and once again Thomas suggests that the Spirit “works through human spokespersons.” Finally, the witness of the Spirit in the extraordinarily difficult passage, 1 John 5:6–8, Thomas takes to refer to the Spirit’s confirming assurance of the significance of the blood and water—a witness in line with what is said in John 15:26. This is a very difficult passage, and I am not sure that Thomas is right—but in any case, his interpretation is not distinctively Pentecostal. The distinctively Pentecostal contribution, then, comes down to suggesting that in several passages, which do not explicitly say so, the Spirit’s role may be exercised through the prophetic ministry of human spokespersons.

Granted the burgeoning number of Pentecostals and charismatics around the world, the series title will doubtless draw the attention of a substantial number of readers who might not otherwise read a serious commentary, and that in itself is a very good thing. Nowadays, however, there are so many commentaries on the Johannine Epistles that it is difficult to assign this one to the top rank of necessary reading for those serious expositors and scholars, Pentecostal and otherwise, whose choice of commentaries scarcely takes into consideration series labels such as “Pentecostal,” “Wesleyan,” and “Reformed.”

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