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BOOK REVIEW

Thomas R. Schreiner. *Galatians*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. 423 pp. ISBN 0310243726.

Thomas Schreiner, the James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has provided a valuable tool for students and pastors with his recent commentary on Galatians. This work, which is the fourth entry of the emerging ZECNT series, was written with the needs of the biblical preacher or teacher in mind. The series is unique in its approach, so this review will look both at the commentary series and Schreiner's contribution to Galatians scholarship.

The creators and editors of this commentary series were intentional in their design and approach. The target audience includes those with some formal Greek education and an interest in communicating the biblical message for contemporary application. As such, the design of the commentary includes seven components for each biblical passage studied: Literary Context, Main Idea, Translation and Graphical Layout, Structure, Exegetical Outline, Explanation of the Text, and Theology in Application. While these components are often helpful for studying a passage with the intention of preaching, it becomes clear that they can be constricting for the commentary author. Some passages lend themselves better to these conventions, while others seem strained in certain categories.

The first section, Literary Context, places the passage under examination within the context of the book as a whole—highlighting its connections with what comes before and after it in the text. In practice, however, this section serves as a summary of the argument of Galatians up to the present passage—with little interest in what comes after the particular passage. For

example, Schreiner establishes the argument leading up to 2:15–21, which he identifies as a transition in the epistle, yet provides little by way of what it is transitioning into.

The Main Idea section offers a “carefully craft[ed]” statement of the “big idea or central thrust of the passage” (p. 10). This section, I imagine, will be of great assistance for those who follow the Haddon Robinson (or similar) “big idea” model of expository preaching. While helpful in many respects, this concept can be misleading, depending upon how the text is divided. Is it not clear that *every* division of the biblical text actually has a “big idea.” Often, the main point of each section is dependent upon what precedes and/or follows it; so, isolating its main idea can be tricky. This is apparent in Schreiner’s commentary as the “one- or two- sentence statement” (as defined in the series introduction, p. 10) of each passage’s main idea often drifts into four or five sentences or the use of run-on sentences (for some examples, see pp. 107, 200, 224).

The next two sections examine the individual passages by first providing a translation and then describing the internal flow of the passage. Each translation is presented as a diagram to emphasize main and subordinate clauses and how they relate to each other. These diagrams, or “graphical layouts,” are helpful in a limited way—one wonders why the Greek of each passage is left out of the diagram. If this series was intended for those with some New Testament Greek training, it would be more helpful to diagram how the Greek text is structured, rather than the commentator’s English translation. After the translation/graphical layout, the Structure section looks at each passage as a unit—tracing its flow and argument. The need for a closer look at the Greek is obvious in these sections, as Schreiner often appeals to Greek markers to argue for transitions within each passage (γάρ, διό, οὖν, and others).

The fifth section, the Exegetical Outline, places the individual passage within the structure of the larger sections of the discourse. Schreiner places each passage within the larger structure of Galatians that he established in his Introduction (see pp. 58–59). Concerning the structure of the epistle, Schreiner rightly challenges the recent trend of applying to Paul’s letters the

rhetorical conventions of oral speech found in ancient Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks. Made popular by Hans Betz and George Kennedy—and presently championed by Ben Witherington III—this strand of rhetorical criticism understands Paul’s letters as essentially oral speeches that were written down. As such, they are analyzed and arranged using the conventions of Greek rhetorical speeches (such as *exordium*, *narratio*, *propositio*, and *probatio*). Galatians, in particular, has been used as a test case for this approach—something that Schreiner correctly calls into question. Instead, Schreiner uses epistolary features to outline the text and a close reading of the body of the letter to determine its units and subunits.

The next section, Explanation of the Text, is the commentary proper, where Schreiner is allowed to look closely at each verse exegetically. After the author’s translation of each verse, the Greek is presented (finally!) and Schreiner carefully fleshes out the meaning and his interpretation. More detailed explorations are provided in shaded units titled “In Depth.” Schreiner makes good use of this feature—particularly to present various positions and arguments for troubling passages or issues. A good example of this is in his chapter on Gal 2:15–21. The In Depth sections tackle the topics of “Justification in Paul,” “Works of the Law,” and “Faith in Jesus Christ.” If one is familiar with Schreiner, it is not surprising where he lands (“justification” is forensic—a declaration by God of righteousness; “works of the law” refer to the entire Mosaic law and should not be reduced to “boundary markers”; “faith in Christ” makes use of the objective genitive), yet he uses these sections not only to present his case, but to place them within the larger scholarly discussions on these issues (supplemented heavily in the footnotes).

In the final section of each chapter, Theology in Application, the author attempts to do two things based upon his exegesis of each passage. First, he presents the theological contribution of the passage within the context of its first readers. So, as an example, Schreiner reflects upon Gal 6:6–10 by placing it within the broader Pauline concept of providing for those in the faith community. Second, this section attempts to bring out the contemporary application of each passage. Reflecting upon

Paul's discussion of the temporary role of the law in Gal 3:19–25, Schreiner moves to contemporary application by discussing the role of the Old Testament for believers today. Here, Schreiner argues that the Old Testament remains authoritative, but that application of its laws must be discerned in light of their place in the redemptive story of Jesus Christ. This is a challenging, if not provocative, assertion that should confront contemporary readers of Galatians. An example that Schreiner provides is tithing—“Many preachers insist that Christians must tithe today, but in most instances the reasons why this command of the Mosaic covenant is still normative remains unexplained” (p. 250). Schreiner is content leaving his challenge there (possibly to spur critical thinking)—yet it may have been helpful at least to point his readers to how the New Testament picks up the notion of tithing or issues related to it (almsgiving, giving to the poor).

These seven components are obviously designed for the preacher or student of the New Testament and will certainly be of help if one uses the commentary when studying a particular passage. By working through each section, one can easily locate the passage within the context of Galatians and grasp its central idea(s). Further, the theology/application sections provide possible ways to relate the text to a contemporary audience—often with illustrations and anecdotes.

Schreiner's best contributions in this commentary are found in the section of each passage where he is able to dive into the text as the careful exegete that he is. It is at this point that Schreiner is able to engage with the Greek text and the secondary literature relevant to interpreting each passage. It is a shame that Greek is reduced to these sections—since knowledge of Greek should at least inform the sections on structure and translation. Schreiner seems less comfortable in the application sections and often struggles to connect the ancient text to contemporary issues.

Schreiner's commentary on Galatians and the ZECNT series have identified their ideal audience and the results are helpful tools for the preacher and student of the New Testament. The commentary lends itself well to the pastor or undergraduate student needing to study a passage quickly with some direction

for application. More academic scholars and students may be frustrated with its brevity on interpretive issues and reduction of important scholarship to footnotes. Further, one may be just as frustrated with the commentary's lack of emphasis on the Greek and how it informs interpretation. Yet, Schreiner's commentary is successful in what it sets out to accomplish and certainly fills a need in the church.

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