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BOOK REVIEW

David S. Lovi and Benjamin Westerhoff, eds. *The Power of God: A Jonathan Edwards Commentary on the Book of Romans*. Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2014. 400 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0718893271.

The editors are to be commended for their “labor of love” for the church (xi). Much of Edwardsean scholarship since its renaissance during the last half of the twentieth century has been written for the benefit of the academy and often has been unnecessarily esoteric in nature. The list of scholars and scholarly works on Edwards that have been produced since the 1950s is seemingly endless. Starting with Perry Miller on the secular side, there have been hundreds of writers attracted to Edwardsean studies. “Jonathan Edwards Centers” have sprung up worldwide including such far-off places as Poland, Africa, Brazil, Japan, and the Benelux Countries. The phenomenon is pleasantly surprising given the fact that Edwards was a preacher and theologian first, and a philosopher a distant second. But too few efforts have been directed at showing how Edwards’s insights can help the church today. Edwards did not write sermons and treatises with the purpose of advancing scholarship per se. He ministered to advance the kingdom of God. John Gerstner (1914–96), who, according to the editors, inspired the present book, Ralph Turnbull, John Piper, and R. C. Sproul are among the few theologians who have studied the works of Edwards with that purpose in mind. Gerstner’s work, for example, includes *Jonathan Edwards: Evangelist*; *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*; *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell*; and *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* in three large volumes.

Lovi and Westerhoff have collected and organized all the available comments by Edwards on the book of Romans into what approximates, at first glance, an actual commentary. That

Edwards's comments on the Romans letter are now available in this handy format can be of benefit to preachers and interested laypersons, especially those who prefer to have a book in hand.

A few words of caution are appropriate, however. There is a concern regarding context on two fronts. First, the contexts of Edwards's own comments are not identified aside from mentioning the actual source. Apart from that the reader has no inkling whether the comment on a certain text was a part of a philosophical discussion, an apologetic discourse, or a sermon. Pertinent and likely questions regarding the actual content of each selection, and Edwards's approach to the text, the style of his comments, and the purpose of his writing about the passage are not answered. Second, Edwards's widely scattered writings on Romans are presented today at a time of great flux and uncertainty on the evangelical scene with respect to the interpretation of the Romans letter. In this book there is no reasoned engagement with the current scene on Edwards's behalf. In fact there is no engagement at all. No effort is made to address either Edwards's own setting on the one hand or to suggest where his interpretation can be of help to pastors in the confused state of Romans studies in which they find themselves with respect to preaching on the Romans text. This is a significant weakness in the publication that could have been remedied.

It is true to say that Jonathan Edwards was primarily a biblical preacher. But when he was not engaged in that work he was occupied with clarifying the Great Awakening to a confused Christendom, elucidating the vagaries of "vital piety" for the sake of seekers and detractors alike, and defending the theology of the Bible. Edwards often found himself in the thick of theological controversy, was an able apologist, and most often left the field less cluttered with error. His rejoinder to John Taylor, minister at Norwich, England, and others regarding original sin (volume 3 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Yale edition) and the freedom of the will (*Works*, volume 1) in two large treatises are cases in point. The intention here is to suggest that Edwards, given the magnitude of the issues involved in the Romans debate and the implications for evangelical theology today, would have jumped into the fray. It would have been very helpful if the

editors had used Edwards's own words to interact with the current debate.

A quick look at Romans studies today will show how useful this would be. The purpose and message of the book of Romans is being hotly debated. The responses of conservative writers to some recent interpretations of Romans range from gracious and reasoned exchange to startling accusations of heresy. The traditional view of Romans is that Paul intends to set forth the doctrines of grace. In other words, Paul explains in this epistle that salvation is of the Lord and that any dependence on human effort in order to earn salvation is out of the question. He therefore spends a considerable amount of his writing, as in other epistles, critiquing the legalism of the Jews, who believed that salvation involved an earned righteousness.

Another view emerged during the late 1970s. For an overview of some of the major issues in Romans studies, see Karl Donfried's *The Romans Debate, Revised and Expanded* (2001), and Richard Longenecker's *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (2011). The "new perspective on Paul" advocated by E. P. Sanders (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 1977) argues that rather than being legalists, Jews were merely responding in obedience to the grace of God. This has been interpreted to mean that Paul endorsed good works in addition to faith in Christ as the entry point of salvation. Others have followed Sanders's lead: James Dunn (*Romans 1–8 and Romans 9–16*, 1988; *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* 1997; and *The New Perspective on Paul*, 2007) and N. T. Wright (*Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* 2009). John Piper has provided a gracious rebuttal to Wright's thought (*The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*, 2007). Piper is concerned particularly about whether or not Wright has denied the doctrine of justification by faith alone. In 2009, Wright addressed the issue in his book *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*. Thomas Schreiner (*Romans*, 1998), and Douglas J. Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 1996) in the main uphold the traditional view that Paul in Romans teaches salvation by faith alone. See also John Stott (*Romans: God's Good News for the World*, 1995).

The above summary is provided simply to illustrate the theological milieu into which the present work is being introduced. The editors have taken a brilliant, even iconic, eighteenth century Puritan stalwart and entered his comments on the book of Romans with not a word about his relevance to the current debate. The only reference I can find regarding the purpose and message of the book of Romans and justification doctrine is a brief statement in the Introduction (xii) where the editors mention N. T. Wright in dialogue with John Piper. Even where Edwards's comments clearly intersect with issues in the current debate throughout the text, none is highlighted. This places a limitation on the book's usefulness for a considerable part of the theological market.

For pastors, it would be helpful to know the context of Edwards's writing. For example, if Edwards referred to a verse in Romans in order to buttress a philosophical argument, the application of such comment might well be different than if he was writing a sermon for preaching. Conversely, an intended exegetical study would contain connotation and meaning radically different from a mere oblique reference to such a passage. One might argue therefore that had Edwards written a formal commentary on Romans it would look substantially different than this offering. Context is crucial. But the editors have allowed Edwards's words to stand without annotation. In the strict sense of the word then, to call this book a commentary is widening the definition.

Clearly, the present work needs revision and expansion. The editors would be advised to research the writings of Edwards from which comments are extracted and provide contextual comment in each case. Similarly, wherever Edwards makes reference to verses in the book of Romans that are relevant to the present-day debate about purpose and message, notes to that effect would be helpful to the user.

Without these improvements, the book remains a "cut and paste" effort. In fact, for the computer-literate pastor, all of the content is available online. One needs but click on *jestudies.yale.edu* and then do a search for the relevant passage in the *Online Journal* using its in-house search function to find almost all

of the material that fills this book.

One hopes the editors will expand this work in a second edition. A suggestion for potential buyers would be to wait for that. Edwards is, above all else, an amazing interpreter, head and shoulders above the rest in his time. He still speaks into many of today's issues through his prolific writings. Exegetically he is sometimes creative but is always insightful and God-honoring. Edwards's thought on the book of Romans is worth preserving in this form. But as it stands, £22.50 (about \$38) seems a lot to pay for what can be gained from this book as it is.

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