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BOOK REVIEW

S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. *Discovering Romans: Spiritual Revival for the Soul*. Adapted by Mike Abendroth. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 260 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-51542-5. US\$19.99.

S. Lewis Johnson was a pastor for fifty years, and for most of that time a theology professor. For thirty-one years at Dallas Theological Seminary he taught biblical languages and then Systematic Theology. He also taught Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield Illinois (1980–85) and Tyndale Theological Seminary in the Netherlands (1985–93). He died in 2004 at the age of eighty-eight.

Dr. Mike Abendroth, pastor of Bethlehem Bible Church in West Boylston, Massachusetts, was introduced to the work of Johnson by John McArthur. McArthur has written the foreword to the book, and notes among other things that the audio recordings of most of Johnson's sermons are still available on the Internet. This volume on Romans is the first of a planned series of Johnson's biblical expositions in book form. Johnson devoted his time to ministry rather than to publication and left behind only one major book (*The Old Testament in the New*, Zondervan, 1980). The publication of the material he preached and taught will make his work more available to future generations.

In his Introduction, Abendroth gives a brief biography of Johnson. He then describes his own work in collecting the material, and categorizes the book as an "expositional" commentary, neither totally exegetical nor devotional, but a hybrid of these two. Johnson worked from the Greek text but was concerned with its application to the life of his congregation. Abendroth reports that he collected over 160,000 words of Johnson's material on Romans. Although Johnson taught

through Romans more than forty times in his lifetime, the core of the material collected by Abendroth was typed versions of sermons preached at the Believers Chapel in Dallas, Texas, from July 13, 1980 to September 20, 1981. Johnson had these made to circulate to his church members. Abendroth also accessed Johnson's nine articles in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1971–74) on Romans 1:1—3:20. The result of the editing of this material is a book of about 90,000 words.

Johnson saw Romans as a theological treatise, and the commentary itself, not surprisingly given Johnson's interests, is primarily a theological one. He works through the text, but comments mainly on parts that inform his systematic theology. No opportunity to point out support for theological doctrines such as the sovereignty of God, double predestination, and human responsibility as opposed to human freedom, is missed. Predictably for a Dallas Theological Seminary professor, he promotes dispensational understandings, including a theological future for physical Israel and the cessation of some spiritual gifts. His method, however, leaves some parts of the text without commentary. For example, there is no commentary on the implications in Rom 4:13 of Paul's choice of the term "world" (*κόσμος*) rather than the term "land" (*γῆ*) to describe Abraham's inheritance, and the fact that though Paul must have been aware that a major part of the promise about which Abraham had faith in the Old Testament was receiving the "land" of Canaan, Paul seems to have substituted the world to come for this promise in the Abrahamic inheritance of New Testament saints. Though in most places supportive of Calvin's interpretations of various passages, Johnson criticizes him for "spiritualizing" Israel in the New Testament, and particularly in Romans. Likewise, other parts of the text that held no theological interest for Johnson, or were not germane to his audience, receive no comment.

Because this is largely sermon material, there are a number of fine illustrations and apt quotations scattered throughout the book. A preacher looking for material to help make Romans interesting and relevant to a modern audience will find some inspiration here. Abendroth has also made an effort to provide notes citing the commentaries and other materials Johnson used when preparing the sermons. The original sermons were full of

quotations from named persons, and in this book the sources have been found and given academic-style endnotes to enable the reader to find them in their original context. One should naturally not expect to find references to material written after 1981.

Each section ends with discussion questions intended to make the book useful for individual or group study. It is not clear who wrote the questions, but one might suppose that it was Abendroth. The questions could, however, have been more expertly framed. They do not cover all parts of the passages just treated. Some are leading questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no,” or assume that the reader shares Johnson’s views. (Example: “Are Jewish unbelievers helped today when Jesus is preached as a weak, sentimental, faceless, amiable carpenter instead of the God-man who has offered a penal, substitutionary sacrifice for wicked sinners among whom are all people? Explain” [182].) The questions mainly aim to reinforce the theological views expressed in the exposition.

Although Johnson worked from the Greek text of Romans, he was not, in the early 1980s, able to access the work that has been done since then using insights from the discipline of modern linguistics to understand Greek grammar. He assumes, for instance, that if something is expressed in the aorist tense it always means that this thing happened in the “past.” Thus, it would not be appropriate to expect that all references to Greek grammar in this book represent current scholarship.

This book would be a useful supplementary resource for someone preparing sermons or lessons on Romans. However, it would probably only be appreciated as a study guide for groups or individuals who already share Johnson’s theological views. Johnson rightly saw theology as important, for lay Christians and professionals alike, because ideas result in behavior. He therefore sought to make it accessible to all believers. A number of people already use Johnson’s online material for devotional purposes, which I think would have delighted him. This book appears to have been compiled mainly to give resources to such people and to increase their numbers.

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