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**Thomas, John Christopher**

***The Pentecostal Commentary on 1 John, 2 John, 3 John***

The Pentecostal Commentary, New Testament

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This commentary is one of the first examples of a new commentary series written by Pentecostal scholars. The author of this volume is also the series editor, John Christopher Thomas, who is Professor of Biblical Studies at the Church of God Theological Seminary, Cleveland, Tennessee.

In the editor's preface Thomas argues that Pentecostalism is not fundamentalism plus spiritual gifts. He avers that its theological heart is Jesus as Savior, Sanctifier, Holy Spirit Baptizer, Healer, and Coming King. Authors have been selected with this theological stance and the spirituality of the tradition in mind. Guidelines laid down for the writing of commentaries in this series include an atmosphere of prayer, the support of local churches possibly through discussion Bible studies, and discussion with academic colleagues, so that its production is not just the labor of the isolated scholar. Each volume is expected to begin with a series of questions designed to identify corporate and individual issues raised by the biblical book. An introduction is provided that deals with the usual questions of date, authorship, and provenance. A section is also included specifically on what the book has to say about the Holy Spirit. A verse-by-verse commentary is given. Exposition also focuses on texts that might be considered of special interest to Pentecostal readers. At the end of a major section of a book there is a section

devoted to reflection and response. This is done deliberately to emphasize the tradition's practice of not only hearing the word but of responding in concrete ways to it. Thomas calls it a "literary equivalent to the altar call." These emphases should not, however, cause one to assume that the commentary is purely devotional or only of interest to Pentecostal or charismatic Christians.

Thomas argues that the Fourth Gospel and all the Johannine Epistles come from the same community and probably the same author. In particular, he discusses John the son of Zebedee and John the Elder as possible authors, favoring the latter.

The commentary at first seems to be back-to-front. Thomas has taken the unusual step of dealing with the epistles in reverse order. He offers two reasons for this. First, it means that 3 John is read in its own right rather than as an addition to 1 John. Second, he feels there is some justification for believing that 3 John was the first to be written. He notes that canonical order often does not indicate chronological order.

In the commentary on 3 John, Thomas discusses the resemblance of the letter to secular Greco-Roman letters and concludes that 3 John is a genuine private piece of correspondence and a "most intriguing glimpse into the Johannine community." In particular, he discusses the rift between the Elder and Diotrephes, summarizing seven possible hypotheses. Thomas focuses on the attitude of Diotrephes and his hostility to others.

The addressee of 2 John, "the elect lady," is taken to refer to a local congregation that is part of the Johannine community. The children would then appear to be members of the congregation, as distinct from specific believers over whom the Elder had oversight, as seems to be the case in 3 John.

Thomas notes the differences between 1 John and the two shorter epistles. The epistolary characteristics are absent from 1 John. Following, R. E. Brown, he views 1 John as a kind of commentary on Christological issues that have been misunderstood. It is possible that the letter was sent to house churches in the Ephesus area where epistolary markings were unnecessary or was carried to churches by the Elder's representative and so needed no identification.

Thomas finds a chiastic structure to the work, summarizing the contents of each section. The central section, he suggests, is 3:11–17. This focuses on love for one another within the church. A strong connection is seen between love and eternal life. The other significant term is "remain" (*meno*), which, Thomas notes, appears frequently throughout the epistle.

One or two particular points of exegesis might be mentioned. In his discussion of the meaning of *hilasmos* (89–90), Thomas argues that the idea of Jesus serving as a propitiating sacrifice to appease the wrath of God is not the best interpretation in the Johannine context. He sees the main emphasis of the term as demonstrating that the atoning death of Jesus is the basis of cleansing and forgiveness and, furthermore, the ground of Jesus' intercession with God.

It is interesting that in commenting on 2:22 Thomas resists the temptation to interpret the antichrist in an eschatological manner, as one might have expected a Pentecostal to do. His emphasis is that the antichrist denies that Jesus is the Christ.

On 3:9, Thomas admits the problem of reconciling the statement that “No one born of God commits sin” with other statements in the book about the possibility of a Christian sinning. He mentions the often-proposed grammatical explanation that the present tense in the Greek might cause one to interpret the text as saying that the Christian does not sin as a course of habit. While accepting the logic of this explanation, Thomas feels it fails to do justice to the intensity of John's words. He mentions the comments of John Wesley but argues that the tension between 1 John 3 and 1–2 is not relieved. However, he fails to mention several other possible solutions to this crux. More detail on issues such as this would have been welcome.

Greek words are used sparingly and are not transliterated. It is disappointing that there is only a very short bibliography, but a number of scholarly works are mentioned in the footnotes. There are no indexes. Headers that gave reference to the chapter or section of the chapter being discussed would have been helpful.

This is not a technical commentary; there is little on textual criticism, for example. However, it would be incorrect to view it as just a devotional commentary. It is a commentary that will prove useful to pastors and to laypeople needing clear comments without a large amount of technical detail. Thomas's writing style is very clear and comprehensible. Finally, one hopes that the series title will not deter non-Pentecostals from using what is a fine medium-sized commentary.