

RBL 02/2005



Thomas, John Christopher

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

The Pentecostal Commentary: New Testament

Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004. Pp. xv + 282. Paper. \$24.00.
ISBN 0829816496.

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John Christopher Thomas is not just the author of this book but also the editor of the series in which it is included, *The Pentecostal Commentary*. The motivation for such an enterprise was to offer reasonably priced biblical commentaries to pastors, laity, and students written from the perspective of the Pentecostal tradition (ix). Since *The Pentecostal Commentary Series* is not intended for the halls of academia, Thomas writes in a popular style that aims at clarity. To wit, “[t]he aim is to communicate the meaning of the text, with minimal technical distractions” (ix). Hence, a prudent effort has been made to restrict the inclusion of any notes and apparatus to what is necessary for the reader’s understanding (xii).

Contributors to the series are encouraged to engage in prayer for the project, seeking the guidance and leadership of the Holy Spirit, whose intercession is viewed as essential for interpretation. They have also been asked to contextualize their scholarship within the broader community of faith by covenanting with their local churches, asking for spiritual support, and (possibly) leading a Bible study on the book of scripture about which they will be writing for the commentary (x). Thomas himself brings to the venture his own experience as a professor of biblical studies at his denomination’s seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, as well as his part-time ministry in the pastorate for the Woodward Avenue

Church of God. His expression of thanks to the members of his congregation for their prayerful intercession—some of whom have been formerly enslaved to drugs, sex, alcohol, and the like—is especially poignant (xiv–xv).

The commentary seeks to express in its format the spiritual outlook of Pentecostalism by giving pride of place to a dialogical approach to the text of scripture (xi). Thus Thomas proposes a running exposition of the text with extended comments on those passages with an especial significance for Pentecostal Christians (xi). Additionally, the introduction to each book in the series will have a section devoted particularly to the biblical book's teaching about the Holy Spirit (xi; see 13–4 for this). Brief "Reflection and Response" sections are also included throughout book (34–36, 51–52, 91–92, 121–23, 140–41, 169–71, 183–84, 195–97, 212–14, 247–49, 262–64, 281–82) that not only outline the commentator's own summation of and thoughts on the text just discussed but also suggest ways in which the reader may actualize the scripture in his or her own life. For example, after analyzing the section about fellowship with light or darkness and about acknowledging one's sins before God (1 John 1:5–2:2), Thomas asks his readers to pinpoint how their lives may embody the sinful attitudes and behavior alluded to in John's letter (92). In another place he encourages the reader to reflect on the story of his or her own conversion to Christ (170) or to ascertain what "witnesses" are in the reader's life to whom or to which he or she has not paid sufficient attention (263–64). These reflections will certainly bear spiritual fruit for those who join them with a prayerful reading of the biblical text.

As mentioned above, the authors have been encouraged to address any themes, issues, and practices that have a peculiar importance for Pentecostal believers. Therefore, in one place Thomas shows a distinctive concern for the practice of footwashing (79), which is even considered sacramental by some members of the Pentecostal fellowship. He suggests that his readers participate in a footwashing service as a sign of their confession of sin as well as of their forgiveness and cleansing by God (92). One does not often find a biblical commentary that advocates forms of piety to its audience, but I myself find it pleasantly refreshing and not at all inappropriate to the context. The relationship between the anointing (*chrisma*) of Jesus in the Holy Spirit and a believer's own anointing is also probed (129–31, 138–41), as would be expected in a work from this theological perspective. He also includes a long discussion about the meaning of the phrase "the last hour" and the appearance of antichrist when he arrives at 1 John 2:18 (124–30; see also 46). Surely his thoughts on that subject are most welcome considering that some people in Pentecostal congregations may have already read or been exposed to the apocalyptic "pulp fiction" that has been making the rounds as of late among conservative Christians.

Thomas provides a satisfactory distillation (see 2–12 *passim*) of the current scholarship about the relationship of the three Johannine letters to the Gospel of John and about the nature and history of the community from which those documents have sprung. He furthermore treats well and in some detail the knotty question of who wrote the letters (4–10), adjudging “John the Elder” to have been the most likely candidate for authorship (9). He also briefly examines the provenance and dating of the letters and notes their order of composition and *Sitz im Leben*. I was grateful to Thomas for reproducing two secular letters (the first from one brother to another, the second from a soldier in the Roman navy to his father) that not only helped me as a reader place 2 and 3 John within their cultural and historical setting but also ably demonstrated the epistolary form (16–17).

I was somewhat less impressed by Thomas’s handling of the question about the “Johannine Comma” (1 John 5:7–8; see 254–55). His explanation is adequate as far as it goes but far too cursory. I wish that he would have done more in explaining the textual illegitimacy of the reading, especially when there can be a tendency among some Christians to suspect that the work of biblical scholars is to remove valid readings from the words of scripture. Instead, Thomas seems to add grist for the mill when he asks, “Why do most modern translations *omit* these words?” (254, emphasis added). Merely referring his readers to Bruce Metzger’s excellent retelling of the story about how the comma came to be added to—not omitted from—1 John is not good enough, in my estimation (see 255 n. 193). Alas, I feel that he has missed an opportunity fully to expose the dubious pedigree of the passage and, thus, has left the door open for some readers to still wonder if a heretofore legitimate reading (marginal gloss or not) was suppressed by liberal Bible critics.

Unfortunately, there are some fundamental problems with this work. First and foremost, Thomas never informs the reader what the source of his text for the epistles is: Is he using a particular Bible translation? If so, which one? Is he translating from the Greek text itself? He does not specify; he simply leaves the reader to guess which version or text he is using. This seems to me to be a basic piece of information that should have been stated clearly at the beginning of the book.

Second, the commentary studies the Johannine epistles according to the following order: 3 John, 2 John, 1 John. Of course, this is not a “problem” per se, since Thomas is not the first to have proposed this sequence. For that, the honor goes to François-Marie Braun. (Other scholars, like Bultmann, suggested that the third letter was composed before the second—but after the first.) The difficulty, on the contrary, is that his own argument in favor of this order is completely flawed. According to Thomas, the 3-2-1 sequence makes more pedagogical sense because, for instance, 3 John will be examined on its own merits, on its own terms, without one’s understanding having already been colored by his or her

reading of the first and second letters of John. Furthermore, 2 John will be read without any undue influence from a previous reading of 1 John. He furthermore explains why he thinks that the letters have been written in that chronological order based solely on internal evidence: 3 John—“studied on its own terms”—shows no knowledge of the false teaching mentioned in 1 and 2 John. “[I]t is simply too difficult to believe that the same author who is so quick to discuss the dangers of false teaching in 1 and 2 John would write to a community and/or individual and not make the slightest reference to such false teaching” (11). At this point the writer should have sensed the blatant contradiction found in his approach, namely, that he is unable to support his arguments on the temporal preeminence of 3 John without *some* kind of reference to the contents of the other two epistles! Leaving alone the innate circularity of Thomas’s argument (i.e., 3 John was written before 1 and 2 John, because 3 John does not contain the warnings about false teaching found in 1 and 2 John), the third letter’s silence about false teaching proves nothing whatsoever in regard to its chronology. It can be maintained with equal validity that it has been composed last—or second. Since there are no indicators in the epistles themselves about when they were written, it is really impossible for Thomas to assign either priority or anteriority to any of them with any degree of assurance. What is more, throughout the commentary Thomas repeatedly violates his stated principle of reading 3 John (or 2 John, for that matter) without reference to the other writing or writings he wants to exclude from consideration. Indeed, he himself is unable to deal with the second and third letters in the relative isolation he proposes. As a matter of fact, he continually references the contents of 1 and 2 John throughout his commentary on the third epistle (cf. 17, 19, 21 n. 10, 23, 27–28, 31, 34), and in his discussion of 2 John, he frequently makes use of 1 John (cf. 40, 42, 43, 44, 45–6, 48–50). Still, I maintain that the treatment of the second and third epistles by Thomas is too brief and lacks the profundity he demonstrates in other places (cf. 16–52)

The great bulk of the commentary (54–282), however, is devoted to 1 John. The structure of 1 John has always been a *crux interpretum* for students of the New Testament. Thomas believes that he has figured out the structural puzzle of the letter by noticing that 1 John has “a concentric or chiasmic structure” (56–57) in which the central theme is the command to love (see 1 John 3:11–17). I suspect that many informed readers will be distrustful of Thomas’s discovery of the well-worn notion of chiasm (especially, as the concept has been overused by biblical scholars). But one can judge more surely if the inverted parallelism Thomas sees in 1 John is real or imagined by the lack of scholarly support found in some of the best commentaries on the letters of John, such as R. E. Brown’s massive study for the Anchor Bible. The basis for this idea about the structure of 1 John apparently derives from Thomas’s own scholarly research on the subject: he cites his 1998 article from *Novum Testamentum* (56 n. 2). While I do not challenge his right to

cite his own work on the issue, I do question if a purportedly nontechnical commentary directed at pastors and lay persons is the appropriate place for him unilaterally to promote his view on a difficult and controverted issue.

I regret that I cannot recommend this particular book to anyone but advanced degree-level students of the Bible (M.A., Ph.D.). There is just too much in it that can possibly mislead the average reader about the consensus of contemporary scholarship on the letters of John. On the other hand, Thomas's actual commentary on the text of scripture is typically unproblematic and, as mentioned above, can make for many productive reflections—both for Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal Christians alike. I would encourage Thomas as series editor as well as the other writers to continue *even more vigorously* their work of providing contemporary biblical studies with other volumes from The Pentecostal Commentary Series: they are providing us with their fellowship's much-needed voice.