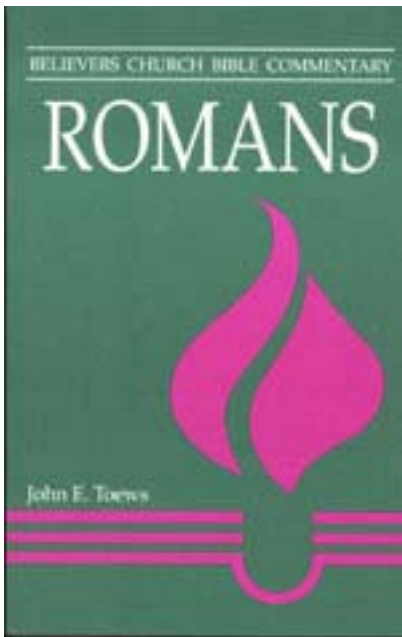


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Toews, John E.

Romans

Believers Church Bible Commentary

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This commentary on Romans by John Toews is part of a series containing some strikingly good contributions by scholars in the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions. It seems that one could hardly claim justification for the release of one more commentary on Romans, with the field already quite cluttered, but this volume more than justifies its existence. It is a readable commentary for students, pastors, and lay persons that is fully informed at every point by current scholarship, clearly and concisely written, and aimed at nurturing the life of the church.

This commentary is intended for a wide readership and is probably most suitable for educated pastors and Bible students, though scholars will doubtless benefit from Toews's lively discussions and fresh readings. Toews's introduction is somewhat brief, but his discussion touches on all the necessary points, including the situation and make-up of the church(es) in Rome and the pastoral and missionary aim(s) of the letter. Toews emphasizes that Romans must be read *as a letter* rather than as a theological treatise that is abstracted from an historical situation. Here also Toews notes that his commentary "shares the 'new perspective on Paul' with many contemporary scholars" (29), and his discussion of this angle of approach vis-à-vis a more traditional Protestant reading (29–31) is concise, complete, and helpful to readers not entirely familiar with contemporary

Pauline debates. Toews also discusses Paul's apocalyptic frame of thought and its importance for comprehending the progression of thought in Romans (32–35).

Readers of this volume will find its layout extremely useful. For each section of text, Toews provides a preview wherein he discusses the place of the portion of text within the larger context of the letter, followed by an outline of the text. His detailed comments on the passage are then found under "Explanatory Notes," the most extensive portion of each section. As in other contributions in this series, two further discussions follow: "The Text in Biblical Context," and "The Text in the Life of the Church." In the first of these Toews situates the portion of Romans within the larger biblical context and relates it to broader biblical-theological dynamics. In the second Toews attempts to bring Romans to bear on the life of the church, reflecting on how the church might faithfully respond to the teaching of Scripture.

At key points throughout the commentary (after chs. 1–4, 5–8, and 9–11) Toews provides summaries of Paul's logic. Following the entire section of commentary he provides a brief essay on the theology of Romans (365–68). One of the outstanding features of this series is the section of essays that close out the volumes. This section in Toews's commentary runs to fifty pages, covering crucial topics for interpreting Romans (369–416). Each of the essays is both accessible to any reader and well-informed by contemporary scholarship, functioning like articles in a theological dictionary. They are immensely helpful and concise, covering topics such as "The Law in Romans," "Flesh," "Grace," "Homosexuality," and "Righteousness." An extensive outline of the letter and bibliography close out the volume.

As mentioned earlier, Toews makes full use of new perspective readings of Paul and sees the revolution in reading Paul over the last thirty years as more positive than negative. He notes that such angles of approach resonate with his Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective on Christian faith and biblical interpretation because of the emphasis on the corporate people of God rather than on the individual's standing before God, as in the more traditional Protestant paradigm (36). In line with this perspective, Toews claims that the purpose of Romans is to answer the question of the nature of the people of God—its continuity or discontinuity with the Jewish people.

Just to mention briefly his readings of several key texts, Toews regards 3:21–26 as "the revelation of God's end-time righteousness, which is effected through the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus" (100). He does indeed recognize that human salvation is an important component of the drama here but also that it is not the main feature of the narrative of God's salvation in Jesus. The issue, rather, is the integrity and faithfulness of God: "Paul's concern has less to do with the salvation of humans than with the righteousness

of the saving God” (100). Toews’s new perspective inclinations become clearer in his handling of the phrase “apart from law” in 3:21. He claims that the “law as the boundary marker of Judaism plays no part in effecting the new manifestation of God’s righteousness. God is now revealing the divine righteousness without this hallmark of Jewish identity” (101–2). This does not mean, however, that the new revelation signals an abandonment of the old, but rather is directly in continuity with God’s previous involvement with Israel (102).

Toews reads Paul’s “righteousness” language with reference to “the end-time saving and right-making power of God to transform the universe” (102), which he masterfully unpacks and defends throughout the commentary and in two essays at the end of the volume (400–407). Not surprisingly, Toews sees the “faithfulness of Jesus” as a major theme in Romans and, more broadly, in Paul, so that he reads the *pistis Christou*-related phrases in Romans as subjective genitives. That Paul has in mind the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus in 3:22 is clear from the emphasis on the necessity of the human response in 3:22b. He prefers this reading on linguistic and grammatical grounds (108), along with wider New Testament usage. Further, Toews notes that all the early translations of the New Testament render the phrase in the eight Pauline texts as “faith of Jesus” (109). He also defends this reading in one of the more extended essays at the end of the volume (375–79).

He powerfully captures the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ for contemporary church life (187–91), which he construes as a narrative according to which the life of the church—and the lives of individual Christians—are to be ordered. Such a “narrative spirituality” undoubtedly challenges most contemporary spiritualities, as Toews notes, but will inevitably lead to fruitful Christian growth. One hears echoes of the work of Michael Gorman here—along with others who have explored Paul’s cruciform spirituality—signaling again how much Toews’s accessible commentary is informed at point after point by the best in contemporary Pauline scholarship.

He presents a highly satisfying account of Rom 7, noting how the law—the good gift of God to Israel—has become captive to the powerful apocalyptic forces of the flesh and sin, which “use the law to demonstrate the radical sinfulness of Sin and to work death rather than life” (393). He shows why this section of Romans is needed: because Paul has thus far linked the law along with sin rather than with the grace and righteousness of God, a grave problem from the Jewish perspective (193). He reads the “I” in Rom 7 as referring to Israel and its experience with Torah throughout biblical history (196–97). He argues for a corporate view of election in Rom 9, claiming that the individualistic perspective is “radical,” “dangerous,” and “damaging,” resulting in “a long history of hostility toward the Jewish people that reached its apex in the Nazi Holocaust” (255). In

line with this, he further argues against a displacement theology, noting that Paul claims that God will indeed fulfill God's promises to Israel. This is accompanied by two portions of well-informed discussion of the issue of contemporary Jewish-Christian relations, noting especially the contribution of John Howard Yoder (250–57, 287–94).

It is evident throughout that this commentary is indeed the product of an experienced teacher and long-devoted student of Paul. Toews excels in explaining the text of Romans clearly and with an economy of words, while providing theologically powerful exposition that will prove fruitful for the life of the church. Though this volume is must reading for pastors and Bible students working in Romans, Pauline scholars will surely benefit from interaction with Toews's compelling and stimulating work.