This commentary on Galatians by Thomas R. Schreiner appears as volume 9 in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series. The series, with Clinton E. Arnold as general editor and Schreiner as one of four associate editors, will appeal primarily to students and pastors in evangelical circles.

The introduction (21–59), which is followed by a select bibliography (61–69), is reasonably comprehensive and traverses the usual issues of author, recipients, date, situation, and the letter’s structure. Thus, Schreiner considers the authorship to be undisputed and therefore hardly warranting discussion (22). As for the recipients, Schreiner gives a balanced discussion of the north Galatian and south Galatian theories (22–29), as well as of the opponents (39–52). He slightly favors the south Galatian theory and reiterates that “[i]dentifying the recipients of Galatians is important for Pauline chronology and history, but it is not determinative for the interpretation of the letter” (29). The opponents of which Paul speaks are identified as Judaizers—in accord with the traditional view—who believed in Jesus as the Christ but who asserted that one must be circumcised in order to be part of the covenant community (51). A detailed outline of the letter is given at the end of the introduction (58–59).

To be expected, the majority of the book consists of commentary on the text of Galatians (71–386). The arrangement of the commentary, however, is novel in some respects, and an explanation of the layout is clearly communicated in the “Series Introduction” (9–12).
The commentary of each pericope is structured according to seven components, including literary context, main idea, translation and graphical layout, structure, exegetical outline, explanation of the text, and theology in application. Under the “literary context” section, the relevant portion of the letter’s outline is reproduced. In addition, a computer-like scroll bar (i.e., as for navigating up and down in a PC window) is printed at the right of the outline, which means that the reader may determine at a glance just how far into the letter is the pericope under commentary. This is a great idea. Further, under the “translation” section, the text is not only arranged according to usual syntactical structures (e.g. phrase, clause, sentence), with appropriate use of bold, italics, and indenting to show various relationships, but there are “interpretive labels that indicate the function of each clause or phrase of the biblical text” (10). These labels are deliberately descriptive and not technical, and they lend themselves to readers who possess little or no knowledge of the underlying Greek. Again, this is helpful. In the last section (theology in application), Schreiner breaks into the first-person mode and offers numerous anecdotal stories to illustrate the text. Whether this section is relevant, however, rests primarily on a reader’s agreement with the ideological views espoused. Distinctions between “evangelical” and “liberal” are overtly promoted.

The running text of the commentary is well set out. The explanation for each verse, or part thereof, is marked by a bolded translation, followed by the Greek text in brackets. Schreiner’s writing style is easily read, and throughout the commentary numerous “In Depth” sections (akin to “Excurses”) appear to alert the reader to further details of the text. Obviously, it is impossible in a review of this size to describe Schreiner’s handling of all the difficulties in interpreting the Galatian text. It will have to suffice to say that, in the main, Schreiner offers a reasonable analysis of most verses, but this commentary struggles to fulfill the series ideal of offering “the results of the latest and best scholarly studies and historical information” (9). References to secondary sources are largely English-only, with few references to German-language literature and one to a French article (359 n. 28). But it is what Schreiner brings to the text as a self-confessed “Southern Baptist” (132) that must be taken most seriously. The inspiration of scripture, as inerrant and authoritative, is espoused repeatedly (see, e.g., 32, 52, 273), sometimes at the expense of merit-based discussion. For example, the problems relating to the historicity of Acts are ignored in his analysis of the recipients (22–29), and Schreiner rejects the views of Mark Nanos regarding the opponents on the basis of “inspired Scripture” (see 51–52). To be sure, there are usually no problems with interpretations that reflect different methodologies, assumptions, and faith-communities, but the discussion is more helpful when it is merit-based, not ideologically driven. To reiterate, statements such as “Jesus is fully divine and hence should be worshiped” (22) and “Jesus clearly shares the same stature as God” (388) are legitimate opinions of Schreiner, whereas front-on attacks of persons (rather than
their arguments/conclusions) are perhaps too polemical. Thus, Gordon Fee is labeled as “remarkably naïve and ahistorical, for he pretends…” (21), and, “Do false brothers worm their way into our midst today? Clearly they do. The history of American universities testifies to such. So many of our great universities began as evangelical colleges, but they slowly became subverted. We think of Harvard and Yale…. False teachers came in and the gospel was lost” (132); finally, the prominent atheists Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris are dismissed wholesale (328). Even less helpful is the negative stance Schreiner takes against rabbinic views (230), ongoing Judaism/s (389), and homosexuals (259). With regard to anti-Jewish views, in particular, Schreiner’s negativity impinges on his handling of Gal 3:24–25 (“the custodianship of the law”) and 6:16 (“the Israel of God”), where the Sonderweg-debate is not even raised, let alone discussed. (That the views of Kristor Stendahl are omitted is understandable, considering that Stendahl was a former Dean of Harvard Divinity School!) Schreiner rationalizes his judgmental views on the basis that he is imitating Paul (see 391).

With regard to the formal details of publication, the production of the book is excellent, in terms of its cover, binding, and print quality, but its margins are far too small (~ 1/2 inch) for anything but the briefest of annotations. The reader may take issue with the use of landscape-orientation for the translations of some sections (see especially 116–17, 296–97). Unfortunately, the table of contents does not reflect the chapter headings in the book on repeated occasions (compare entries on page 7 with corresponding chapter headings on pages 13, 21, and 71); there is also a text-wrapping problem on page 174. I noted a number of other issues, such as inconsistent abbreviation of the same author’s name (17, lines 29–30) or the appearance of redundant bibliographical details (34 n. 56). For a book of this size, typographical errors are admirably few. The indices are fine, although the lack of ancient references is telling; while Schreiner refers to Jewish literature from time to time, literature from late antiquity is generally ignored other than two negative references to Aristotle (205, 261) and one reference each to Plato, Diogenes Laertius, Xenophon, and Plutarch (267). But it is the ideological tendencies of the author that mar an otherwise very readable commentary on Galatians.