

defining feature of the new covenant is the recreative power of God already moving saints to please him, as Meyer rightly holds, is it coherent to bar off this pneumatic reality from the grounds for God's terminal verdict that people are righteous (Gal 2:17a; 5:4-6; 1 Thess 3:12-13; 2 Thess 1:5-12; 1 Cor 3:13-15; 4:4-5; 2 Cor 5:10; Rom 2:13; 8:33-34; 14:10-12, 17-18; 2 Tim 4:8)?

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Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition. By Dean Flemming. New Beacon Bible Commentary. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009, 255 pp., \$25.99 paper.

Long overshadowed by the theological heavyweights of Romans and Galatians, Paul's short epistle to the Philippians has in recent years gained increasing interest among Pauline interpreters. For example, led by the works of Stephen E. Fowl and Michael J. Gorman, scholars have reassessed the place of the so-called "Christ-hymn" of 2:6-11, not only within Paul's theology in general but also within our understanding of Paul's apostolic purposes for his churches. Thus, the appearance of an explicitly theological commentary on the letter written by an author with broad international experience is a welcome development.

At the same time, I admit to approaching this commentary with some reluctance. I have no reservations about the author, the commentary series itself, or Paul's little jewel of a letter. Rather, the multiplication of commentaries and commentary series on the market is enough to make one's eyes glaze over at the thought of yet one more. What I found when I read the book, however, was an astute compendium of scholarship, both ancient and modern, expressed in a succinct and lucid style. In other words, this is an ideal commentary on Philippians for students, teachers, or pastors who want an informed, even-handed tour through the letter.

After a 24-page introduction, the commentary proper follows the format for the New Beacon Bible Commentary. That is, the letter is broken down into major subsections (seven for Philippians), each of which is examined in a three-stage process. The first stage, a brief "Behind the Text" component, locates the text within its literary and social-historical context. Second, the longer "In the Text" section offers a mostly verse-by-verse treatment of the text based upon the *New International Version*. No Greek is required to follow the discussion, though Flemming refers to the Greek using transliteration when necessary. A final "From the Text" segment examines issues of theological import, history of interpretation, and contemporary application. Sprinkled throughout are short excursions on a variety of subjects that arise in the course of the letter. For example, Flemming treats such topics as "Women Leaders in Philippi" (4:2-3); "Paul and Financial Support" (4:10-20); "Augustine on Jesus' Incarnation" (2:5-11); and "Paul's Story and Ancient Autobiography" (3:1-11). The book contains no indices, though an index of authors cited would have proved helpful. After all, in a series advertised as written "from the Wesleyan theological perspective," one would like to be able to locate readily what Mr. Wesley himself said about the letter.

Flemming's introduction covers the standard issues for studying Philippians including the city of Philippi, Paul's mission there, and the thorny problem of Philippians's date and place of writing. He also discusses Philippians as rhetoric and as a letter, dealing with issues of unity in the process. Finally, the introduction examines key themes including, among others, the defining story of Christ, the surpassing knowledge of Christ, cruciform living, and partnership in the gospel.

Flemming argues for a Roman imprisonment in the early 60s as a setting for the letter. He regards the letter as a unified composition and offers his own analysis of the rhetorical flow of its argument. He cautions, however, against forcing the text into either epistolary or rhetorical "pigeonholes" (p. 38). In line with much recent work on Pauline theology in general and on the interpretation of this letter in particular, he finds story-shaped theology in Philippians centered on the depiction of Christ in 2:6–11. That story of self-humility and a refusal to exploit what was his own for his own gain then becomes the pattern for the Philippian believers to follow in their own life together.

A review of Flemming's three-part examination of one segment of the letter should provide a flavor of the exegesis that runs through the commentary. Flemming identifies the second major subsection of Philippians as 1:12–26, which he entitles, "Paul's Circumstances: An Example of Faithfulness to the Gospel." In the "Behind the Text" section, he explains several socio-rhetorical conventions that help us understand Paul's argument here in its ancient context. For example, the "disclosure formula" that opens the letter body (1:12; "I want you to know that . . .") is an attested feature of letters in antiquity. In order to illustrate this point, Flemming quotes an example from an early second-century letter. He goes on to examine this subsection in terms of its function as the *narratio*, that is, "the 'narration of facts' that provides a background to the main argument of the letter" (p. 64). Flemming, however, recognizes this passage does more than simply provide information. By citing his personal response to his circumstances, Paul demonstrates for the Philippians what faithfulness to the gospel looks like (as his subsection title makes clear). Finally, he examines this pericope in terms of Paul's appeal to his own character, or *ethos*, and how by the manner of his presentation Paul appeals to his auditors' emotions (known as *pathos*).

Flemming's "In the Text" section breaks down the subsection into three further division: verses 12–14, 15–18a, and 18b–26. The text of Philippians appears in bold print with an occasional transliteration appearing italicized in parentheses. Given the purpose of the series, Flemming's comments are not exhaustive, but his prose is clear and to the point. I regard his selection of what information to include and what to leave out quite prudent.

Flemming includes two excursuses in the section. The first examines the meaning of the ambiguous term "*praetorium*" in verse 13. Following Lightfoot, Flemming concludes this refers to the Praetorian guard in the city of Rome. His second excursus diagrams the explicit comparisons Paul makes between those who preach with good motives and those who preach with false motives.

The four-and-a-half page "From the Text" section draws together implications from Paul's argument in 1:12–26 using six points that are numbered and italicized for easy identification. Stated in parallel fashion using the rubric "*A Perspective on . . .*," Flemming develops observations on adverse circumstances, on evangelism, on living, on death, on the afterlife, and on prayer. The author roots each point solidly within the text of Philippians and develops each succinctly within a few paragraphs.

Several features of this commentary justify my judgment that it qualifies as an "ideal commentary for students, teachers, and pastors." First, on multiple levels Flemming demonstrates admirable balance. For example, he judiciously selects what to include and what to exclude. In the "Behind the Text" section described above, he introduces his reader to both epistolary and rhetorical conventions relevant for understanding the opening of the body of the letter. At the same time, he does not become bogged down in the details to which engaging such background could lead. In other words, this is a balanced treatment of these issues within the limits of the series. Furthermore, his interpretive conclusions, while not novel (plowing new interpretive ground is not the purpose of the series), do not stray into idiosyncratic territory. This is a reliable,

well-reasoned theological reading of the letter. Finally, Flemming integrates the best of recent scholarship on Philippians with regular doses of readings drawn from the church's best interpreters throughout the centuries. This practice is also in keeping with recent trends in scholarship. Yet I know of no other work at this level that integrates old and new in this fashion.

Each of these features makes this book a useful choice for the undergraduate classroom. Flemming introduces relevant issues, whether socio-rhetorical criticism or matters highlighted in the numerous excurses, which a professor can develop for students. Furthermore, students will be exposed to the best of recent interpretive trends without falling for the widespread prejudice that serious biblical interpretation began a century ago. Finally, Flemming models well-rounded, responsible exegesis expressed in transparent, precise prose. For the teacher or preacher, Flemming does all of the above as well as suggest useful implications of Paul's argument in his "From the Text" sections.

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Colossians and Philemon. By Michael F. Bird. New Covenant Commentary. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009, xiv + 177 pp., \$22.00 paper.

Michael F. Bird has written a number of books including *Jesus and the Origin of the Gentile Mission* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), *The Saving Righteousness of God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), and with James Crossley, *How Did Christianity Begin?* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008). Added to this number is now a commentary on Colossians and Philemon. After summarizing Bird's position on important introductory issues in both Colossians and Philemon, I will survey some of Bird's decisions on notable exegetical debates in both letters and offer a concluding assessment of the commentary.

Concerning introductory issues in Colossians, Bird defends Pauline authorship in terms of the apostle writing with a team of co-workers, especially Timothy (p. 9). Bird has a full discussion of provenance in which he slightly favors Paul writing from an Ephesian imprisonment in AD 55–57 (pp. 9–15) and a lengthy defense identifying Jewish mysticism as the philosophy that Paul opposes in Colossians (pp. 15–26).

Concerning introductory issues in Philemon, Bird affirms Pauline authorship (p. 15), with the letter written from an Ephesian imprisonment sometime between AD 55 and 56 (p. 26). He also favors the more recent dispute mediation hypothesis as opposed to the traditional runaway slave hypothesis because of a lack of technical terms typically used to describe fugitive slaves (p. 27). Therefore, Onesimus came to Ephesus in order that Paul as the *amicus domini* (friend of the master) might "mediate between him and his master over some matter that is now public before the Colossian church" (p. 29).

Also of interest is Bird's reconstruction of the events surrounding the sending of the letters of Philemon and Colossians in which he postulates a gap between the writing and sending of the two letters and thus two different journeys of Onesimus. Paul first sent Onesimus (and Paul's letter to Philemon) back to Philemon, and they were reconciled. Philemon then returned Onesimus back to Paul's side according to Paul's request. Several months to a year later, Paul and his coworkers heard about a "philosophy" in Colossae that threatened the church, and so they wrote Colossians and the circular letter of Ephesians, which Onesimus and Tychicus delivered (p. 10). Ephesians also represents the so-called Laodicean letter referenced in Col 4:16 (p. 10, 15, 125). Bird