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Galatians, Ephesians (Book Review)

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Gerald L. Bray, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians*. Reformation Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, 10. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2011. Pp. lvii + 446. \$50.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by John B. Roney, Sacred Heart University

This commentary on Galatians and Ephesians is the first in a new commentary series from the age of the Reformation published by InterVarsity Press. Future volumes are planned in four-month intervals in the next few years, with the goal of 28 volumes. The four stated goals of the Reformation Commentary are “the enrichment of contemporary biblical interpretation through exposure to the Reformation-era writers; the renewal of contemporary preaching through exposure to the biblical insights of the Reformation writers; a deeper understanding of the Reformation itself and the breadth of perspective represented within it; and the recovery of the robust spiritual theology and devotional treasures of the Reformation’s engagement with the Bible” (xiii). This series will become a valuable resource for scholars, pastors, and laypersons.

Since the 1970s, when Robert Webber published *Common Roots* (1978), evangelicals have increasingly become interested in renewing their connections with the early church as well as the medieval and Reformation eras. This call to connect with the longer tradition and the growing paleo-orthodoxy as a result, has included looking at how Christians in an earlier age read and understood Scripture. The editors point out that in 1980 David Steinmetz published “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” placing Reformation exegesis within the tradition of the church and reducing dependence on the skepticism of post-Enlightenment scholarship. Based on this new interest, and with larger ecumenical collaboration in mind, InterVarsity Press embarked on this quest in 1985 with Christopher Hall’s *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, and then subsequently in 1998 engaged in the ambitious plan of producing the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* in 27 volumes. Thus, the Reformation Commentary is a further step to understand how the church is “one foundation” and how the Bible has been read.

In our contemporary world, where it is not a foregone conclusion that the Bible can speak to every age, or that one’s translation can escape national, economic, political, or ethnic positions, theologians and pastors are called to explain Scripture with the goal of reducing any time-bound restrictions on language and relationships. Indeed, this developed stage of hermeneutics may be coming closer to allowing God’s Word to be seen and heard around the world in a way never previously experienced. From a historian’s perspective it is a daunting task to reduce the time-bound cultural and linguistic dimensions that form a unique age with the goal of seeing continuity. While the Reformation era is far closer to our modern age than the early church, we cannot assume that its worldview was similar to ours. Some Protestants may need to re-consider how the reformers’ medieval roots still affected their understanding of the world and God’s providential activity.

If we see the issues and problems of the day, and see how the reformers applied Scriptures, it will help us more clearly recognize our contemporary issues and apply Scripture. Most of the reformers, in varying degrees, checked their reflections and

insights on Scripture with the commentaries of the early and medieval church. John Calvin, one of the most important and well-published reformers, was intent on checking in with Augustine, Bonaventure, and others—even with Aquinas. As the editors point out, “For them, *sola scriptura* was not *nuda scriptura*. Rather, the Scriptures were seen as the book given to the church, gathered and guided by the Holy Spirit” (xxvii). Within the framework of Christian humanism the reformers accepted the new philology, diminishing the allegorical sense, but also continued the medieval tradition of *sacra pagina*. Thus, after the work of philology came *lectio divina*: reflection, meditation, prayer, and a time of struggle (*tentatio*). The goal of biblical interpretation was not only to recover the meaning of the text but to be renewed and changed by it.

The selection of reformers in this commentary is unique and historical, so while most commentators are Protestant, a number remained Catholic. In reality, in the early sixteenth century there was often more of a continuum, not as sharp a distinction as later arguments would have it. The well-known magisterial Protestant reformers are well represented, such as Luther, Calvin, Bucer, Melancthon, and also lesser known Anabaptists, such as George Blaurock and Hans Hut. In addition to the many reformers who eventually broke with Rome, it is important to listen to many who did not: Erasmus; John Colet, Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London; and Guillaume Brinçonnet, Bishop of Meaux. Thus, not only does this Reformation commentary show widespread reading of Scripture, but many of these reformers’ commentaries have been translated for the first time from Latin, French, German, Dutch, and Italian.

What ties all these reformers together is their belief in the centrality of Scripture as a means to reform the church. The editors make an important distinction, however, between the new focus on the centrality of the teachings of Paul in contrast to the early church’s reading scripture through the eyes of John. Paul appealed to the reformers since, “living as they did in a church whose titular head claimed to be a direct successor of Peter, they were impressed by a man who had received his preaching commission directly from Christ” (xli).

This commentary on Galatians and Ephesians follows a method of selecting a small number of passages and showing how a variety of reformers respond to the meaning of the text, some rather brief, others more lengthy. Indeed, the fact that they were not all from the same circle of friends or religious community heightens our excitement when they arrive at the same conclusions from Scripture. In this limited review it would be far too extensive to analyze each reformer’s contribution to this collective commentary on Galatian and Ephesians; suffice it to say that one will discover a wealth of insight and knowledge on every page.

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