

BOOK REVIEWS

TEACHING 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS: From Text to Message

Angus MacLeay

Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2014 345p £8.99pb
ISBN: 9781781913253

When I was first given *Teaching 1 & 2 Thessalonians*—the first book from this series I had encountered—I expected another commentary from the pastoral mid-range style of the Tyndale and Bible Speaks Today series. It is a similar length and appeared to have a similar emphasis on practical application. Reading the book it quickly became apparent that this was not the case and to judge it in comparison to other such commentaries would not only be unfair but to be asking the wrong questions and looking for this book to provide something it was never intended to. This was a most pleasant surprise.

If you are looking for a commentary that will deal with a text verse by verse and maybe even touch on how best to translate the original languages, then this is not the book you are looking for. If you are looking to start a sermon series on 1 and/or 2 Thessalonians, this is without a doubt a five star, must-buy book.

From the highly concise introductions to the general themes of the books and the well-crafted choice of sermon series outlines, this handbook to your future sermon series provides preachers with an excellent tool kit to get them started. Whereas many commentaries often lose sight of clear structure and thematic progress in a biblical book, making it hard to sculpture a sermon series, this book keeps such concerns to the front making sure that from start to finish a sermon series has a definite pace and constancy.

Especially helpful are the parts of the book dealing with illustrations that provide a ‘way in’ to a topic and ideas for applying a text to the lives of the congregation. Helpful bullet-point summaries are provided at the end of each chapter asking the kind of questions the congregation and preachers need to be thinking about based on the teaching. These applications and illustrations are especially helpful for ministers who are either more generally academic and often forget about ‘real world’ application, or on the other hand ministers who are (likely) too young to have had the life experience needed to illustrate and apply all such passages to the lives of people usually much older than they are.

In sum I could not recommend this book highly enough. Having come across such a resource I doubt that in future I would ever embark on preparing an expository sermon series without first consulting a book from this series.

ADAM YOUNG

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ELISHA: Man of Mission, Man of Miracles

John Cheeseman

Leominster: DayOne, 2015 96pp £6pb ISBN: 9781846254369

In just under 100 pages, John Cheeseman takes us through the life and ministry of Elisha. The aim is, in part, to increase our familiarity with a man who can often be lost in his great predecessor's shadow. Elijah's miracles were largely performed in the context of death and destruction, whereas the miracles of Elisha were largely to do with healing and restoration. Because of this, Cheeseman suggests that the story of Elisha actually speaks very powerfully into our own sin-sick world, and the longing of people to hear the good news of grace.

Cheeseman provides 18 little chapters, each taking us through a portion of the relevant biblical texts. His style is breezy and informal, but without losing a deep engagement with the scriptural material. He is equally at ease with tricky exegetical questions (for instance, in 2 Kings 8:7–15), and with practical applications for Christians today. He writes with eyes fully open to the idolatry and unbelief present in our country, without falling into the trap of eliding the nation of Israel with the nation of England. I found the consistent focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, as the fulfilment of all to which Elisha pointed, to be particularly encouraging. As such, this book would be ideal as a companion in daily Bible reading—for, in uncovering the riches of Elisha's ministry, Cheeseman is a reliable and friendly guide.

MARK SMITH

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THE WAY OF THE WESLEYS: A Short Introduction**John R. Tyson**Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014 202pp+ix £11.99pb
ISBN: 9780802869548

A New York academic here acclaims the Wesley brothers as his ‘theological mentors.’ His final sentence urges us to practice what we have just read, ‘to call people to vital Christian faith and to further God’s work in our world, in preparation for the next.’ One of his ‘Questions for Reflection,’ which follow all fourteen thematically-arranged chapters, asks ‘Have you “received” Christ?’

So then, a committed book as well as a doctrinal and historical summary; committed to Christ (excellent!) and to the Wesleys (more problematic?). For although the quoted hymns of Charles are marvellously matched with extracts from John, the ‘way’ of these Wesleys was truly two or more ways; they diverged more than Tyson and most older Methodists would allow. ‘Friendly friction’ is putting it mildly. And John often changed course while denying he was doing any such thing; as in the somewhat complacent sermon on page 46. But it is good to be reminded that to these men, the Scriptures come from ‘the only Guide infallible.’

Both men were giants of faith, evangelism, and social concern; but whenever John, as brilliant at pithy prose as his brother was in soaring verse, uses words like ‘calm,’ ‘plain’ or ‘reasonable,’ we need to watch him very closely. This survey crucially tells the story through the printed word, as refined, edited, and relentlessly published by John himself.

So Charles may sing wonderfully of ‘perfect love,’ and John tie himself in knots trying to explain it; but how did the older brother actually treat his enemies, those friends who dared to question his autocratic rule, or the women of his own family? Here a rather different ‘way’ operated. John Cennick appears briefly in the text (‘a closet Calvinist!’) but not in the Index; Doddridge, Harris, Toplady, and Isaac Watts feature in neither. Smaller but topical omissions: what the brothers thought of war, Jewish people, and Mohamed.

The presentation is clear, with useful headings and some modest ‘Further Reading’; but capital letters for ‘divine pronouns,’ which come in neither hymns nor Bibles, are scattered randomly throughout; and one letter ‘s’ is missing from a hymn (!) on page 11.

CHRISTOPHER IDLE
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THE DISSENTERS (Vol. III The Crisis and Conscience of Nonconformity)**Michael R. Watts**

Oxford: OUP, 2015 493pp+xviii £85hb ISBN: 9780198229698

This is the third volume in Watts's history of Dissent, the previous two having taken the story to the middle of the nineteenth century. It displays the same masterly combination of narrative sweep and close detailed analysis which characterised the other volumes. Sadly, there will be no more, as Watts died in 2011. He had completed the text, thankfully; it has been lightly revised by Professor Chris Wrigley and a valuable introduction is provided by Professor David Bebbington.

The opening chapters present the major intellectual and philosophical challenges to evangelical nonconformity which arose in the mid-nineteenth century: Romanticism, higher criticism and evolutionary theory. The same period saw a rise in interest in spiritualism and an increasing hostility to Calvinist theology. Watts devotes three chapters (not always sympathetically) to C.H. Spurgeon's stand against the downgrade and the victory towards the end of the century of a liberal theology which proved incapable of attracting significant numbers of new recruits.

The decline which then set in is documented by detailed statistical analysis supported by an astonishing 101 tables. Watts shows that attendance at dissenting chapels in England increased through to the 1880s, but that irreversible decline then set in. In Wales, membership figures were boosted by the 1904–05 revival, but attendance continued its decline.

Watts's analysis also demonstrates the shrinking social base of nonconformity, with neither poor nor wealthy any longer attracted to Dissent. Neither Moody and Sankey nor the rise of the Salvation Army made a significant difference. Methodist missions to the poorest areas saw some success, but even this was diluted by the tendency for converts to move to more respectable areas.

Decline was accompanied by measures—relaxation of discipline, less insistence on a clear conversion and the introduction of amusements—which unsuccessfully sought to stem the outgoing flood. Watts closes the volume with an examination of Dissent's contribution to education, politics and the labour movement, a sad note on which to end: all the political influence in the world cannot begin to compensate for the demise of Dissent's spiritual impact on the nation which is evident from Watts's excellent account.

ROBERT STRIVENS

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SCRIPTURE AND COUNSELING: God's Word for Life in a Broken World**Bob Kellemen, ed.**Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014 480pp £20.99hb
ISBN: 9780310516835

This is the second book in a series edited by Bob Kellemen of the Biblical Counseling Coalition (USA). Co-authored by twenty-two biblical counsellors, it aims 'to help us regain our confidence in God's Word as sufficient to address the real life issues we face today.'

Biblical Counseling has reached a level of maturity in the USA that Biblical Counsellors in the UK have much to be thankful for. There are differences on every level in how we approach the business of counselling in the local church. The term 'counselling' itself stirs up controversy and dissent, both culturally and theologically.

I recommend this book to you if you are open to thinking through these matters for yourself, whether pastor, counsellor, discipler, small group leader, or good friend trying to love others well and wisely in your local church family. It's American, and the cultural context can feel very different to our experience of pastoring and counselling in the local church in the UK. Globally, however, 'we face a tremendous weakening of confidence in the Bible.' There is much godly wisdom here to help us in how we view and use the Bible for life in a broken world.

Chapters answer such questions as, 'in what ways is God's Word rich and relevant, sufficient for life and godliness?' 'Where do we find Truth?' 'What is Psychology?' and 'Scripture is sufficient, but to do what?'

So I commend this book to anyone looking to explore how true biblical wisdom can be worked out in your pastoral ministry wherever you are placed in your local church.

SALLY ORWIN LEE

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LOOK AND LIVE**Matt Papa**

Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2014 251pp £7.99pb ISBN: 9780764212512

I am constantly on the look-out for books that are light of touch, biblically faithful, theologically rich, and easy to read. I need books that will whet and feed the appetite of a diverse congregation. *Look and Live* is one of the best recent ones I have come across.

Thomas Chalmers famously preached a sermon called ‘the expulsive power of a new affection.’ Here is Thomas Chalmers for the twenty-first century; Christ-exalting, grace-centred, heart-changing. Papa’s style is conversational but the gospel symphony he weaves is music to the soul. Papa simply wants us to ‘behold the soul-thrilling sin-destroying glory of Christ.’ He does it extremely well indeed.

Papa is what some would call a ‘worship leader’ as well as a ‘professional Christian’ in his church (in my context the first is a selling point—in other contexts, don’t let that put you off!). Papa makes it clear we are all worshippers all the time. We worship what is most glorious to us. If we are truly going to worship (i.e. have hearts focussed on) Christ, it is not just a matter of knowing the gospel. We need to savour the glory of Christ in the gospel. It is Christ’s glory that will expunge our idolatry and change our lives.

Papa’s book is as far from ‘dry theology’ as you can get. Here is someone who has seen something of the awe-inspiring glory of Christ, is excited about the implications in his own life and is gifted at communicating that in print. Papa’s book combines the best of Edwards, Keller, and Piper with the enthusiasm of a little child taking you on a tour of his favourite place and excitedly saying ‘WOW! Look at that, look at that!’

Assuming you get on with Papa’s contemporary style and that you take the time to do what he says, this book will be an accessible and rich feast for anyone’s soul. It is particularly good if you need to refocus in a setting where sung worship has become ‘the thing.’ Equally *Look and Live* is ideal if your preachers and Bible study leaders are prone to taking the focus off Christ and turning every passage into pietism. And it is both soul-food and an example for the preacher who wants easy-to-read encouragement to keep his life and preaching focussed on the glory of Jesus. We’re reading it as a staff team. Read, look and live!

NICK GOWERS
Holy Trinity, Old Hill

VICTORIAN RELIGIOUS REVIVALS: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts

David Bebbington

Oxford: OUP, 2012 307pp £65hb ISBN: 9780199575480

Longing for 'revival' has been a central aspect of evangelical identity since the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. Tales of lives and communities transformed, as the Holy Spirit is suddenly poured out as in the days of the apostles, dominate Christian thinking. Churches across the globe pray and preach energetically in the hope they might experience the same blessings of God in their own generation and their own contexts. But the revival phenomenon is very poorly understood. In this deeply impressive monograph, Professor David Bebbington sheds new light on the question by patient historical research.

Most modern literature on revivals falls into one of two camps. First there are the advocates, keen evangelicals whose primary interest in history is to identify the action of God, and who write about revivals in order to promote more of them. John Wesley and George Whitefield led the way, publishing carefully edited versions of their journals for an eager Christian public. In the twentieth century, revivalist Edwin Orr produced an important series of books with an explicit providentialist reading—they are packed with detail but, as Bebbington notes, very little analysis.

In the second camp are the cynics and secularists, psychologists and sociologists whose agenda is to dismiss revivals and explain them away. William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is a foundational text, and revivals are caricatured as religious frenzy or unhinged emotionalism. Bebbington's magisterial chapter surveying this historiography is essential reading for every student of Christian history.

What both the advocates and the cynics have in common is a broad-brush approach. They hunt for common patterns and standard characteristics. They generalize at the expense of the particular. They simply don't 'do justice to specificities.' So despite the plethora of books about revival, Bebbington declares that 'we barely know what actually took place in awakenings.' His monograph turns the standard methodology on its head, nothing less than 'a fresh paradigm.' It is 'a celebration of the particular', of history in microcosm, providing detailed case studies which illuminate the whole, with special attention to culture and piety. As he puts it, 'Local revivals illustrate global developments.'

The seven case studies examine revivals between the 1840s and the 1880s in Texas, Cornwall, County Durham, North Carolina, Forfarshire,

South Australia, and Nova Scotia. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians are much in evidence, both Calvinists and Arminians. Anglicans, who often frowned upon revival, are conspicuous by their absence. Bebbington is immersed in local archives—church records, local newspapers, census returns—and reconstructs the specific contexts of the each revival. He gives particular weight to individual stories—family relationships, education, employment, local politics, public health.

The case studies are not of major national events (like the revivals which swept Britain and North America in 1857–9) or preaching tours by the global superstars like Charles Finney and D.L. Moody. Instead the focus is on small communities, and some common features do emerge. Bebbington shows how tight social bonds, especially family ties, were important in conversions. Young people were particularly likely to be swept up by the events. Sudden deaths were also significant sparks to revival, forcing inhabitants to think about eternal issues. But a dominant message from the book is that every individual story is fascinatingly different, and every revival is a unique event. This delightful volume, a Bebbington masterpiece, helps us to see them up close with a clarity and variety like never before.

ANDREW ATHERSTONE
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A JOURNEY TO WHOLENESS: The Gospel According to Naaman's Slave Girl

Mark Belz

Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015 208pp £9.99pb ISBN: 9781629950631

Mark Belz has taken on an unusual challenge: writing a whole book about an unnamed character, whose actions take up only two verses of the Old Testament. The result is a rich, beautifully written, and edifying extended meditation on the story of Naaman, Elisha, and his servant, Gehazi.

Belz takes us through the story, as told in 2 Kings 5, considering the spiritual dynamics at work in the characters, the lessons for believers today, and the links to the gospel. We see the slave-girl's courageous witness, telling Naaman's wife about the prophet in Samaria who can heal her master's leprosy. We see Naaman, healed of leprosy and apparently won to faith in the God of Israel, and then Elisha refusing payment, in a glorious picture of God's free grace. Belz doesn't let us escape the twist

at the end of the story, when Gehazi greedily tries to win money out of Naaman and is struck with his leprosy, but Belz also reminds us that in later chapters, it seems Gehazi is repentant and healed.

Belz movingly recounts his own experience of serious sin, faithful church discipline, and restoration. In an age when church discipline is much discussed but too often seems impossible in practice, this personal testimony is worth the price of the book! Belz concludes with a meditation on the biblical theme of reconciliation, between humanity and God, and between conflicting humans. Reconciliation may not be the main theme of 2 Kings 5, but Belz certainly makes encouraging points.

Belz can be in danger of speculating beyond the text when he discusses the plans and activities of Satan in the events, but this reflects the kind of book he is writing: a pastoral exposition, that ‘brings to life’ the ancient story. This book is not a commentary on the chapter and contains no interaction with the original historical context, Hebrew text, or other technical matters, so a preacher preparing a sermon might want to supplement this volume with others. But this short and readable book would be an excellent resource to anyone preaching or teaching 2 Kings 5 and a refreshing reminder of the gospel to anyone else.

MICHAEL DORMANDY
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GOD: A Very Short Introduction

John Bowker

Oxford: OUP, 2014 160pp £7.99pb ISBN: 9780198708957

I tip my hat to anyone courageous enough to write ‘A Very Short Introduction’ to God. Bowker acknowledges the immense challenge and, despite the breadth and depth, doesn’t produce a textbook.

The hypothesis is that ‘God’ is ‘the word people use when they want to talk about whatever is the ultimate and absolute Reality.’ Chapter 1, ‘Does God exist?’ recounts the philosophical history where ‘traditional’ descriptions of God’s transcendence, often caricatured as a ‘God of the gaps’ have shifted to God’s immanence.

Chapter 2, ‘Why believe in God?’ builds on God’s immanence acknowledging that throughout human history God is ‘experienced as one who is active in many ways, and as one with whom...people can interact.’ Bowker also points to processes of conservation and correction

in human understanding, which leads him to document a progression from Jewish (ch. 3) to Christian (ch. 4) to Muslim (ch. 5) conceptions of God, in contrast to perceptions of Indian religions, Hinduism, as polytheistic (ch. 6).

As a Christian reader, my greatest interest was the chapter about Christianity. Bowker, concerned with how people experience God, explains Jesus challenged prevailing ideas about how to live in covenant relationship with God and also ‘made real in the world things that it was believed only God can do.’ His ongoing presence with the disciples would be through the Lord’s Supper, though sadly there was no mention of the Holy Spirit at this point.

Jesus’ immanence leads to a brief outline of the doctrines of the incarnation, atonement, and the Trinity. Bowker concludes, ‘The Christian understanding of God as Trinity begins at the only place where any knowledge of God *can* begin, in the ways in which life is experienced in a universe of this kind including what are taken to be the effects and consequences of God.’

Sadly Bowker’s assessment is that ‘God *is* unknowable, so that whatever we attempt to say positively about God has to be corrected and indeed negated because it must necessarily always fall short.’ I would have appreciated engagement with John 1:14 and Hebrews 1:1–3 to flesh out the incarnation: ‘The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.’

JOSHUA KUSWADI

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