

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (Two Horizons New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). x + 254 pp. Pbk. US\$20.00.

The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary Series is a new series designed primarily for pastors, Christian leaders and students of theology who seek to engage in the theological interpretation of Scripture. It is the hope of this series to provide a thorough theological interpretation for New Testament books and complement the modern exegetical commentaries that are on the market today.

Fowl begins his commentary of *Philippians* with an introduction to his understanding of what a theological commentary should encompass. Included within this section is a good explanation regarding the evolution of the commentary genre and the major differences that exist between a modern commentary and a pre-modern commentary. This introduction provides the reader insight into Fowl's mindset and the methodology that he has used in writing this book.

The general structure of this commentary is unlike that of traditional commentaries in that it does not have the conventional text-critical, historical or grammatical sections, but is purely focused on theological reflection. Although there is no section for historical evaluation, this does not mean that it is absent from this commentary, but that it is only included when information on ancient customs and ideas is needed to develop theological points.

In addition to the commentary, Fowl includes one excurses on the 'hymn' passage of *Philippians*. In this section, Fowl calls for a firmer definition of the term 'hymn' because it is used so imprecisely. It is Fowl's belief that if the term 'hymn' is properly defined there is insufficient evidence to support its application to this passage. In addition to this, there is also a reflection on the relationship between this passage

and some sort of ‘Adam Christology’ and how this passage strongly asserts Christ’s preexistence.

The commentary concludes with a theological summation of what Fowl believes is the overriding theme in the book of Philippians: friendship. Fowl seeks to expand the notion of friendship, not only within Philippians, but also in theology as a whole, by outlining four topics of friendship: friendship based on the character of the triune God, the character of God as displayed in different narratives, especially Phil. 2.6-11, practices of friendship in Christian community and the extraordinary emphasis on joy and rejoicing in Philippians. These four topics evaluate this key theme from a variety of different perspectives and place this concept within the larger theological picture. Overall, this section provides a fine theological synopsis of the book of Philippians and nicely sums up Fowl’s theological comments made throughout the book.

One of the strengths of this book is that Fowl presents historical concerns and issues in a way that enhances the study of theology, rather than hindering it. To facilitate this, Fowl reads Scripture in light of Scripture and allows his understanding of Philippians to be shaped by the Bible as a whole, rather than isolating it from its surrounding context. This is an important characteristic in a theological commentary, because the book of Philippians is only one of the voices that shape our understanding of God and the nature of the Christian faith.

Another strength of this commentary is how Fowl uses the book of Philippians, along with the situations and issues that it addresses, to speak into North American culture in the twenty-first century. There are a number of places where Fowl presents a sharp critique of North American individualistic Christianity and challenges the reader to re-evaluate their understanding of Scripture and their Christian practices in light of Scripture and the theology outlined in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. This blending of theology and practice makes this commentary especially useful for pastors and lay leaders who are looking to apply the text to daily life and to challenge their congregations to a more theologically sound interpretation of the Bible and its effect on daily life.

Although there are a number of strengths, there is still room for improvement in a few minor areas. First, although Fowl does have a brief introduction that introduces his methodology, it would have been

advantageous to include a brief outline and overview of Philippians, as well as an explanation of how he has divided the text.

Second, because of Fowl's desire that this be a commentary that pastors, lay people and people interested in theology could use, an additional section outlining further reading materials and other resources for the different sections would have been beneficial for the reader.

Overall, Stephen Fowl's commentary on Philippians provides a detailed theological commentary. Fowl does an excellent job of highlighting the theological issues in the text and interpreting their meaning in light of today's culture. In conclusion, this commentary is not primarily for those who want to do critical textual or grammatical exegesis, but is an excellent tool for pastors and people who are interested in theology and how it can be practically applied to modern North American culture.

Sean A. Adams
McMaster Divinity College