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Sam K. Williams

Galatians

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Sam Williams has written a very clear and concise commentary in which he notes major positions not adopted and offers precise explanations for those which are. W.'s work is fully informed by the "new perspective," yet this is no mere rehashing of views found elsewhere—throughout W. provides valuable insights of his own. Williams introduces the letter, its background, and its place in interpretive tradition with economy unparalleled among commentaries on Galatians. This precision is a notable characteristic of the entire work.

The contemporary debate on *pistis Christou* is well covered, as those who know the work of W. might expect. It is helpful to see how W. works out his position as he follows the flow of the text. W. shows the shortcomings of both the "faith *in* Christ" and the "faith(fulness) of Christ" for understanding *pistis Christou*. He argues instead for a nuanced version of the later position which "bears a sense different from either faith *in* Christ or faith *of* Christ. *Pistis Christou* is that faith which is characteristic of believers because they are 'in Christ.' It identifies those who are 'in Christ' because it is, in its fundamental character, the same absolute trust and unwavering obedience that Jesus actualized and exemplified" (p. 69). This allows Paul's intention to come through: that of shaping the faithful response of the Galatians to the gospel which they have received

from Paul. Thus, *pistis Christou* refers both to the faith of Christ and the answering faith of the Galatians: “in Galatians, Paul’s emphasis falls not on Jesus’ own believing/faithfulness . . . but on faith as it bears the character of Christ’s own steadfastness, a steadfastness grounded in absolute confidence in, and reliance upon, God” (p. 69).

Williams sometimes builds important bridges from the world addressed by the historical text to the tensions faced today. One such move follows the observation that Paul’s argument in 3:1—4:7 was not constructed to convince outsiders but is rather an appeal to those who have shared in the experience of the Spirit (3:2, 5, 14; 4:6). This sociospiritual community of people “in Christ” intersects the public world, which “has enormous implications for Christian ethics” (p. 118). W. moves this observation away from the smug and easy road, often traveled, of asserting Christian identity over against Jewish identity or behavior, or the often supposed Jewish crime of “legalism,” to the more productive path of seeking to discern the *analogous* “works of the Law” of one’s own time. His provocative questions speak for themselves: “What, rather, are the accoutrements of Christianity itself which, like the Law for Paul, can become slave masters? Doctrines meant to safeguard the integrity of the church’s faith? Practices that keep outsiders out? And the ‘beings who in reality are not gods’ (Gal 4:8 AT) but that many worship nevertheless, where shall Christians find *them* today? Incarnated as age-old prejudices and animosities? Camouflaged as political ideals? Ensnared on Wall Street? In the shrine of rampant consumerism? Between the covers of a holy book? Among the idols of popular culture? Seated proudly in the halls of academe?” (p. 118).

Some presuppositions behind W.’s work should be noted, even if they are widely held. For this reviewer some of them turn the interpretation away from what may have been the letter’s impact on the first hearers. For example, W. follows the consensus when he states that Paul’s use of “gospel” to denote the message of the “agitators” provides *certainty* that this message was explicitly called a gospel by the agitators in the Christian

sense of the term (i.e., that it was about Jesus Christ) and that it was regarded as a gospel of Jesus Christ by the Galatians as well. This intra-Christian context of the letter and the interpretive decisions which follow may be questioned. Use of the word “gospel” was not limited to Christian news in this period; more importantly, Paul’s adoption of it here is ironical: he has chosen the label to shock the Galatians into realizing that by their response they have given legitimacy to this other message on a level equal to that of Christ—even if the result was unintended—a move which necessarily (from Paul’s perspective) invalidates the gospel of Christ.

If you are working on Galatians, or if you realize that the interpretation of this letter is important for your working assumptions in whatever area you are engaged, specialist or not, you should consult W.’s commentary. It is a concise, informative, and creative work.