

Student's Name Here

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Galatians

Date

Evaluation of James Burton Coffman's Commentary on Galatians

Commentaries can be an invaluable resource in understanding the Biblical text as they provide additional historical, cultural, and theological insight. In this paper I will be evaluating the Galatians portion of the "Commentary on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians" by James Burton Coffman. This evaluation will examine the author's background, style of commentary, strengths and weaknesses of the commentary, his views on some key issues in the epistles, and a summary recommendation.

James Burton Coffman (1905-2006) was a prominent preacher and commentator among the Churches of Christ throughout the 20th century. In his ministry he served as minister in Texas, Oklahoma, Washington, D.C., and for the Manhattan Church of Christ.

Bro. Coffman has written this commentary in the verse-by-verse style. His approach to the text assumes the Bible text to be God-breathed and inerrant and reflects his Restoration Movement roots and principles.

This commentary on Galatians has some appreciable and helpful strengths for the student of the Bible. He writes in a broadly understandable style that brings scholarship without compromising readability. His sources are diverse, spanning from John Wesley to David Lipscomb, and William Barclay to J. W. McGarvey. I appreciate the broad pool of insight, and that he does not include only those scholars with whom he agrees; Coffman also includes alternative views, sometimes for added points of view, other times for the purpose of refutation. Personally, I appreciate a commentary more when, like this one, the author draws on views beyond his own.

There are not many weaknesses in this commentary that I find a hindrance. As I have noticed in past readings of his commentaries, there are occasionally individual verses that he skipped without commentary. Some are insignificant, but occasionally there are passages for which I would have appreciated his insight.

There are several key issues addressed in the commentary, I am including a sampling of three in Coffman's commentary that help illustrate his approach to the letter.

First, in his comments on the first two chapters where Paul describes his relationship to the gospel and to the apostles, Coffman is helpful in relating that Paul was not chiding or dismissive of the apostles, but does have pity that some of them were slow to understand the full extent to which God was opening up fellowship to the Gentile brethren. Coffman goes on in his notes on chapter two to point out that Paul again affirms his respect for the apostles, and that Paul is helping us see a healthy and humble approach to leadership that shows proper respect without the worldly power positions of politics in the church. That stands in contrast to the Judaizers' abuse of Paul.

Coffman also addresses the inspiration of Scripture in his remarks on chapter two, saying, "the Holy Spirit has never conveyed a single new truth to any person whomsoever; and, as always, the Spirit's function even in those instances was to enable truth to be remembered and not to convey it." In our current climate, a clear and concise statement such as this is always helpful, and aids the reader in understanding Coffman's approach to Galatians and the false teachers.

Similar to Ed Wharton's explanation, Coffman's clarification of the metaphor of Sarah/Hagar and Isaac/Ishmael is helpful. This is a difficult text for the 21st Century American to grasp (or maybe that is just me) and his explanation, too long to include here, is excellent.

J. B. Coffman does an excellent job in providing insight—including many other scholarly points of view—on the book of Galatians and our freedom in grace, freedom from law, and our walk in the Spirit, and I do recommend this as a useful commentary for the student of Paul's letter.