

BOOK REVIEWS

A Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles, Mal Couch, Gen ed. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999. 455 pp. \$25.99.

Dispensationalist commentaries on the crucial book of Acts are few and generally quite brief; thus a 455-page contribution to this field raises considerable interest. The volume is not called a commentary, but a handbook, a somewhat nebulous designation that reveals little about its contents. The reader will find the book comprised of three parts, the first and second being a collection of essays on eight topics within Acts: introduction, the church, the person of Jesus Christ, use of prophecy, demonology, Paul, the temple, and two chapters on the Holy Spirit. Part three is a 223-page verse-by-verse commentary on the book of Acts. The commentary is followed by four appendices: a timeline and three topical essays: one each on the laying on of hands, sign gifts, and progressive dispensationalism as they relate to the book of Acts. The volume is compiled from the research of twelve contributors, most with ties to Tyndale Theological Seminary (Fort Worth, TX), the conservative offspring of Dallas Theological Seminary. The general editor, Mal Couch, is founder, president, and director of the department of theological studies at Tyndale.

The value of the work is severely restricted by a litany of distracting editorial glitches. As in Couch's earlier editorial effort, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), there are numerous typographical errors. The endnotes (problems in and of themselves for the serious academic reader) are also littered with mistakes. Endnotes 3–9 of the introduction are out of order, and part 2, chapters 1–2, are mislabeled as chapters 8–9. The notes themselves are frequently incomplete, leaving the already frustrated endnote-seeker even further distracted. For instance, chapter 1, n. 16 (p. 425) reads, "Stanley Toussaint and Charles Dyer, *Pentecost Essays* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 24." The reader is forced to do a bit of detective work to discover that the note should read, "Stanley D. Toussaint, 'The Kingdom and Matthew's Gospel,' in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint & Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), p. 24." Many readers will be unable to find the work as cited. Finally, reprint editions are frequently listed without reference to their original publication, leaving the false impression that the writers are interacting with recently published materials.

There are also numerous internal problems in the book. Overlapping and duplication of topics (e.g., sign gifts and their cessation—pp. 37–42; 64–69; 169–175; 412–16) are frequent. Further, when several contributors worked together on some chapters, they made little attempt to harmonize their findings, resulting in disconnected discussions and conflicting conclusions. For instance, within twelve pages one finds the following three statements: (1) “It is probably best to take the statement [the “rock” of Matt 16:18] at face value as an actual reference to Peter” (p. 46). (2) “It [the “rock” of Matt 16:18] certainly is not pointing back to the apostle Peter!...the church is to be built upon the person of Christ, not upon the disciple Peter” (p. 53). (3) “Most church fathers believed that...the rock has to do with Peter’s confession of who Jesus really is. It is upon this confession that the church will be built” (p. 57). Ironically, the final reference is accompanied by a stern reminder that a given passage can have only one meaning. That an editor could miss this glaring inconsistency is bewildering.

There also seems to be a hesitancy in the volume to give credit to the Grace Seminary (Winona Lake, IN) school of dispensational theology. For instance, while there seems to be a general acceptance of Alva J. McClain’s view of the kingdom within the volume (pp. 21–23; 85–88), credit for the view is given only to Stanley Toussaint. The seminal source, McClain’s *Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), is never cited. Likewise, when discussing the new covenant (p. 89) the author takes the view and even the terminology of Homer A. Kent Jr.,¹ but declines to cite anyone at all. Later in the book (pp. 421–23), when the new covenant is discussed under a separate heading, credit for Kent’s view is given entirely to Scofield’s less than fully developed view. This is odd in light of the book’s tendency to over-citation, often of unnecessary and obscure sources. The reader is left with the impression that the authors view Dallas Theological Seminary and her children as the sole guardians of dispensational theology.

Other examples of DTS influence include the denial of regeneration and Holy Spirit indwelling prior to Pentecost (pp. 19–20, 122–123, 134–35, 139–40), and the necessary corollary that faith precedes regeneration within the *ordo salutis* (pp. 123, 135, 140). Going an alarming step beyond the traditional Dallas view on this issue, the authors cite favorably Lenski’s Arminian comments on Acts 13:48, effectively

¹“The New Covenant and the Church,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Fall 1985): 289–98; also his *Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 158–160. Cf. R. Bruce Compton, “An Examination of the New Covenant in the Old and New Testaments” (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1986); Rodney J. Decker, “The Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July–September 1995): 290–305; (October–December 1995): 431–56.

denying divine election in the verse (pp. 237–38; note, however, conflicting comments on pp. 310–11). Repentance is viewed as a mere “change of mind” (p. 212), though Simon’s conversion (8:13) is viewed as disingenuous (p. 265). The authors deny the possibility of absolute principles of church polity and elder selection, yet advocate the necessity of the plurality of elders (pp. 48–49).

This is not to say that the *Handbook* is without value. The dual adoption of McClain’s view of the kingdom and Kent’s view of the new covenant is to be applauded. The discussions of tongues and sign gifts were good, and the authors go on record in declaring that these gifts have ceased (pp. 173–75, 414). Incidentally, the authors take the unusual stance that the 1 Cor 13:10 reference to the “perfect thing” is a reference to both the closing of the canon *and* the second coming of Christ (p. 415). The discussion of the Sabbath (pp. 60–63) is likewise excellent, though one wonders why the argument was not sealed by referencing Romans 14:5–8. The demonstration of the distinction between Israel and the church in the book of Acts (pp. 63–64) was succinct and convincing. The authors’ speculations concerning the continued early Christian recognition of the temple and its ordinances (pp. 109–118) are also informative. The final appendix denouncing progressive dispensationalism (pp. 417–23), while brief, confirms for the reader that the authors tolerate no shift toward covenant theology.

The commentary section itself is also profitable, giving readers a fresh dispensational survey of the all-important book of Acts. Greek and Hebrew terms are kept to a minimum, and always appear as English transliterations; nor do the writers labor excessively over textual or source criticism. Background material, maps, and a timeline also assist the reader in sorting out the chronological, geographical, and historical aspects so critical to the understanding of the book of Acts. As such, this non-technical commentary is helpful for both scholar and novice.

In summary, much of the information collected in the *Bible Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles* is profitable and, if carefully arranged, could have constituted a valuable contribution to a needy field within dispensationalism. It is unfortunate that such a worthy cause was hampered and valuable research squandered due to something so ancillary as poor organization, harmonization, and editorial work. A comprehensive, dispensational treatment of the book of Acts remains to be written.

Mark A. Snoeberger
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary