

Books in Review

The Works of F.F. Bruce

There are certain writers on the Bible whose books I make it a policy to collect. Foremost among these is the late Scottish NT scholar F.F. Bruce (1910-1990), considered by many to be the leading evangelical Bible scholar of the 20th century. The hallmarks of his writings are a deep devotion to God, a constant consideration for the unity of the body of Christ and a fierce integrity and honesty in regards to a proper handling of the biblical text. I highly recommend *all* of his works.

Bruce's background makes him especially sensitive to the issues of biblical studies. Being the son of an evangelist in the Plymouth Brethren movement (begun in the 19th century by men such as George Mueller and J.N. Darby) he was brought up on the Scriptures but also exposed to the various sectarian issues of his day. Through his studies at the Universities of Aberdeen, Cambridge, and Vienna as well as through his teaching positions at several British universities, Bruce became renowned not only for his encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible and its underlying texts and history but also for his ability to communicate this knowledge to the public at large.

Bruce's books on the historical and textual background of the NT - *New Testament History*; *The Books and the Parchments*; and *The Canon of Scripture* - are all classics in their fields. But it was in Pauline studies that he particularly distinguished himself. Here he emphasized salvation as the free gift of God, received solely through faith in Christ - but, with a corresponding emphasis on the believer's responsibility to express this faith through the fruit of the Spirit in one's life. Bruce not only wrote leading commentaries on each of the Pauline Epistles and the Book of Acts, he also

summarized his life-long study of Paul in the classic work: *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. For those who are interested in getting acquainted with his writings, I recommend some of his shorter but first-rate books including: *The Message of the New Testament*; *The New Testament Documents*; and *NT Development of OT Themes*. Mention must also be made here of Bruce's concise but excellent study of *Romans: Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series*. This may be the single most useful commentary for understanding the New Testament message of salvation in Christ spelled out so well in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans.

As with anyone whose writings span almost a half-century F.F. Bruce grew in his understanding of different biblical issues. This is very evident when one reads his writings keeping in mind the dates of their publication. Bruce was from the beginning a strong believer in the second coming of Christ as a single climactic event at which time God's people would be made immortal and God's kingdom would be established in a renewed earth. He was also a firm believer in the gift of the Spirit as the firstfruits of the believer's final inheritance. But though he always rejected the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul, he seemed to struggle with regard to the state of the "dead in Christ" because of verses such as Phil. 1:23 and II Cor. 5:8. This struggle can be seen especially in his work *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* pp. 309-313. Even here, however, he offered a possible solution to this struggle in footnote 40 on p. 312:

The tension created by the postulated interval between death and resurrection might be relieved today if it were suggested that in the consciousness of the departed believer there is no interval between dissolution and investiture, however long an interval might be measured by the calendar of earth-bound human history.

As time went on Bruce seems to have gravitated more and more to this position as can be seen by his commentary notes on I Cor. 15 and II Cor. 5:1-8 in the *New Cent. Bible Commentary, I and II Corinthians*, pp. 137-159 and 198-206:

Paul does not think of immortality or survival after death apart from resurrection ... while Paul longed to be delivered from the present mortal body it was in order that he might exchange it for one that was immortal: to be without a body of any kind would be a form of spiritual nakedness from which his mind shrank ... So instantaneous is the changeover

from the natural to the spiritual body - "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (I Cor. 15:52) - that there will be no interval of conscious 'nakedness' between the one and the other ... In I Cor. 15 this takes place at the parousia in those believers who are still alive then, while those who have died will rise in bodies which are not liable to corruption ... in the consciousness of the departed believer there is no interval between dissolution and investiture.

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