



**Abraham Kuruvilla, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus: A Theological Commentary for Preachers*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021, xi + 261 pp., \$31.00.**

### **Review by Paul S. Jeon**

As the subtitle indicates, this commentary is written for preachers. Perhaps what will most interest the reader is the author's eclectic background: Kuruvilla is a physician, preacher, and professor. Having taught at Dallas Theological Seminary for some years, he has just been appointed Professor of Christian Preaching at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His broad background undoubtedly contributes to the unique perspective he brings to his extensive study on the Pastoral Epistles: he is the ideal embodiment of a preacher living between two worlds.

There are different ways to assess this book. I take the approach of asking whether a typical preacher would find this work helpful, which raises the question of what a typical preacher knows. For instance, Kuruvilla extensively engages the Greek text, applies literary devices like chiasms, and engages scholarly works. Upon reviewing the different chapters, I wondered whether the "typical" preacher would be able to track Kuruvilla's deep analysis. But perhaps the problem lies in my cynicism regarding how much the typical preacher knows and/or will appreciate.

The book itself is organized simply, with a standard "Introduction" regarding the author's approach and basic matters of prolegomena. The book then divides into three sections corresponding to 1 Timothy, 2, Timothy, and Titus respectively. Each of these sections is organized according to what Kuruvilla believes are the umbrella themes of each letter—"1 Timothy: Shepherding the Saints," "2 Timothy: Completing the Course," and "Titus: Exemplifying the Excellent." Kuruvilla divides 1 Timothy into ten pericopes, 2 Timothy into five, and Titus into three. This organization can potentially serve the preacher that is interested in developing a preaching plan for the Pastorals. However, I would advise referring to Kuruvilla's organization more as a comparison than an outline that is to be slavishly followed. The work of identifying a letter's main theme and organization is so important to any interpreter's understanding that it should be done independently first; that is, preachers should do this hard work for themselves instead of relying unduly on the work of even the best commentaries.

Each individual pericope-chapter follows the same format: pericope number, chapter title, scripture in consideration, a subtitle, review-summary-preview, overview, translation, notes, and sermon maps. My feedback here seems intuitive: simplify the chapter makeups. For instance, is it necessary to have both a “theological focus” for each pericope and a “theological focus” for the corresponding passage? Similarly, perhaps a detailed outline of each letter would have been preferred over sporadic outlines relating sequential pericopes. Having suggested more simplicity, I would have advised more notes on the translations—precisely because they are excellent and merit further comments given their deviations from more standard translations. But Kuruvilla does this to some extent in the “Notes” section of each chapter.

I do recognize that my suggestion towards more simplicity may reflect my own bias that straightforward commentaries, which comprise brief summaries, translations, and notes, better serve the typical preacher. In his desire to serve preachers, Kuruvilla may have complicated the chapters. But such “complication” is understandable given the nature of the book. Had Kuruvilla sought to write either a technical commentary or a preaching guide, the individual chapters would likely have been simpler. Because he is seeking to do both, the chapters are understandably dense. If a preacher is willing to do the initial hard work of orienting himself to the organization and density of each chapter, he will benefit greatly. This is not to suggest, however, that the serious exegete/scholar should dismiss the work as useful mainly to preachers. If anything, Kuruvilla’s “Notes” (where the bulk of his comments lies) are as stimulating as they are clearly written: the scholar will benefit as much as the preacher.

Although the work is focused on assisting preachers to communicate the theology of the Pastorals, some comment is in order on Kuruvilla’s actual exegesis, particularly because his preaching approach (rightly) depends on sound exegesis and theology. First, Kuruvilla approaches the three letters with the assumption that they share a single theological focus, namely “how leaders of the divine household promote God’s economy” (12). I’m not entirely persuaded that the three must be interpreted as a coherent unit, although it seems fitting to read 2 Timothy in light of 1 Timothy. Also, it could be argued that this theological focus is true for many books of the NT. Second, Kuruvilla might have considered describing in more detail how he arrived at the theological themes for each individual letter. To be sure, he notes that the titles “Shepherding the Saints,” “Completing the Course,” and “Exemplifying the Excellent” “are attempts to provide an approximate heading that is specific for each of the PE” (12, n. 47). But if each of these represents the goal toward which each pericope progresses, then it is all the more important to establish that these are in fact *the* main themes in each of the letters.

In sum, Kuruvilla’s theological commentary on the Pastorals is to be commended for the preacher that is willing to do the hard work of working through both the biblical texts and a quality commentary.

Paul S. Jeon  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, DC  
NewCity Church, Vienna, VA