

1-1-2001

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### Recommended Citation

McDowell, Markus H. (2001) "Resource Guide: First Corinthians," *Leaven*: Vol. 9: Iss. 3, Article 12.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol9/iss3/12>

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## Resource Guide First Corinthians

MARKUS H. McDOWELL

**B**eginning a study of 1 Corinthians, one might think of these words from Ecclesiastes: “There is no end to the writing of books, and much study is wearisome” (12:12). Yet the daunting array of available material can better prepare one to speak and teach God’s word to the modern church and to the world. Because 1 Corinthians addresses such issues as preaching and evangelism, sexual activity, women’s roles, the individual versus the community, and “true” spirituality versus spiritual elitism, it may be more immediately relevant to the modern church than any other book of the Bible. The primary difficulty is sorting through the mountains of material. Since a comprehensive reading survey is impossible, I will highlight some of the best resources available and offer suggestions for further bibliographic resources.<sup>1</sup>

### ORIENTATION

A good, brief, general introduction is the article on the Corinthian letters in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Intervarsity Press, 1993) by S. J. Hafemann. This study includes a description of the letter’s contents in outline form, information on the city of Corinth, the church’s history with Paul, the social situations behind the problems addressed, critical questions about the letter, and a summary of theological themes. Some of the descriptions are so cursory as to be potentially misleading. Nevertheless, the overview of the social world and how it affected the views of the Corinthian Christians is quite good.

More technical in nature is the article on 1 Corinthians by Hans Dieter Betz and Margaret M. Mitchell in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday, 1992). Here, one finds more of the history of schol-

arship and literary analysis than in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Betz’s compositional and rhetorical analysis is often helpful and insightful as long as one remembers that his analysis occasionally forces the letter into a pre-defined mold.

For a more detailed introduction, turn to the volume on 1 Corinthians in the New Testament Guides series by James D. G. Dunn (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995). This short book (110 pages) presents an excellent introduction to the contents of 1 Corinthians and also serves as a concise survey of the important issues. Each chapter includes a decent-sized bibliography for further study. Other sources worth consulting that include chapters on 1 Corinthians are *An Introduction to the New Testament* by Raymond Brown (Doubleday, 1997), Luke Timothy Johnson’s *The Interpretation of the New Testament* (revised edition; Fortress Press, 1999), and the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice-Hall, 1990).

### MAJOR EXEGETICAL COMMENTARIES ON THE GREEK TEXT

Stranded on a desert island with only one book on 1 Corinthians, I would want Gordon Fee’s commentary (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Eerdmans, 1994). Fee is not only an excellent writer and communicator; he is also one of the few text critics to have written a major commentary on the Greek text of 1 Corinthians. His insights and exegetical comments are reasoned and informed by faith. A pleasant surprise is found at the end of each section in the form of a modern application—a welcome addition to a scholarly commentary. Another important work is by Hans Conzelmann (Hermeneia; Fortress, 1975). Conzelmann’s attention

to philology, history of tradition, history of religions, and extensive footnoted references to Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Ancient Near Eastern sources makes this study an excellent companion to Fee's commentary. With these two works, one can be well versed in the major issues in scholarship and interpretation of 1 Corinthians. A third beneficial commentary is by Raymond F. Collins (Sacra Pagina; The Liturgical Press, 1999)—a study that provides a current, detailed analysis, focusing mainly on the rhetorical and theological aspects of the letter.

Helpful for its Greco-Roman citations, even though out of date in a number ways, is Robertson, Archibald, and Plummer's volume in the International Critical Commentary series (T&T Clark, 1914). Likewise out of date but worthwhile for its analysis of the Greek language is the Cambridge Greek Testament series on 1 Corinthians by R. St. John Parry. Other volumes of less importance but containing occasional gems are F. Godet's *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1886; reprint Eerdmans, 1957); and T. C. Edwards' *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 3d ed. (London, 1897).

#### COMMENTARIES ON THE ENGLISH TEXT

There are a number of smaller and less technical commentaries on the English text. At the top of my list would be C. K. Barrett's *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* in the Harper's New Testament Commentary series (Hendrickson, 1968). Barrett's work, like all in the Harper series, is concise and easy to read while covering all the major issues. This study can also serve as a good, in-depth introduction to the letter and its issues, though it does not cover much grammar, history of scholarship, or Greco-Roman and Jewish parallels. It focuses mainly on interpretation.

Another commentary that approaches the text differently is *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* by the prolific Ben Witherington III (Eerdmans, 1995). As the title indicates, this book focuses on the sociological setting and the rhetorical units of the book; yet it does not neglect the more

traditional methods of biblical study. As in his other similar studies,<sup>2</sup> this is a solid, engaging, and readable work. I would also recommend it to any student or preacher/pastor seeking a fresh look at 1 Corinthians.

Along different lines, Charles H. Talbert's study, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Crossroad, 1987), should be read for a number of reasons. Talbert does not provide a translation or a verse-by-verse commentary, but rather treats larger blocks of material. He employs a wide variety of methods and relies on sources from Hellenistic philosophy as well as Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism for comparison and background. Some of Talbert's conclusions may be forced, but his concise handling of issues is quite valuable. I appreciate that Talbert's work is often provocative and not just a rehash of other commentaries.

Other commentaries worth consulting as references include *First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians* in the Cambridge Bible Commentary series by Margaret Thrall (Cambridge, 1965) who often deals with issues that others ignore. Leon Morris' *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (London, 1958) proves restrictive in some of the more critical issues because of his overly conservative stance. From a faith perspective, however, it yields worthwhile conclusions. Two other authors to consider are Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* (Wilmington, 1979); and John Ruef, *Paul's First Letter to Corinth* (Philadelphia, 1971).

#### POPULAR AND PREACHING COMMENTARIES

The best popular/preaching commentary to date is Richard B. Hays' volume in the Interpretation commentary series (John Knox Press, 1997).<sup>3</sup> Hays deals with many questions that a preacher or teacher in a church setting needs to address. He presents the best of critical scholarship on the major issues in an accessible manner and leaves the minutiae to the more scholarly commentaries. Certainly, his study is not a substitute for reading good critical commentaries, but it is essential for anyone employing 1 Corinthians in a ministry setting.

For the serious church class teacher or preacher who wishes to delve more deeply into the text, a newer work is *1 Corinthians* in the New International Biblical Commentary series by Marion Soards (Hendrickson, 1999). This is a reliable, clear, and well-written volume. While it provides nothing particularly new, it is useful because it first expositis each passage before it provides a more technical treatment (54 times throughout the book). The bibliography is also useful.<sup>4</sup> Also worth mentioning is a commentary by a Restoration tradition author, Carl Holladay, in the Living Word Commentary series (ACU Press, 1979). This is a readable, verse-by-verse commentary that is solid in its review of background material.

Also, for a church class teacher or preacher who wants to do some extended study of 1 Corinthians, see Kevin Quast, *Reading the Corinthian Correspondence: An Introduction* (Paulist Press, 1994). Well written, this volume contains a number of helpful lists and charts. Another popular work worth consulting is William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* in his Daily Study Bible series. This book is one of the best popularizations in his series; Barclay knows the Greco-Roman world fairly well, but he lacks knowledge of (or simply ignores) the Old Testament and Jewish backgrounds. A more current popular work that is thorough (672 pages), theological, and conservative is Gregory Lockwood's volume in the Concordia Commentary series (Concordia Publishing House, 2000).

### SPECIAL STUDIES

A book that focuses on the theology of 1 Corinthians is *The Theology of First Corinthians* in the New Testament Theology series (Cambridge University Press, 1999), by Victor Paul Furnish.<sup>5</sup> Furnish believes that 1 Corinthians is actually a better place to discover Paul's theology than Galatians or Romans because Paul relies so much more on his understanding of soteriology, Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology as he answers the Corinthians.

Since 1 Corinthians deals with a number of clearly defined issues, one can learn greatly from special studies or background topics. Four classic

articles that orient one to a theology of the Corinthian church are:

- Anthony C. Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology in Corinth," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977): 510–526.
- Robert McLachlan Wilson, "How Gnostic Were the Corinthians?" *New Testament Studies* 19 (1972): 65–74.
- R. A. Horsley, "How Can Some of You Say There is no Resurrection of the Dead? Spiritual Elitism in Corinth" *Novum Testamentum* 20 (1978): 203–31.<sup>6</sup>
- J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (Novum Testamentum Supplementum 30; E.J. Brill, 1973).

Perhaps more than any other New Testament writing, knowledge of the social world of Corinth is essential in interpreting the texts of 1 Corinthians. An excellent commentary with a different slant is the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* by Craig S. Keener (InterVarsity Press, 1993). This verse-by-verse commentary provides socio-cultural information rather than interpretations of the text. Since it is intended for a general audience, it does not include full documentation as one might wish, but it is well worth consulting. Two standard works on the social world of Corinth (and early Christianity) are Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (Yale University Press, 1984); and Gerd Theissen, *Social Settings of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia, 1982).<sup>7</sup> See also the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* mentioned above.

Because of the letter's references to temples, the agora, the homes in which the church met, and other various aspects of life in the city of Corinth, a familiarity with the city itself and its architecture is also quite helpful. A tremendous amount of work has been done in the excavation of Corinth that is described in a number of good resources. For a quick overview and some drawings of the city, see the article "Corinth" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's article, "The Corinth

That Paul Saw," (*Biblical Archaeologist* 47 [1984]: 147–159), is a more readable overview with pictures of the site. Finally, for an excellent source with descriptions and diagrams keyed to the texts in 1 Corinthians, see Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Text and Archaeology* (Good News Studies 6; Glazier, 1983). A different resource for the archaeology of Corinth is the website at <http://corinth.sas.upenn.edu/corinth.html>, which presents historical backgrounds, maps, and the city plan of ancient Corinth. It also has numerous drawings, diagrams, pictures, and descriptions of the sections and buildings of the ancient city.

To begin a detailed study of specific issues addressed in 1 Corinthians, begin with articles in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* or the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (i.e., "Lord's Supper," "Resurrection," "Food Offered to Idols," "Marriage and Divorce," etc.). The bibliographies provided lead to more detailed studies. What follows is a small selection of some major sources dealing with the specific issues found in 1 Corinthians. For a study of the factions and divisions in the church (1 Cor 1–4) see N. A. Dahl, "Paul and the Church at Corinth according to 1 Corinthians 1.10–4.21" in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (Cambridge, 1976); and a little known but helpful study on Paul's use of persuasive speech in 1 Cor 1–10 by Rollin S. Ramsaran (another scholar from the Restoration tradition) entitled *Liberating Words: Paul's Use of Rhetorical Maxims in 1 Corinthians 1–10* (Trinity Press, 1996).<sup>8</sup> Paul's use of the Old Testament and his theology and hermeneutic of ethics is examined in Brian S. Rosner's *Paul, Scripture, & Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7* (Brill/Baker, 1994).<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion of slavery in the Greco-Roman world and 1 Cor 7, see S. Scott Bartchy's *MALLON CHRESAI: First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Cor. 7.21* (Scholar's Press, 1973; reprint 1985). For an analysis of gender, marriage, and divorce issues in 1 Corinthians, the following studies are worthwhile:

- David E. Garland, "The Christian's Posture Toward Marriage and Celibacy: 1 Corinthians 7," *Review and Expositor* 80 (1983): 351–62.

- Robin Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (1972): 283–9.
- Raymond F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament* (Liturgical Press, 1992).

For a debate over the issues of idol meat, pagan temples, and Christian behavior within the community, see Gordon Fee, "Eidōlothyta Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8–10" *Biblica* 61 (1980): 172–97; Bruce N. Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols: Corinthian Behavior and Pauline Response in 1 Corinthians 8–10 (A Response to Gordon Fee)" *Trinity Journal* 10 (1989): 49–70; and Wendell L. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 68; Chico, Calif., 1985). D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Baker, 1987), gives an overview of the issues of the assembly and the topics addressed such as speaking in tongues, spiritual gifts, the body, and so forth, in 1 Cor 11–14. A vast amount of material has been written on chapters 11 and 14 concerning women's roles. For some orientation to the issue, orientation to the main points, and options of interpretation, see M. D. Hooker, "Authority on Her Head: An Examination of 1 Cor. XI.10," *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963–64): 410–16; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Once Again," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 265–274; and "Sex and Logic in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 482–500.<sup>10</sup> See also the chapter on "1 Corinthians" by Jouette M. Bassler in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Westminster/John Knox, 1992). While brief, this work discusses the passages having to do with women and lists a number of possible interpretations for the more difficult passages.

Probably the best treatment of the Lord's Supper passage (11:17–34) is in Fee's commentary mentioned above on pages 531–569. For a good, practical, church-oriented discussion in a popular format see Markus Barth, *Rediscovering the Lord's Supper* (John Knox, 1988); E. Schweizer, *The Lord's Supper According to the New Testament* (London, 1952); R.

P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Eerdmans, 1974); and William Barclay, *The Lord's Supper* (Westminster, 1967).

### FORTHCOMING WORKS

The *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Abingdon Press), scheduled for release in July of 2002, will include a treatment of 1 Corinthians by J. Paul Sampley. The *NIB* usually contains solid introductions to the various books of the Bible and will be worth evaluating upon publication. Carl Holladay is working on an introductory New Testament volume tentatively entitled *Reading the New Testament as Scripture: A Theological Introduction*, to be published by Abingdon Press within the next two years, which will include an extensive section on 1

Corinthians. E. Earl Ellis has been working for some time on an updated volume on 1 Corinthians for the International Critical Commentary series. The Word Biblical Commentary on 1 Corinthians (volume one) has recently been assigned to Linda L. Belleville, which probably means a number of years before its publication.

The good news about studying 1 Corinthians is two fold: there is a vast quantity of material available, and scholars generally agree on background, location, purpose, and critical questions. While the task can be daunting, by careful study and prayer, we can build on what others have done as we read and sort through the material at hand. As Paul reminds the Corinthians: some of us plant, others water, some reap the harvest...but it is God who gives the growth.<sup>11</sup>

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### NOTES

- 1 I will only list English works; for important works in other languages see the bibliographies in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and Hans Conzelmann's commentary (Hermeneia; Fortress, 1975).
- 2 See Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2001); and *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1997).
- 3 See my review of this book in *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 139-40.
- 4 I am indebted to Ronald R. Tyler of Pepperdine University for the evaluation of this book. See his upcoming review in *Restoration Quarterly*.
- 5 Furnish has written a number of books and articles on the Corinthian correspondence, including the *Anchor Bible Commentary* volume on 2 Corinthians (Doubleday, 1984).
- 6 Horsley has recently written a commentary on 1 Corinthians in the Abingdon New Testament Commentaries series (Abingdon Press, 1998) that is a concise, critical commentary aimed at theological students as well as church leaders. It breaks no major new ground, but is one of the more recent shorter commentaries.
- 7 Other important works are Theissen's *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Fortress Press, 1978); Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (Fortress Press, 1976); John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, Wayne Meeks, ed. (Westminster Press, 1986).
- 8 See my review of this book in *Leaven* 5/4 (1997): 44-46.
- 9 See my review of this book in *Restoration Quarterly* 42 (2000): 253.
- 10 See also Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman* (Liturgical Press; 1988) especially pages 1-14 and 31-66 and C. L. Thompson, "Hairstyles, Head-coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth," *Biblical Archaeology* 51 (June 1988): 99-115; see also the articles on 1 Corinthians 14 in this issue by Krystin D. Higgins and Paul Watson. For a different approach and alternate conclusions, see Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric* (Fortress Press, 1990).
- 11 I wish to thank my colleague Ronald L. Tyler of Pepperdine University for his evaluation and suggestions during the writing of this article.