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## Resources for Teachers: Commentaries

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Wendell Willis, Editor

# Resources for Teachers

## Commentaries

Solomon's famous lament about "the making of many books" might well be applied to commentaries. It seems that almost annually there is a new series of commentaries announced, and one cannot help but ask if there is really a need for more.

In earlier issues I have urged that preparation for teaching and preaching ought not to begin with or be derived from commentaries. The biggest danger from commentaries is that they short-circuit the personal engagement with the bible which is the heart of true study and teaching. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that most ministers and teachers want to have good commentaries in their libraries.

This wish is particularly troublesome given the fact that commentaries are so very uneven in intent, quality, and usefulness. To complicate the matter even more, there is often a wish to buy a commentary series. Many tomes (especially around Christmas!) I will be asked what is the best commentary series. The true answer is that no series is best — on all books. Some excellent commentaries are published independently from a series, and the quality of commentary within a series varies widely.

However, going against my belief that one should look for a good commentary for each specific book regardless of the series, I would like to describe some series with general remarks. I will do this alphabetically, and not in any order of preference. I

have decided (with one exception) to not refer to commentary series by a single author, because people who have a favorite commentator or author will generally be committed to their series.

I have chosen series based upon references to the New Testament (feeling inadequate to evaluate the Old Testament series), although some do contain Old Testament volumes as well. I have also basically excluded works which are based upon the original languages (with two exceptions), because most church users cannot take full advantage of the content and can become intimidated or turned off through using them.

The **Anchor Bible** is a multi-volume commentary series published by Doubleday. Only because it is marketed for the "layman" do I include it. Some purchasers may believe this claim to their disappointment. This is a series for advanced students able to make use of the biblical languages. There are no confessional commitments expected of the writers whose religious and academic backgrounds differ widely. Fairly uniform is style, this series is very uneven in quality. For example, the two volumes on Ephesians are probably the best on the book available, while the volumes on Revelation and Matthew are very regrettable.

**Barclay's Daily Bible Study**, known widely as "Barclay" is a very popular commentary

series by a famous British linguist (the exception to my avoiding single author series). It is well-known and enjoyed for its word expositions and illustrations. Certainly usable by the average layman, it has excited the interest of teachers and students for years. Its biggest disadvantage is that it often gives the impression of greater assurance on a given interpretation than is warranted. Barclay also held to old liberal assumptions that color his interpretation (on the miracles of Jesus, for example), but is not offensive or argumentative in his treatments.

**Cambridge Bible Commentaries** are a slim series based on the New English Bible translation, written by competent scholars with the average (but serious) student in mind. One finds the expected British commitment to "fair play" in the books, so they are basically very non-argumentative. They are often, in my view, one of the best buys around, although they too differ in quality from volume to volume (e.g., the one on Mark by C. F. D. Moule is very good).

The **Interpretation** series, published by Westminster/John Knox, is a relatively new series. This is not a homiletical series, as one may have encountered such, but is specifically related to preaching. The writers are very qualified, mostly professors, and in the broad spectrum more typically conservative minus the tendency to engage in doctrinal debates. I think the format makes it very usable, since it usually deals with paragraphs or larger units, not individual words or phrases.

Though not really a commentary series, the **Knox Preaching Guides**, by John Knox Press, should be of great interest to the teacher or preacher. These volumes are very brief (112 pages for I and II Corinthians), treating units of the Bible rather than a verse by verse analysis. For this reason, they may not be the best for class teaching, but would be perfectly suited for expositional preaching (my bias that sermons should deal with texts in context rather than focus upon single words or phrases).

The **New International Commentary**,

published by Eerdmans, represents very good, conservative scholarship in its best tradition. This series is being revised from an original done basically by British writers, now being replaced with new volumes by other authors. These newer volumes may be the best current conservative scholarship series. The volume on I Corinthians by Gordon Fee may be the best on this letter, but it is very lengthy.

The **Sweet New Testament Commentaries** are still available, and in general are a well written series. These are done by well qualified writers who understand their audience, both in belief and popular reading level. Although the series is not as current as other choices, it is still very helpful.

Finally, **The Word Biblical Commentary** series is probably the best competitor for the New International Commentary in level of seriousness and quality of execution. While not representing a particular religious affiliation, the writers are "evangelicals" (broadly defined). Because these volumes are written for a serious audience there is reference to the original language, and the helpful bibliographies contain reference to foreign language works. Still, because of the format it is possible for them to be used with real profit by readers without language training.

There are two other anticipated series done by scholars in the Restoration heritage which hold good promise. The Gospel Advocate plans to revise its series (many volumes are over a half-century old now) and has contracted with many excellent scholars within our tradition. College Press, of Joplin, Missouri, has announced a series with writers from the Independent Christian church and churches of Christ. Both series, however, are only in beginning stages at present.

Finally, upon completing this review, I discovered a worthwhile book covering much the same ground which I commend for additional details: D.A. Carson, **New Testament Commentary Survey** (Baker Publishing).