First Corinthians

Raymond F. Collins
Sacra Pagina 7, Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999,
695 pp., h/b, $39.95

The First Epistle to the Corinthians

Anthony C. Thiselton
New International Greek Testament Commentary, Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000,
1446 pp., h/b, £49.99/$75.00

Raymond F. Collins’s First Corinthians begins with a forty-page introduction in which he shows how Paul’s apostolic letter compared to other letters in antiquity, and how it may be treated as an oral communication in written form, ‘a kind of “speech-act”’. Because Paul is a ‘great preacher’ set on persuading his hearers to act and think in certain ways in the future, 1 Corinthians can be identified as a piece of deliberative rhetoric. What unites this letter is Paul’s concern: ‘What does it mean for the Christians of Corinth to be God’s one holy people at Corinth?’ The Introduction concludes with an outline of the letter and a bibliography.

The layout of the commentary is according to the rhetorical and epistolary structure that the author sees embedded in the letter. 1 Corinthians 1:1–9 and 16:1–24 provide the introduction and closing of the letter. The body of the letter is divided into seven parts: the theme and occasion in 1:10–17; and six rhetorical demonstrations, 1:18 – 4:21; 5:1 – 7:40; 8:1 – 11:1; 11:2–34; 12:1 – 14:40; 15:1–58. This commentary challenges interpreters to pay attention to argumentative designs that give cohesion to the letter as a whole.

Collins begins each section of his exposition with a literal translation that is reminiscent of the New American Standard Bible. It will serve as an exemplar for students reading 1 Corinthians in Greek for the first time. A section of Interpretation follows, in which the author provides his exposition and how the unit functions argumentatively. He takes note of epistolary and rhetorical features, and explains
Paul's thought against the backdrop of his historical situation and roots in Judaism. Collins avoids interpreting the letter in terms of later theological developments in Christianity, but this does not mean that First Corinthians is non-theological. For Paul's thought is frequently explained in terms of what the author perceives to be Paul's theological perspective. A section of Notes follows, where select words and phrases are examined and text-critical issues discussed. A bibliography of scholarly works concludes each unit.

Indexes, of 'Scripture References', of 'Classical, Jewish, and Patristic sources', of 'Modern Authors', and of 'Topics', round out the commentary.

There are a number of occasions where I would like to have seen the author explain himself more fully or push the data further. For instance, in his discussion of 7.14, he says that the non-Christian partner and children are made holy through the spouse, and that this holiness means 'belonging to God' (267). However in distinguishing this from salvation, one is left to imagine how the spouse can belong to God and be in need of salvation at the same time. Also, Collins reads the letter in terms of later Jewish rabbinic texts, but this is a practice that Pauline specialists more and more think is anachronistic. As he sees things, the form of Paul's argument is Hellenistic but the content is Jewish. If this were indeed the case, why does Collins not make an effort at least to explore the possibility that Paul was also informed by approaches to rhetoric that was indigenous to the Jewish tradition? He does, however, note Paul's midrashic expositions and admits that with respect to the appropriation of the Scriptures, Paul shares the hermeneutic of his Jewish contemporaries, that the Scriptures applied to his own situation.

For those who would teach 1 Corinthians to undergraduate and graduate students who have little in the way of formal training in Paul and Greek, this reviewer can think of no better commentary to assign as course reading than Collins' First Corinthians. It is, furthermore, excellently suited for clergy and lay people who are looking for a full-length, critical commentary on 1 Corinthians to assist them in interpretation and application.

Along with other subject-matter typical of introductions, the fifty-two page 'Introduction' to Anthony C. Thisselton's The First Epistle to the Corinthians furnishes the reader with the latest scholarly opinion on the historical reconstruction of the Pauline mission to Corinth. It also covers the apostle's socio-economic status, and the history, geography, economy, social structure, and cultural values of Roman Corinth. According to Thisselton, because 1 Corinthians addressed a church in an environment that was pluralist and acquiescent to "local" social constructions of truth as opposed to 'trans-contextual rationality', the letter 'stands in a distinctive position of relevance to our own times' (16-17). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the history of rhetoric in Pauline studies, an explanation of how the author will employ rhetoric (subservient to Paul's theological strategies), and a justification for reading Paul's 'apostolic rhetoric'
in terms of speech-act theory. In the outworking, the Paul of 1 Corinthians is never seen as authoritarian, manipulative, or self-deceived in his use of reason. Instead, he expects his readers to evaluate the letter's content in terms of logical coherence and other canons of rational thought.

Each section of the commentary begins with Thiselton's modern English translation, which is true to the intent of the Greek, gender-neutral, and, considering Paul generally did not write in that fashion, in non-technical language. The author provides comments, sometimes brief, often extensive, to justify his translation over against other translations. In an otherwise splendid translation, his rendering of ho adelphos as ‘our Christian brother’ at 1:1 is problematic, for had Paul understood the word this way we should suppose he envisaged his movement to be a separate religion from his ancestral faith. With respect to 12:15, this reviewer asks why Thiselton chose to translate the text as an interrogative when he thinks that such is unlikely.

When it comes to his discussion of textual variants Thiselton parts company with the NA27/UBS4 at 1:14 in omitting ‘to God’, at 7:18 and 21 on matters of punctuation (although not reflected in the translation), at 10:2 in reading the aorist middle rather than aorist passive, and at 14:7 in reading ‘similarly’ instead of ‘nevertheless’ (a question of Greek accenting).

The exposition of 1 Corinthians is rich in lexicography and exegetical detail, which, when combined with the translation, will make this commentary a valuable tool for translators and interpreters. At every turn the exegesis is informed by what Thiselton thinks the linguistic – there is considerable drawing from ancient writings – and theological context of the ‘word, phrase, sentence, verse, or extended passage’ was (xvi). Moreover, he delivers on his promise to pay ‘especially close attention to the socio-historical background’ (xvi). This is illustrated well in his treatment of 11:17–34. He draws on ‘the dining customs and arrangements of the Roman world’ (860) and thereby keeps the text anchored in history.

One will find in The First Epistle to the Corinthians a special emphasis on Paul’s theology, and how patristic, Reformation, and modern theologians have been reading and appropriating the apostle’s thought. Of the modern theologians, Thiselton interacts especially with Barth, Jüngel, Moltmann, and Pannenberg. In method, then, he makes it plain that theological investigation is unshakably rooted in exegesis.

If all this were not enough, the author also puts to use his encyclopedic knowledge of hermeneutical theory. He draws, for example, on Ricoeur’s understanding of metaphor to explicate the polyvalent meaning contained in the symbols of the eucharist at 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, and he discusses Paul’s use of power in relation to Nietzsche and Foucault.

Thiselton also concerns himself with the contemporary relevance of the letter. He seeks to provide ‘some kind of answer’ ‘on the varied
range of serious and responsible questions which readers of today will bring to the text, and especially 'on issues and topics of special concern today' (xvi, xvii). Thiselton's articulation of Paul's theology of proclamation, as that comes to expression in 1 Corinthians 1–2, and the apostle's philosophy of ministry are impressively handled according to their literary and historical contexts, yet it is accomplished with an eye to how they might be modeled today. His treatment of 1 Corinthians 13 is superb, as is his treatment — regardless of whether one supports his arguments in detail — of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16.

There are exhaustive bibliographies throughout. The commentary concludes with three comprehensive indexes, of subjects (itself twenty pages), of Modern Authors, and of Ancient sources.

As learned and detailed as the commentary is, there are however, some matters of concern. Granted, there is a two-way dialogue between the horizon of text and interpreter, yet it is this reviewer's conviction that Thiselton gives too much interpretive weight to his own horizon of understanding, to such an extent that at times his method and conclusions are skewed. To illustrate, despite his sound criticism of Boussel ('an outdated separation between "Palestinian" and "Hellenistic" compartments of culture'; 926), Thiselton himself (like Collins incidentally) all too often polarises the Hebraic and Greek backgrounds and situates Paul's thought in the former. Because of this polarisation, Hebraic-language backgrounds of words, seen, for example, in his interpretation of 'peace' at 1:3 (p. 82; might not Paul's own theology provide the interpretive key?), the anthropological terms at 2:11 (258), and 'rod of correction' at 4:21 (378), are freely drawn upon. This polarisation also manifests itself in his treatment of blocks of text. At 1 Corinthians 7, Paul's attitude towards sexuality is seen to be entirely in accordance with the OT, so the counsel to mutually abstain at 7:5 has to do with opening up time in one's schedule for prayer; it has nothing to do with avoiding an activity that might have been perceived as a hindrance to the efficacy of prayer. In his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 2:11, Thiselton even goes so far as to say that if the view of human nature reflected there is dualistic (Ryle's 'ghost in the machine'), then we must be dealing with 'a quotation from a piece of Corinthian theology or a post-Pauline editorial interpolation' (257). Now if Thiselton is correct on this approach, it begs the question whether Paul's readers at Corinth, possessing little or — more realistically — no knowledge of that Hebraic language background as the interpretative key for reading Paul, would have understood the letter as Paul intended it. And if that were the case, I have to question how effective Paul was as a communicator, since he failed to take his audience into consideration. Without a doubt, Thiselton is sensitive to this problem (see 816 and 820), and he sees Paul as an effective communicator whose 'fundamental rhetorical strategy' is to start 'within a projected "world" of the addressees' (621). I agree, but I also think Thiselton has inadvertently committed the fallacy of 'unwarranted restriction of the semantic field' (to borrow from Carson's Exegetical Fallacies) in interpreting 1 Corinthians all too
Hebraically, much like other scholars who read Paul all too Hellenistically.

Thiselton wants an interpretation of 1 Corinthians that is not only valid for himself and his faith community, but also one that can be judged, with respect to its truth claims, by trans-contextual standards of rationality within the public domain. However by the very selection of the ‘texts’ that he uses to test and support his interpretation, I wonder if he has given some hostages to fortune by being open to the criticism that the final determiner of his interpretation is whether it coheres with selected texts that express his theology? To take his treatment of 1 Corinthians 12 – 14 as representative, he says, ‘It is almost universally agreed that reference to modern Pentecostal and charismatic phenomena cannot be used as an exegetical test for proposed interpretations of Paul and Corinth’. Then comes the reason: ‘This would be to presuppose the validity of one specific tradition of interpretation in a circular fashion’ (979). But if one were to treat ‘Pentecostal and charismatic phenomena’ as a text that interprets, just as Calvin’s Institutes and commentaries are texts that interpret, how is one to decide whether the other tradition of interpretation is better or worse than one’s own as ‘an exegetical test’ for valid interpretation? Were this commentary to drift into the wrong hands, it could be used to show that validity in interpretation is circular.

To work productively with The First Epistle to the Corinthians, it will benefit the reader to have first-hand acquaintance of Pauline scholarship. A casual glance will show just how meticulously its author has interacted with the scholarly literature on 1 Corinthians. Yet on account of its depth in exegetical and philological insight, and its breadth of historical and contemporary scholarship, Thiselton’s First Epistle to the Corinthians functions masterfully – if comparison may be permitted – to bring up to date and stand beside that other important and indispensable exegetical and historical commentary on 1 Corinthians, the one by H.A.W. Meyer.