

Fall 2000

## Book Review: First Corinthians

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### Recommended Citation

Tarwater, John, "Book Review: First Corinthians" (2000). *Business Administration Faculty Publications*. 141.

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*First Corinthians, by Richard B. Hays. Interpretation. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997. Pp. 328*

*Richard Hays, professor of New Testament at the Duke Divinity School, presents for the reader a user-friendly commentary to 1 Corinthians. In keeping with the guidelines of the series, Hays integrates the results of historical-critical scholarship and theological reflection in one text. Hence, the series is not meant to replace historical-critical commentaries, but rather, to stand beside them and assist the lay reader, teachers, and ministers. Nevertheless, in this text Hays clearly interacts with critical scholarship, despite the complete absence of footnotes.*

*In the introduction, Hays outlines for the reader what follows. In this introduction, he discusses the setting for Paul's letter and what he believes to be the major theological themes. As major theological themes, Hays lists Christology, apocalyptic eschatology, embodied existence, the primacy of love, and the power of the cross. Throughout the text, Hays' comments reflect these themes.*

*The commentary does not follow a verse-by-verse exposition. Rather, it is divided into passages, such as [1 Cor. 2:6-3:4](#). Moreover, for each passage, Hays has a commentary proper and a "reflections for teachers and preachers." These homiletic additions reflect one of the most positive aspects of the commentary. In them he confronts the reader with a plethora of ethical and ecclesiastical issues, each flowing from the text. For example, he addresses church discipline, which he says is the "most fundamental challenge ... to the church today" (p. 89). Similarly, he confronts divorce and remarriage and gender-role issues (pp. 131 and 191).*

*For this reviewer, the commentary sections were informed and thorough. In addition, although aware of the original language, and for the most part dependent upon it, the commentary avoids burdening the reader with syntax and focuses rather on how the text may be applied in the life of a believer. Moreover, Hays ably demonstrates how to move from exposition to application.*

*Despite the overwhelming positives associated with the book, two areas of disagreement remain. The first concern relates to Hays' handling of [1 Cor. 7:12](#) and following. Hays appears to say that since this is Paul's opinion and not the Lord's, believers are invited "into the process of rethinking and moral deliberation" (p. 133). "Insofar as Paul's clear preference for celibacy is based on the assumption that 'the form of this world is passing away,' we must make some adjustments to account for our changed historical perspective." Such an approach, however, appears not to take seriously the inspiration of all Scripture ([2 Tim. 3:16](#)). It is as if Hays says that when God inspired Paul to write this letter, He had no idea what the world would be like today.*

*My second area of disappointment is with Hays' treatment of gender issues. Throughout this section, Hays exercises extreme academic caution. He advises the exegete not to disregard the passage as being "culturally conditioned" (p. 190). Similarly, he encourages interpreters to be honest in translation and not explain away meaning by a technical move, such as translating *kephale* as "source" (p. 192). In addition, he affirms that Paul argued for distinctions from creation and that these distinctions "should be honored in the church" (p. 191). Yet, despite*

these positive statements, Hays advocates “functional equality of men and women in *worship and community leadership*.” It is as if Hays says that Paul supports a functional hierarchy, but questions if his argument is sound. He writes, “Are Paul’s arguments persuasive on their own terms?” (p. 190). One is forced to ask Hays, “What is the purpose for created distinctions?” Surely, *as Paul notes, God had a purpose for creating Adam and Eve in two separate acts. Contrary to Hays, I believe that part of the answer may be found within “the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 192).*

*Outside of these two concerns, Hays’ work contains a wealth of insights and information on the meaning and application of 1 Corinthians. Moreover, his work will serve as a good text for the Sunday school teacher, pastor, and lay reader. Hays’ work is a positive contribution to the ongoing studies of the Book of 1 Corinthians.*

*John Tarwater*