



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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1 Corinthians

(Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series)

Kimlyn J. Bender (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, Baker Publishing House, 2022)

REVIEWED BY REV DR WILLIAM OLHAUSEN

As we all know, the progress of the pilgrim is fraught with dangers. The sheer hard slog of everyday life and the seemingly overwhelming complexity of the world can mesmerise us. This can leave the individual believers, and the churches to which they belong, vulnerable to a host of possible errors in matters of belief and practice. In time, we can fall out of step with the Spirit, we lose (literally) our spiritual sense, or, in the memorable phrase of Pierre Bourdieu, we lose the “feel for the game,” and our Christian “*habitus*” fragments. No other New Testament letter speaks to the human condition of the church quite like 1 Corinthians. The letter is a masterpiece of pastoral theology as the apostle to the nations brings to bear foundational

Christian revelation (the *kerygma*) on the real world and real-life experience of a small house church in first century Corinth. (Scholars estimate a community of no more than 100 people.)



Temple of Apollo; Ruins in Ancient Corinth



Kimlyn Bender's achievement is to carefully exposit the elements of Paul's letter in such a way as to illuminate and amplify the logic of Paul's gospel. This makes the letter readily accessible and applicable to the life of discipleship and ministry. His engagement with leading commentators on the letter is judicious and reasonable. Prominent dialogue partners include all the most important modern commentators like Anthony C. Thiselton, Raymond F. Collins, Gordon D. Fee, Charles K. Barrett, David E. Garland, Wolfgang Schrage, Richard B. Hays, Joseph Fitzmyer and Hans Conzelmann. Theological interpretation finds support from leading patristic writers and the later Reformed traditions of Luther, Calvin and Barth. This then becomes a proper case study in the formation of Christian tradition. In fact, this is Tradition. Bender's commentary provides the pastor or the student with an excellent introduction to both New Testament scholarship on this letter and to subsequent theological interpretation of it in the life of the church. This is, therefore, exemplary Christian teaching.

Stripped of excessive philological and historical detail, the commentary allows the logic of Paul's thought to be more easily grasped. At the same time, it also shows us, reveals to us, the underlying anthropology of the congregation (their "fleshly," or, in Thiselton's phrase, "all-too-human" orientations). What makes this so compelling is the realisation that this exposed (we might say "unmasked") anthropology incisively reflects facets of every subsequent Christian community down through the ages.

The logic of the cross runs through and informs every subsequent difficulty Paul addresses in the letter: factionalism, fascination with the purveyors of human wisdom and rhetoric (celebrity), "spiritual" elitism and triumphalism, the true character of Christian leadership, ethical confusion and chaotic worship. Chapter by chapter Bender proves an expert guide. True spirituality (being a person of the Spirit) is that process whereby the church is disciplined and so transformed by the wisdom and power of the cross. This is the experience of being saved, becoming, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, a "living sacrifice."

Where perhaps we, as 21st century readers, feel the full force of this theology is the way in which it challenges our cherished Western (and modern) ideals of individualism, self-determination and rights: "**You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies**" (6: 20). The reference to bodies invites an account of the resurrection, what for Paul was the divine vindication of the man who died a criminal's death. Implicit throughout the letter, Paul will finally address the resurrection of Jesus, and its implications for believers, in chapter 15. And, once again, Bender provides sound and incisive commentary. But for the pastoral problems particular to the Corinthian church and to many churches today, it is a careful consideration of the cross that safeguards the integrity of the Christian church. Elsewhere, Bender has appealed to the analogy of a wheel to emphasise its centrality. If we lose

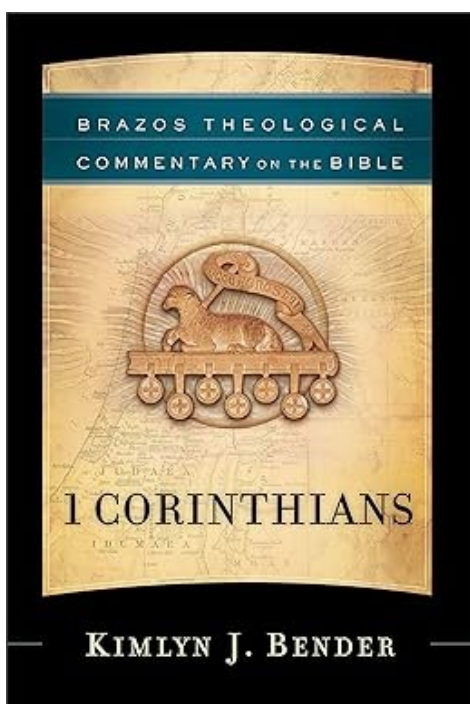
Below: Caravaggio, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (detail)

Right: Guercino, *Saint Paul*



sight of what Bender says, then the wheel either comes off or fails to turn truly.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this commentary. I had not read any of the commentaries in the Brazos series and Bender's commentary on 1 Corinthians provided me with a real sense of reading this letter with the (Western) church – in and through time. Whilst Paul's letter represents pastoral instruction for a unique context, the underlying theology remains relevant and urgent for the church catholic today. There is a very important verse in chapter 4 of the letter reminding us of this: "For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. **He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church**" (1 Cor 4: 16–17). What Paul tasked Timothy with all those years ago, Kimlyn Bender has continued in this excellent commentary. His teaching reminds us of the biblical foundations for pastoral care in the life of the church. You won't be surprised to hear that I strongly recommend you get hold of a copy of this commentary.



Dr Kimlyn J. Bender is the Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University. His primary area of research is in 19th and 20th century theology with a particular specialty in the theology of Karl Barth, though his publications extend to include work in ethics and philosophy in addition to historical and systematic theology.

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All photographs, taken by Lydia Rodseth, are of Ancient Corinth.

From the Back Cover of 1 Corinthians:

The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible enlists leading theologians to read and interpret scripture creedally for the twenty-first century, just as the church fathers, the Reformers, and other orthodox Christians did for their times and places. 1 Corinthians, like each commentary in the series, is designed to serve the church and to demonstrate the continuing intellectual and practical viability of theological interpretation of the Bible.

Praise for 1 Corinthians in the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible

The vision of the Brazos series of theological commentaries is once again vindicated in this dazzling work by the distinguished theologian Kimlyn Bender. The radical nature of Paul's apostolate is illuminated on every page by Bender's focus on Paul's Christ-centered message. This commentary gleams with passion reflecting that of the great apostle as he risks everything to give his whole self for the life of the body of Christ. I particularly urge this book upon preachers looking for larger vistas of proclamation.

Fleming Rutledge, author of *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*

Kimlyn Bender's commentary both explains and honors Paul's self-description as an apostle: one commissioned by the risen Christ to bear a Spirit-empowered witness to the identity and meaning of Christ's work, an identity and meaning that transcends Paul's own cultural and historical context. The commentary makes it clear how Paul's testimony to the cross and resurrection of Christ challenges the local church--and not only in ancient Corinth but in every time and culture--to decide to follow the way of Jesus Christ. Throughout, Bender does well to keep out of the way in order to let the reader receive the full force of Paul's apostolic preaching and his call to respond to the gospel by living a life of suffering witness.

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