

Opening John's Gospel and Epistles: Pastoral Reflections on Love, Light, and Logos

Book Details:

- **Author:** Philip W. Comfort and Wendell C. Hawley
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Recommendation:

- **Review Date:** 08/21/2010 by [Bob Hayton](#)
- **Rating:** Highly Recommended



Review:

Teaching and preaching the New Testament text with vitality and faithfulness is a high calling. The tools for the faithful student of the New Testament are many and varied. A teacher's needs will be different than those being taught however, and many times a commentary is designed more for the end audience than for the one teaching them. Some resources delve too deeply into biblical languages and critical analysis – much deeper than the average teacher needs. Others package up the application so nicely that there is no effort expected or required of the reader.

Philip W. Comfort and Wendell C. Hawley have given us a unique blend of particularly helpful scholarly material and pastoral insight. In *Opening John's Gospel and Epistles* one finds detailed textual and interpretive notes, sprinkled throughout a warm exultation of the main points being taught in the text. The result is a manual or guide for the active teacher, rather than an application book or a detailed exegetical analysis.

The book is laid out in a helpful format, with 6-12 page introductions to the books (2 & 3 John are treated together), followed by separate discussions of each unit of text. The discussions include an exposition and notes on pretty much each verse. The section on John also includes a key words and phrases section.

The expositions set the stage and serve to provide a big picture and background for one's study and preparation. This is the place helpful application points and themes are raised. The notes explain the text and cover critical or textual matters in some detail (but those discussions stay brief and accessible).

Given Comfort's expertise in textual critical matters, the work abounds with detailed textual notes explaining alternate readings and the manuscript evidence behind various readings. This can be a strong point, as when the publication and canonicity of the Gospel and epistles are explained, and when the leading papyri witnesses to John's writings are described. It can also be distracting to those less familiar or concerned about such matters. I think Comfort aims to make the wider church more aware of such discussions, and this work will make such points more accessible for sure. Of particular note, is the decision to set off the story of the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11) as an appendix to the section on John. The manuscript evidence argues against the inclusion of the story in the text of John's Gospel, and Comfort and Hawley correspondingly treat the passage as less than fully inspired.

The commentary reflects a conservative evangelical approach to Scripture. Detailed theological points of controversy are generally avoided, however, in favor of the explication of the text. In John 6, for instance, the transubstantiation debate and the unconditional election question (6:44), are only referenced obliquely. In John 3:5 the various interpretations for “born of water and of the Spirit” are

offered, and the preferred choice defended briefly. That discussion was quite helpful, and the discussion stayed very irenic.

I found the claim that John's version of the Last Supper was not a Passover meal to be somewhat confusing. The introduction and also the discussion in chapter 19 assert that John asserted the Last Supper to be prior to the Passover meal. But the discussion in chapter 13 was referenced for more information, and there the commentary explained the Last Supper likely *was* a Passover meal.

The combination of two separate works into one presented some problems. *Opening the Gospel of John* was the original title. The work on the epistles was published as a separate work later in the *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* series. Bringing the two works together is great, but I would have liked to see a greater attempt at standardizing the work as a whole. The *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* Greek numbering system was used in the epistles of John for instance. Each Greek word is transliterated (as in the Gospel section), but it is a Strong's number, as well as another number as well. This convention is not followed in the Gospel of John. What makes this even more confusing, is there is no mention of what the numbering system is or means in this book at all. I had to pick up a *Cornerstone* commentary to find that the numbers with a prefix "TG" refer to a Tyndale's modified Strong's Greek number, and "ZG" refers to a similar numbering system popularized by Zondervan. "TH" and "ZH" refer to the numbers for the Hebrew words in such a system. A similar matter is the absence of end notes in the epistles of John entirely, whereas every section of the book of John had several end notes. Also the NLT is emphasized in the work covering the epistles whereas the section on John (produced before the publication of the NLT Bible) ignores it.

Along these lines, I encountered a few editing errors. Following the appendix to the Gospel of John, a list of three papyri is found with no explanation as to why it is there. At the very end of the book a list is given of all the papyri and major manuscripts and there are a few obvious typos in that list as well. Furthermore in at least two places (pg. 335 and 351) a single Greek word is followed by a reference to a Greek and a Hebrew number (TG & ZH).

These minor quibbles aside, the notes and commentary provided in this work seem especially clear, straightforward and eminently helpful. It will be a volume that I'll be keeping in arm's reach, whenever I teach from John's Gospel or his epistles. I recommend this book highly.

Author Info:

Philip W. Comfort (D.Litt. Et Phil., University of South Africa) is a professor of New Testament at Coastal Carolina University and Senior Editor of Bibles and Bible Reference at Tyndale House Publishers. He has published several books on Bible translation and textual criticism.

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