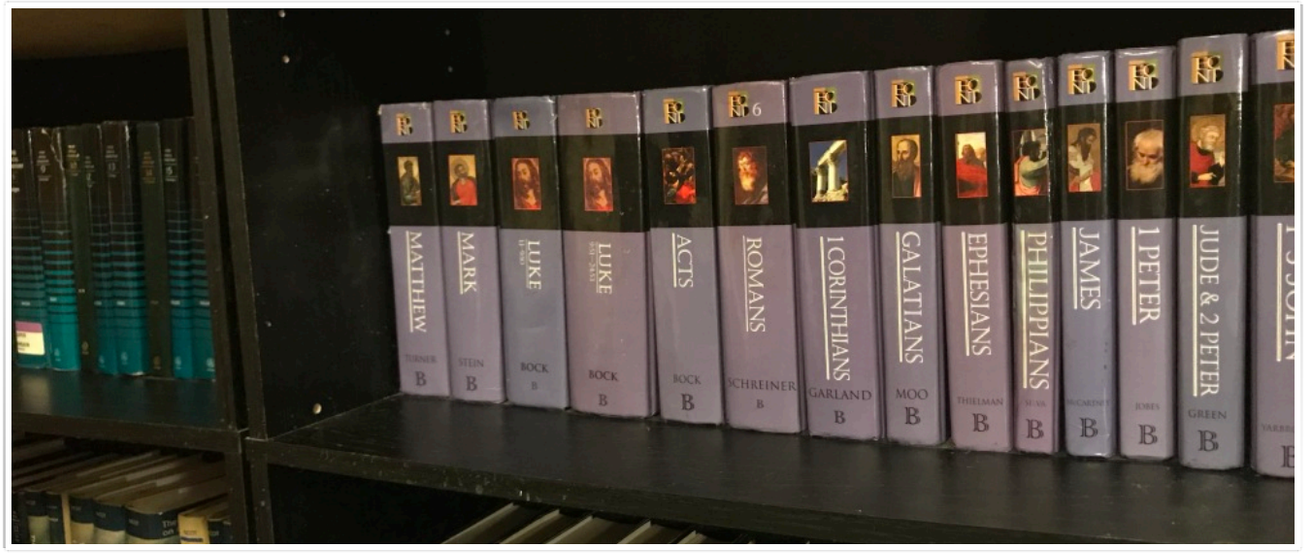


On The Use, Neglect, And Abuse Of Technical Biblical Commentaries

Timothy Berg

Like 143

Friday, December 28, 2018

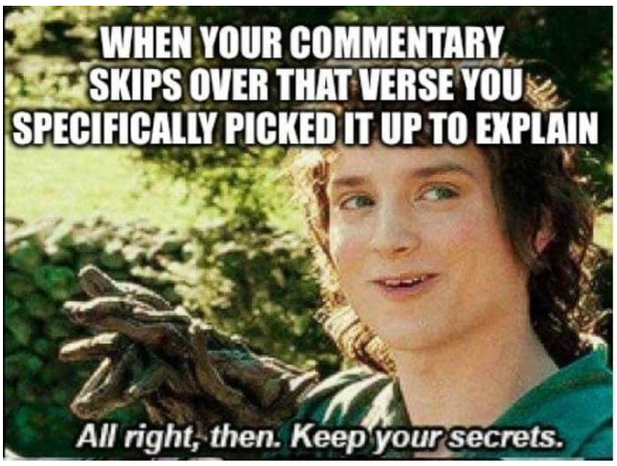
Maybe you've heard a Bible teacher or preacher say something like, "Well, our Bible text this morning is a hard one," then continue with one of the following;

- "I looked at all the commentators on the passage, and they all skipped this verse. Didn't want to get in trouble I guess."
- "I looked at so-and-so's comments on this passage for help, and he skipped this passage entirely."
- "I looked at the commentaries on this passage, and they failed us again. They listed some possibilities, but they were wishy-washy. They wouldn't take a stand and tell us what they actually thought."
- "I looked at the commentaries here, and they were no help at all. I read five different commentators and got six different opinions."
- "All commentaries are really just sermons put into print. Someone else giving us man's words instead of God's words."

I must admit that such statements trouble me. Not for my sake, but because I feel bad for those who say such things. They may not know it, but their ignorance is showing. I would suggest that *when such statements come from a pulpit, they likely reveal a serious dearth of deep biblical study.* Let me clarify lest you stone me now.

To The Teachers:

Let me be clear to whom I am writing. Some share a comment like the above only for humor. For example, the following meme has made waves lately, and some who share it know it's only true of pop-level or devotional commentaries, and only chuckle at the humor. I am not addressing them.



Others share such a sentiment because they are not teachers, preachers, or elders in the Church. Thank God for the giftings he has given them, equally important to the Body as preaching and teaching gifts are! The Spirit gives gifts sovereignly as he wills. They do not have the obligation to study the biblical text in a critical fashion. (*Critical* here refers to depth of study, not a negative attitude towards the historicity of the text.) I am quite pleased when such men and women, often far more godly than myself, consult any commentary at all, and a devotional commentary will probably better serve them than a technical commentary. I am not addressing them here.

But those who *do* have preaching and teaching gifts, or who *are* teaching elders in a local body, (or a seminary or college training teachers for the Church) do indeed have an obligation to study the Biblical text well - to dig into it deeply. Some of them mean such a statement quite literally. They genuinely think that it true. This reveals volumes about their exegetical competence. I heard every one of these sentiments (and many like them) scores of times growing up. From pulpits, televisions, radio preachers, authors, and Bible College Teachers they came. I made them myself once. Sometimes spoken only to elicit a chuckle, but often also meant as statements of reality. That is a sad commentary (pun intended!) on the exegetical literacy in some pulpits and classrooms.

This is the group I am addressing.

Or I should say, the group *experts in the field* are addressing. I'm in no position to admonish anyone. I am only an amateur exegete, without the training or skills to do much academic exegesis myself. Most of this blog post will thus be lengthy quotations from others who are masters in their fields. I humbly acknowledge the greater wisdom and authority of these men. I think these masters deserve to be heard.

The Birth Of Technical Commentaries

There was an age when commentaries might have fallen prey to the comments we opened with. Comments were written by hand, indexes made on paper or 3x5 cards, and the voices of the past harder to access. And to be sure, when critical studies first arose, they were often employed in ways destructive to the Christian faith, sometimes severing the meaning of the text from the importance of living it. But inasmuch as they were advocating a deeper engagement with the text of Scripture, or a closer exegesis of the text, there was also in God's providence a gift to the Church. The two-fold nature of the Bible - human *and* divine - must ever be kept together. To emphasize one or other side of the equation to the neglect of the other is to mistreat the Bible. Far too often, the theological *liberal* wished to view the Bible as only a human book, and thus skirt (or deny!) divine authority. But the *fundamentalist* made the opposite error in overreaction, choosing to see the Bible as only a divine book, and to ignore (or even deny!) its human authorship and specific location in space-time-history. Ladd cautions;

> "We must clearly recognize that the “historical-critical method” as the discipline has developed historically... and as it is often employed today, has had little room for the recognition of the Bible as the Word of God. It has insisted that in historical study, the Bible must be viewed only as the words of men. This one-sided approach has often led evangelicals to take an equally one-sided position and emphasize the Bible as the Word of God to the practical exclusion of the fact that it is also the words of men."
- George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism*, 1967, pg. 12.

"The Bible is the Word of God given in the words of men in history."
- G.E. Ladd
(Tweet This)

To the Church's shame, it sometimes happened that skeptics were reading the Bible more closely than pastors and scholars in the Church, especially in terms of *historical* and *introductory* questions.

Let this never be said. The Bible is *our* book. It is *our* sacred text. Our commitment to this book as *God's revelation of himself*, and our respect for the fact that he chose to give it through *human* men in *history*, should mean that no skeptic on the planet has a better knowledge of it or a deeper engagement with it in their studies than we have in ours.

Today we have a wealth of material that no prior generation had. One of the greatest advances in Bible study in the last several hundred years has been the arrival of the critical commentary. This tool has taken the *historical* side of the equation by the average pastor to new levels.

> "We are living in the greatest explosion of knowledge in all of history. Anyone with a computer knows that. In biblical and theological studies we have virtually doubled or even tripled our knowledge base in the last couple of decades. Never have so many commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias and articles been published as in recent years."
> - Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2006, pg. 15–16.

It ought to be the case that deeper engagement with the text - from a faith stance - leads to deeper understanding of it, deeper experience of the Spirit, and deeper holiness as a result.

Categories Of Commentary

Homiletics legend Haddon Robinson divided commentaries into four categories, ranging from deeper engagement with the historical issues of the text to more shallow engagement with the critical issues;

1. *Technical* (based on the original languages).
2. *Expositional* (English-friendly).
3. *Applicational/devotional* (focusing on the application of the text, or the devotional import of it).
4. *Printed Sermons.*

He offered advice to the preacher in using each category;

> "As you teach the Scriptures, you need teachers to teach you. Through commentaries, scholars serve the church. They offer a wealth of information about the meaning of words, backgrounds of passages, and the argument of a writer. As a general rule, it is wiser (and cheaper!) to select the best volumes on individual Bible books from several different series. It is also helpful to consult an assortment of commentaries on a passage and weigh what they say against each other in determining the meaning of the biblical author. For your basic study you will want to consult commentaries based on the original languages and not only on the English text. Several bibliographies exist to guide you in your selection of a library.
>
> For your initial study you will be helped by consulting commentaries based on the original languages.

Volumes in the *International Critical Commentary* series or the *Word Biblical Commentary* series are examples of this category. These are often quite technical and require some knowledge of the original languages, but they wrestle with the meaning of the text.

You will also want to consult expositional commentaries. They are much more English-friendly, but be sure to select those written by authors who work from the original languages. InterVarsity's *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* series or Zondervan's *Expositor's Bible Commentary* series would be typical of this group.

You will find additional help in commentaries that focus on application, such as the *NIV Application Commentaries* on both the Old and the New Testaments or the *IVP New Testament Commentaries*. These volumes also deal with exegesis and exposition, but sometimes not at the same depth as the critical or expositional commentaries.

There are many books and tapes of sermons preached by well-known preachers. Although these may give you some ideas of how to approach or apply your sermon, they should not be used early in your preparation. You will be tempted to rely too heavily on them and therefore short-circuit your own study of the text."
- Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed., 2014, pg. 37–38.

Similar divisions have been proposed by others. How you parse each category is less important than deeply engaging the text. Don Sunukjian proposes three similar categories and offers the same advice about spending more time with the more academic categories;

"Good commentaries tend to fall in one of three categories. The first category is what we might call an expositional, or synthesis, commentary. This type of commentary, often an inexpensive paperback, is written for the intelligent English reader. Its goal is to present the flow of thought of the biblical writer, with some attention to individual words and phrases. This kind of commentary is often a good place to start, since it will quickly give you the large units of thought and the lines of argument of the text.

The second category is what we might call an exegetical, or critical, commentary. Usually in more expensive hardback, this type of commentary is the most detailed and scholarly. It focuses on words, phrases, and intricate issues of grammar and syntax and presents long discussions of culture and background. It has the best chance of resolving the study questions you flagged earlier.

The third category is the sermonic, or homiletic, commentary, which is usually a series of sermons that were first preached to a local congregation and then put into print for a wider audience. The value of this type of commentary is that it might spark applications, titles, special phrasings, or even a creative approach to the message.

Study thoroughly in the first two categories before you read the third. If you start with sermonic commentaries, you may be tempted to prematurely conclude, "That'll preach!" without first determining whether the printed sermon accurately reflects the meaning of the biblical author. Instead, start with the commentaries that have no homiletical ax to grind. Become emotionally wedded to the concepts and flow of the biblical author, and then you'll be more properly selective in how you benefit from someone else's sermon."
- Sunukjian, Donald. *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance*, pg. 24-26.

This more academic second category (commonly called "Technical" or "Critical") represents the fruit of *scholars* engaging with the text. Often a volume on a particular book is written by a scholar who not only has an enviable knowledge of the languages and backgrounds, but who has taught that particular book of the Bible in academic settings for decades. Homiletics and Exegesis professors join in unison to urge preachers and teachers to spend most of their time with these works. *These works absolutely don't "skip verses." They don't "skip over" the hard and controversial passages.* They often if any thing go to the *opposite* extreme, only lightly treating simple passages and giving disproportionate space to controversial passages. They go on for pages tracing all the different ways a controversial text has been interpreted, interacting with the secondary literature on that passage, and contending for their own views. They may spend page after page explaining a *single word* of the text. One thinks for example of Craig Keener's 4,000+ page commentary on the book of Acts (in four volumes that are each larger than a *Strong's Concordance*). He is not skipping over hard parts, or skipping verses he doesn't like. Claiming such a thing is an insult to him and other academics everywhere.

> *"As you teach the Scriptures, you need teachers to teach you."*
> *- Haddon Robinson*
> *(Tweet This)*

Anyone familiar with this brand of commentary knows that claiming that they are "just like sermons" is preposterous. Someone holding such a sentiment has either been exposed to some very poor preaching, or has never encountered this level of commentary (focusing on detailed exegesis, background, and introductory issues), which has little in common with preaching (focusing on exposition and application) except that they both relate in some ways to the biblical text.

Claiming that your commentaries "skipped over the hard parts" or "skipped this verse" simply reveals that you are using only commentaries from the *devotional/pastoral/applicational* category, and neglecting the ones from the more technical categories. Such a statement reveals much about the level of study in which its speaker engages. Follow the advice of seasoned expositors and exegetes, and you will never make such a statement again.

Why Do You Need Commentaries?

It's not unusual at all to find a preacher who claims he needs *no* commentary. This results from a terrible lack of faith in the doctrine of the Fall, a blatant pride, or a mistaken view of how the Spirit guides us. I'll address the first and then let wiser voices address the second and third.

Isolation And The Danger Of Locking In Your Errors

Many students unwittingly operate with a mentality that is the result of modernist presuppositions. They think that the best way to keep error out of their biblical interpretation is to keep all voices but their own at bay. The motive is great - *keep error out*. But the problem is that they have assumed that error, misinterpretation, and heresy will stem only from *outside* themselves. This is to fail to reckon with the fallenness of their own mind, and the distance at which they stand from the original contexts in which the text was first given. When you shut all voices out of your head except you and the Bible, you are not engaging in "more pure" study of the Bible. You are simply canonizing your own interpretive errors. The greatest distortion of the Bible likely won't come from *outside* you, but *within* you. In walling other voices out, you lock your own errors in.

> *"When you shut all voices out of your head except you and the Bible, you are not engaging in 'more pure' study of the Bible. You are simply*

canonizing your own interpretive errors."
(Tweet This)

This is especially so because of your own religious culture, environment, and upbringing. We all inevitably face the temptation to read our own religious culture into the text of Scripture. Words, phrases, ideas, and doctrines have a particular shape in our thinking. It is frighteningly easy to read the text of Scripture and see our corner of space-time-history as the referent. We see ourselves affirmed in the Bible when God actually intended the Bible to challenge our errors. We desperately need the voice of the larger body of Christ to show us where our readings are sectarian, individualistic, or eccentric.

Blatant Pride

Charles Spurgeon in his marvelous *Lectures* to his students argued ardently that preachers needed the voices of commentators;

> "In order to be able to expound the Scriptures, and as an aid to your pulpit studies, you will need to be familiar with the commentators: a glorious army, let me tell you, whose acquaintance will be your delight and profit. Of course, you are not such wiseacres as to think or say that you can expound Scripture without assistance from the works of divines and learned men who have labored before you in the field of exposition. If you are of that opinion, pray remain so, for you are not worth the trouble of conversion, and like a little coterie who think with you, would resent the attempt as an insult to your infallibility. It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others."
> C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Commenting and Commentaries; Lectures Addressed to the Students of the Pastors' College*, Metropolitan Tabernacle., 1876, 4:11.

He went on to remind his students what happens when a preacher claims to need no commentary but that of the Spirit to themselves;

> "Need I after my previous lectures commend to you the judicious reading of commentaries! These are called "dead men's brains" by certain knowing people, who claim to give us nothing in their sermons but what they pretend the Lord reveals direct to themselves. Yet these men are by no means original, and often their supposed inspiration is but borrowed wit. They get a peep at Gill on the sly. The remarks which they give forth as the Spirit's mind are very inferior in all respects to what they affect to despise, namely, the mind of good and learned men."
> - Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 4:50.

Bill Mounce notes that one of the great values of commentaries is the humility they enjoin on us. They inherently mitigate against our internal pride;

> "If you come up with an interpretation and you can not find a single commentary that even lists it as a possibility, there is a really good chance that you are wrong. Humility is important. Even someone like Luther who disagreed with everybody, at least had historical precedent. He could go back to the early church fathers. Even he was out on a limb all by himself. It is hard. Many times you will look at your thoughts, at an illustration or application. The more you study the verse, the more you realize that they may not come out of it. That is where humility and integrity apply. You might fight it. We tell

> students that when you learn Greek and Hebrew, you will loose most of your good illustrations because you find out what the text really says. You will find out that it might not say what you thought it said. I encourage you; you have got to check yourself. If it is not listed, then you need to drop it. It is God's word, after all, and it is better to be safe than sorry."

And here especially those of us preachers who are *not* experts in the biblical languages must be humble enough to admit what we do and do not know. We are dependent on the scholarly work of others. If we aren't fluent in reading the text in the original languages, then we are already employing a translation produced by scholars, enmeshed with their own interpretive work. If we are humble enough to admit our shortcomings of skill and knowledge, then this will drive us to even more deeply scour these goldmines of information from those who have the knowledge that we lack.

Misconstruing The Spirit's Role In Interpretation

Some students have imagined that since the Spirit illumines their interpretation of Scripture, they have no need of commentators or teachers. They commonly point to 1 Cor. 2:12-14 and 1 John 2:20, 27. These texts do bring questions about the role of the Spirit in Interpretation. Dan Wallace has taken up some of those questions here. Surely we need the Spirit to interpret a divine text. But these passages should not be construed to suggest that we don't also need other teachers. After all, John and Paul were both intending to teach their readers even through the use of these texts, so one cannot take them to mean that an individual who has the Spirit needs no other guide. As Grant Osborne explained;

> "While the Spirit enables the reader to gain insight into the Word, he does not provide that information for the reader. We still must utilize our rational capacity to draw inferences from the data. ...[The] Spirit makes it possible for the reader to use every faculty to discern the Word and apply it. How does this explain the fact that equally spiritual scholars interpret the same passage quite differently? The Spirit makes it possible to overcome our preunderstanding in order to discern the Word, but he does not guarantee that we will do so. On difficult passages we must use every tool we can muster, but we still will often read a text the way our experience and theological proclivities dictate. My good friend Doug Moo...and I...have both written commentaries on Romans (I call mine "Moo light"!) and disagree on several points (e.g., Rom 7:14–25; 9–11), but neither of us say to the other, "You must be wrong because the Spirit told me this is the meaning!" Some passages are so ambiguous that more than one interpretation is possible. We must make our hermeneutical choice but remain open to further leading from the Spirit and challenge from our peers. The Spirit enables us to free our minds to the text but does not whisper to us the correct answer."
> - Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pg. 436–437.

We desperately need the Holy Spirit to interpret Scripture aright. But he does not speak to us alone. We need to hear his voice through other believers as well, both those present and past. Failing to listen to these voices is actually to claim not that the Spirit speaks to us, but to claim that he speaks *exclusively* to *me* as an individual. Spurgeon again took up the question of how this claim is less about belief in the Spirit and more about belief in the self;

> "So when I listen to the senseless twaddle of certain wise gentlemen who are always boasting that they alone are ministers of the Spirit, I am ashamed of their pretensions and of them. No, my dear friends, you may take it as a rule that the Spirit of God does not usually do for us what we can do for ourselves, and that if religious knowledge is printed in a book, and we can read it, there is no necessity for the Holy Ghost to make a fresh revelation of it to us in order to screen our laziness. Read, then the admirable commentaries which I have already introduced to you. Yet be sure you use your own minds, too, or the expounding will lack interest... If you do not think and think much, you will become slaves and mere copyists. The exercise of your own mind is most healthful to you, and by perseverance, with divine help, you may expect to get at the meaning of every understandable passage. So to rely upon your own abilities as to be unwilling to learn from others, is imbecility."
- Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 4:50–51.

> *"It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others."*
> *- Charles Spurgeon*
> *(Tweet This)*

How Do You Evaluate Commentaries?

Knowing that consulting commentaries is an important part of the exegetical process, how do you decide what is and isn't a good commentary? Fee and Stuart suggest criteria for evaluating commentaries, and their section is worth quoting at length. They give two criteria that should *not* be used, and then seven criteria that *should* be used;

> "How, then, does one evaluate a commentary? First, you do *not* evaluate on the basis of your agreement with the author. If the commentary is really a good one, and if you have done your own exegesis well, more often than not you and the better commentaries will be in agreement. But agreement is not the basic criterion.
>
> Moreover, you do *not* evaluate on the basis of its "turning you on." The point of a commentary is *exegesis*—what the text *means*—not homiletics—preaching the text in our day. You may make good use of books of this kind in trying to discover how to use a text in the present scene. As preachers, we ourselves confess to the usefulness of such books to get one's mind to thinking about the present age. *But these are not commentaries*, even if they are excellent models for how to apply the Bible in the here and now. Our concern here is not with these books but with *exegetical* commentaries alone.
>
> There are at least seven criteria you should use in judging a commentary. Not all of these are of the same kind, nor are all of them of equal importance. But all of these combine to help at the one crucial point: Does this commentary help you understand what the biblical text actually said?
>
> The first two criteria are basically points of information that you will want to know about the commentary.
>
> > 1. Is the commentary exegetical, homiletical, or a combination of both? This simply reiterates what we have just said above. Remember, what you really want in a commentary is exegesis. If it also has hermeneutical suggestions, you may find this helpful, but what you want are answers to your content questions—and content questions are primarily exegetical.
> >
> > 2. Is it based on the Greek or Hebrew text, or on an English translation? It is not bad for a commentary to be based on a translation, as long *as the author knows the text in the original language and uses this knowledge as the real source of their comments*. Note well: You can use most commentaries based on the Greek or Hebrew text. Sometimes you will have to "read around" the Greek or Hebrew, but you can usually do this with minimal loss.
>
> The next criterion is the MOST IMPORTANT, and it is the real place to bring your evaluation.
>
> > 3. When a text has more than one possible meaning, does the author discuss *all the possible meanings*, evaluate them, and give reasons for his or her own choice? For example, [earlier in the book they gave an] illustration from 1 Corinthians 7:36 for which there are at least three possible meanings. A commentary does not fully inform you unless the author discusses *all three* possibilities, gives reasons for and against each, then explains his or her own choice.

[This is why someone complaining that they "picked up five commentaries and got ten interpretations" has so missed the point. If they *didn't* get more interpretations than they have commentaries, then they are not using technical commentaries. One shouldn't complain about a critical commentary doing a shining job of fulfilling its purpose.]

The next four criteria are important if you are going to get all the help you need.

4. Does the author discuss text-critical problems?
5. Does the author discuss the historical background of the idea of the text at important places?
6. Does the author give bibliographic information so you can do further study if you wish?
7. Does the introduction section in the commentary give you enough information about the historical context to enable you to understand the occasion of the book?

The best way to get at all this is simply to pick one of the really difficult texts in a given biblical book and see how helpful a commentary is in giving information and answering questions, and especially how well it discusses all possible meanings. One can initially evaluate the worth of a commentary on 1 Corinthians, for example, by seeing how the author discusses 7:36 or 11:10. For the Pastoral Epistles, check 1 Timothy 2:15. For the book of Genesis, 2:17 would constitute a “checkpoint.” For Isaiah, it might be 7:14–17. And so on.

The final judgment, of course, is *how well the author puts his or her information together in understanding the text in its context*. Some commentaries that are mines of historical and bibliographic data are unfortunately not always adept at explaining the biblical writer’s meaning in

context."
- Fee and Stuart, *How to Read*, pg. 275–278.

The Best Commentaries Are Usually Lengthy Works On a Single Book Of The Bible

Not One-Volume Or Two-Volume Works Covering The Whole Bible

"If you are a serious Bible student, you will eventually want to secure or have access to a good commentary for each book of the Bible. There really is no completely satisfactory one-volume commentary. One-volume commentaries are usually designed...to...briefly give the historical context and then trace the meaning of the text in terms of its literary context. This indeed has its value, but much of this you can find in the *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*, for example."
- Fee and Stuart, *How to Read*, pg. 275–276.

Rather, Works On A Single Book (or a small few) By A Respected Scholar Who Has Spent A Lifetime In A Single Book

"The best commentators, after all, are those who have written upon only one book. Few men can comment eminently well upon the whole Bible; there are sure to be some weak points in colossal works; prolixity in so vast an undertaking is natural, and dulness follows at its heels—but a life devoted to one of the inspired volumes of our priceless Bible must surely yield a noble result. If I find myself able to do so, at some future time I will introduce you to a selection of the great one-book writers. For the present this much must suffice."
- Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 4:41.

The Best Commentaries Soak In And Engage With The Voices Of The Ancient Past

Not all will agree with me here. But I think the Church has lost something when it fails to listen to (or even, suppresses) the voice of the ancient Church. As I Protestant, I don't see the tradition, comments, and viewpoints of the early Church as a separate authority along-side Scripture, nor do I view them as an infallible guide to interpreting Scripture. Surely at times the ancients have their own errors and eccentricities. But I think far too often this noble Protestant wariness of elevating the tradition to divine authority has led to the extreme over-reaction of not hearing it at all, or not giving it the respect it is due. Tom Oden perceptively points out;

"One reason that critical exegesis has been so centerless in our time, prone to exaggerated radicalism, captive to historical skepticism, and tempted to inordinate speculation is that modern exegesis has not had rigorous enough partners in either ancient ecumenical or systematic theology. Meanwhile modern exegetes have been so busy disavowing the classic exegetes that they have by now almost entirely quit reading them—a premise easily tested by examining the footnotes of Bultmann, Tillich, Kümmel, Käsemann, Perrin, and Marxsen (Barth, Meyendorff, and Pannenberg being among the happy exceptions). A new era of exegesis is called for by exegetes who have carefully read Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Calvin, and not just commentaries postdating Schweitzer."
- Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology, Vol. II*, 1992, pg. 536.

Chris Hall has written a marvelous call for Protestants to recover the beauty of engaging the voices of our ancient past. He explains how valuable this can be for how it exposes our own biases;

"Learning to read the Bible through the eyes of Christians from a different time and place will readily reveal the distorting effect of our own cultural, historical, linguistic, philosophical and, yes, even theological lenses. This is not to assert that the fathers did not have their own warped perspectives and blind spots. It is to argue, however, that we will not arrive at perspective and clarity regarding our own strengths and weaknesses if we refuse to look beyond our own theological and hermeneutical noses. God has been active throughout the church's history and we rob ourselves of the Holy Spirit's gifts if we refuse to budge beyond the comfort zone of our own ideas."
- Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, pg. 35.

"The best commentaries, and those of enduring value, will I suspect usually turn out to be those that have listened closely to the Ancient Voices."
(Tweet This)

Take the classic commentary on Romans in the *ICC* set by Cranfield. It is well known as one of the best commentaries on Romans ever penned. Surely much of this is due to his erudite handling of the syntax and grammar of the book, its logical structure, its historical background, and the pauline theology that stands behind it all. Yet one finds well over a hundred references to the two voices of Chrysostom and Augustine in his first volume alone. He has not arrived at his genius by himself; he has swam deep in the ancient voices. And we may rightly question whether anyone would give his work enduring value today if not for how closely he was in touch with the minds of those and other giants. When considering a commentary, the discerning reader can learn much by scanning the abbreviations or bibliography to know what relation he has to the early church and its figures.

The Best Commentaries Are Purchased And Used Selectively

Rob Plummer suggests careful and calculated purchases;

> "Christians are advised to build their libraries slowly and thoughtfully. Every time you begin the detailed study of a new book in the Bible, you should consult one of two guidebooks to determine which individual commentaries to purchase: Tremper Longman's *Old Testament Commentary Survey* or D. A. Carson's *New Testament Commentary Survey*. [I would add this website as a free alternative, despite its limitations, and this work as superior to Carson's and Longman's.] These texts are filled with excellent advice and are also worth skimming in their entirety for their more general suggestions on acquiring and using commentaries."
> - Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, pg. 120–122.

The Best Commentaries Are *Expensive*

There is simply no way around it - *good commentaries cost money*. There is a wealth of public domain material available free out there. But the best works still cost good money. This is one more reason why it's typically wisest not to try to buy a huge library at once, but to purchase several of the best single volumes on whatever book you happen to be studying at the moment.

"Yes, encyclopedias, commentaries and other reference materials are expensive. But so is everything we do. The question is about priorities: what is important enough for our time and money? I want to encourage you to get and use the tools that enable us to bridge the gap back to Bible times and authorial intention."
- Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pg. 25.

"A library is indispensable for anyone doing serious Bible study. A collection of basic study books and some good commentaries will cost about as much as a year's tuition at many colleges or seminaries, but if selected with care, their value will last a lifetime."
- Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pg. 38–39.

"A wise preacher will budget money to buy these books. Just as the mechanic has to invest in the latest tools to diagnose complex engines, so you must have the best and latest books to keep up with advances in biblical knowledge and to stimulate your mind."
- Sunukjian, *Invitation*, Pg. 24-26.

"I have turned my entire attention to Greek. The first thing I shall do, as soon as the money arrives, is to buy some Greek authors; after that, I shall buy clothes."
- Erasmus of Rotterdam, CWE 1

How To Abuse Good Commentaries

Not Using The Best Ones

Some works becomes classic that should always be consulted and interacted with, and I've argued above that ancient works should always be engaged. With those caveats in mind, as a general rule the best commentaries are those of recent decades;

> "Good commentaries generally are found among those produced in the last few decades. Older works, perhaps in the public domain and therefore inexpensively available, have limited value. Though perhaps written by godly men or women, many are merely random devotional observations without a grasp of the author's true meaning or flow of thought. Others, though written by competent scholars, are dated and lack the benefit of recent cultural, archeological, and grammatical studies. We're all indebted to scholars who have spent their lives understanding the biblical languages and cultures. As we read and compare their insights, the biblical author's flow of thought begins to take definite shape, and our own understanding of the passage crystallizes further."
> - Sunukjian, *Invitation,* pg. 24-26.

Using Them Before Doing Your Own Exegesis

Another abuse is the use of them to short-circuit the exegetical process. Far too many students (and scholars) jump immediately to a commentary before having engaged the biblical text themselves. Sometimes they even jump to a commentary before having even read the Biblical text. Such students cheat themselves and their listeners. But not always for the reasons some assume. I would suggest two reasons you should turn to commentaries only after doing your own work;

First, because failing to do so robs you of the sanctifying work of being arrested by the Voice of the Spirit. It's a common thought that you shouldn't turn to commentaries first because you don't want to be "tainted with the words of man" or "misguided by man's interpretations." Such a notion, as we noted above, surely has not taken into account the distance at which you stand from the original readers, or the depth of the fallenness in your own mind. The commentators are almost surely *better* readers of the text than you are. Nowhere do you face greater likelihood for heresy than when it's just you and your Bible. Rather, the danger of approaching a commentary first is that you are trying to steal someone else's mastery of the text without letting the text master you. Preaching is God's plan. The *Great Commission* could have read, "Go ye therefore and make copies of the Bible for each individual to read for themselves in isolation." But that's not the plan. God didn't just send a word, he sent (and sends) us *with* a word. His plan was always for prophets and preachers and teachers and others in the body to be first mastered by the Voice of the Spirit in a text, and then, as they share that text through their own encounter with it, to work through that personal contact to freshly encounter all who hear the word preached.

> "...the truth must be applied to the personality and experience of the preacher. This places God's dealing with the preacher at the center of the process. As much as we might wish it otherwise, we cannot be separated from the message....As we study our Bible, the Holy Spirit studies us. As we prepare expository sermons, God prepares us...William Barclay diagnosed the cause of spiritual

> malnutrition in a minister's life when he pointed out that if our minds grow slack and lazy and flabby, the Holy Spirit cannot speak to us. 'True preaching comes when the loving heart and the disciplined mind are laid at the disposal of the Holy Spirit.' Ultimately God is more interested in developing messengers than messages, and because the Holy Spirit confronts us primarily through the Bible, we must learn to listen to God before speaking for God."
> - Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pg. 8.

Having done your own work with the text first puts you in close proximity to the work of the Spirit. And it gives you confidence, when you then come to a commentary and find your interpretation confirmed, that you have handled the text well yourself instead of simply relying on others.

> "Do not avoid commentaries; just be sure you do not read them through as the first order of business. If you do, you will always be preaching from someone else's work on the text, however good that may be, and never have confidence that the text is your own because you have come to grips with it."
> - Fee, Gordon D. *New Testament Exegesis*, Kindle Locations 3004-3013.

But a *second* reason to avoid short-circuiting the exegetical process by turning to commentaries first is that it also short-changes the listener or reader. When a student fails to engage the text freshly, he only reproduces work already done. He offers no original thought; no fresh engagement with the text. In academic work, this leads to producing an exegetical paper or a commentary that is little more than a rehash of older ideas. One can sadly peruse the entirely of some works and not find a single fresh thought. In sermon or lesson prep, this robs the hearers of a message that is tailored to their own situation and context. Sermons built on such short-circuited exegesis come across lifeless, and irrelevant. Bryan Chapell warns us wisely;

> "The expertise that commentaries bring to bear on a particular passage is at one moment their greatest benefit and their greatest danger. The mixed blessing is evident in the two types of pastors who will never make great preachers: The first will not listen to what others say; the other will say only what others say. A preacher who refuses to pay attention to what gifted scholars have discovered mistakes personal arrogance for erudition. God does not give all his insights to any one person. At the same time, a preacher who says only what a commentator concludes is trying to preach by proxy.
>
> You must think through what Scripture says in order to be able to expound adequately and apply meaningfully what commentators say. No commentator has room to write down all the implications, insights, and truths given in a text. No distant educator or long-dead scholar knows your situation or your congregation's concerns. It is not wise habitually to run to commentaries as the first step of sermon preparation, lest your thoughts start running in a groove carved by one not in touch with what you need to address.
>
> Commentaries are better used as a check than as a guide. Develop your exposition and tentative outline based on work with the basic tools and then consult commentaries to flesh out, refine, and, if necessary, revise your ideas. Try not to preach a dead or a distant person's sermon. Spurgeon advised, "The closet [i.e., the place of personal meditation] is the best study. The commentators are good instructors but the author himself is far better."24 God called you to this situation. He wanted no one other than you to prepare this message for this moment....Let the Holy Spirit work in your heart and mind to develop a message a commentator would approve, not design. Concern for precision should not so overwhelm you as to deny you or your listeners the insights God will grant you in his Word."
> - Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed., 2005, pg. 74–75.

Using Them For Their Conclusions Instead Of Their Data

A related abuse is turning to commentaries only for their *conclusions* about the meaning of the passage, rather than the data they provide on the passage. In a sermon a preacher typically shares only as much of the exegesis as is necessary to support the application. But a technical commentary is a different beast altogether. It's not a minimalist methodology. Quite the opposite, the goal is often to present the most *exhaustive* treatment possible. If the only goal of a technical commentary was to share what they thought the text ultimately meant, the small section labeled "summary" or "overview" would be all they wrote. Yet this is typically one of the *smallest* sections of the work. Reading a technical commentary isn't just about the destination you reach; it's about an author taking you by the hand and walking the journey with you. The process is more important than its conclusion, because it forces you into the details of the text. seeking the conclusion first causes you to regurgitate the author's opinion. The interpretation is theirs, not yours. Grant Osborne cautions us to first study the text ourselves, and;

> "Then we use the tools (lexicons, commentaries, word study volumes and the like) to study the passage in depth, asking grammatical, semantic and syntactical questions as they arise in the text. In using the tools, the most valuable thing is not the conclusions that the authors make but the evidence they utilize. As R. T. France says, “no serious exegete should be content merely to follow where some revered commentary or version leads. He should satisfy himself whether the job has been properly done”... This is the mistake of many term papers, which become little more than glorified lists of other peoples’ opinions. When I study a text, I want to consider the material discovered by other scholars but come to my own opinion as to the original meaning of the text. The conclusions of the commentaries are not as important as the data and information they contain. Only after assembling the data and considering the options on the basis of the immediate context (which best fits the passage itself) do I make up my mind. Then it becomes *my* interpretation."
> - Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, pg. 130–131.

A Personal Testimony

I have shared elsewhere that God planted a passion to study the text of Scripture in my heart from an early age. The pages of my Bible soon became the most regular place where I encountered the Risen Christ again and again. But it took some time for my stubborn, arrogant, and ignorant heart to learn the basics of good exegesis. Somewhere along the way, I came across Fee's *How to Read The Bible*, and he taught me that I didn't know what I was doing. I could finally admit this, but needed help to go from there. I followed his recommendations to William Mounce's critical commentary on the Pastoral Epistles in the WBC series. Our Bible classes in the Bible College I was attending at the time used mostly J. Vernon McGee's works for each class. Or J.R. Rice, or in some cases John Phillips. All of these are in that fourth, (and *lowest*), category of commentary which Robinson mentions (which struck me later as incongruous, since we wisely used Robinson as a *Homiletics* text). That was the level of engagement with the text I and my classmates were being given, as those who were to lead the future Church. That's not to speak against the good and godly men teaching. They simply hadn't been taught better themselves.

Then I met the WBC.

To say I was floored, and deeply humbled, is putting it mildly. The arrogance was knocked out of me as I came to realize just how *little* I knew the biblical text, and how *shallow* my engagement with the text had been up to that point. Despite all my pretensions to be a "preacher" of the text, I had to sit down at the feet of a scholar and learn that I was barely a student. Over the course of a few years, I worked my way through Mounce's almost 800 page exegesis of Paul's three little letters. I honed my exegetical skills as I watched over his shoulder while he handled the text of Scripture with such precision, detail, respect, and prowess.

The experience changed my life.

Never had I been in closer contact with the biblical text. I was immediately hooked on critical commentaries, and began to seek them out and snatch them up like candy. They became a staple of my exegetical diet from that point on. I made most of the errors I've warned about above along the way.

I have on a number of occasions introduced other classmates to the wealth of biblical knowledge contained in them. I've often bought a copy of a good critical commentary for those who love to teach the Bible but are still reading Rice or McGee. In many cases, they have shared a similar story with me of their world being changed. Let it be clear - that's not the power of a particular author, or a particular theological viewpoint.

It is rather *the power of the Word itself.* The overwhelming power of the Voice of the Spirit in the text is heard more clearly and more forcefully the more deeply we engage with the biblical text. And if you have not yet passed through the doorway into the biblical text that is good technical commentary, I invite you into the journey.

Deeper engagement with the Bible might just change your life.

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