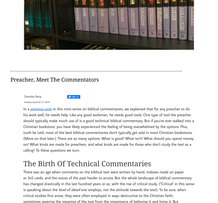

Preacher, Meet The Commentaries

Timothy Paul
Tuesday, January 27, 2015

Tweet

In a previous post, in this series on biblical commentaries, we explained that the any preacher to do his work and his ministry help to the people needs to have good commentaries. The word of God the preacher should typically made much use of a good technical biblical commentary. But if you've ever walked into a Christian bookstore, you have likely experienced the feeling of being overwhelmed by the options. Thus, would be rude, most of the best biblical commentaries don't typically get sold in most Christian bookstores. Thus, in this post, I'm going to give a few suggestions for a good set that will cover almost all your needs and what kinds you make the purchase, and what kinds are made for those who don't study the text on a calling? So these questions on turn.

The Birth Of Technical Commentaries

There was an age when commentaries on the Bible were written by learned scholars made on paper on 3x5 cards, and the voices of the past harder to access. But the whole landscape of biblical commentary has changed dramatically. Biblical commentary has been in us, as the term of art historians call it, "Critical" in the sense is speaking about the level of detail you engage, not the attitude towards the text). To be sure, when we speak of "Critical" commentaries, we don't mean commentaries that are critical of the Bible, but commentaries that are critical in the sense that they have the commitment of looking at the text in fact. Inasmuch as they were advancing a deeper engagement with the text of Scripture, or a clearer exegesis of the text, those who are called commentaries of a critical nature. This is because they dug more deeply into the human aspects of the biblical text than most students had before.

The two-fold nature of the Bible - human and divine - must ever be kept together. To emphasize one side to the exclusion of the other is to make a false and fatal cleavage. The Bible is a human book, and must be treated as other the Bible, as a human book, and thus don't do deep divine authority that the fundamentalist made the opposite error in overreaction, choosing to see the Bible as only a divine book, and to ignore the deep human aspects and authorship and illustration in space-time history. The historic Christian view must always keep both together. G. E. Ladd rightly concludes:

"We must clearly recognize that the "technical" commentary is not the discipline into which preachers must enter. The technical commentary is a tool for the use of the preacher, just as the Bible as the Word of God is the material out of which the sermon is formed. The Bible must be mined for the ore which it bears. 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 point that a better knowledge of it is the sum and substance of it all."

- George Eldon Ladd, The New Testament and Criticism, 1967, pp. 5

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

So the church's theme, it sometimes happened that skeptics were reading the Bible more closely than pastors and others in the church, especially in terms of historical and introductory questions.

Let this tweet 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 the chose to give it through human men in history, should ever be on the pastor's mind. The pastor is the chief knowledge of it, and the deepest engagement with it in their studies than we have in ours.

Today we have a wealth of technical resources on every conceivable topic. One of the greatest advances in Bible study in the last several hundred years has been the advance of the critical commentary. This tract has taken the historical side of it to mean that the language spoken of in new tools. Consider examples:

"We are living in the greatest explosion of knowledge in all of history. Anyone who is computer literate that is biblical and theological tools at have actually doubled or even tripled our knowledge base in the last couple of decades. Never have so many commentaries, dictionaries, monographs and articles been produced in a generation."

- Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, 3rd ed., 2006, pp. 17-18

It ought to be the case that deeper engagement with the text - from a faith stance - leads to deeper understanding of the nature and ministry of the Spirit, and deeper Christ-likeness as a result. This is what the arrival of technical commentary, if stewarded appropriately, should result in.

Categories Of Commentary

Hardcopy-based technical-grade biblical-critical 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 language).*
2. *Expositional (English-friendly).*
3. *Devotional/Homiletical (focusing on the application of the text, to the devotional impact of it).*
4. *Pastoral (general).*

He offered advice to the preacher in using each category:

You you teach the Scriptures, you need teachers to teach you. Through commentaries, scholars serve the church. They offer a wealth of information about the original languages, and the meaning of words, and the argument of a writer. As a general rule, it is wiser and cheaper to use reference sources on individual Bible books from several different series. It is better to have several commentaries on Romans than one set of commentaries on the whole Bible. Different authors will differ on many points, and they will help you 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 language and on the English text. Several bibliographies exist to guide you in your selection of things.

For your initial study you will be helped by consulting commentaries based on the original language (emphasis mine). Volumes in the International Critical Commentary series in the West Biblical Commentary series are examples of this. Some of the volumes in the Word Biblical Commentary series are examples of this. Some of the volumes in the Anchor Bible Commentary series are examples of this. Some of the volumes in the New International Commentary series are examples of this.

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. Interlinkers's Zondervan Pocket Commentary series, Zondervan's Expositor's Bible Commentary series, Baker's commentary series would be typical of this group.

You will find pastoral 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 tend to be short and inexpensive, but sometimes not as helpful in terms of the critical or expositional commentaries.

There are many books and series of sermons preached by well-known preachers. Although these may give you some ideas of how to approach a apply your sermon, they should not be used early in your preparation. They 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, pp. 37-38.

Dave Sunderjan, another widely respected homiletics professor and author, proposes three similar categories, but more specific advice about spending more time with the more academic categories.

"Good commentaries tend to fall in one of three categories: technical, exegetical, and pastoral. Use all an exegetical or pastoral 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 helpful in the sermon preparation. It will quickly give you the big picture of thought and the lines of argument of the text.

The second category is what we might call an exegetical or critical commentary. Unlike the more expensive hardbacks, this type of commentary is not as helpful in the sermon. Its focus is on word studies, and minute details of grammar and syntax and presents long discussions of critical issues. Although it has the best chance of resolving the study questions you flagged earlier.

The third category is the sermons, 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 sermon.

Study thoroughly in the first two categories before you read the third (emphasis mine). If you start with sermons commentaries, you may be tempted to be prematurely conclude. "That'll preach" without first determining whether the printed sermon accurately reflects the meaning of the biblical author. Instead, use the sermons commentaries that have been summarized as to give Christ-centered, redemptive, wedded to the concepts and flow of the biblical author, and then you'll be more properly selective in how you benefit from homiletic commentaries."

- Sunderjan, Dwight. Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance, pp. 24-26.

This paper website: NewCommentaryGuide describes commentaries into four similar categories based on the Sunderjan model, but with a slightly different flavor. Technical (based on the original language) is the first between these distinctives, and so receive multiple tags. Similar distinctives have been proposed by others. Have you used each category in how important they strategically the text with the higher categories.

Some Examples of Each Category

Technical/Critical Commentaries

Some examples of commentaries in the technical category (Bibliocentric IPD are volumes in the West Biblical Commentary series, the Anchor Bible Commentary series, the Word Biblical Commentary series, the International Critical Commentary set contains many classic works. Some volumes are quite dated, though the set is slowly being updated. The Hermeneia series represents extremely technical treatments primarily by scholars, sometimes translating into English works originally written in German. The volumes in the Anchor Bible Commentary set are likewise erudite, and are from broadly diverse traditions. Volumes in the New International Greek Aquarmint Commentary are thorough and devoted exegesis from evangelical scholars. Most use friendly, accessible, and giving more attention to discourse analysis is the more up-to-date series. The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series is a fairly recent, exceptional recent commentary set. NT books have been released, and the volumes that complete Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series. The editors wisely translate and transliterate all the Greek and any language other than English, aiming to be extremely readable. Many of these volumes are my personal favorites.

Volumes in each of these series represent 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 notable knowledge of the original languages and backgrounds, but who has taught that particular book of the Bible in academic settings for decades. All of these volumes will require at least some knowledge of the original languages, but don't assume that one must be an original language expert to read them and benefit from their deep exegesis. Even a beginner's understanding of the language can open the door to benefiting from these commentaries. The NIV Bible Commentary series, which is a fairly recent series, is a little more lacking in technical terms. Sometimes you will have to "read" the Greek or Hebrew in the English. This series is a little with minimal fact (Pen and Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Fourth Edition, 2014, 227).

Expositional Commentaries

Examples of volumes in Bibliocentric IPD category, sometimes called expositional commentaries, can prove extremely helpful to the preacher, especially the one who struggles with the languages, and may find the technical volumes difficult to use. Some of the volumes in the Pillar New Testament Commentary series are generally helpful treatments of the text at an expositional level. The Pillar New Testament Commentaries are excellent detailed treatments in readable style. More readable still, and accessible to the average reader with no real exegetical training, are the excellent volumes in the Tyndale New Testament and Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series. These are inexpensive paperbacks that can be easily read, yet provide a helpful guide through each biblical book. Slightly more condensed (but published in a further 10 volume hardback set) is the Baker Exegetical Bible Commentary, which updates the beloved EBC set.

The New American Commentary on the OT and NT represent almost exclusively Baptist contributors, and are generally helpful treatments of the text at an expositional level. The New Testament Commentaries are excellent detailed treatments in readable style More readable still, and accessible to the average reader with no real exegetical training, are the excellent volumes in the Tyndale New Testament and Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series. These are inexpensive paperbacks that can be easily read, yet provide a helpful guide through each biblical book. Slightly more condensed (but published in a further 10 volume hardback set) is the Baker Exegetical Bible Commentary, which updates the beloved EBC set.

Application or Special Focus Commentaries

Some volumes, Bibliocentric IPD category, focus specifically on application, devotional insight, or have other specific focuses beyond straightforward exegesis of the text. Expository commentary, information commentary, eschatological commentary, theological commentary, biblical theology, etc.) The volumes in the Tyndale Biblical Commentary Series are technical treatments of the text (which might put them in the previous category) but with a specific focus on theological structures and sociological/cultural contexts behind the biblical books. The NIV Application Commentaries on the OT and NT for another example give helpful ideas for how to apply the text. The Preaching the Bible Series is a series of sermons and various ways the text can be brought into the modern world and applied with integrity and faithfulness.

Printed Sermons and Sermonic Commentaries

Volumes in the IV Category Bibliocentric (pray, sometimes called sermonic, or homiletical commentaries, are basically sermons put into print. These have a very shallow level of engagement with the text, going no deeper than a sermon might. They can have their value, but preachers should read these works last (if at all) and with a critical eye. Sometimes these volumes are helpful in sermon preparation, especially when they do it first, were the first of preaching the text. The volumes by John MacArthur are generally sermons complete with extensive alliteration for the preacher who uses outline. The volumes by J. Vernon McGee are simply his radio sermons from the "through The Bible" broadcast are put into print. The MacArthur Commentaries are the sermons of John MacArthur, adjusted slightly for print. Because MacArthur generally gives more detailed treatment in his sermons than many preachers do, these volumes have sometimes been invaluable for expositional commentaries.

D. A. Carson, in his helpful survey of NT commentaries (which we will look at more next time) focuses almost similarly to the above academic commentaries, since these are the ones preachers need to spend most of their time with. Many McGee or Rice, for example, are not even on his radar, because they are not helpful for commentaries. Only a few of John Phillips's works are mentioned (as a popular level alternative) and he has place the dates reversed on one of his commentaries by John MacArthur. He explains that the Pillar Commentaries are "a mixture of technical, homiletical, Scriptural, and practical" and the Warren Wiersbe "Bit" series, which is his sermon work put into print, and also not even mentioned by Carson in his treatment.

There is nothing wrong with using such popular-level commentaries, but they are not what we should be aware that are they consult such a work by the consulting the lowest category of commentary in terms of its depth and engagement with the text. As Pen and Stuart note, "You may make good use of books of this kind in trying to discover how to use a text in the preaching of your ministry, for example, but you should not let them do your work for you and is trend to thinking about the present age. But these are not commentaries, even if they are excellent sermons. Use them with care, and don't let them do your work for you." Sermonic commentaries are not the same thing as technical commentaries (and Pen and Stuart have the distinction in their book, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Fourth Edition, 2014). Homiletics and Exegesis professors join in unison to urge preachers and teachers to spend their time with work in the technical categories.

Some Signs You Haven't Yet Met The Best Works

Maybe you've found a little teacher or preacher say something like, "Well, our Bible teac this morning is a great man." When commentaries are of the following:

- "I looked at all the commentaries on the passage, and they all dropped this verse. Didn't want to get in trouble I guess."
- "I looked at an word-a's commentaries on this passage for help, and they don't even mention it."
- "I looked at the commentaries on this passage, and they failed to agree. 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 commentaries and just a different opinion."
- "All commentaries are really just sermons put into print. Someone else giving so man's version of God's word."

Or maybe you've said such a thing yourself. I have heard each of these statements, and I've used them myself. Such statements, if they come from a pulpit or teacher, should trouble you. Someone making such a statement may be revealing their ignorance or laziness. When such statements come from a pulpit, they betray a serious dearth of deep biblical study. Because wishy-washy statements might be true of other commentaries, but technical commentaries in the lower category are dedicated to deeper study. Where they are in the top rank of critical biblical commentaries. Any preacher or teacher saying these things simply reveals that they haven't engaged with critical commentaries.

These works absolutely don't "skip verses." They don't "skip over" the hard and controversial passages. They offer if any thing, go to the opposite extreme, giving disproportionate space to controversial passages. Sometimes, they don't even mention the passage you are preaching because it doesn't connect in any way with the secondary literature on that passage, and commenting for their own sake. They spend page after page explaining a single word of the text. One thinks for example of Craig Blomm's 400+ page commentary on the book of Acts for his volume that we will cover later. Blomm's Craig's Commentary He is not skipping over hard parts, or skipping verses he doesn't like. Saying such a thing is an insult to him and other academic exegetes.

Further, anyone familiar with this level of commentary knows that claiming that they are "just the sermons only in print" is simply preposterous. That would be true only of the fourth level of commentary, the sermonic or homiletical commentary. Even the pastoral level commentaries are not sermons. Pastoral commentaries are only preaching in that just cover exceptional this level of commentary, and focus on issues of devotional exegesis, background, and introductory issues), which tend little to commentary with preaching (with its focus on exposition and application) except that they both relate in some way to the biblical text.

Follow the advice of seasoned expositors and exegetes, and you will never make such statements again. Listen to our commentaries in the technical/exegetical category. Not as well some, only the matter of these statements. Use the commentaries in the technical/critical category, and you will never make such statements. Rather you will be able to say what they think it means. This isn't wishy-washy, this is them doing their job, and doing it well.

God's Word is worthy of our hard work. It is worthy of us rolling our sleeves up, pulling out that massive commentary with more pages than we can count, and digging into the inspired text like never before. God's people are worth us spending more money than we might on pop-level commentaries, even when it hurts our wallet. They are worth us taking the time to read more pages than we like, more than are easy for us, until our eyes strain and our brains hurt. God is worth us stretching ourselves. Stretching our minds. Growing. Going deeper. Tackling more. Wrestling when we have to. Feeling overwhelmed at times. The Spirit who inspired the text is worth the difficulty of us diving so deep that we feel we can't breathe, so we can come up again with the treasure of his Voice to share with his people. Don't be content to always swim in the shallows. Dive into the deep.

Knowing that consulting commentaries is an important part of the exegetical process for the preacher, and knowing that commentaries fall into several basic categories, how do you decide what is and isn't a good one? How do you evaluate a commentary? What marks do you look for?

To these questions we turn in our next post, part III of this series.

Blog posts in this series;

Part I - Preacher, You Need Good Commentaries
Part II - What Kinds Of Commentaries?
Part III - Marks Of A Great Commentary
Part IV - Using And Abusing Commentaries

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