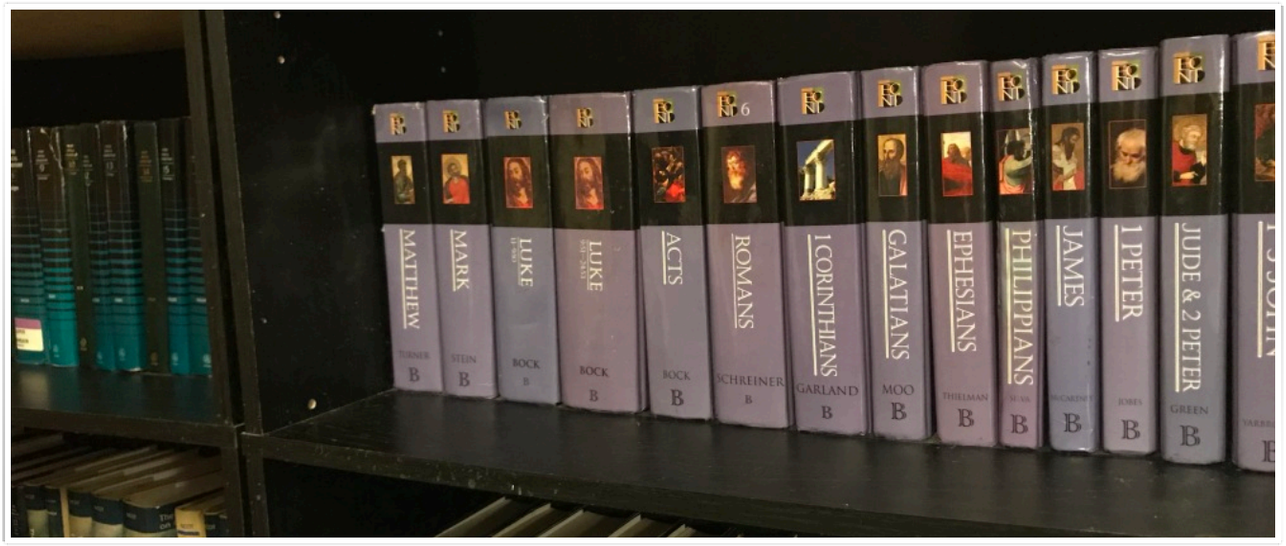

Preacher, You Need Good Commentaries

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The preacher or teacher gifted by the Spirit and recognized by the Body of Christ has a responsibility to feed the flock of God the word of God (see Acts 20:28; II Tim. 4:1-2; I Pet. 5:1-4; *etc.*). Surely handling the Bible is one of the greatest of privileges, and greatest of responsibilities. Much work goes into careful and accurate Bible study. It's a long and arduous labor of love. The object of our study is always the biblical text itself (or better, we are the objects of its transforming work upon us). Nothing should ever replace the focus on Scripture as God's authoritative word. The biblical text must be that in which, "we live and move and have our being." But in the course of studying the Bible, preachers must make use of Bible study tools. As an aircraft mechanic, I can testify that using inferior tools (or succumbing to the temptation to misuse tools) can result in disaster instead of beautiful work. And it is no different in Bible study.

Some of the most important tools preachers should make use of are good biblical commentaries. If the preacher neglects good technical commentaries, some of the flock will invariably be left hungry. Especially those who sit under your preaching precisely because they want a "meatier" dose of Bible than they could have come up with on their own. Feed them only your own shallow handling of the text, or what you have found from material on the internet, and they may starve. God's flock deserves more. They have come to be fed. You have been charged by the Spirit to feed them. Shame on the shepherd who doesn't fulfill his calling to its fullest.

Why Preachers Need Commentaries

While all would acknowledge the preacher's duty to study the word, it's not unusual to find a preacher who claims he needs no commentary on the Bible to do this work. "I just need my Bible and the Holy Spirit" some have claimed firmly. But such a claim is in fact deeply misguided. I suspect this claim results from a weak view of the doctrine of the Fall, a blatant pride of heart, or a mistaken view of how the Spirit guides us.

The Fall Of Adam And Your Broken Mind

Many students unwittingly operate with a mentality that is the result of modernist presuppositions. Beginning with an extreme optimism about their ability to read the text perfectly, they think that the best way to keep error out of their 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 even 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 distortions of the Bible likely won't come from *outside* you, but *within* you. In walling other voices out, you only lock your own errors in.

The truth is that the biblical doctrine of the Fall teaches us that your own mind and heart are broken. You are a child of Adam. You don't need a heretic to come knocking on your door to lead you astray from the truth of God's revelation; that heretic already lives inside of you. What you really need are godly voices in the Body of Christ, who are also seeking the direction of the Spirit, and who can call out that heresy when it emerges in your own interpretations of the Bible. When you assume that other voices mislead you and that your interpretation will be perfect if you can just keep them out, you reveal that you have a weak view of the Fall, and of the effects it has had upon you.

> "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."
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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 can find ourselves and our practices affirmed in the Bible when God actually intended the Bible to challenge our errors and reshape our practice. We desperately need the voice of the larger Body of Christ to show us where our readings are sectarian, individualistic, or eccentric.

A Blatant Pride Of Heart

But if a weak view of the Fall is one error that can lead a preacher to think he needs no commentary, a second error is a preacher's blatant pride in his own exegetical or theological abilities. Charles Spurgeon in his marvelous *Lectures* to his students argued ardently that preachers need 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;* 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 put a check on our eccentric interpretations, and force us to come to a humility of heart. When we come up with an interpretation that not a single commentator lists, there's a good chance we are wrong. We must be more humble than that. He goes on to point out that even someone like Luther, who seemed to take on the whole world, couldn't have done so without historical precedent. We have to humbly submit our thoughts to the voices of those before us. Sometimes this hurts;

"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 [your interpretation of the text] is not listed [in the commentaries], then you need to drop it. It is God's word, after all, and it is better to be safe than sorry."
- Bill Mounce (see his video lecture here)

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 utterly and undeniably dependent on the scholarly work of others, however much you may not like that. 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 decisions. 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. The preachers who most need biblical commentaries that engage with the biblical text in the original languages as a check on their thoughts are those who themselves most struggle with the original languages. Yet sadly, these are often precisely the preachers who claim most boldly that they need no outside help.

A Misconstrual Of The Role Of The Spirit

But a weak view of the Fall and a proud heart are not the only causes of the mistaken notion that a preacher doesn't need commentaries. Such a claim also sometimes comes from a misunderstanding of the work of the Spirit. 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 complex questions about the role of the Spirit in Interpretation. Dan Wallace has taken up some of those questions here. He explains;

> "On a popular level, there has always been a large misunderstanding about the Spirit's role. Many Christians believe that if they simply pray, the Holy Spirit will *give* them the proper interpretation. Others are not so concerned about the interpretation of the text; rather, they are happy to see an idiosyncratic meaning of the text ("What this verse means *to me*. . ."). All of this is the doctrine of the priesthood of the believers run amok. Although each of us is responsible before God for understanding and applying the message of the Bible, this in no way means that a pooling of ignorance or a merely pietistic approach to Scripture meets the divine mandate."

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 human teachers, to whom the Spirit speaks as much as to us. 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... 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, those both present and past. Failing to listen to these voices is actually to claim, not that the Spirit speaks to us, but that he speaks exclusively to *me* as an *individual*. Spurgeon again took up the question of how this claim is really 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.

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should think so little of what he has revealed to others."
- Charles Spurgeon
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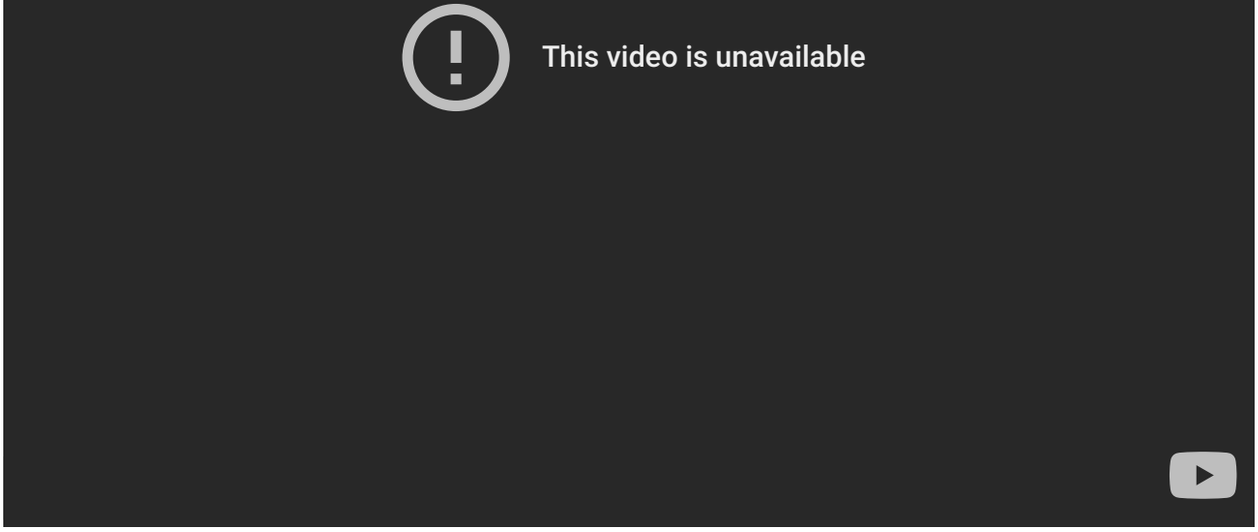

A Cup Of Coffee With An Expert

Let me draw a similar analogy to the one Tim Kimberly uses in the video above. Let's say you are starting a sermon series on I and II Timothy. You want to handle the text well. But you don't really need help, do you? You have the Bible and the Holy Spirit. That is enough. Then, you get a phone call. On the phone is a man who has faithfully pastored a conservative Baptist Church for years. He's heard that you are about to preach through I and II Timothy. He's so excited for you, and tells you how the Spirit worked in his own local church while they preached through those books. He offers to sit down and get a cup of coffee with you, to answer questions you might have about the text, and offer his guidance. "Why would that help me?" you ask. He explains that he actually has taught NT Greek for decades, and has written a standard first year Greek Grammar. Wouldn't you want someone with that kind of knowledge of the original language to help?

You're still not convinced. So he explains that not only has he worked with the language of the NT at great length, he has in fact spent decades of his life studying and teaching the Greek text of I and II Timothy in particular. He's made it a special focus of his studies and his academic career. He's read all the relevant primary literature, and the important secondary literature. He's already aware of the complex questions that you are going to encounter, even those that haven't occurred to you yet. He has been thinking carefully about them for years. He knows the passages that are extremely controversial, and has studied all the best voices from all sides of each debate. In fact, it turns out some of the most important studies of I and II Timothy can only be read in German. But that's Ok. He's learned German and read those works too, and can summarize them for you so you don't have to spend years of your life on such a task. Plus, he knows what it's like to try to preach these books in a local church context. He gets it.

What preacher in his right mind would turn down that cup of coffee?

Yet this is no hypothetical. That man is William Mounce. He would be too humble to say any of the above about himself, but he has put the best of his decades of experience with these letters into his almost 800-page commentary on the Greek text of the Pastoral Epistles in the *Word Biblical Commentary* set (snag it on Kindle for a few more days at just 1/5 of its normal price). While he may never actually call you on the phone, if you purchase that volume, his voice can set there on your desk right beside you. At your leisure, he can offer guidance in all the places where you are not an expert, but he is.

And you don't even have to pay for his cup of coffee. :)

This is what good technical commentaries offer to you. Voices of wisdom and experience, from experts who have spent a lifetime studying the original language text of a book of the Bible, and all its relevant backgrounds and languages, into which you are just starting to dig. Have the humility to listen to their voices. Stay with us for our next posts in this series, as we dig into the world of technical biblical commentaries.

- Next time we will examine the types or categories of biblical commentaries that are out there (part II of this series).
- Then we will take up what to look for in a good technical biblical commentary, and where to find them (part III).
- Finally we will take up the proper use of technical biblical commentaries, and warn about their abuse (part IV).

How I Encountered Jesus In A Technical Commentary

But first, let me share some of my own story. 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 Gordon Fee's, "How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth." It was a Godsend. Fee and Stuart taught me that I didn't know what I was doing. I could finally admit this. But I needed help to go from there. I followed their recommendations to William Mounce's critical commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, which I mentioned above. Our Bible classes in the Bible College I was attending at the time used mostly J. Vernon McGee's works for each class. Or John R. Rice, or in some cases, John Phillips. As we will see in later posts, all of these are in the fourth, (and lowest), category of biblical commentary, (in terms of the depth of their engagement with the biblical text). That is sadly the level of engagement with the text that some are given, even as those who are to lead the future church.

Then I met the *Word Biblical Commentary*.

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 humbly 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. Like a child learning by watching over his dads shoulder, I honed my exegetical skills by looking on 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. And never had I heard the voice of the Spirit more powerfully in it. 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 plenty of errors (I'll share some in later posts). But I grew closer to the text. And I grew closer to Jesus as a result. And those who heard me preach came closer to the text, because I had invited into my life the voices of scholars who had lived in that text for decades. The work of scholarship came to inform the preacher, which passed on benefits to the hearer, all under the guidance of the Spirit.

> "As you teach the Scriptures, you need teachers to teach you. Through commentaries, scholars serve the church."
> - Haddon Robinson

I have on a number of occasions introduced others to the wealth of biblical knowledge contained in critical commentaries. 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 or something similar. In some cases, they have shared a similar story with me of their world being changed, and their walk with God deeply enriched. Let it be clear - that's not the power of a particular author, or a particular theological viewpoint. It's not the power of a commentary.

It is rather the power of the Spirit working through 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 and humbly 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 life-changing journey.

This deeper engagement with the Bible might just change your life.

And your hearers will be eternally grateful to have gone deeper into the text and deeper in their walk with God through a preacher who humbled himself enough to admit that he needed help.

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