

How to study the Bible: Commentaries

We've seen the value and importance of examining the context of a given passage, and we've looked at how to take advantage of comparing multiple translations of a passage, and even making word studies from the original language for a passage. Today we'll explore the use of commentaries to help us develop a richer understanding of the scripture passages we look at.

We're probably all familiar with news commentaries or news commentators. The reporters bring us the details of the news, and the commentators explain to us what's important about it and why (from their point of view). Sadly, it is hard for us to distinguish sometimes the difference between the facts of the news story and the opinions of the commentator -- especially when commentators deliberately try to present their commentary as if it were the actual news story.

Fortunately when we're studying scripture there is very little doubt about the facts of the story: we have the text right there in front of us. There can be some issues with translators selecting words and phrases that best support their doctrinal biases, but we've already learned how to overcome this problem. When we select Bible commentaries we can use similar strategies to minimize the effect of doctrinal biases.

Consulting commentaries used to require a trip to a well-stocked library since printed commentaries tended to be expensive to acquire. Now there are many available for free online anytime you need one. Online commentaries tend to be one of two varieties: either an old published commentary for which the copyright has expired; or newer works that were deliberately intended to be freely published online. We'll look at at least one example of each. What we won't find are commentaries like the Beacon Bible Commentary, 10 Volume Set, which was published in 1969 and features the work of about 40 Bible scholars from the Wesleyan Holiness tradition.

There are a few sources of online commentaries listed on my Bible Study page at <<http://jdcad.com/BibleStudy.html>>. For our exploration this time we'll start at <<http://www.studylight.org/>>. Select "BIBLE STUDY TOOLS" from their top menu, then "Commentaries". StudyLight has provided a brief description of each commentary, which helps us select the ones that may be more useful to us.

Now we probably need to discuss exactly that issue: how do I select a commentary from the hundreds that are available? The Salvation Army grew out of the Methodist church and its doctrinal positions are often described as Wesleyan-Arminian, Holiness Movement, and/or evangelical. We won't find many commentaries labeled with any of those terms. We may encounter commentaries described with connections to scholars from various other Christian backgrounds such as Calvinist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Reformed; Catholic, Anglican, or Episcopal; or various others (Baptist, charismatic, Adventist, etc.).

For 95% (or more) of the time we want a commentary this is not terribly important. There are a few passages of scripture that are the subjects of the various denominational splits that created this variety of Christian churches. It is those passages where we are likely to see significant differences in the interpretations offered in the commentaries. If you find explanations that are dramatically different between commentaries you've probably encountered one of those passages. Ask your friendly Corps Officer or other trusted adviser to help you sort it out.

Here's a list of a few commentaries that should provide a good place to start.

- Adam Clarke Commentary - 1831, Methodist
- Brian Bell Commentary on the Bible - contemporary, Adjunct Faculty and Guest Lecturer at Calvary Chapel Bible College
- Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary - 1878, classic and well-respected; Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible, Unabridged.
- Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas Constable - contemporary, Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary.

WARNING: commentaries are not the word of God! Always keep in mind that, as helpful or confusing as they may be, they are no substitute for your own prayerful study of scripture. Use them along with the other Bible study tools we're learning, and discuss any remaining questions with other spiritually mature Christians, and you won't go too far wrong.

Next week: Search tools, “study” Bibles, and other tools