

Guidelines for Selecting Bible Commentaries

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Bible commentaries are undoubtedly some of the most important tools in a preacher's library. They aid in the preparation of sermons and lessons by offering textual, linguistic, cultural, historical, geographic, theological, and homiletical insights relevant to specific portions of Scripture.

There are thousands of commentaries—multi-volume sets, stand-alone volumes, and volumes in series—on the market today. They are not all created equal. Rather, they differ in purpose, theological perspective, depth of treatment, reading level, and other features. Consequently, it is imperative for the preacher to exercise caution when selecting them for purchase or use. Making a wise commentary choice involves collecting information in four categories—*purpose*, *evaluation*, *experience*, and *perspective*.

Purpose

When evaluating a commentary, a preacher should consider the purpose for which it was written. Does it aim to ascertain the precise meaning of the text? To inspire the reader to spiritual growth? To discuss potentially relevant background information without arriving at a definite interpretation? To suggest means of outlining or illustrating texts in sermons or lessons? To bridge the gap between ancient revelation and contemporary life? These are but some of the goals of commentaries.¹

No commentary successfully caters to all readers; in fact, none should attempt to do so. Each reader approaches commentaries with a unique set of needs. Wise is the preacher who seeks out works whose purposes align with his own.

Discovering the purpose of a commentary is fairly simple in the case of a work that is part of a series. The distinctive features that define a series are stated prominently in each of its component volumes. Thus commentary series are uniform as to purpose. (It should be noted, however, that they are rarely uniform in quality.) The aims of commentaries that do not belong to series may be advertised less prominently, but can usually be discovered by reading the book's cover and prefatory information.

Ascertaining a commentary's purpose is highly important. To ignore it is to risk selecting the wrong tool for the job.

Evaluation

A second stage in selecting commentaries consists of obtaining reliable assessments of their quality. While ministers might rely on their colleagues to some extent for this kind of insight, more informed judgment is often available in published bibliographies and reviews.

Commentary bibliographies appear in various forms. Most Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias list useful commentaries at the end of their entries on specific books of the Bible. For example, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4th edition, lists eight titles at the end of its entry on 2 Corinthians. While the works listed are not evaluated in any way, the mere fact that they are cited implies some recognition of their quality.

Critical analyses of commentaries appear within annotated bibliographies. A recent example of a book in this genre is David Bauer's *An Annotated Guide to Biblical Resources for Ministry*.² Bauer lists bibliographic data for more than 2,000 works in dozens of categories, including one-volume commentaries, lexicons, and studies of specific books of the Bible. He identifies each source as "Highly Recommended" or "Also Significant" and provides evaluative commentary on the former.

James Stitzinger's "[850 Books for Biblical Expositors](#)" is also a worthwhile resource for pastors. After discussing the theory of building a quality expository library, this document links to a list of 850 books that pastors should seek to acquire. Among many other topics, the bibliography recommends commentaries on the whole Bible (both single- and multi-volume), and commentaries on specific books of the Bible.

By comparison, Cyril Barber's *The Minister's Library* focuses on a broader range of subject matter.³ Published in two volumes, it critiques books in several areas of interest to the pastor, including Old and New Testament commentaries, theology, church history, and Christian education. Though dated, Barber's work still holds value.⁴

Tremper Longman's *Old Testament Commentary Survey*⁵ and D. A. Carson's *New Testament Commentary Survey*⁶ go a long way toward guiding the preacher to the best commentaries. Longman surveys selected commentaries on each Old Testament book, evaluating its overall quality and identifying the audience(s) for which it is appropriate. By contrast, Carson attempts to critique more commentaries per New Testament book, a feature that often allows him to provide only the briefest of evaluations.

Readers seeking to select the best scholarly commentaries will appreciate the IBR Bibliographies published by Baker Book House. Each volume in this series evaluates an extensive range of books and articles on a particular segment of biblical literature or theology. Titles in this series cover the synoptic gospels, the Pauline writings, and Old Testament theology, to cite a few examples.

Expositors who enjoy mining the riches of older works will profit from Charles Spurgeon's *Commenting and Commentaries*. This book consists of two lectures and a bibliography which helps separate the wheat from the chaff among works published through the late 1800s. Both digital and clothbound editions of this work are currently available.⁷

Commentaries and other resources relevant to expositors are often reviewed in journals such as *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, *Expository Times*, *Interpretation*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *The Master's Seminary Journal*, and *Southwestern Journal of Theology*. Perusing reviews is a simple, effective method of staying aware of new resources relevant to preaching and other facets of Christian ministry. One can also use databases such as *ATLAS* and *Christian Periodical Index*—typically available at Bible college and seminary libraries—to search for reviews of specific commentaries.

Consulting commentary evaluations can pay rich dividends. A small investment in the selection process can save valuable time and contribute to greater effectiveness in preaching and teaching. Preachers do well to heed the advice of expert evaluators.

Experience

The third stage of commentary selection consists of applying the preacher's personal experience to the decision-making process. Choosing a commentary involves an element of personal preference. What one preacher finds highly useful may be unsatisfactory to another, and vice versa. It is therefore advisable for preachers to take steps to avoid purchasing materials they will rarely use.

Ministers can avoid making poor choices by examining commentaries personally before deciding to buy them. This is particularly important in the case of commentary sets, which usually cost several hundred dollars. It is best if the examination process begins during a minister's formal education, when he has access to the resources of a campus library. In the absence of a theological library, he may still browse prospective purchases at a bookstore, on an on-line bookseller's site, or in a friend's study before committing to buy them.

A second aspect of experience has to do with the accumulation of knowledge regarding authors, publishers, series, and the various features of commentaries. As a preacher expands his understanding of

the world of commentaries, he becomes less likely to make poor choices. To neglect the role of experience in commentary selection is to risk spending funds that might be better used elsewhere.

Perspective

The final stage of commentary selection involves assessing the theological and philosophical perspective of the author(s). Many commentators approach the Scriptures purely as a compilation of ancient literature, thus presuming the authority to critique a text that identifies itself as the pure, living Word of God (Prov. 30:5; Heb. 4:12). Accordingly, expositors with a high view of biblical inspiration must learn to deal with commentaries that reflect divergent theological views.

It is admittedly tempting to discard works written by authors with whom one disagrees. Yet, the decision to restrict one's reading to authors presumed to be safe is faulty on several grounds. First, this action significantly reduces the pool of available writings. Second, it breeds an uncritical acceptance of the views of "safe" authors. Third, it prevents the reader from drawing benefit from authors whose writings are only partially in error.

The solution, in my view, is for the reader to judge the merit of each work on an individual basis. Some works are so saturated with error that they are practically useless. Others are worthy of commendation in that they successfully explore the intellectual depth of the Scriptures while conveying a sense of their spiritual warmth. Still other commentaries deserve limited acceptance because they present useful data from language, history, or culture, yet err in their exegesis.

The preceding stages of the selection process—purpose, evaluation, and experience—will undoubtedly help the reader determine the author's perspective and decide whether to use or ignore a given commentary. Critical bibliographies are especially valuable. Furthermore, the minister should rely on the Holy Spirit to aid him in the discernment of truth.

How a preacher goes about choosing commentaries will determine to some extent how well he spends his money, understands God's Word, and carries out ministry. The application of the principles discussed in this article should help readers make more informed choices.

¹ The history and philosophy of commentaries are further discussed in many Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias under the heading of "Commentary" or "Commentaries."

² David R. Bauer, *An Annotated Guide to Biblical Resources for Ministry* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003).

³ Cyril J. Barber, *The Minister's Library*, 2 vols. (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1974-85).

⁴ Out-of-print works listed in *The Minister's Library* and other bibliographies can often be obtained on the used market. Good tools for locating used books include [American Book Exchange](#) and [BookFinder.com](#), both of which list more than 70 million items.

⁵ Tremper Longman, III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).

⁶ D. A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books; Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001).

⁷ The digital edition is available at <http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/c&c.htm>. The clothbound edition is contained within Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1990).