WITHOUT NOTE OR COMMENT

An evaluation of today’s study Bibles

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In the 1970s, many believers began to take an increased interest in studying the Scriptures for themselves. This movement provided tremendous blessing to many churches. But it brought to the forefront the lack of resource materials available to laymen for the study of Scripture. Until this time, most materials designed to aid in indepth Bible study were written for pastors and teachers who had academic theological training; most books written for laymen were of a popular nature, designed to ‘meet needs’ rather than to help the believer dig deeply into the Bible in order that he might discover how God by the principles of His Word had already met his needs. Thus the movement also brought about in the publishing community the realization of the need to provide the necessary tools for laymen to study the Bible. Various books were written, and others were adapted for those who did not have the academic training to use the resources designed for pastors and teachers. However, these books were bulky and often difficult or time-consuming to use. Thus, the idea of taking information from these various books and placing it within the covers of the Bible itself, and often within the Scriptures themselves, became the practice.

Of course, it is a rare Bible that has nothing except Bible text. Most Bibles have some sort of referencing, either in a centre column of the page or in the outside margin, which alerts the reader to parallel
passages. Most also give alternate readings of words or phrases; some include textual variations. In the early 20th century, this referencing was expanded in The Thompson Chain Reference Bible. In its various editions, it introduced a unique numbering system which sent the reader to the appendices in the back of the Bible; here he would find not only parallel passages but themes and subjects which F. C. Thompson had accumulated during his years of study. Also in the back of the Bible Thompson included outlines of the books of the Bible, archaeological notes, a dictionary and numerous other helps to move the reader to more indepth study. In 1917, C. I. Scofield took this a step further when he published his Scofield Reference Bible; it lacked the numbering system for parallel passages, but included instead an index to Scofield’s doctrinal and thematic footnotes, which are inserted at the bottom of the appropriate pages of Scripture.

Since the publication of the Authorised Version, it had not been acceptable to include interpretative notes in the publication of the Bible. References, textual notes dealing with differing Greek or Hebrew manuscripts and variants and alternative word meanings, had been the standard. Information beyond that was reserved for commentaries and other study helps. The phrase which was used by most publishers, and which is still used by the Trinitarian Bible Society, is “The Bible without note or comment.” In the 20th century, however, it was decided that man’s words could be on the same page as God’s Word in what are commonly called study Bibles. This takes the form of footnotes, interpretative references, outlines, book analyses and other devices. Some are liberal, some conservative; the problem is the audacity of certain believers and publishers in not seeing the harm of printing the Bible with man’s notes on the same page as Scripture.

**Footnotes**

The most obviously problematic way of placing man’s words with God’s Word comes in the form of footnotes. No longer is it left to the believer to meditate on the meanings of passages of Scripture. Now his attention is diverted to the bottom of the page where he has notes which are intended to clarify the passage. However, most of these notes are blatantly biased toward one doctrinal scheme or another. The notes given by Scofield and Ryrie in their Bibles are decidedly dispensational; those in the Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible give as fact a variation of dispensationalism that nearly doubles the number of time periods found in Scofield. The Catholic Gift and Study Bible has, as its name implies, notes to teach Roman Catholicism, as does the New Jerusalem Bible; the Full Life Study Bible New Testament and the Spirit Filled Life Bible teach the Charismatic/Pentecostal approach to Scripture. While it may be true that these notes might clarify a passage of Scripture, that clarification may not always be the correct interpretation, for, indeed, the notes are merely the interpretation of men.
However, often readers of such annotated Bibles discover that they have ceased to differentiate between what is actually Scripture and what is in the notes; or worse, they never realize this and they confuse the two. To illustrate this point, there was a young lady who, during a visit to a Christian bookshop, presented a particular theological opinion that she said came from the Scriptures. The salesman expressed his doubt that this doctrine was taught in the Word of God. He handed her a simple Authorised Version of the Bible with only centre-column references and asked her to show where the doctrine was taught; she could not find this doctrine in the Word of God. She discovered that the doctrine was taught in a footnote found in a study Bible from her denominational persuasion; this she had mistakenly believed was written in the text of the Scripture itself. This was not an isolated case; very few people who use such annotated Bibles are able to distinguish, when that Bible is closed, what in their memories is from the footnotes and what is actually Scripture. Many even underline certain aspects of the footnotes in the same way that they would underline Scripture. This young lady had completely confused what was a rather bizarre theological interpretation of a passage with the actual text of Scripture itself.

Involved in this addition of notes and comments is the undermining of the priesthood of all believers. This particular problem has been noted in the approach that the cults take to Bible study. There are many pseudo-Christian cults which will allow the study of the Bible only when it is done from a Bible that meets the cult’s approval. The Bible will be in a translation that supports the cult’s views, and include footnotes, outlines, and other materials which teach the cult’s own brand of heresy. Thus the reader is instructed in the ‘truth’, as taught by the cult, from the Bible itself. Since these things are in his copy of the Bible, the reader does not question them; thus he is kept locked in the cult.

This is akin to what can happen with study Bibles. Unless he is careful, the believer does not learn to study the Scriptures in order to determine what God is saying. Instead, he is unwittingly taught whatever the editors of the particular edition want him to believe. Thus the individual believer no longer holds the office of believer-priest as taught in the Scriptures. If a believer-priest cannot approach the Word of God without note or comment, without having to read the footnotes of learned and unlearned men, without being forced into interpretative outlines and psychological schemes, then that believer does not have the right and privilege of interpreting Scripture for himself. In depriving the individual believer of the right to interpret the Scriptures for himself, the study Bibles provide the same type of framework that the cults do. It is very difficult for a believer to go against something that is written in black and white, that is found not
only in the pages of his Bible but sometimes between the verses or even within the verses of his Bible.

References

Too often in these Bibles, the actual references in the centre column or margin to other Scripture passages reflect and support the theological or doctrinal bias presented in the footnotes. This, of course, can also be true of the references in non-study editions, but more often than not the non-study editions are not trying to present a particular doctrinal persuasion as are so many of the study editions. Non-study editions normally reference only similar wording and parallel ideas, information which sometimes comes from computer analysis. Many of the study Bibles, however, tie together by way of references passages that have only the editor’s imagination in common. Thus the unwary reader, believing that Scripture is interpreting Scripture, can be easily led astray.

Outlines

Outlines can have the same purpose and effect. There are some study Bibles in which outlines are placed in an appendix. Most, however, are placed at the beginnings of the Bible books, or, worse, are inserted between chapters or even between verses. Some outlines are non-interpretive; many are not. These latter serve to impress more heavily upon the reader that the Scriptures are to be divided in the way that the editor desires. This may be the correct way, or it may not. One way or the other, it affects how the reader interprets the Word; evolution can easily be written into the Bible by the way the first two chapters of Genesis are divided. The book of Isaiah has fallen prey to the liberal belief that the book had several authors, a belief which is easily taught to the unsuspecting Bible reader by way of outlines which divide the books amongst its ‘authors’. Too often the reader unwittingly believes everything that he finds written on the page of his Bible, including footnotes and comments.

Introductions to Books

One feature of many Study Bibles is introductions to the books of the Bible. These generally include such pertinent information as date of writing, author, recipients and main theme. Theme, of course, is open to interpretation and thus falls into the same problematic category as outlines; theme is occasionally made a part of the outline or affects the way in which the book is outlined, as when joy is given as the theme of Philippians. Many readers believe that such general information is always objective, that such information could not lead the reader away from Biblical truth. However, if the editor is neo-orthodox or liberal, he will be more likely to believe that Moses could
not have written the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch; since one view held by such men is that men of Moses’ time could not write, Moses could not have written the Pentateuch. Thus, the introductions to the books of the Pentateuch in the more liberal editions of the study Bibles present the ‘authors’ of the Pentateuch, listing the dates of writing as sometime well beyond the years of Moses’ life.

Dating Scripture’s Events

A more subtle form of interpretation is the dating of Scripture’s events. Many study Bibles place dates not only on events known to have occurred in certain years, but also on more undatable events. One such event is the creation of the universe; Bishop Ussher believed this occurred in 4004 B.C., a belief which several study Bibles include and from which they date other events in Scripture. Other editions take a more liberal view by dating the creation to include the millions of years necessary for theistic evolution to have occurred. Some place prophecies in years that change them from being prophecies to being historical accounts; by dating Isaiah’s prophecies in Isaiah 44-45 after the events recorded in Ezra, editors have demolished for their readers the impact of the miracle of revelation found in Isaiah.

Other devices

There are some study Bibles that have creative devices, such as colour-coding particular subjects, an action which tends to trivialize and generalize the Scripture; no one verse will deal with only one subject. Some of the study Bibles mark prophetic passages, or passages which the editor believes are prophetic, listing them as fulfilled or unfulfilled by the use of stars, arrows and various other quaint markings. Other markings are used to indicate subjects which are not directly addressed in Scripture, such as the psychological theories which are so prevalent today.

One of the unique elements that has come into Bible publishing is that the maps and diagrams are no longer merely found at the end of the Bible, but now are actually part of the text itself. In the book of Joshua, the reader can find maps integrated into the text which show the conquests of Israel; in the genealogies, he could study the summarized and categorized diagrams rather than have to read the text itself.

In addition, some of these editions contain copies of paintings of different artists’ interpretations of Jesus’ appearance. This is done to, as one believer put it, “help believers focus their minds on the Lord during Bible reading and prayer”. This, of course, ignores the teaching that the second commandment forbids the use of pictures of God, including the Second Person of the Trinity, in worship. There are some who do not view this as a violation of this commandment, but it is a
negative comment on the spiritual health of Christians today to think
that believers must have physical representations of Jesus as a part of
Bible study.

Theological devotionals and articles by famous authors are used in
some editions to supplement the text of Scripture. Many times these
are co-ordinated with the footnotes and the outlines that are in the
text. Sometimes ‘famous’ preachers include their own ideas,
interpretive helps, or ministry principles to supplement the text of
Scripture so that no one could possibly miss the importance of their
particular ideas. This also adds to the theological bias or prejudice of
the particular edition.

Translations

As would be expected, some of these study Bibles have been
published in a variety of translations. Some study editions are available
in the New King James Version, the Authorised (King James)
Version, the New International Version, the New American Standard
Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard
Version, the Contemporary English Version and others, so that the
reader can have the study Bible of his choice in whichever translation
he chooses. If his choice of translations changes, he can still have the
benefit of the notes and devices with which he is familiar even though
he changes Bibles. These study Bibles cater to the almost Tower of
Babel mentality, that believers must have modern versions and more
modern versions in order to understand the Scriptures, or that
additional study Bibles will in some sense make him more mature
spiritually or theologically.

The Separation of Christians

The marketing strategy of the Bible publishers is to target special
interest groups. The marketing techniques are also designed to
provide denominational ownership of the Bible. Now we have
Lutheran Bibles, Roman Catholic Bibles, Baptist Bibles, Methodist
Bibles, Presbyterian Bibles, Pentecostal Bibles; many denominations
have their very own study Bibles which promote their very own
doctrines for their very own people. Additionally, there is the problem
that within individual church contexts, the congregation may be using
Bibles produced for children, teenagers, adults, elderly, families, old
Christians, new Christians, the mentally ill, conservatives, liberals,
Charismatics, dispensationalists, all of which Bibles tend to promote
differing ideas, theories, scholarship, and opinions. Most churches
find ministry difficult enough when its members use a plethora of
translations, but now with these different voices calling it increases the
difficulty for pastors and church leaders and teachers to minister
effectively. The confusion of voices extends even to individual
families, whose members use these varying Bibles.
This abundance of study Bibles also trivializes the Word of God into opinions. Thus the reader has fads or current problems, such as learning to love yourself, AIDS, gang warfare, war and peace, homosexuality, the role of women and many other perspectives written into the Word of God via footnotes. Many of these issues are not directly addressed in Scripture; it is apparently believed that Christians cannot understand God’s teachings on these subjects and apply the principles of the Scriptures for themselves. Worse, many of the issues that are addressed in the notes and comments in these Bibles are not consistent with the true teachings of Scripture, and many times express a completely opposite view from that of God’s Word. These notes and outlines are merely opinions about the Scriptures, but they lead to eisegesis (that is, reading man’s opinions into the text), rather than to the objective study of the Word of God. This is true not just in theology but in the actual interpretation, or misinterpretation, itself.

To demonstrate just how widespread this problem is, note the number and variety of these study Bibles. The Adventure Bible, the Annotated Study Bible, Believer’s Study Bible, the Bible for Today’s Young Reader, the Catholic Gift and Study Bible, The Catholic Study Bible, the Christian Character Bible, the Christian Life Bible, Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible, the Disciple’s Study Bible, the Explorer’s Bible: Study Bible for Kids, the Full Life Study Bible New Testament (Pentecostal and Charismatic), the Geneva Study Bible, the Harper Study Bible, King and the Beast: a Student New Testament, the Life Application Bible, Life Source New Testament in the new Contemporary English Version, the Master Study Bible, the New Jerusalem Bible, the Open Bible, the New Oxford Annotated Bible, the Scofield Reference Bible 1917, the New Scofield Study Bible, the NIV Study Bible, the NIV Student Bible, the Psalty’s Kids Bible, the Rainbow Study Bible, the Royal Reference Bible, the Ryrie Study Bible, the Self-Study Bible, the Serendipity Bible for Study Groups, the Spirit Filled Life Bible (Pentecostal and Charismatic), the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, The Topical Chain Study Bible, the Wesley Study Bible, The Word (Pentecostal and Charismatic), the Salem Kirban Reference Bible.

In addition, there are study Bibles with the notes from Robert Schuler and W. A. Criswell. There are New Testaments with psychological and counsellor’s notes and New Testaments that contain steps for being delivered from alcoholism, substance abuse and addiction; there are even Bibles which teach self-esteem and self-love. There are Bibles available in specialized editions for young children and school-aged children, for teenagers, for adults, for the elderly; several are aimed at Roman Catholics, others at Pentecostals and Charismatics, Dispensationalists, Lutherans, Evangelicals,
Arminians, Calvinists, liberals. It seems that, if there is a theological perspective, it now has its own study Bible.

The Financial Implications

These Bibles are presented to the Christian public in order to meet a perceived need and also, it would appear, to provide finances for the publishers. Study Bibles range in price from £10 up to and including £100; many are in the £50 to £75 range. There is nothing inherently wrong in the publishing of the Scriptures by retail publishers. However, since a number of the Bibles in question, in their least expensive hardbound editions, range from £20 to £40, one can perhaps begin to see why we have such a plethora of study Bibles; these Bibles can greatly increase revenue and will enhance sales of translations that may no longer be as high as they once were, or that may never have been good. Bible publishing is big business. It helps fund all of the other facets of the Christian publishing industry. And while from a retail perspective this is not necessarily a problem, it appears to be out of control.

One aspect of this that must be addressed in a period of recession such as the world finds itself is that the small Christian bookshops cannot compete in the Bible-publishing world. They do not have the resources to stock even a small percentage of the Bibles available in all their editions and translations and styles and colours and prices. These bookshops must constantly order and re-order Bibles in order to meet the whims and fancies of the Bible-buying public. This the bookshops do, to the detriment of stocking the books which would be really useful to these buyers, as well as to the rest of the Christian world. Thus believers who enjoy good Christian literature may suffer from the glut of study Bibles available today; this can lead to the demise of good Christian bookshops.

Conclusion

Let it be said that the Trinitarian Bible Society does not want to hinder the study of the Word of God. If Bible students want to use commentaries, dictionaries, word study books and other tools, the Society would indeed encourage it. Each believer must study the Word of God. Nor are our objections aimed at any particular theological or ecclesiastical group. The objection comes when such information is placed in the Bible, where it may be accepted as absolute truth. God's people should stop listening to the opinions of others. One of the reasons why the New International Version is so popular today is because the opinion of its publishers, put forth through brilliant marketing techniques, have put tremendous pressure on pastors and laymen to use that translation; if they do not use it, there must be something spiritually or theologically wrong with them. Today
believers need to return to the purity of Bible study that can be achieved by using a regular reference Bible, concordance and other study helps. But for this they must have access to a plain, unaided, non-interpretive text that can be the basis of evaluating how theologically sound these other study tools are and which will provide the Christian with the objective truth of the Word of God without note or comment. Word of God without note or comment.

Many Christians have seen over the years people believing bizarre and strange things, simply because those people read it in the footnotes of their Bible. Because of their use of study Bibles, they did not have the opportunity of interpreting the Scripture for themselves. May God grant grace today that God’s people will be able to stand against this current torrent of voices which are dividing the body of Christ and are regrettably in many instances infecting the body of Christ with erroneous theology and ungodly practice.