

Students of the Bible face a significant dilemma in choosing resources for Bible study. There have never been so many options in the English language as there are today. Some of these tools are tremendous gifts to God's people. They are the product of thousands of hours of prayerful labor done in the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:15. Others are poor quality, providing only a superficial or partial treatment of the biblical text, thus wasting the time and money of those serious about deep study. Still other resources are misleading and even antagonistic to the faith. They use the biblical text to promote ideas that are contrary to the very nature and message of the Bible itself.

Consequently, students eager to study the Bible can waste precious resources in acquiring and utilizing books that are unhelpful at best or harmful at worst. Or they can find themselves lost in a sea of resources, paralyzed in their study. How, then, can a student wisely navigate the plethora of options? Here are twelve principles to consider:

- 1) **Be patient.** The vast number of resources on any given topic of biblical study can easily overwhelm any student. The knee-jerk reaction is either to try to acquire everything or to walk away with nothing. To avoid these extremes, the student will have to accept the fact that gaining familiarity about publishers, authors, the genres of biblical resources, and Bible software platforms will take time. This is normal.
- 2) **Prioritize quality over quantity.** Do not fall for the notion that a large library will guarantee success in study. Remember what Solomon told his son: "The writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body" (Eccl 12:12). Whether you are preparing to study a specific passage of the Bible or attempting to build a biblical resource library, you must prioritize the quality of these tools over their quantity. Books cost money, take up space, and demand your reading time. To be an effective student means being a good steward of these precious commodities. This requires a steadfast commitment to gaining access to the very best in available resources, not the greatest number.
- 3) **Study the study tools.** Before you begin signing resources out of a library or buying them off the bookshelf, take time first to become familiar with what exists. An easy first step is to ask those you respect as good expositors of Scripture about the resources they recommend on a given book or topic of Scripture. Furthermore, take advantage of special resources designed to provide assessments of the tools that are available. Known as "annotated bibliographies," these resources list the books that have been published on a given topic and provide brief summaries of their strengths and weakness. These bibliographies are invaluable for making decisions about which books should be on your shelf.

An immensely valuable tool in this regard is Jim Rosscup's book, *Commentaries for Biblical Expositors*. Although now somewhat dated, his work is the place to start. Rosscup divides existing commentaries into three helpful categories (exegetical, expositional, and devotional), lists their strengths and weaknesses, and ranks them according to their usefulness to the student. Similar assessments can be found in books like Tremper Longman's *Old Testament Commentary Survey*, D. A. Carson's *New Testament Commentary Survey*, and in the bibliographies of recommended resources found in many Old Testament and New Testament Surveys and Introductions.

A growing number of assessment tools can also be found online. One example is the website "Best Commentaries" found at <http://bestcommentaries.com>. Similar webpages can be found by entering "recommended commentaries on (pick your book of the Bible)" into an internet search engine.

- 4) **Practice triangulation.** The resources that assess and recommend Bible study tools will often disagree with each other over the identity of the best books in any given category. Rather than becoming discouraged over the lack of a consensus, the student should employ the process of "triangulation." Triangulation involves the comparison of at least three different recommended resource lists on a given topic (e.g., commentaries on Romans). The titles that can be consistently found among the top ten in each of the resource lists are probably the ones that deserve a place on your desk or in your library. This process follows the same wisdom Solomon gave when he stated, "Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed" (Prov 15:22).

- 5) **Compile a buy list.** An important step for anyone building a personal library of biblical resources is to compile a “buy list.” This list provides the titles of books that the student has deemed worthy of acquisition. Arranged according to helpful categories, this list should include exact details about authorship, publisher, date of publication, and edition number (if multiple editions exist). Moreover, this list should be located “in the cloud” so it can be linked with all your electronic devices and accessed easily, even when least expected.

This list serves two purposes. First, it gives the student a central location in which to record recommended titles before he forgets. These recommendations may come in the least expected moments—in a passing conversation, at a conference, in a podcast, etc. Second, a personal list gives the student parameters when acquiring books. Rather than buying whatever is available, the student will steward his book budget, shelf space, and reading time wisely by buying only those titles on his list—the titles which deserve to speak into his study.

- 6) **Set a monthly budget.** We must certainly disagree with the theological convictions of Desiderius Erasmus, but we can side with him with respect to his view on the importance of books: “When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes!” The influence of good books is not very different than the influence of good pastors. We must do whatever we can to surround ourselves with them. This requires prioritizing the acquisition of good resources by setting aside a reasonable amount of money on a regular basis for that purpose. These purchases, small but regular, should be designed for your personal edification and preparation for ministry. They add up quickly over time.
- 7) **Avoid impulse acquisitions.** Do not judge a book by its cover. Some of the most handsomely published books are not worth a place in your library, even if they are free. Others, printed on cheap paper and in paperback, are gems to be treasured. Similarly, avoid acquiring books simply because they are cheap (thinking to grow your collection quickly), or because they are expensive (thinking they must be worth their weight in gold), or because they are on sale (thinking they are a great deal). The content determines value, not the price tag.

- 8) **Give special consideration to authorship.** Look for biographical information about the book’s author. Where an author received his education often serves as an indicator of his theological views. If he was drawn toward and studied in a university or seminary known for its skepticism toward Scripture, realize that he sat at the feet of those who actively promoted a low view of the Bible. While some may be able to resist this influence, most cannot help but assimilate some degree of the views of their teachers. Influence, after all, is the explicit goal of teaching.

Even more importantly, consider where the author now teaches (if in an academic institution) or serves (if in a church). If the author currently teaches in a school which espouses higher criticism, recognize that he must have a favorable view of higher criticism to be comfortable in that environment and for that environment to accept him as one of their own. Conversely, if he teaches or ministers in a seminary or church known for affirming a high view of Scripture, you can assume—at least initially—that he shares such a view as well.

- 9) **Read the Foreword and Preface.** To learn more about the author and his work, take the time to read the introductory pages to the work before you decide to put it on your shelf. These pages often include the back story about why the author chose to write the book, identify who influenced him most in its composition, and summarize the author’s overall purpose in writing. This information can be very helpful in deciding whether the book should be allowed to influence a reader.
- 10) **Consider the book’s promoters.** Most books contain at least a few recommendations printed on the book’s back cover and opening pages. This oft-neglected material can be very helpful. Consider the names of those who promote the resource and the reasons they do so. If these names are trustworthy scholars and pastors, and if they provide good reasons why one should acquire and read the book, then you have another reason to consider it for your study. But look specifically for clues in the recommendation that the one promoting the book has actually read its contents. It is not unusual for notable names to promote a book simply because it is a friend who wrote it.
- 11) **Find the controversy.** A very helpful practice for determining the value of a book is to turn to the section in it that deals with the most controversial aspect associated with its topic. For example, if you are considering a commentary on 1 Timothy, turn to the commentator’s treatment of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 and survey how the author deals with the exegesis of this controversial text. You may not even agree with the author’s conclusion, but if he strives to uphold the ultimate authority of the biblical text, attempts to handle its contents carefully, represents the views and

arguments fairly, and articulates his own view respectfully, this resource may very well provide great help in your study of 1 Timothy in general.

- 12) ***Mix the old and the new.*** Reject the thinking that insists that whatever is new is right and whatever is old is wrong. But also reject the idea that only one era of scholarship—the early Church Fathers, the Reformers, or the Puritans—were the only ones who got it right. Your desire must be to learn at the feet of godly interpreters from a broad range of church history. By mixing old and new commentaries, you can glean from the best in church history and the best in recent scholarship. A suggested approach is the 70/30 principle—70% of your resources should be made up of books published in the last thirty years, while 30% of your resources should take into account the best of the tools from more than thirty years ago. There is much to be said for resources which were authored centuries ago but remain in print today.

Next to those who sat at the feet of the Apostles themselves, English-speaking interpreters have access to the best resources that have ever existed in the history of the church. With this comes a sobering responsibility. We must utilize the very best of these resources to the very best of our ability—as those who will give an account.

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