

## Burn Your Commentaries!

I hope the title got your attention. It was intended to be dramatic. Though commentaries<sup>1</sup> may have some use, many Christians would be better off if they were completely deprived of access to them for the rest of their lives. In my recent article [Anticipating our Next Intimate Encounter with Jesus](#), I included the following footnote:

**Concerning our careful study of God’s Word, I strongly recommend you avoid running to commentaries and even articles like this in order to learn from Jesus. The thoughts expressed in this article were not taken from another’s writings. God gave them to me as I prayerfully meditated on this passage. If you don’t already do so, I encourage you to spend the time studying God’s word while purposely avoiding the use of commentaries and the writings of other people. God desires to bless us directly and personally if we seek Him this way. It is one of the ways He uses to show His love for us personally.**

One good brother wrote in response:

*your comment (though accurate for you) is a bit misguided for most folks as they don't have the foundation created in you. Yes, they NEED a personal relationship with Jesus and the Spirit as they chew deeply on biblical texts but commentaries and books by gifted men have been crucial for me over the years as God HAS developed what you're talking about. I'm concerned that your spoken perspective betrays your higher intention and encouragement. I KNOW your concern but I think your angst toward some (for good reason) betrays your desire to see people grow in the faith. God has grown me SO MUCH BECAUSE of what I've read - as that was instrumental in me gaining a personal deep connection with New Covenant truth under a deep love for Systematic Theology.*

When I raised this issue with another good brother, he replied with the following word which he copied and pasted from a well-recognized theologian of our time:

*“The ideal approach is for the preacher to thoroughly engage with the biblical text firsthand and consult the commentaries only after he has studied the passage for himself.”*

*“The opposite error is to ignore biblical commentaries altogether. Many commentators are faithful teachers of the Word, given to the church to lead God’s people into a clearer understanding of the Bible. Therefore, to ignore their insights is to reject the blessing of divinely gifted teachers in the Body of Christ. As D. A. Carson writes, if you do not use biblical commentaries, “you are failing to tap into generations of stimulating thought undertaken by Christians and others who have come before you, so you may overlook important things that you should not miss.”*

*“If the preacher finds himself interpreting a biblical text differently than all of the commentators, humility should compel him to abandon his novel view of the passage. Put simply, new interpretations are most certainly misinterpretations. For this reason, one of the most important functions of commentaries is to steer the exegete away from a novel interpretation that would have surprised even the biblical author himself! If you are the first person to interpret a biblical passage in a certain way, you are most certainly mistaken, and humility will help you recognize this error.”*

These words<sup>2</sup> probably represent today’s conventional thinking on this subject in evangelical circles. Over the years, I have taught Bible students to follow these guidelines. But I have noticed that most of my Bible students seem to ignore the first and most important paragraph and run to commentaries to see what various theologians think rather than wait upon the Lord to see what He will tell them. For example, after receiving the words in italic directly above, I asked my friend, “Before going to commentaries, do you first do word searches to see what the Chief Commentator might say? (The Bible itself)” Below is his response to this question:

*No, I normally don’t do word searches. Sadly, I have great tools that would make it easy for me to do. I blame laziness. Using Word searches is something I need to take advantage of. Good suggestion:)*

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<sup>1</sup> The commentaries that have the most value are those that provide background information rather than mere verse interpretations.

<sup>2</sup> In the Addendum at the end, I point out issues I have with these words.

[Back to the Free Articles and Media page.](#)

I believe with all my heart that this brother would be better off if he never could gain access to commentaries again for the rest of his life. I feel sorry for the many Christians who are in the habit of running to commentaries to see what men have to say rather than wait upon the Lord to see what He has to say. They are being cheated out of intimacy with Jesus that is experienced when God's Spirit personally teaches His children.

Twice a week, I teach a small congregation. We study through entire Bible books rather than topically. On occasion, while looking at the passage ahead of time, I run across a verse that is not clear to me. Immediately, there is a temptation to run to commentaries to see what others have said about the verse. But I purposely resist that temptation and begin asking God to direct my thoughts. I believe that this honors Him. I believe it would dishonor Him if I were to run first to a commentary written by a man.

Someone might think from my words so far that I am downplaying Bible study. I am not. On the contrary, I am lifting up Bible study. I really believe that we do not need commentaries written by men. We have a commentary written by God available to us and His promise to guide us in the proper use of His Commentary. I am talking about the Bible itself. It is the only Commentary you can fully trust. Often, I can do a simple word study in English and quickly find other verses in the Bible that can help clarify things for me. I use a reference Bible so I often check the margins to see if the publisher has noted a verse or two that might relate to the verse I am trying to understand. Sometimes, I consult Nave's Topical Bible to see if it includes any verses related to the particular topic in question. I also have some tools that allow me to access the original languages. But most often, these are not necessary for the verse or topic in question.

I also admit that there are many passages that remain ambiguous after praying and studying using means like those mentioned above. In such cases, even without looking, I can tell that there are probably a variety of opinions available in commentaries. If it seems ambiguous to me, it is likely that it is ambiguous to others. Instead of teaching something that I am unsure about, I tell them this verse is not super clear to me. I might provide a couple of possible interpretations and even give my own opinion. But when I give my opinion, I am sure to tell them that this interpretation is only my opinion and others may have differing opinions. But we don't have to know all the answers and if you run into anyone that seems to have all the answers, get his autograph.

Let me get back to the point of this article. I believe Christians should purposely try to avoid using commentaries, and mainly for two reasons. I will again use a statement made by one of my friends mentioned above to illustrate one of them.

*I KNOW your concern but I think your angst toward some (for good reason) betrays your desire to see people grow in the faith.*

In this statement, my friend admits that it is understandable to have "angst toward some" (of the commentaries). His point is that some commentaries are unreliable. If asked, I am sure he could provide a list of such commentaries. But if there are some that are unreliable, which ones are reliable? To compound things even more, which parts of the "reliable" commentaries are accurate and which parts are not accurate. After all, the commentator is just a fellow human being. He cannot be 100% accurate. How do we know if his comments on the verse in question are accurate? Or, do we take a poll of all of the "reliable" commentaries to see which opinion is expressed the most and go with that one?

If a Christian forms his thinking on the basis of the views of men, how can he be sure he has come to the correct conclusion? I suggest that such views cannot be the basis for deep convictions necessary for Biblical faith. I consider opinions that are founded upon the words of mere men to be fluff. This is no foundation for faith. We need to be convinced by God Himself, not men. The Bible is full of very clear information that God has provided to form the convictions that are necessary for faith that results in a Christ-like life. If something remains ambiguous, it probably is not a necessary building block for our faith. For more on this aspect, I recommend the article, [Some Principles of God's Revelation](#), written by my friend Van Parunak.

The second major reason why I tell Christians to avoid using commentaries is the detrimental effect they can have on our intimacy with Christ. Jesus said, "Seek and you shall find." He also said, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13). He also said, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26).

It may seem simplistic to some but it boils down to this. How much do we believe these words of Jesus? Why should we put our confidence in the words of men (commentaries) when we have these promises from God? He offers to shape our thinking if we diligently seek His help. If I opt to run to a commentary, I will surely miss out on a potentially intimate

[Back to the Free Articles and Media page.](#)

moment with Jesus. On thousands of occasions, I have purposely resisted this temptation. Instead, I began praying and waiting upon Jesus to show me His thinking while at the same time I meditate and study His Word (as opposed to commentaries). Then, if not immediately, over the course of the next several days, the Holy Spirit began to shape thoughts in me that clarified things in a very intimate and awesome way. When this happens to me, I feel greatly honored and loved by God personally. My life is filled with this type of back and forth with Him. My books and articles are the result of this approach to learning what God wants me to know. When writing them, I consulted the Holy Spirit rather than commentators.

Before closing, I call attention to the use of **study Bibles and devotionals**. Since most of these provide more than mere background information, I highly recommend that you avoid using them altogether. When reading a passage in a study Bible, there is too much temptation to let your eyes glance down at the notes that were written by a commentator.

In summary, I encourage everyone to read the Bible and prayerfully meditate on it. I encourage everyone to utilize the tools available to study the Bible itself. But I also encourage Christians to discipline themselves and avoid running to commentaries. Lastly I say, hold off on burning your commentaries unless you have run out of firewood and need some extra fuel to heat your dwelling. I have started many fires using my own articles. (Although, printer paper does not burn as well as newspaper.)

### Addendum

In this addendum, I wish to express further concerns I have with the conventional wisdom conveyed by a quote near the beginning of this document. Here is the quote:

*“The ideal approach is for the preacher to thoroughly engage with the biblical text firsthand and consult the commentaries only after he has studied the passage for himself.”*

*“The opposite error is to ignore biblical commentaries altogether. Many commentators are faithful teachers of the Word, given to the church to lead God’s people into a clearer understanding of the Bible. Therefore, to ignore their insights is to reject the blessing of divinely gifted teachers in the Body of Christ. As D. A. Carson writes, if you do not use biblical commentaries, “you are failing to tap into generations of stimulating thought undertaken by Christians and others who have come before you, so you may overlook important things that you should not miss.”*

*“If the preacher finds himself interpreting a biblical text differently than all of the commentators, humility should compel him to abandon his novel view of the passage. Put simply, new interpretations are most certainly misinterpretations. For this reason, one of the most important functions of commentaries is to steer the exegete away from a novel interpretation that would have surprised even the biblical author himself! If you are the first person to interpret a biblical passage in a certain way, you are most certainly mistaken, and humility will help you recognize this error.”*

**I would change** “consult the commentaries only after he has studied the passage for himself” to read something like “consult the commentaries only after he has thoroughly studied the passage, looked within the Bible to see if it comments on the passage, prayerfully meditated on the passage and waited upon the Lord to show him insights.”

**I fully disagree** with the statement, “The opposite error is to ignore biblical commentaries altogether.” This wording “opposite error,” implies that to avoid commentaries is just as bad as not studying the passage for oneself. It is way overstated. A Christian can grow wonderfully if he studies the Bible without ever looking at a commentary.

**I also disagree** with this statement, “If the preacher finds himself interpreting a biblical text differently than all of the commentators, humility should compel him to abandon his novel view of the passage.” While I agree that he should question his interpretation if he does not know of others that share his opinion, there is also a possibility that he might be correct in his interpretation while all the commentaries he consults are incorrect. This is a possibility but to take a lone view should not be done without good warrant and he should also inform his students that most commentators disagree with him. I wrote and published an article that takes such a stand with the knowledge that no commentators (that I know about) agree with me. It is called, [What was Paul Thinking?](#)

### Addendum Two

***Other reasons why I am cautious about commentators and generally do not consult them:***

I believe there are reasons to be cautious about commentators. As already outlined in my article above, my foremost reason is because we are taught in the Bible to not trust in man but God alone. Rather than consult commentaries, I first consult the Holy Spirit and His Word which is the only trustworthy commentary. **But second**, we must

acknowledge that in many cases, there are other realities that have played a role in shaping the opinions of theologians. Here are some examples:

- a.) During the past hundred years, we have observed how man-centered theology has shaped the evangelism methods most commonly practiced over the past 100 years. We have all watched a Billy Graham crusade and watched the invitation at the end. We have seen many books by famous evangelists touting the use of “apologetics.” We have seen many pushing “friendship evangelism.” Over a long enough period of time, some man-centered methodologies cause errors to seep into the conscious without being scrutinized so that even some respected “reformed” theologians begin to think some of these practices are justified.
- b.) The rapid spread of dispensationalism also produced the “easy believism” movement which downplays the Lordship of Jesus in salvation. After time, even “reformed” evangelists tend not to talk much about the results of true faith being a life characterized by righteousness. Even though many know about it, they just don’t emphasize it in their evangelism and some never even mention it.
- c.) Also related to the one immediately above, reformed theologians tend to view the concept of salvation through a perspective that has been affected by years of distortion, even if they know about the distortions and try to guard against it. So, when they read the word *salvation* or *saved* in the New Testament, their mind tends to gravitate to something that took place in their past instead of the salvation that will take place when Jesus returns. Dwelling on the salvation that took place in our past makes us feel comfortable while thinking about salvation as something that takes place in the future might force us to do some soul searching to verify that we will indeed be one of the ones who will be saved on that day. My latest article, “[What was Paul Thinking?](#)” demonstrates that the word *salvation* in the book of Romans refers to the salvation that will take place when Jesus returns. I believe that the sentiments of this article are not mentioned by most commentators today because they tend to think primarily of salvation as something that has taken place in the past rather than when Jesus returns. They surely know about the future salvation, but I believe that we have all been affected by subtle distortions that prevail in our day so that our mind tends to gravitate to the salvation that took place at some point in our past.

What I am trying to point out is that many factors play a role in shaping the theological views of commentators and the best of them can’t help but be affected. We have very strong reason to believe that some of their views have some amount of distortion. We have much reason to be cautious!

In addition, I wish to cite the reality that seminary students are often taught to spend much time in commentaries as a primary method of learning theology. I believe this entire process fosters an environment prone to group-think. Some errors of well recognized theologians are accepted and believed and these errors are then propagated. I realize that a good student will be on guard against this but why push this unbiblical model in the first place? This is not how Jesus and Paul taught their disciples.<sup>3</sup> But the most well-known theologians learned under the seminary model which is prone to the propagation of error made by other respected theologians. Also, keep in mind that in today’s seminaries, there is always pressure to get assignments done on time so good critical thinking can suffer and take a back seat when a student is cramming.

Having this awareness, I have been studying the use of the word *salvation* in the book of Romans armed with the knowledge that years of distortion in Christendom could very well have affected the views of even the most respected theologians on this particular subject. (I know they affected my views on it.) So, it was a no brainer for me to do all of my analysis without consulting commentaries. I did not want to be influenced by views that could very well be distorted in some way, even if they might be small distortions.

*Thomas Bear, 8/13/2018*

Οὐαὶ μοί ἐστιν ἂν μὴ εὐαγγελίζωμαι (Προς Κορινθίους Α 9:16)

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<sup>3</sup> They taught in a hands-on model in which the students observed the teacher DOING the things he taught. Also, there were no quizzes or time crunches produced by artificial time constraints.

[Back to the Free Articles and Media page.](#)

**Note:** After reading this article, a good brother had some clarifying questions. Since he had these questions, I thought it would be good to list them and attempt to answer them. (Others may have similar questions.) This dialog appears on the **next page**.

**Question #1.** Is your statement below meant to be hyperbole?

*"I believe with all my heart that this brother would be better off if he never could gain access to commentaries again for the rest of his life."*

My answer: No, this is not hyperbole. I really believe this. I sense that this brother has a habit of running to commentaries prematurely. As a result, he is being cheated out of potential intimacy with Jesus. I cannot say this is always the case for him but even if it happens a little, it is too much. So, for all Christians that are in the habit of running to commentaries prematurely, I think they would be better off never gaining access to another commentary for the rest of their lives. But, the better solution would be if they developed a proper discipline regarding them. I am not suggesting we ban commentaries by my article. I am only trying to call attention to what I consider a very detrimental habit of many Christians.

**Question #2:** If one's private interpretation is wrong, without commentaries they remain unknowingly a false teacher. (I use the phrase "private interpretation" to mean wrestling with the text mostly through prayer and meditation. No commentaries to pollute one's thinking.) Supporting thoughts: This assumes that they are teaching others in some ministry capacity. They might even feel very confident of their understanding and have no reservations triggering a need to give a disclaimer to their students that they are unsure about said interpretation. Being wrong feels like being right until the moment you learn that you're wrong.

My answer: In reality, this is not a question but rather, an assertion that assumes the worst case. This assertion assumes the person teaches his false opinion as fact. I never propose such a way of teaching. In addition, the assertion paints the person as a "false teacher." The Bible condemns false teachers but characterizes them as deceivers who are not believers. I would change the wording of my friend's first sentence to read, *If one's private interpretation is wrong, without commentaries, they end up teaching something false.* My suggested statement puts the teacher in the best light as a believer who mistakenly taught something false. This is far less serious than being a "false teacher."

Back to his assertion. It assumes that if the teacher goes to a commentary, he will get the correct answer. No guarantee! But you are correct in your assessment above. The best way to avoid teaching as fact something that is false is to teach reverently. If we do that, we WILL alert people when we are providing "our opinions." So, this problem can be avoided if we are diligent. (Even without commentaries usually.)

**Question #3:** Are you saying that John 16:13 "He will teach you all things" means that real Christians will eventually be led to correct private interpretation?

My answer: **Definitely!!!** (Assuming they are those who walk in the Spirit as a general course of life. I cannot guarantee anything for casual people who have no business teaching anyway.)

**Question #4:** By rejecting commentators, isn't that rejecting God-given teachers?

Supporting thoughts: Teachers are described as gifts from God for the equipping of the saints. Couldn't that be rejecting God by rejecting one of the means of His grace?

[Back to the Free Articles and Media page.](#)

My Answer: Again, I am not proposing a ban on commentaries. I am only trying to call attention to a detrimental practice of running to them. But going beyond this answer of mine, I suggest that the main ministry of teachers is within the local body of Christ. (Not that others can't be useful.) The NT teaching model tends to have a more relational component involving people in relationship with other people. Commentaries have a different dynamic that can tend toward an unhealthy dependence. Christians sometimes form a view of certain men as if they are fully reliable and they are not! The way some Christians view certain famous commentators almost seems idolatrous.

Keep in mind, the Bible is in reality, ALL that is necessary for our spiritual growth towards a righteous life. Commentaries are not essential. A righteous life is made possible through the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. All this is possible without commentaries.

Lastly, most of the Bible is very clear. For example, virtually every statement in John chapter 9 is easily understood as you read it. Nobody needs a commentary or devotional to help them understand it. The Holy Spirit is fully able to guide us as we read such passages and bless us with not only the correct interpretation, but also many other thoughts that He wants us to have.<sup>4</sup> He enlightens us this way making the Word glorious. If when reading John 9, a person quickly looks at a devotional or commentary before praying and meditating, he will miss out on the rich enlightenment that could have been given to him directly by the Holy Spirit. He will miss out on intimacy with Jesus. I suggest that most of the Bible is pretty clear and the Holy Spirit is fully able to guide us as we prayerfully read and study it.

But there are some passages in the Bible that remain a mystery in some way. Perhaps those who take issue with my article are focused on the passages that seem a bit mysterious. Maybe they think that we need commentaries for those types of passages. I suggest that God intended many of those passages to retain some mystery. (Deut 29:29). I have noticed Christians debating back and forth about some of these passages while citing what this commentator says about it or what that commentator says about it. I suggest that the things that are mysterious will remain that way no matter what. No number of good commentators will change that. Nobody can say for sure which one is correct in regard to the mysterious things in the Bible. Any commentary that claims otherwise should be discarded.

The goal of all Bible comprehension is not comprehension itself! It is a righteous life. Perhaps Christians spend too much time debating about things that cannot be known fully and not enough time spent on pursuing the fruits of righteousness in his or her life.

Since the reader may still wonder, let me now make three statements that summarizes my purpose for writing this article:

I simply want Christians to discipline themselves to resist the temptation to run to commentaries to see what men have to say. Instead, begin asking the Holy Spirit to form in you the thoughts that He wants you to have in regard to the passage and patiently wait upon Him for this. Also, accept the fact that you may never fully understand everything you read in the Bible knowing that commentators must wrestle with this reality also.

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<sup>4</sup> Without consulting commentaries, I recently, prayerfully read and meditated on John 9. I then wrote the results of my meditation in a recent article, "[Anticipating Our Next Intimate Encounter with Jesus](#)." I mention this only to give an example of the Holy Spirit's teaching ministry in my life. He is fully willing to give any Christian thoughts He wants them to have as they study this way (without using commentaries).