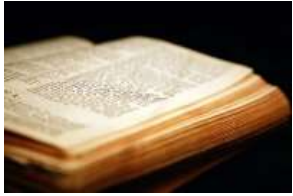


Beware of Study Bibles

Steve Burchett

I like resources that help me understand the Bible. My collection of commentaries grows yearly. The amount of books I own addressing various areas of theology numbers in the hundreds. There are a couple of websites that I visit regularly where numerous Bible study tools are offered. I also own four “Study Bibles,” which include not only the biblical text, but introductions and outlines for each book of the Bible, notes that explain verses, maps, articles about major concepts, and a large concordance at the back. I have been strengthened by all of these resources, and I’m confident others could testify likewise.



However, every good gift from God can be abused. Of all the study tools, perhaps in our day the Study Bible is the resource that is most often misused. For example, many who have taught the Bible have felt the frustration when, instead of meditating on the passage of Scripture being

taught, several in the group were busy reading and then sharing from the study notes at the bottom of the page!

Perhaps some might respond, “But at least these people are trying to understand what the Scriptures say.” Indeed, their motives may be pure, but excessive reliance on study notes actually removes them from what a Study Bible intends to promote: The study of *the Bible*! James tells us to receive and live out the Word of God (James 1:21-22), not what somebody else says about the Bible. The Lord *has* given the church teachers (Ephesians 4:11), but we should follow the example of the Bereans who not only listened eagerly to Paul’s preaching, but were known for “examining *the Scriptures* daily to see whether these things were so” (emphasis mine).

Maybe you are not convinced that you can really understand Scripture apart from the significant aid of others. Perhaps you have been led astray by certain preachers or writers who seem to imply that you have to be an expert in Hebrew or Greek (the original languages of the Old and New Testaments) in order to “really comprehend the Bible.” Yes, a knowledge of the original languages is quite valuable, but it is not required.

Peter does admit that “some things” in Paul’s writings are hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16). Commentaries, Study Bibles, and conversations with other believers are a valuable tool when we come across these places in Scripture. But Peter didn’t say *everything* is hard to understand! In fact, with a careful and contemplative reading of a verse or passage and its surrounding context,

and with the help of the Holy Spirit (see 1 John 2:27), we can grasp what God is saying. Probably our larger struggle is living out what we clearly see.

Does this mean you should throw away your Study Bible? No, but consider three ways to guard against misusing this tool:

1. Don’t use a Study Bible as your primary Bible. Regular Bible reading, group study, and personal study should be out of a Bible without study notes. This eliminates the temptation to look away from what God has said.
2. Before you pull your Study Bible(s) off the shelf, force yourself to think hard about the text of Scripture alone. The person who “looks intently” at God’s Word and lives it out is “blessed in what he does” (James 1:25). You may even want to purchase a Bible with wide margins in order to write down your thoughts, or maybe a notebook or journal.
3. When you struggle to figure out what a verse or passage means, ask the Lord for help. You’ll be amazed at what He helps you comprehend. If you still don’t understand what you are reading, ask Him again and meditate longer. How often do we skip this vital step of depending upon the Lord? Who is more resourceful, a biblical scholar or God?

Consider your Bible study methods: Do you spend more time focusing on the text of the Bible, or the words of non-inspired writers who are seeking to explain the Bible? When we are overly dependent on study notes, a subtle shift takes place from living “on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4) to living “by the words of Bible teachers.”

As I write, I’m aware of another Study Bible soon to be unveiled. It has been endorsed by a large number of well-known pastors and ministry leaders, and it includes over 20,000 notes, over 50 articles, and over 200 color charts. I’ll probably buy one. More, and even better, Study Bibles will surely follow. There is no doubt that they will shed much light on the text of Scripture. But we must beware: They may also distract us from the very thing they are intended to illuminate.