

Chapter 7

THE BIBLE

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom:
and with all thy getting get understanding.

–Proverbs 4:7 KJV

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman
who needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the
word of truth.

–2 Timothy 2:15 KJ21

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for
teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in
righteousness, so that the man of God may be
thoroughly equipped for every good work.

–2 Timothy 3:16–17

The Bible is the world's most precious possession. It is God's love letter to humanity and, together with His Holy Spirit, represents His abiding presence among us. It is indeed a divine book, not of human origin. While it has human *involvement*, of course, it originated in the mind of God alone. "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). And God's Holy Spirit who gave birth to Scripture is the same Spirit who carries its message deep into our hearts as we encounter it today. Because its message still reaches human hearts, the Bible is the most widely printed and read book in the history of the world. It seems only fitting that Gutenberg's Bibles were among the very first books produced by the world's very first printing press.

The Reliability of the Old Testament

Confirmed by the text. Because of its divine origin, the Bible has been preserved down through the ages with a remarkable degree of accuracy, more so than any other book in history. The accuracy of our present-day Old Testament was verified anew by the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the 1940s and 1950s in caves near Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.

These scrolls contain Scriptures from all of the books in the Old Testament we use today, except Esther. The Dead Sea Scrolls are copies made between the middle of the second century BC and the first century AD.

Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the most recent copy of the Old Testament available—the Masoretic Text—was made about AD 1000. Despite the span of about a thousand years between the copying of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text, differences between them are minimal and insignificant. “For example, amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls and fragments found at other places in the Judean desert, there are some which differ from the Masoretic Text in only about 1 letter of each 1000 letters.”¹

This high degree of accuracy is not true of other works coming to us from antiquity. In his book *A Survey of the Old Testament Introduction*, Gleason Archer documents the dramatic changes and discrepancies found in several other ancient works of note—then draws this conclusion regarding the Old Testament.

Apart from the divine superintendence of the transmission of the Hebrew text, there is no particular reason why the same phenomenon of discrepancy and change would not appear between Hebrew manuscripts produced centuries apart. Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered...near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text...The five percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling. Even those Dead Sea fragments of Deuteronomy and Samuel which point to a different manuscript family from that which underlies our received Hebrew text do not indicate any difference in doctrine or teaching. *They do not affect the message of revelation in the slightest.* (Emphasis added.)²

Another example of the reliability of the documents we have: Scholars say that only seventeen letters of the 166 words in Isaiah 53 differ between the Dead Sea Scrolls text and the Masoretic Text. In “The Dead Sea Scrolls and Biblical Integrity,” author Garry Brantley accounts for these seventeen letter changes.³

10 letters are spelling differences

4 letters are stylistic changes

3 letters are an added word for “light” in verse 11

¹ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Masoretic Text,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoretic_text (accessed Mar. 28, 2006). *Wikipedia* content is licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License.

² Archer, *Old Testament Introduction*, p. 29.

³ Brantley, “Dead Sea Scrolls,” <http://www.apologeticspress.org/articles/266>.

The important thing to note is that these seventeen letter changes are deemed to have virtually no affect on biblical teaching.

Confirmed by archaeology. In addition to this and other textual evidence, thousands of archaeological digs in the Middle East over the past century and a half continue to confirm the existence of various places, events, and people mentioned in the Old Testament. And it is interesting to note that many people involved in these digs do not even believe the Bible. Their work, nonetheless, continues to verify its accuracy. Consider the following books for reading about archaeology and the Bible: *Wycliffe Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, ed. by Charles F. Pfeiffer, and *Archaeology and the Land of the Bible*, by Amihai Mazar.

The Reliability of the New Testament

The accuracy of the New Testament is amply attested as well. With over five thousand manuscripts⁴ (24,000 if you include fragments),⁵ it is the most widely attested book in world history. The “best and most important” of these manuscripts are copies made about AD 350, comments Bible scholar F. F. Bruce. He notes that some fragments are much older than that, as early as forty years after their original composition. He says, “Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works.”⁶ He continues by providing the comparatively skimpy manuscript evidence for other classic works of antiquity, including Caesar’s *Gallic War*; *History of Rome* by Livy; Tacitus’s *Histories*, *Dialogus*, *Agricola*, and *Germania*; and *The History* by Herodotus. Bruce concludes,

The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no-one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt. It is a curious fact that historians have often been much readier to trust the New Testament records than have many theologians. Somehow or other, there are people who regard a “sacred book” as *ipso facto* under suspicion, and demand much more corroborative evidence for such a work than they would for an ordinary secular or pagan writing. From the viewpoint of the historian, the same standards must be applied to both. But we do not quarrel with those who want more evidence for the New Testament than for other writings; firstly, because the universal claims which the New Testament makes upon mankind are so absolute, and the character

⁴ Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, p. 16.

⁵ Rhodes, *Bible Translations*, p. 2.

⁶ Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, p. 16.

and works of its chief Figure so unparalleled, that we want to be as sure of its truth as we possibly can; and secondly, because in point of fact there *is* much more evidence for the New Testament than for other ancient writings of comparable date.⁷

We would ordinarily expect to find wide-ranging discrepancies and variances among documents as old as the thousands of New Testament manuscripts. But, just as we found with the Old Testament, this is not the case. In Bruce's opinion, "The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice."⁸

The New Testament is attested not only by vast numbers of manuscripts. Quotes in writings of early church leaders as well as Jewish and Gentile writers further confirm the reliability of the New Testament documents.⁹ And, as with the Old Testament, archaeology continues to verify details of history known to us only through passages in the New Testament.¹⁰

Pseudo-Christian Cults Reject the Reliability of the Bible

Pseudo-Christian cults get into trouble by not having a proper reverence for the Bible—a low rather than a high view of Scripture. Some teach that the Bible has become corrupt through transmission and needs restoring. This view led Joseph Smith to dramatically alter the King James Version into his so-called *Inspired Version*, also known as *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible*. Interestingly, his work did not involve any manuscripts whatever and cannot correctly be deemed a translation at all.¹¹

The idea that the Bible text needs fixing led, in the late 1940s, to three Jehovah's Witnesses being commissioned to come up with their *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, though none of them had ever studied biblical languages at even a college level. Not only is their work highly suspect, biblical texts appear to have been intentionally distorted to match the Witnesses' already distorted theology.¹²

Christian Scientists discredit the Bible altogether in favor of Mary Baker Eddy's superior personal revelations. For them, she has replaced the inferior Bible with her own supernatural experiences. The Bible for them remains a

⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

⁹ Ibid., chapters 9 and 10, "The Evidence of Early Jewish Writings," and "The Evidence of Early Gentile Writers."

¹⁰ Ibid., chapter 8, "More Archaeological Evidence."

¹¹ See Trask, "Joseph Smith's *Inspired Version* of the Bible," chapter 9 in *Part Way to Utah*.

¹² Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, pp. 71ff.

quaint artifact, something to quote occasionally in a weak effort to support the markedly superior pronouncements of Mary Baker Eddy.¹³

The apostle Paul admonished the younger Timothy, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). Bogus scriptures produce bogus doctrine. How can it be any other way? But if persevering in only legitimate doctrine will help you “save both yourself and your hearers,” what can be said of people who promote bogus doctrine? When cults reject the reliability of the Bible, they doom their followers to belief in a gospel “which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:7). God wants to save cult members from this.

The best antidote to the corrupt doctrine of cults is a strong dose of biblical theology. Former members need “brain washing”—out with the old and in with the new. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2). You can look at this as a process of deprogramming and reprogramming yourself. You won’t accomplish this overnight, but the results are well worth the time and effort.

The rest of this chapter offers guidance in this process of renewing your mind. We will look first at information on Bible versions and finish by looking at various Bible study helps. I have also included a list of books For Further Reading and Growth in *Appendix B*.

Bible Versions

Historically, in Europe, before the American Revolution, most countries had a national church, and each national church required use of a specific version of the Bible. The Founding Fathers of the United States, however, wisely parted with this custom by providing for freedom of Christian expression, thus refraining from mandating one particular denomination of Christianity as a national church. This new freedom gave rise to a much wider variety of Christian denominations than were tolerated in Europe. And the same unique freedom that gave rise to American denominationalism is the same freedom that continues to give rise to a wide variety of new Bible versions. As recently as 1995 there were “nearly sixty more or less different English versions of the whole Bible; plus another seventy-five or so of the New Testament.”¹⁴ It is significant to note that most of these versions sprang from the United States, with new versions coming out almost every year.

This seeming explosion of Bible versions can create confusion, however. Just as an abundance of denominations requires Christians to use discernment and to make wise choices, the abundance of Bible versions requires careful

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 126ff.

¹⁴ Guthrie, *Choose Your Bible Wisely*, p. 13.

judgment as we select which ones we will use. Making choices is harder work than simply accepting the dictates of a national church, but I am sure we would have it no other way. “Those who think that every nation should have its own national church also require that there should be one national version of the Bible.”¹⁵ But that’s just not the American way.

As with choosing a church, choosing Bible versions wisely may seem complex, mysterious and confusing. In this section I will try to add clarity by briefly surveying the versions and giving some general principals. For a more thorough analysis, I highly recommend each of the books under Bible Versions in *Appendix B – For Further Reading and Growth* at the back of the book. If you are going to buy only one of these books, I suggest Philip Comfort’s *Essential Guide to Bible Versions*. If the King James Version of the Bible is an issue for you, or someone you know, I additionally recommend James White’s *The King James Only Controversy*.

The original documents that make up the Bible were written in three different languages over a period of roughly fifteen hundred years, ending nearly two thousand years ago. Language and culture mirror each other; indeed, each helps define the other. Needless to say, our modern culture is dramatically different from those biblical cultures. And our modern language, consequently, is every bit as different as well. As a result, Bible translators always face important decisions about how they will approach their work. Bible versions fall broadly into three translation styles. The definitions used here are based on *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.¹⁶

Literal Translation. The traditional approach to Bible translation is to stick very close to the original text—a literal translation. The result is an English version that may be technically accurate but awkward, both linguistically and culturally. Often called word-for-word translations, many also call them stiff and wooden. General readability is sacrificed. The King James Version and *New American Standard Bible* are examples of literal translations.

Free Translation, or Paraphrase. At the other end of the translation spectrum is an approach that seeks to translate the *ideas* from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original. This kind of translation renders Scripture in completely modern language style and cultural conventions. Free translations and paraphrases are very readable but are often criticized for not faithfully following the original biblical text. In the quest for thoroughly modern English, the author of the paraphrase says, “Let me tell you what the writer *really*

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁶ Fee and Stuart, *Read the Bible for All its Worth*, p. 35.

meant,” and goes on to *interpret* rather than *translate*—big difference. Examples of paraphrase versions are *The Living Bible*, *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips, and *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson.

Dynamic Equivalence. In the middle of this spectrum lies the translation principle of dynamic equivalence. Dynamic equivalence translations concentrate *primarily* on updating style of language, while leaving historical, factual and cultural features largely in place. The result is much more readable than a literal translation, yet far more accurate than a paraphrase or free translation. This is why most modern Bible translations are dynamic equivalents, the most popular of which is the *New International Version* (NIV).

As you can see, translators have to make trade-offs. In choosing Bibles, you should consider how you intend to use them. For detailed, technical study, you cannot beat a literal translation. For devotional use and everyday reading, however, you may find a dynamic equivalent version more readable and enjoyable. You won’t spend your time tripping over awkward or archaic words and grammatical constructions but will still have a high degree of accuracy. Dynamic equivalents represent a good blend of readability and accuracy. Many people use a dynamic equivalent for everyday reading, but supplement it with a literal translation for detailed study. That includes me. In fact, a most useful book is a parallel Bible, which usually contains four translations. I use *The Comparative Study Bible*, which contains the King James Version, the Amplified Bible, the *New American Standard Bible* and the *New International Version*—two literal translations, a paraphrase and a dynamic equivalent. Different parallel Bibles contain different combinations of translations, so compare carefully before purchasing one.

The chart below (from Fee and Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*¹⁷) demonstrates the continuum from literal to free translation for some of the more popular English Bible versions. See the legend that follows the chart for explanations of abbreviations and for additional information. I have added *The Message* (MSG) version in the far right column.

Literal		Dynamic Equivalence			Free	
KJV	RSV	NRSV	NIV	GNB	Phillips	LB
NASB			NAB	JB		MSG
			NEB			

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Abbr.	Year Published/Revised	Grade Level	Full Name
KJV	1611; rev. 1768	12 th Grade	King James Version
NASB	NT 1963; OT 1971; rev. 1995	11 th Grade	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
RSV	NT 1946; OT 1952; rev. 1971	7 th Grade	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>
NRSV	1990	10 th Grade	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
NIV	NT 1973; OT 1978	7 th Grade	<i>New International Version</i>
NAB	1970; NT rev. 1986; Ps rev. 1992	11 th Grade	<i>New American Bible</i>
NEB	NT 1961; OT 1970	8 th Grade	<i>New English Bible</i>
GNB	NT 1966; OT 1974; rev. 1993	7 th Grade	<i>Good News Bible</i>
JB	1966	7 th Grade	<i>Jerusalem Bible</i>
Phillips*	NT 1958; rev. 1972	9 th Grade	<i>New Testament in Modern English</i>
LB*	NT 1962; OT 1971	8 th Grade	<i>The Living Bible</i>
MSG*	NT 1993; Ps 1994; OT 2002	7 th Grade	<i>The Message</i>

Note: The year published/revised and grade level data is from the All Bibles Web site at <http://allbibles.com/bibleversions.asp>. Grade level refers to the readability of the text. The All Bibles complete chart includes this data and more for forty-eight English Bible versions.

* Please note that Fee and Stuart give this caution regarding paraphrase versions of the Bible.

The problem with a free translation...especially for study purposes, is that the translator updates the original author too much. Furthermore, such a “translation” all too often comes close to being a commentary. A free translation is *always* done by a single translator, and unless the translator is also a skilled exegete who knows the various problems in *all* of the biblical passages, there is a danger that the reader will be misled.¹⁸

If you need a Bible that is very easy to read, with a simpler literary style and vocabulary, I believe there are better alternatives than a paraphrase—legitimate translations that follow the original biblical texts much more closely. One is the *New International Readers’ Version* (NIrV). Another is the *New Century Version* (NCV). The NIrV was produced specifically for children as a steppingstone to the NIV. The NCV is at a third-grade reading level for adults.

You might wonder which of all these versions is the most popular, best-selling one. For nearly four hundred years it was the KJV, hands down. But since 1987, the KJV has been surpassed by the NIV.¹⁹ (An added benefit to

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 36–37.

¹⁹ Comfort, *Essential Guide*, pp. 190–191.

the NIV translation is that Zondervan's *NIV Study Bible* is also the best-selling study Bible, which I will discuss below under "Bible Study Helps.")

In the final analysis, I must agree with a pastor of ours who once said, "It really doesn't matter what version of the Bible you read. Just get one, read it and treasure it up in your heart!" The Bible itself tells us why.

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
(Ps. 119:11)

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

The holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:15)

Bible Study Helps

Many resources are available today to help you grow in understanding God's Word. Some of these should become trusted and good friends to which you will turn time and time again as you research Scriptures and topics over the years ahead. I present these resources in what I consider to be the order of their importance or the order in which you may wish to acquire them. This list includes only traditional book formats, but most of these resources are available in various electronic formats, even for Palm Pilots! But I will let you explore electronic formats for yourself, if you are so inclined.

- **A Good Study Bible.** This is the place you want to start. If you can only afford one book, make it this one. All popular Bible versions today are available in at least one study Bible edition. A good study Bible costs a little more than a text-only edition, but it is well worth the extra money, since you have a wealth of information available at your fingertips each time you open it up. Choose one with the best resources. A good study Bible will have a variety of charts and maps and will have text notes at the bottom of each page that comment on the verses above. It should also have cross-references to related Scriptures, often in a center column. And it should have an adequate concordance and possibly a dictionary.

Another helpful feature is a summary of each book of the Bible, with information about the author and the original recipients of the book. But please remember that these summaries are not actually part of the biblical text; they simply give us insight into the Bible. A good study Bible will not favor a particular denomination or prominent person. You want the notes and other resources to be free from either individual or denominational bias. As you read and research, you can

make up your own mind what you believe. Don't let someone else tell you what you should believe at the beginning of your study.

Zondervan was a pioneer in study Bibles with its *NIV Study Bible*. It set a high standard to which other publishers have aspired by substantially beefing up the quality of their study Bibles. But for my money, I believe the *NIV Study Bible* remains the best one available. It also remains the best-selling study Bible. So I recommend that you first take a good look at the *NIV Study Bible* and use it as a benchmark to compare to any others you may be considering. By the way, Zondervan now publishes its study Bible for translations other than the NIV.

- **Concordance.** I would make this the second book you buy. A Bible concordance is an alphabetical index of words in the Bible and where they are located. For example, a concordance lists all occurrences of the word *salvation* in the Bible. Concordances are available for most popular translations. And as with study Bibles, concordances come in a variety of flavors. Many Bibles have a concordance in the back, but it will be pretty limited. Stand-alone concordances are more comprehensive. They come in three sizes, small, medium and extra-large.
 - ✓ ***Small concordances*** are essentially pocket editions and may also be referred to as “concise.” They are generally inexpensive but are understandably limited by their small size. They do go beyond the scope of concordances found in back of many Bibles but not a lot further. Concise editions may contain five thousand entries. They are particularly handy if your Bible does not have a concordance.
 - ✓ ***Medium-sized concordances*** are the handiest for general everyday use and are less expensive than the extra-large ones but have fewer features. A medium-sized concordance will be roughly the size of a large Bible, with maybe a thousand pages. Medium-sized editions may contain two hundred thousand entries.
 - ✓ ***Extra-large concordances, or exhaustive concordances,*** are generally top of the line. But beware—they can be both exhaustive and exhausting. They are large books, even requiring the use of both hands. In recent years, smaller exhaustive editions have become available—if your eyes are good. A concordance is published as a companion for a particular Bible version. Exhaustive concordances have a

wealth of features and are extremely useful. They list virtually *every* instance of *every* word in their related Bibles—even all instances of *a, an, the, is*, and so on. They may also include abbreviated Greek and Hebrew dictionaries or lexicons, which are useful for detailed study, as we will discuss below.

Concordances have many uses. The simplest: If a passage of Scripture comes to mind, you can generally find it with a concordance. I find this tremendously helpful and use my concordance all the time.

Another good use for a concordance is doing word studies. You can pick an English word, say *justify* and/or *justification* and review each Bible passage where it occurs. In this way you can see how the word is used throughout the Bible.

Another way to approach a word study is to use the Hebrew or Greek lexicon—even if you don't know Hebrew or Greek. A number keyed to the lexicon follows each verse listed for an English word in the main concordance. Find the number for that word in the lexicon to see the Hebrew or Greek word and a list of all the places that same Hebrew or Greek word is used in the Bible. You can compare all the ways the word is translated and used.

Your selection of a concordance depends on three things: (1) your budget, (2) your level of interest in technical study and (3) the strength of your hands. I use my medium-sized concordance most of the time, and it works just fine. I use my exhaustive concordance only if I have trouble finding a passage or if I want to do more extensive study.

- **Bible Study Guides.** I recommend three guides that I believe will bless your reading and study of the Bible immensely.
 - ✓ ***How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth***, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. If I had to condense my three-year seminary program into a single book, this would be it. But it's not a big book—only about 250 pages—and very readable. It is not the least bit intimidating. The authors begin by covering different types of Bible translations. They go on to explain the need to first interpret the Bible in its original context. An explanation of each type of literature in the Bible follows and what to look for in each type. In the appendix, the authors include a good summary of what to look for in Bible commentaries and their ideas of the best

commentaries available. This little book may revolutionize your reading and study of the Bible.

- ✓ ***How to Read the Bible Book by Book***, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart—the same guys. They are both conservative and widely respected theologians, by the way. This book was designed as a companion to their immensely popular *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. In this volume, the authors begin with a well-done summary called “The Biblical Story: An Overview.” They then survey each book of the Bible. The survey for each book contains four elements: (1) orienting data (setting, authorship, date of composition, etc.), (2) an overview of the book, (3) specific advice for reading the book and (4) a walk through the book. It’s a sort of Cliffs Notes for the Bible. It is also like a condensed one-volume Bible commentary, with additional user-friendly features. Great book!

- ✓ ***How to Read a Book***, by Mortimer J. Adler. Interestingly, this book is not specifically a Bible study guide. But it is the one book most consistently recommended by my professors in seminary. It’s a classic work first published in 1940 and freshened up over the years. It will make you a better reader not only of the Bible but of anything you pick up. Adler begins by describing “The Activity and Art of Reading.” He then defines different levels of reading, from elementary to analytical. Considerable time is spent on various techniques of analytical reading. Adler then tells how to read various *kinds* of matter, including (1) practical books, (2) imaginative literature, (3) stories, plays and poems, (4) history, (5) science and mathematics, (6) philosophy (including theology) and (7) social science. He concludes with the ultimate goal of synoptic reading—how to read numerous sources on the same subject. I learned to practice much of what Adler says in the intensity of a rigorous seminary environment. Now, these techniques are second nature and invaluable to me. I highly recommend this book to everyone.

- **Bible Dictionary**. A good Bible dictionary will give you important insight into the background and significance of a myriad of biblical people, places, objects and terms. Some Bibles come with abbreviated dictionaries in the back, but just like back-of-the-Bible

concordances, they will be limited. Stand-alone dictionaries come in three sizes, miniature, one volume, and multivolume.

- ✓ **Miniature dictionaries**, paperbacks, often called pocket editions, will have perhaps 150 to 200 pages. A handy size and useful, to be sure, but with limited contents.
- ✓ **One-volume dictionaries** are more substantial, with maybe 1,200 pages or more. This is the kind most people will want, at least to start. A popular one is *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. I have had my *Unger's* for over twenty years. Next to my Bible and concordance, it is the book I use the most for study and research. (I often use it in conjunction with *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F.L. Cross, which I will discuss below under "Other Reference Works.") A lot of good scholarship has occurred over the last twenty years, so when I buy a new dictionary I'll also consider InterVarsity's *New Bible Dictionary*, edited by D. R. W. Wood, et al. But many good ones are available today. Pick a reputable publisher like Eerdmans, Zondervan, InterVarsity, Holman, Tyndale, or Word. Ask your pastor to recommend one if you wish.
- ✓ **Multivolume dictionaries** run the gamut from general layperson use to professional "industrial strength" sets. So be careful here. You don't want to get in over your head. A good one-volume dictionary should serve you well for some time. If you get to the point where you feel you have outgrown this dictionary, you'll be in a better position to know just how much dictionary to get next.
- **One-Volume Bible Commentary.** Dictionaries help you understand individual terms in the Bible. Commentaries help you understand the larger context of those words and the flow and meaning of the text as a whole. Commentaries are most often written by seasoned, professional scholars whose job it is to thoroughly research the text and understand it fully. There is a lot of professional pride in scholarly ranks, so they are very careful to do their best work in commentaries. They know they will be evaluated on that work for many years to come.

There are commentaries on each of the sixty-six books of the Bible. But it is certainly not practical to buy sixty-six commentaries right off the bat. So the best place to start is with a one-volume commentary. As your interest and needs grow, you can buy

individual book commentaries as you go along. The *New Bible Commentary*, published by Eerdmans and edited by Guthrie and Motyer is regarded by many as the best one-volume commentary available.²⁰ Selecting individual book commentaries, however, is not quite so easy.

- **Individual Book Commentaries.** Somewhere along the line you may want to bear down on a particular book of the Bible for in-depth study, whether individually or in a group setting. When you do, you will want to get at least one commentary for that book. But picking out that commentary can be daunting, unless you have some help. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of commentaries out there, and more being produced each year. How can you know which one to trust, to learn from? Only professional scholars have the time and knowledge to effectively evaluate the many commentaries available today. So what is the layperson to do? Most of the time we will just settle for whatever happens to be on the shelf when we visit our local Bible bookstore. But I believe there is a better way.

The book *A Guide to Selecting and Using Bible Commentaries* takes much of the mystery out of selecting individual book commentaries (written by Douglas Stuart and published by Word Publishing). I consult it every time I buy a commentary. Stuart explains what commentaries are, and what they aren't. He also describes sizes and types of commentaries, and major commentary series. He concludes with his ideas on the best commentaries for each book of the Bible. This is a priceless guide that I highly recommend. Stuart makes his lifetime of scholarship available in a very readable and useful volume. As far as I know, this is the only book of its kind. I would not buy a commentary without first consulting it.

- **Other Reference Works.** Depending on your needs and interests, you may find some other reference works useful as well.
 - ✓ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, revised edition, edited by F. L. Cross. This is a standard, classic dictionary that I find particularly useful. As its title indicates, this is a dictionary of the Christian church, not the Bible, though there are many overlaps. The scholarship is first class. Many entries list standard reference works for further research, an extremely useful feature. The dictionary includes entries for people, places, doctrines and events that

²⁰ Stuart, *Using Bible Commentaries*, p. 98.

have been important in church history. It is one of the best purchases I have ever made.

- ✓ *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, edited by Daniel G. Reid, et. al. This is more than a handbook of denominations. It gives concise histories of denominations, people and movements in American Christianity, including doctrinal developments. Very useful in cutting through the maze of denominations crisscrossing our continent. And as with *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, it includes bibliographic references for further research and study.

Avoid Bibliolatry

Bibliolatry may be a term you have not yet encountered. It means “the worship of the Bible.” The Bible is most important to Christians—it is God’s own Word to us. We treasure it as our infallible guide to faith and practice. But we do not *worship* the book; we worship its *Author* instead. People sometimes become so obsessed with detailed information about the Bible that they overlook their relationship to its Author, thereby missing the mark altogether. The Bible itself becomes the object of their worship, and they content themselves with ever increasing knowledge of it. This leads to arrogance. So please remember, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1).

In chapter 5, on “Salvation,” I told a story from the life of Wong Ming-Dao (Wang Ming-Tao), considered the spiritual father of China. I will close this chapter with some of his wise counsel as he reflects on his rich pastoral experience.

I came to appreciate that the greatest need of the flock was not so much for me to understand all the Scriptures but to develop my trust in and dependence on the Word of God to produce fruits of holiness and piety and to live a life like Christ. If we do not achieve this, even though we preach the Bible most clearly and even though those who listen are given perfect understanding we shall nurture only Pharisee-type Christians—and that is all.²¹

²¹ Wong, *A Stone Made Smooth*, , pp. 103–105.