

The Bible vs. Books About the Bible

by Bryan Gibson

I don't read many books about the Bible, but I do read the Bible—frequently, and sometimes for long stretches. In the interest of full disclosure, that hasn't always been my practice. Back in my early to mid 20's (I'm 50 now), I read a lot of books about the Bible, but I cut way back and here's why. Unsound ideas had begun to creep into my mind, and it scared me. When I did get around to actually reading the Bible, I could tell that these uninspired authors were taking me in a different direction. These weren't what some would call major departures from the truth, but how far does one have to stray to be wrong? I wanted to be right about everything, and I knew the Bible was right.

I'm sure there's been some downside to my present practice. No doubt I've missed some wonderful insights from other authors, but I want to make sure that the source of all my teachings is the One “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and there's only one book that can provide that. “The entirety of Your word is truth...” (Psalms 119:160)—I believe that with all my heart.

Perhaps you're thinking that you can read all this outside material without being influenced by error, that you can properly discern between truth and error. Maybe YOU can, but many have proven that they cannot. I read and hear lessons from my own brethren that sound more like the popular authors of today than they do Jesus or His apostles. It is clear to me at least that they've read more books about the Bible than the Bible itself. Personally, I prefer an inspired author over an uninspired one any day (2 Timothy 3:16-17). I've yet to find an uninspired author that can match their skill in argument, their fire, their heartfelt compassion, their beauty of expression, etc. In other words, I'm more impressed with THE word than I am their words.

I know I'm going to be challenged on this, so let me add this for clarity. I don't put all books about the Bible in the same category. Concordances, word studies, topical Bibles, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias—these pose little or no danger, and they can be most helpful in better understanding the text. I don't read many commentaries, because they do pose a greater danger, but at least there's an effort to stick to the Bible text, and to prove each point that is made. The worst culprits seem to be the “devotional style” books, where the author often goes for long stretches without citing a Bible verse to prove his point. It's easy to get caught up in their “fresh, contemporary” style, and not even bother to search the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things are so (Acts 17:11).

Yes, I know the Bible contains some things “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16), but God assures me that I can understand His will for me (Ephesians 3:1-5; 5:17). I'm not anywhere close to brilliant, but I am capable of understanding, and I plan to pursue this understanding as diligently as I possibly can (Proverbs 2:1-5).

“Give me the Bible, holy message shining, thy light shall guide me in the narrow way,
precept and promise, law and love combining, till night shall vanish in eternal day” (“Give
Me the Bible,” E.S. Lorenz, Priscilla J. Owens).