Interpreting and Applying the Bible
Using Bible Commentaries

I. Selecting Bible commentaries.

A. Three basic types of commentaries
   1. **Devotional commentaries**: Focus on contemporary relevance and life application of Bible teachings. The style may be conversational. Usually only the big ideas are discussed and many words, phrases, ideas and even some verses are not explained. There is usually no reason given for interpretations.
   2. **Homiletical commentaries** ("homily" = sermon): Focus on interpreting the basic meaning of the passage and applying it. These are generally written by preachers and may be lightly revised collected sermons. Only for the most controversial issues are reasons given for interpretations.
   3. **Expository or Exegetical commentaries**: Focus on the determining the author’s original meaning, rather than application. They will often give reasons supporting their interpretations. They will give insights from the original Hebrew and Greek text, explain cultural and historical background, and often address current scholarly disputes.

B. The most helpful commentaries for Bible study emphasize interpretation as opposed to modern application. Usually these will be expository or exegetical commentaries and less often homiletical commentaries.

C. Features to look for:
   1. Reasons for their interpretations.
   2. Describe several views of complex and controversial issues.
   3. Use of the original language, even if they translate or transliterate the Greek and Hebrew words. Even ones that include Greek and Hebrew script can be understood by reading around the original language words and concentrating on the English explanations.
   4. Explanations of cultural and historical issues.
   5. Bibliographic citations of other books and journal articles.
   6. Pick commentaries that stretch you and give you information that you might not get otherwise.
   7. Any commentary older than 100 years old will usually be too dated to be of much value for solving interpretive problems. Commentaries older than 50 years old could not use the findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls that have enriched our understanding of the historical and religious climate of the NT.
   8. Test a commentary by seeing how it deals with 2-3 controversial passages. Make sure the explanations are clear, use the interpretive checkpoints we have discussed and compare several interpretations.

D. Commentaries on an individual book of the Bible are more useful than commentaries that treat several books in a single volume.

E. Consult books that evaluate commentaries and other reference books to help you select them. Take one of these with you to the bookstore when you are shopping for commentaries.
   1. The appendix of Fee and Stuart.
   2. Bestcommentaries.com aggregates evaluations from various sources
   3. The standard critical lists of commentaries:
      b. Tremper Longman III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey*
   4. Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) and Institute of Biblical Research (IBR) have a series of bibliographies evaluating reference books. For example:
      a. Craig Evans, *Synoptic Gospels: An Annotated Bibliography*
      b. David E. Aune, *Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels*
      c. Mark A. Seifrid and Randall Tan, *The Pauline Writings: An Annotated Bibliography*
Interpretation: Commentaries

d. D. Brent Sandy, *Prophecy and Apocalyptic: An Annotated Bibliography*
e. For others, search for “IBR bibliography” on Google, Amazon or a library catalog
5. James E. Rosscup, *Commentaries for Biblical Expositors*
7. Douglas Moo, *An Annotated Bibliography of the Bible and the Church* (includes suggestions on theology and pastoral duties as well as biblical studies)

F. Some important series:
1. Basic: Tyndale (great inexpensive paperback set); IVP New Testament Commentary (very good); New American Commentary (Southern Baptist)
2. Intermediate: Word Biblical Commentary; New International Commentary (generally very good); Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (good); Expositor's (Zondervan, not the older, Expositors Greek Testament); Pillar (very good)
3. Advanced: New International Greek Testament Commentary (very good); Anchor; International Critical Commentary (especially newer ones); Hermeneia (some great, some have quirky interpretations)
4. Note: Intermediate and Advanced commentaries nearly always interact with secondary literature (other commentaries and journal articles. They will also give a justification for their interpretation on controversial questions. Intermediate commentaries may do this less often and in less detail (particularly Expositors).

G. *New International Application Commentary* explores contemporary application with a good exegetical background. Treat it as a supplement to expository commentaries.

II. Suggestions for using commentaries.

A. **Do your own thinking about the meaning of the passage first,** then consult commentaries.

B. **Remember that commentators are fallible.**
   1. They have their own biases, presuppositions and limitations.
   2. Yet they have a much greater knowledge of the original languages and biblical culture and history, so we should respect their opinion.
   3. Always think critically about what they say.
   4. Let their ideas stimulate your thinking.

C. **Look for the reasons for their interpretations and evaluate the strength of the evidence.** This is the most important thing to look for in a commentary.
   1. Does the reasoning seem valid?
   2. Does it violate any of the checkpoints for interpretation?
   3. Does it make use of all the details you observe in the passage context?

D. **After you have done careful study and evaluated their arguments, you may still believe your interpretation is correct.** Make sure you have good support for your argument and you can answer the support for their view.

E. **You can cautiously use commentaries with erroneous conclusions.** They may have information about culture, history, word meaning, grammar, etc. which can be raw data to help your study.

F. **Use several commentaries to get different opinions.**