

A CHAT ABOUT COMMENTARIES Charles Spurgeon

From Commenting and Commentaries: Two Lectures Addressed to the Students of the Pastor's College Metropolitan Tabernacle Together with a Catalogue of Biblical Commentaries and Expositions by Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1876)

In order to be able to expound the Scriptures, and as an aid to your pulpit studies, you will need to be familiar with the commentators: a glorious army, let me tell you, whose acquaintance will be your delight and profit. Of course, you are not such wiseacres as to think or say that you can expound Scripture without assistance from the works of divines and learned men who have labored before you in the field of exposition. If you are of that opinion, pray remain so, for you are not worth the trouble of conversion. Like a little coterie [clique] who thinks as you, you would resent the attempt as an insult to your infallibility. It seems odd that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves should think so little of what he has revealed to others. My chat this afternoon is not for these great originals, but for you who are content to learn from holy men, taught of God, and mighty in the Scriptures.

It has been the fashion of late years to speak against the use of commentaries. If there were any fear that the expositions of Matthew Henry, Gill, Scott, and others would be exalted into Christian Targums, we would join the chorus of objectors, but the existence or approach of such a danger we do not suspect. The temptations of our times lie rather in empty pretensions to novelty of sentiment than in a slavish following of accepted guides. A respectable acquaintance with the opinions of the giants of the past might have saved many an erratic thinker from wild interpretations and outrageous inferences. Usually we have found the despisers of commentaries to be men who have no sort of acquaintance with them; in their case, it is the opposite of familiarity which has bred contempt.

It is true there are a number of expositions of the whole Bible which are hardly worth shelf room. They aim at too much and fail altogether. The authors have spread a little learning over a vast surface and have badly attempted for the entire Scriptures what they might have accomplished for one book with tolerable success. But who will deny the preeminent value of such expositions as those of Calvin, Ness, Henry, Trapp, Poole, and Bengel, which are as deep as they are broad? And yet further, who can pretend to biblical learning who has not made himself familiar with the great writers who spent a life in explaining some one sacred book? Without attempting to give in detail the names of all, I intend in a familiar talk to mention the more notable.

First among the mighty for general usefulness we are bound to mention the man whose name is a household word, MATTHEW HENRY. He is most pious and pithy, sound and sensible, suggestive and sober, terse and trustworthy. You will find him to be glittering with metaphors, rich in analogies, overflowing with illustrations, superabundant in reflections. He delights in apposition and alliteration. He is usually plain, quaint, and full of pith. He sees right through a text directly. Apparently he is not critical, but he quietly gives the result of an accurate critical knowledge of the original fully up to the best critics of his time. He is not versed in the manners and customs of the East, for the Holy Land was not so accessible as in our day, but he is deeply spiritual, heavenly, and profitable, finding good matter in every text, and from all deducing most practical and judicious lessons. His is a kind of commentary to be placed where I saw it, in the old meeting house at Chester--chained in the vestry for anybody and everybody to read. It is the poor man's commentary, the old Christian's companion, suitable to everybody, instructive to all. You are aware, perhaps, that the latter part of the New Testament was completed by other hands, the good man having gone the way of all flesh. The writers have executed their work exceedingly well, have worked in much of the matter which Henry had collected, and have done their best to follow his methods, but their combined production is far inferior to Matthew Henry himself, and any reader will soon detect the difference. Every minister ought to read Matthew Henry entirely and carefully through once at least.

It would not be possible for me too earnestly to press upon you the importance of reading the expositions of

that prince among men, JOHN CALVIN. I have often felt inclined to cry out with Father Simon, a Roman Catholic, "Calvin possessed a sublime genius", and with Scaliger, "Oh! how well has Calvin reached the meaning of the prophets--no one better." You will find forty-two or more goodly volumes worth their weight in gold. Of all commentators, I believe John Calvin to be the most candid. In his expositions he is not always what moderns would call Calvinistic. That is to say, where Scripture maintains the doctrine of predestination and grace, he flinches in no degree, but inasmuch as some Scriptures bear the impress of human free action and responsibility, he does not shun to expound their meaning in all fairness and integrity. He was no trimmer and pruner of texts. He gave their meaning as far as he knew it. His honest intention was to translate the Hebrew and the Greek originals as accurately as he possibly could, and then to give the meaning which would naturally be conveyed by such Greek and Hebrew words. He labored, in fact, to declare not his own mind upon the Spirit's words, but the mind of the Spirit as couched in those words. Dr. King very truly says of him, "No writer ever dealt more fairly and honestly by the Word of God. He is scrupulously careful to let it speak for itself, and to guard against every tendency of his own mind to put upon it a questionable meaning for the sake of establishing some doctrine which he feels to be important, or some theory which he is anxious to uphold. This is one of his prime excellences."

A very distinguished place is due to DR. GILL. Beyond all controversy, Gill was one of the most able Hebraists of his day, and in other matters no mean proficient. When an opponent in controversy had ventured to call him "a botcher in divinity", the good doctor, being compelled to become a fool in glorying, gave such a list of his attainments as must have covered his accuser with confusion. His great work on the Holy Scriptures is greatly prized at the present day by the best authorities, which is conclusive evidence of its value, since the set of the current of theological thought is quite contrary to that of Dr. Gill. Probably no man since Gill's days has at all equaled him in the matter of Rabbinical learning. Say what you will about that lore, it has its value. Of course, a man has to rake among perfect dunghills and dust heaps, but there are a few jewels which the world could not afford to miss. Gill was a master cinder-sifter among the Targums, the Talmuds, the Mishna, and the Gemara. Richly did he deserve the degree of which he said, "I never bought it, nor thought it, nor sought it." He was always at work. It is difficult to say when he slept, for he wrote 10,000 folio pages of theology. The portrait of him which belongs to this church (and hangs in my private vestry and from which all the published portraits have been engraved) represents him, after an interview with an Arminian gentleman, turning up his nose in a most expressive manner as if he could not endure even the smell of freewill. In some such a vein he wrote his commentary. He hunts Arminianism throughout the whole of it. His frequent method of reflection is, "This text does not mean this", nobody ever thought it did; "It does not mean that", only two or three heretics ever imagined it did; and again it does not mean a third thing, or a fourth, or a fifth absurdity. But, at last, he thinks it does mean so-and-so and tells you so in a methodical, sermon-like manner. For good, sound, massive, sober sense in commenting, who can excel Gill?

Gentlemen, if you want something full of marrow and fatness, cheering to your own hearts by way of comment and likely to help you in giving to your hearers rich expositions, buy DR. HAWKER'S POOR MAN'S COMMENTARY. Dr. Hawker was the very least of commentators in the matter of criticism. He had no critical capacity and no ability whatever as an interpreter of the letter. But *he sees Jesus*, and that is a sacred gift which is most precious whether the owner be a critic or no. It is to be confessed that he occasionally sees Jesus where Jesus is not legitimately to be seen. He allows his reason to be mastered by his affections, which, vice as it is, is not the worst fault in the world. There is always such a savor of the Lord Jesus Christ in Dr. Hawker that you cannot read him without profit. He has the peculiar idea that Christ is in every Psalm, and this often leads him totally astray, because he attributes expressions to the Saviour which really shock the holy mind to imagine our Lord's using. However, not as a substantial dish, but as a condiment, place the Plymouth vicar's work on the table. His writing is all sugar, and you will know how to use it--not devouring it in lumps, but using it to flavor other things.

I must also add to the list A COMMENTARY, CRITICAL, EXPERIMENTAL, AND PRACTICAL, ON THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS. Of this I have a very high opinion. It is the joint work of Dr. Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and Dr. David Brown. It is to some extent a compilation and condensation of other men's thoughts,

but it is sufficiently original to claim a place in every minister's library. Indeed, it contains so great a variety of information that if a man had no other exposition, he would find himself at no great loss if he possessed this and used it diligently.