

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible. 2nd Ed.

by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993. 265 pp.

\$14.99 (paper). Reviewed by T. Scott Christmas.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart have written a work that is very helpful for those who wish to understand the Bible. Fee has authored a number of New Testament commentaries and presently serves as Professor of New Testament at Regent College. Likewise, Stuart serves as Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Both men, having previously published individual works on biblical exegesis, seem qualified to write a book such as this.

In their preface, the authors describe their main concern as providing a better understanding of the different types of literature (genre) that make up the Bible (p. 9). That seems to be the distinguishing characteristic of this particular work, among the many books on how to study the Bible. For instance, a proper understanding that the psalms are to be considered as poems and the epistles as letters, should lead to better Bible reading and study. Successful Bible study involves learning to ask the proper questions of the text. Knowing the proper genre will assist in formulating the proper questions.

After spending the first two chapters addressing the issues of “the need to interpret” and “the basic tool of a good Bible translation,” the authors devote the remaining 11 chapters to the various literary genre of the Bible. Although other texts dealing with Bible interpretation

address the issue of differing genre, few devote as much attention to the issue as this particular work. Fee and Stuart make it very clear that understanding genre is a foundational step in understanding the Scriptures.

In Chapter 1, time is spent defining interpretation, exegesis, and hermeneutics. In Chapter 2, the authors delineate the science of translating Scripture as well as helpful steps in choosing a Bible translation. The preface notes that Gordon Fee penned chapters 1-4, 6-8 and 13, which all address New Testament genre. Those chapters include one chapter each on the Acts, Gospels, parables, the Revelation, and two chapters on the epistles. Stuart wrote chapters 5 and 9-12, which deal with Old Testament genre. His subjects include Old Testament narratives, the Law(s), the Prophets, the Psalms, and wisdom literature. Fee and Stuart conclude with a very helpful appendix showing how to evaluate commentaries and listing commentaries they recommend.

The work as a whole is well done. The format of the book is easy to use. The style is readable. Overall, the work is extremely practical. It successfully bridges the gap between the theory and practice of Bible interpretation. Many of the chapters are prefaced with a clear declaration of the author's concern or purpose. After instruction is given, the writer gives specific suggestions while working with example texts. The texts are well chosen and provide an informative platform to display the techniques being taught.

The book is laced with encouraging comments that seek to involve the reader in consistent Bible study. Some, as they read behind the careful exegesis of these men, might be

tempted to think that such insight is beyond their grasp. However, after dealing quite perceptively with the historical and literary context of 1 Corinthians 1-4, Fee writes:

You may have further questions about specific points of content, for which you can consult your commentary. *But all of what we have done here, you can do.* It may take practice—in some cases even some hard work of thinking; but you can do it, and the rewards are great (p. 57).

Overall, this much needed work fills a void in the area of considering genre in Bible interpretation. The genre-specific guidelines and principles give tremendous help in clarifying the Scriptures and are well worth the price of the book. One specific example is the set of guidelines given for interpreting the problem passages of the epistles (pp. 58-60).

Although the book is quite profitable, there are some weaknesses. First, Fee seems noticeably biased toward the New International Version of the Bible. He recommends that each reader use one translation provided it is a good one (p. 29). However, it is surprising that Fee recommends a dynamic equivalent translation—the NIV as the primary source, instead of a literal translation such as the NASB. He reasons that a literal translation “keeps distance” in the area of language and grammar (p. 36). He also asserts that a literal translation often makes the English ambiguous, where the Greek or Hebrew was quite clear to the original recipients (p. 36). What Fee neglects to inform the reader is that the dynamic equivalent translation often makes interpretive decisions without informing the reader that these decisions have been made. Right or wrong, these interpretive variations from the original go unnoticed by the trusting reader. This reviewer recognizes that every translation makes interpretive decisions. However, as a rule, a literal translation has fewer than a dynamic equivalent translation. If biblical accuracy is the

goal, it only seems logical to have a literal translation as a primary source instead of a secondary. Unfortunately, on page 29, Fee all but dismisses the regular use of the NASB.

Another weakness that reveals itself is that, at times, Fee makes strong theological and hermeneutical statements on controversial issues without fairly representing the possibility of other views. For example, when dealing with the problem of cultural relativity (pp. 70-76), Fee repeatedly raises the question of the proper role of women in ministry. After frequent references to the issue and several attempts to support his egalitarian position, he concludes that the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is culturally relative (p. 75). Unfortunately, he does not include a fair representation of the other exegetically persuasive and historically orthodox position.

There is one other unexplained weakness: Fee gives a surprisingly unorthodox definition of hermeneutics. He writes:

Although the word “hermeneutics” ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts. In this book we will use it exclusively in this way, to ask the questions about the Bible’s meaning in the “here and now” (p. 25).

He goes on to insist that exegesis must precede hermeneutics. Later, Fee again defines hermeneutics as “learning to hear the meaning in the context of our own day” (p. 61). This sounds more like a definition of “application” than of “hermeneutics.” A beginner in the field of Bible study could begin to view Fee’s definition as normative.

Aside from the weaknesses listed above, this book is recommended as a beneficial guide to a better understanding the Bible through a better understanding of Bible genre. Although

there have been many works written in the field of Bible study, this one earns a choice position. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart admirably fulfill the objectives they set forth in their preface by equipping their readers to better read and study God's Word through an awareness of Bible genre. The constant emphasis upon context and the general encouragement to employ other reliable sources in Bible study helps make this work a very effective tool. On the whole the book is fair and objective. Every pastor would benefit by using this work to refresh himself regarding the particular genre he is preparing to preach. He would also do well to recommend this work to lay persons interested in the field of Bible interpretation.