

# Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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## *Which Study Bible?*<sup>1</sup>

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The Free Reformed Churches of Australia in synod Byford (1994) decided that the churches should no longer use the Revised Standard Version (Acts, Art 55). In preference to the RSV, the churches considered the New King James Version to be "a faithful and reliable translation for use in the churches, as well as for study, instruction and family purposes."

Room was also left for the New International Version "to be used in the church service, and for study, instruction and family purposes" on a trial basis.

This decision of the churches has meant that families have had to shelve (or discard) their (tattered) editions of the RSV and purchase new copies of the Bible in a different translation. Given that to date six of the nine Free Reformed Churches have (to my knowledge) definitively opted to use the NKJV in the worship services (as well as in Catechism instruction) most of the membership will be looking for suitable editions of the NKJV. To assist in that search, I wish in this article to offer some comment on the available New King James bibles. Specifically, I want to zero in on the various NKJV study bibles now on the market. (I should add straight-away that a similar article on NIV study bibles would be very brief, simply because the widely available *NIV Study Bible* is hard to beat.)

### **REVISED EDITION**

The first section of the New King James translation of the Bible appeared on the market in 1979 (the New Testament) The Psalms followed in 1980, with the rest of the Old Testament appearing by 1982. Subsequent work on the text of the translation resulted in various improvements being made to the translation, be it improvements of translation proper or improvements in choosing more contemporary words. (So, "purge your conscience" in Heb 9:14 became "cleanse your conscience"; "those beasts" in Heb 13:11 became "those animals".) The result was that in 1984 the publishers of the NKJV (Thomas Nelson) changed their type-settings so that all subsequent printings of the NKJV (with one exception, see below) varied slightly from the original printing. The publishers did not consider the changes to be of such a nature as to warrant public announcement or a designation of "second edition" on the title page of the new printings.<sup>2</sup> It's this action on the part of the printers that explains the differences various of us have noticed in our copies of the NKJV. The trick, then, is to check the (back of the) title page of the edition you would buy: if the newest copyright date is later than 1984, you have the improved edition, if the newest copyright date is 1984 or earlier you have in your hands a copy of the expired edition and you should leave it with the retailer.<sup>3</sup>

### **Study Bibles.**

First, what is a study bible? Editions of any translation of the Bible come in various sizes and formats, some including marginal cross reference texts, others with brief introductions to each bible book, others again with a concordance and /or a dictionary. These additions to the actual Word of itself are meant to assist the reader in his Bible study. A "Study Bible", however, takes these additions farther and supplies the reader (through notes in the text of the Bible, in the margin or at the bottom of the page) with an explanation of the passage in question. If you will, it's a Bible with an on-page commentary. This phenomenon of supplying the Bible reader with explanations of the passage he reads has a tradition going back to the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The (English) Geneva Bible, first published in 1560, was "provided with marginal notes based on Reformed principles."<sup>4</sup> Since that time, various Study Bibles have appeared "with marginal notes". Even the Roman Catholics have put out their own

version (known as the "Confraternity") which contains a set of notes printed on the same page with the text and giving the Roman Catholic interpretation of disputed passages.<sup>5</sup>

Today there exist a wide range of Bibles supplying built-in comment; there's a Study Bible to suit virtually every colour of today's varied ecclesiastical spectrum. That in turn means that it will not do for our families to buy just any Study Bible; we and our children need to be instructed in the faith, not in a (dispensationalist or pentacostal or arminian) perversion of the faith. In what follows, then, I offer comment on the New King James Study Bibles I've come across. I list the various study bibles in the order of their dates of publication.

#### NEW OPEN BIBLE (1990)

It should be noted straight-away that the text of the NKJV in the New Open Bible is the non-revised edition. As long as one is not put out with minor variations, this is not a problem in using this study bible.

As to the study Bible itself, "unlike other study Bibles, the New Open Bible is NOT a commentary. It is one of the few Bibles that uses the Scriptures themselves to illuminate and clarify the text."<sup>6</sup> This study Bible does so by a feature known as "the Christian's Guide to the New Life". This tool is meant to provide a "complete doctrinal overview of the Bible." The Guide is dispersed throughout the Bible, located on pages where one finds texts teaching the doctrine discussed by that section of the Guide. As such, it leads the reader to --what one might call-- key texts of the Bible, and explains the doctrine set forth in those texts (be it in conjunction with related texts). The reader should know, though, that the comments offered, though not a commentary on the bible, is at bottom a textbook on bible doctrine. As to the worth of this textbook, it is disappointing to note that the "Christian's Guide to the New Life" does not specifically mention the sacraments or the return of Christ. One is left wondering why. Might these points of doctrine have been omitted because there is no general agreement on these points in today's Bible-believing circles??

Further, the New Open Bible has devoted a number of its pages to explaining points of archaeology or geography or history and even theology in order to assist the reader in understanding the background and intent of various Bible themes. Though these notes are quite brief, they are, I find, rather helpful.

The New Open Bible also contains an extensive topical index by which the student can discover for himself what the Bible says on countless different points of doctrine or ethics. This index I find helpful, though it does require the student to think of a particular problem and then canvas the Scriptures for an answer. This manner of leading the student to texts relevant to the questions of his current circumstance is admirable.

All together, this study Bible has not been put together for the benefit of the person who reads the Bible systematically. The Guide as well as the topical index are most useful for the person who comes to the Bible with specific questions; they loose their effectiveness for the person who reads the Bible from end to end and wishes to hear whatever God says on each page.

#### SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE BIBLE (1991)

This is a Study Bible in the traditional sense of the word; the text of the Bible is complimented with various notes in the text of the Bible (shaded in grey to set the note apart from the text itself), and more explanatory notes at the bottom of the page. Various charts throughout the bible are provided to assist the reader further. Altogether, quite some information is presented to the reader in the notes of this Study Bible.

However, the "Introduction" to this study bible tells us that "The Spirit-Filled Life Bible is the first of its kind, in which a broadly representative team from more than twenty denominations and independent fellowships has been banded together to produce a study Bible integrating the Pentecostal-Charismatic viewpoint." Concerning this broad team the Introduction describes their doctrinal position as follows:

*"Their convictions about the Person of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death, literal resurrection, and majestic ascension are essentially in agreement. Their view of the authority of the Word of God and its divine inspiration are basically the same. And their experience of the contemporary operations of the Holy Spirit --whose fulness, fruit, gifts, and works of power are welcomed and realised today as at the church's inception-- is held in general accord. However, by reason of the breadth of their denominational backgrounds, a wide diversity characterises this band. They will be found at all points*

*of the spectrum on such issues as: 1) Calvinism as contrasted with Arminianism; 2) Dispensational contrasted with Covenant theology; 3) Premillennial, Postmillennial, and Amillennial differences; and even 4) the meaning of 'speaking in tongues' with reference to the believer's initial infilling with the Holy Spirit."*

It will be apparent that notes prepared in this tradition are not going to lead the reformed believer deeper into all the truth of God's Word. This Study bible, then, ought not to receive a place in our homes.

#### LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE (1993)

This Bible has a layout very pleasing to the eye, and as such is appealing to use. The text is presented in paragraph format (as opposed to verse format), has the reference texts in the inside margin and notes attractively formatted on the bottom of the page. Dispersed throughout the bible are also notes concerning the identity of various bible characters.

Of importance in evaluating this study Bible is the fact that the notes included in this edition do not seek to explain the given text to the reader. Rather, the notes seek to challenge the reader to apply the point of the text in his/her life. In the words of the Introduction: "over 75 percent of this Bible is application oriented. The notes answer the questions, "So what?" and "What does this passage mean to me, my family, my friends, my job, my neighbourhood, my church, my country?" To give a random example (Ps 149:3-5):

*"Although the Bible invites us to praise God, we often aren't sure how to go about it. Here, several ways are suggested – in the dance, with the voice, with musical instruments. God enjoys his people, and we should enjoy praising him."*

And the note on II Cor 6:3:

*"In everything he did, Paul always considered what his actions communicated about Jesus Christ. If you are a believer, you are a minister for God. In the course of each day, non-Christians observe you. Don't let your careless or undisciplined actions be another person's excuse for rejecting Christ."*

Given this emphasis on application, it's no surprise that this study bible is also highly exemplaristic in its comments upon bible characters. The various steps and stages of God's work of salvation do not at all come into focus.

As to the theological position behind this study Bible, a note in the introductory pages of this edition is telling:

*"A special thanks to the nationwide staff of Youth for Christ / USA for their suggestions and field-testing..."*

The Youth for Christ movement, we are to know, is decidedly interdenominational, consciously avoiding the doctrinal stances peculiar to particular (groups of) churches. Predictably, then, the emphasis in this study Bible lies on action at the cost of what it is that God wants us to believe. Yet "getting doctrine right is the key to getting everything

else right." Time and time again the apostle Paul in his letters first laid out the right doctrine and then, after he had corrected the errors of doctrine existing in the minds of his readers, he could lay out how one was to live and what one was to do. Then yes, the Bible is surely to be applied. But this is not the way to do it. This produces activism.<sup>7</sup>

## THE REFORMATION STUDY BIBLE - formerly called NEW GENEVA STUDY BIBLE (1995)

Of all the NKJV study Bibles I have seen, this is decidedly the best. As with the Life Application Bible, this edition too has a rather attractive format in as much as the text of the bible is given to us in paragraph format instead of verse format. The notes on the bottom of the page provide actual comment on the text of Scripture, not simply application. In fact, the comments are in the tradition of reformed exegesis.

To explain the origin, purpose and theological slant of this study Bible, I take the liberty to quote from the Introduction:

*"The Reformation Study Bible is so called because it stands in the tradition of the original Geneva Bible... The Geneva Bible was published in 1560, carefully designed to be accurate and understandable. It was the first English Bible to use verse divisions, as 'most profitable for memory' and for finding and comparing other passages. It was provided with marginal notes based on Reformed principles.*

*The Geneva bible dominated the English speaking world for a hundred years. It was used by Shakespeare. The King James Bible was published in 1611 but did not supplant the Geneva Bible until Fifty years later. The Pilgrims and Puritans carried the Geneva Bible to the shores of the New World. American colonists were reared on the Geneva Bible. They read it, studied it, and sought to live by its light.*

*Since that time a multitude of English translations and study Bibles have appeared. None of these study Bibles has incorporated a summary of Reformed theology. The **Reformation Study Bible** contains a modern restatement of Reformation truth in its comments and theological notes. Its purpose is to present the light of the Reformation afresh."*

The contributors to this volume, then, are largely teachers at seminaries of Calvinist persuasion. Names as JI Packer and Simon Kistemaker appear amongst the contributors. Eleven of the contributors come from Westminster Theological Seminary (be it the Philadelphia or the California branch). Nine others come from the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jacksonville, USA.

Certainly one cannot assume this study Bible to be fully accurate in all the comments it makes on Scripture; the responsibility of reader remains very real. Nevertheless this study Bible is a refreshing alternative to the various others I have seen and essentially on a level with the NIV study bible. Certainly a worthy volume for the reformed home, one that children too can use with benefit.

## OTHERS

In the course of the days and the months various other study Bibles in the NKJV have crossed my desk. I mention the New Scofield Study Bible, the Wesley Study Bible, and the Ryrie Study Bible. None of these are acceptable for the reformed home. The New Scofield Study Bible follows in the tradition of the earlier Scofield Reference Bible, an edition notorious for its dispensationalist emphasis. The Wesley Study Bible describes itself as having been prepared from a Wesleyian point of view, catering to the millions in the Wesleyian/Arminian tradition. The Ryrie Study Bible is the effort of a single individual (CC Ryrie who makes much of end-time theology (the rapture of the saints, the great tribulation, the millennial kingdom, restoration of Israel, etc). In as much as none of these teachings are Scripturally justifiable, none of these study Bible ought to receive a place in our homes.

## CONCLUSION

In an age in which the Christian is beset by so many false doctrines, the edition of the Bible to which he turns for answers and guidance should not confront him with more errors in the footnotes. Study Bibles are surely very helpful and have a tradition going back many years. Of all the NKJV study Bibles I've seen one only stands out as the one to recommend for study, instruction and family purposes: the New Geneva Study Bible.

#### REFERENCES:

1. This article first appeared in the 22 July, 1995 issue of *Una Sancta* ([Return](#))
2. This information comes to me via a telephone conversation with Dr Bob Lintvenich, bible editor at Thomas Nelson Publishers, on 26 October 1992. ([Return](#))
3. This does not seem to be true always: one edition in our home is dated 1982 but is still The improved version... ([Return](#))
4. RC Sproul, "Introduction" to *New, Geneva Bible*, pg iv. ([Return](#))
5. Loraine Boettner *Roman Catholicism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), pg 97. ([Return](#))
6. So reads the advertising brochure initially put out to "sell" the New Open Bible. ([Return](#))
7. For the correct appreciation of the relation between doctrine and life, the reader is encouraged to consult Bruce Milne's handbook of Christian belief entitled *Know the Truth* (IVP. 1982), pg 11f. ([Return](#))