



Sproul, R. C., ed.

*The Reformation Study Bible*. 2nd ed.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Under the general editorship of R. C. Sproul the *Reformation Study Bible* (hereafter *RefSB*) has drawn together a number of scholars (48 in all not including editors) to produce a Bible that “stands in the Reformed tradition of the original Geneva Bible of the sixteenth century.” (iv)

As per the usual for study Bibles the *RefSB* contains a variety of maps and charts interspersed throughout the running commentary/study notes as well as standard section (i.e., Pentateuch, Historical Books, Hebrew Poetry, Wisdom Literature, Prophets, Intertestamental Period, Gospels & Acts, and Epistles) and individual book introductions. These address everything you’d expect, i.e., authorship, date and occasion of writing, book outlines, and the major themes and characteristics of each book. In addition to this is the highlighting of the given book’s interpretive difficulties.

Not surprisingly the *RefSB* takes traditional stances on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and a single author for Isaiah and while it notes the anonymous authorship of the Gospels it presents external evidence for accepting the traditional ascriptions to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (the son of Zebedee). The introduction to Matthew highlights that the identity of the primary author (the Holy Spirit) should concern us more than the identities of the human authors (see 1359). To the *RefSB*’s credit, it does list dissenting views, even if not in any great detail (which is understandable given the short space devoted to introductory matters).

In addition to the introductory matters and commentary notes there is a series (96 total) of short articles called “theological notes” scattered throughout the Bible at appropriate junctures. These cover topics from God’s holiness and justice (168) to hell (1432) to the sinlessness of Christ (1782). Because I jumped around in this Bible and didn’t read it from beginning to end I found myself judging the theological note on “Baptism” (1623) to be somewhat anemic and seemingly politically correct in that no reference to paedobaptism was made and the three common modes (immersion, pouring, sprinkling) of baptism were all affirmed as valid. But in my reading of Genesis 17 (appropriately placed after God makes the covenant of circumcision with Abraham) I came across the theological note on “Infant Baptism” (37) where a proper defense of the paedobaptism of the Reformed tradition was given against the credobaptism of Baptists.

The study notes are pretty much what you’d expect from commentators of the Reformed faith. The OT is interpreted Christologically so that the law points forward to and finds its fulfillment in Christ; messianic prophecies are seen as referring specifically to Christ; etc. Reformed soteriology is apparent everywhere we’d expect to find it, e.g., Romans 8:29-30 is seen as presenting the “golden chain of redemption” (although the commentator does not use this expression) where it is said that, “It is a plan of sovereign saving grace, entitling all who now believe to trace their faith and salvation back to an eternal decision by God to bring them to glory, and to look forward to that glory as guaranteed certainly.” (1627) We naturally find irresistible grace and unconditional election championed in such passages as John 6:37-44 and Ephesians 1:4. The “warning passages” in Hebrews (2:1-4; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29) are dealt with in different ways but 6:4-8 gets the fullest treatment and is interpreted in light of the Reformed understanding of other passages such as John 10:28-29 and Romans 8:28-30, which is to say that it cannot mean that one’s salvation can be lost. So we read, e.g., of those who “shared in the Holy Spirit” that “They had some experience with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but it is not necessary to conclude that regeneration is specifically intended.” (1784) The “falling away” is interpreted in light of 1John 2:19 to refer to those who were “not really a member of the household of faith, although they may have seemed to be.” (1784)

I was somewhat surprised to find no mention of any of the -lapsarian doctrines in either the study and the theological notes (although I admit that I have not read every single word of this Bible so it’s possible I’ve missed a reference) seeing how prominent these theories are in discussions of God’s decree. However, I was not surprised in the least to find repeated references to the Westminster Confession of Faith (and the Longer and Shorter Catechisms) in the theological notes (12x<sup>1</sup>; that I’ve counted so far and once that I found in the study notes [1037]). The Heidelberg Catechism is mentioned once (1411) but there’s no reference (that I could find) to any other Reformed confessions (e.g., the Canons of Dordt or the Belgic Confession).

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 665, 781, 844, 1391, 1411, 1519, 1603, 1627, 1636, 1659, 1677, 1747.

Aesthetically this (hardcover) Bible satisfies on many levels:

- It has sewn binding which allows it to lay flat no matter where you open it from.
- The glossy brown and gold decorative dust jacket is pleasing to the eye and it covers an equally tasteful and attractive gold(ish) hardcover.
- It measures 9.5 x 6.75 x 1.5 in. and is easily the slimmest hardcover study Bible I've come across.
- The opaque paper keeps bleed-through to a minimum.
- The center-column reference system is familiar and helpful.
- The overall content layout is straightforward and unfussy:
  - Two-column Biblical text.
  - Center-column references.
  - Two-column study notes in smaller and different font.
  - Theological notes clearly marked out and presented in different font.
- Large, clear, full-color maps in back of Bible on cardboard stock paper.

My only gripe with the physical features of the hardcover edition is the lack of a ribbon marker.

The *RefSB* is a well-conceived study Bible that will fit the needs of its target audience perfectly. But it's a niche-Bible that probably won't appeal to those outside of its target audience. Those looking for a study Bible based on critical Biblical scholarship will have to look elsewhere. Those looking for a study Bible with as little theological bias as possible will have to look elsewhere as well. But Reformed folk looking for a Bible to confirm and strengthen their current beliefs will find this Bible extremely useful. But I think the Bible is mis-titled. The more appropriate title would be the *Reformed Study Bible*. As it stands there's relatively little mention of the Reformation (10x<sup>2</sup>) or the great Reformers of the past like Luther (14x<sup>3</sup>) and Calvin (17x<sup>4</sup>). The five solas of the Reformation get nearly no mention at all with *Sola Gratia* (1509) *Sola Scriptura* (iv) as the exceptions. The reader expecting to find more unfiltered Reformation theology will be disappointed. What they will receive instead will be Reformed theology as it has survived through centuries, which is fine, but might not be clear to potential readers from this Bible's title.

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<sup>2</sup> See pp. 665, 1148, 1309, 1312, 1509, 1646, 1659, 1695, 1775, 1831.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 290, 559, 738, 776, 781, 1309, 1367, 1611, 1613, 1659, 1731, 1775, 1803, 1850.

<sup>4</sup> See pp. 31, 264, 290, 594, 1256, 1309, 1359, 1405, 1406, 1659, 1683, 1729, 1753, 1775, 1804, 1808, 1823.